

The Ghost of Swiss Castle

After crawling past several mansions on Chicago's Lakeshore Drive during rush hour, the chauffeur of the sleek black limousine clicked on the turn signal. The chauffeur, a heavy man with a thick mustache, had not said a word the entire trip. In the passenger seat, Mabel Honeysuckle sat more erect than a yardstick. Two children sat in the backseat. Paul Honeysuckle squirmed with discomfort in his coat and tie while his sister, Meg, straightened out her long pink dress. Even in early August, they had been ordered to dress that way for their flight to Chicago. Paul's dark blond hair hung down over his ears. Meg's light blonde hair hung down to her shoulders. Paul was eleven, Meg ten.

When they saw a circular mansion with large, round windows on the ground floor flanked by two round towers crowned with pointed roofs, they almost cracked a smile at each other. The mansion's round windows looked like so many holes in Swiss cheese, and Paul silently christened this monstrosity of architecture Swiss Castle. Meg was too bemused to think of a name at the time. When the children realized that the limousine had turned into the driveway of that very mansion, their ongoing state of shock reached its highest level yet.

Paul and Meg were already in shock because their parents had just gone to Copenhagen for a year without them. Their parents were part of a cultural exchange program where they would be resident musicians for a year while their Danish counterparts did the same in Philadelphia. The children had first entered their state of shock when their parents told them it would not be workable for them to spend the year in Copenhagen with them; they would have to stay in Chicago with their Uncle Tobias and Aunt Mabel, whom they hadn't seen in many years. Meg and Paul had always known that their parents' careers came first, but this move really blindsided them. They pleaded with their parents that spending the year in Copenhagen would be great for their musical education as budding concert pianists, but their parents countered that their overall education would suffer. There were plenty of good piano teachers in Chicago, and their aunt and uncle had already made plans to send them to an excellent school. It happened that out of all the piano teachers in greater Chicago, I was unfortunately the one they were most acquainted with, and I was the one lined up to further their musicianship for a year. It also turned out that I would be involved with them in some unnerving events at Swiss Castle that stirred up bad memories for me. After these events took place, the three of us talked at length about what had happened, and the children elected me to tell the tale.

Any hope that their aunt and uncle would not be as bad as they thought was quashed the minute the flight attendant handed them over to the ramrod woman who raised a finger like an empress and pointed to them. "Paul, Margaret, come with me," said their aunt. "Our driver has been waiting for forty-three minutes."

"I go by Meg," said the girl.

"Not in my house, you don't."

Paul and Meg found the interior of Swiss Castle as strange as the exterior. A vestibule led to a living room where the ceiling was three stories high to accommodate the pipes of an organ against the far wall. A cluster of couches and chairs created an island around a coffee table, while two grand pianos and a harpsichord formed a second island in the spacious room. These instruments caught the children's attention, as they were already advanced at the keyboard for their ages. A wall filled with portraits of stern-faced men and women of an earlier era and

paintings of nature scenes cut across the circular living room. In the middle of the wall was a large set of heavy doors with leafy designs carved into the wood.

An African American maid wearing an old-fashioned costume of a washed-out blue dress and fancy apron emerged from the shadows of the living room.

“Cornelia, you may escort the children to their rooms,” Mabel ordered. “Your luggage will be brought up shortly.”

Those were the first words Paul and Meg had heard from their Aunt since she had claimed them from the flight attendant. Before either of them could move, Mabel set her hard, sharp eyes on them. “I trust that both of you understand that we should not *hear* that you are here.”

The children nodded and followed Cornelia to one of the circular towers. Meg and Paul trudged up the winding staircase to the second floor, whose carpeted hallway formed a circle broken up by four doors. Cornelia opened the first door to the right. “For the young miss.”

With its old-style canopied bed, the room looked more suited for a movie set than a place for a child to live. Between the lace curtains at the window, Meg had a breathtaking view of Lake Michigan, a small kindness for her. Meg’s steamer trunk, which had been shipped ahead, was on a luggage rack.

“For the young master,” said Cornelia as she opened the room across from Meg’s, the first door to the left. This room also featured a suffocating canopied bed and lace curtains. Paul felt that no boy should have to live in a room like that, but he knew he had no choice. The view he got from his window was the spacious front lawn, the long driveway, and Lakeshore Drive. Paul’s steamer trunk also was there, ready for him to unpack.

“For your toiletry needs.” Cornelia opened the door next to Meg’s room and pointed to a large bathroom with a bathtub that came up past the knees of the children. There was no showerhead. The floor was checkered with black-and-white tiles. Both children knew this was going to take some getting used to.

As the chauffeur brought up the suitcases and deposited them in the children’s rooms, Cornelia pointed to the door next to Paul’s room, which remained shut.

“That room is not to be entered by either of you.” Cornelia’s stony face only added to the sense of dread those words gave the children as they nodded. “Dinner is served promptly at six thirty in the dining room directly below. Formal attire is expected,” Cornelia announced, and then she followed the chauffeur down the stairs.

Paul and Meg traded despairing looks and went to their rooms to unpack. When Paul saw how carefully his mother had folded his shirts and pants at everycrease, he asked himself why she couldn’t take as good care of him as she did of his clothes. He took out a sizeable stack of comic books and placed them on the lace cloth covering the dresser. In the mirror that hung over the dresser, Paul saw his frightened but determined face, but he also saw the reflection of an indistinct shape that could have been a child standing behind him. Paul froze. His throat choked off any sound he might have made. The ghost, or whatever it was, did not move. Paul felt loneliness, sadness, emptiness, and anger wash over and through him. He was already feeling lonely and sad and angry, but suddenly the feelings were much worse. Paul could not make out the face behind him, but since the phantom was several inches shorter than him, he assumed it was a child. In a fit of bravery, Paul wheeled around to confront the intruder. There was nobody there. The intense feelings that had struck him went away, leaving Paul with his own anger and loneliness, which were enough for him. Paul had always loved ghost stories, but the strange form

he'd just seen made Paul realize that he had a very different attitude toward actually being in a ghost story, especially if the ghost was going to make its problems Paul's problems.

Paul didn't want to think about what he'd seen. It was too much after being sent to such an unfriendly house. Unpacking the rest of his clothes and belongings gave Paul something else to think about. When he put his iPod and electronic book reader on a desk filled with cubby holes, he thanked the inventors of these devices for making it possible to have his music and books without packing an extra suitcase or two. He pulled out his laptop and turned it on to check his e-mail. His parents had written to say that Denmark was a rugged but beautiful country and they hoped he liked the city of Chicago. To his disappointment, there were no e-mails from the friends he had left behind. Then it was time to go through the contortions that taking a bath in an old-fashioned bathtub required and putting on a fresh shirt and tie for dinner.

Meg felt lost in her new room. She unpacked her things and checked her e-mail as soon as she had her laptop running. She had two e-mails from friends along with the same letter from Copenhagen Paul had received. Like Paul, she struggled with the bathtub when it was her turn to use it. When she had put on a clean dress for dinner, she felt better. When she opened the door of her room to go down for dinner, she saw the vague shape of her brother in the circular hallway standing in front of the forbidden door. That was not surprising, since Meg knew it was inevitable that Paul would open it sometime, but she was surprised by a feeling of sadness that felt as if it had been dumped on her. Then the door across from her opened and her brother stepped out. Meg gave out a quick, sharp cry and looked back toward the forbidden door. Whatever she had seen there was gone, and the feeling of sadness was gone too.

"Anything wrong?" Paul asked her as he started down the stairs.

"Nothing except this whole place," Meg replied.

"Same here," said Paul.

Both children were taken aback at the length of the dining room table. Paul thought it was so long it would have taken two days to mail a postcard from one end to the other. Aunt Mabel sat at one end, and a stocky man with thinning, iron-gray hair and thick-framed glasses that made his eyebrows all the heavier sat at the other. Cornelia stood next to a hatch in the far wall. Uncle Tobias stood up and extended a hand to Paul.

"I am your Uncle Tobias," he said in a deep voice. "You must be Paul." He sounded as warm as a freezer on the north coast of Alaska. It was easy for Paul to understand why his parents hadn't seen him in years. It was harder to understand why his parents had dumped him and Meg in his house. Uncle Tobias crushed Paul's hand in a vice and then extended it to Meg. "You must be Margaret." Meg winced as much from having her bones crushed as from being called Margaret. She knew it would be useless to correct her aunt and uncle on the matter.

"The miss will sit here," said Cornelia, pointing to a place in the middle of the table, "and the master will sit here."

That put Meg and Paul across from each other, which gave them both plenty of real estate from either end of the table. Each place already had a covered dish on it. Cornelia removed the covers one by one to reveal plates heaped with roast beef, mashed potatoes, and peas. Paul knew his stomach would be in good shape if he could endure the company.

"Did you have an uneventful flight?" Tobias asked some five or six minutes after everybody had dug in to their food.

Paul looked at Meg, as she was usually the talkative one, but her eyes told her brother she wasn't her usual talkative self.

“It was boring, but it got us here. No crashes or water landings to make things interesting.”

“The verb *get* is too vague for use as proper communication,” said Aunt Mabel. “You should use a stronger word, such as *brought*.”

Paul nodded. Another five minutes or so went by. The roast beef was delicious. At least Aunt Mabel and Uncle Tobias had a good cook.

“How was work today?” Aunt Mabel asked Uncle Tobias.

“The usual. Fired a worker. Looked over some new designs.”

The children knew he was talking about ties, because their father had told them that their Uncle Tobias made some of the most expensive ties in the whole country. Paul figured that if he had worked for his uncle, he would have wanted to be fired as soon as possible.

“How did your day go?” Uncle Tobias asked Aunt Mabel.

“I had to collect two children at that dreadful airport, exacerbated by the plane’s tardiness of nearly an hour, all of which caused me to miss an executive meeting of the garden club. Need I say more?”

Paul was finishing up his peas when he noticed a chair a few feet from Meg. He was sure it hadn’t been there when he sat down. A few seconds later, the same unformed child that he had seen in the mirror of his room shimmered into the chair. Again Paul felt a wash of desperate loneliness mixed with anger. Paul blinked his eyes, hoping to get a clearer vision of the child, but it remained as blurred as before.

“Paul, has something stuck in your throat?” asked Aunt Mabel.

Only then did Paul realize that a soft cry had escaped his throat. Meg was looking at him with some concern. There was no sign she was seeing the ghost sitting next to her. Not quite able to speak, Paul nodded.

“You should clear your throat as gently as possible so as not to disturb the other dinner guests if that should ever happen again,” Aunt Mabel explained. “Such an occurrence can best be prevented by eating at a more leisurely pace than boys your age are wont to do.”

“Okay.”

“You should say, ‘Yes, Aunt Mabel.’”

“Yes, Aunt Mabel.”

Paul almost choked on those words, but he didn’t want to get on his aunt’s bad side more than he already was just for existing. A moment later, the ghost shook its fist at Aunt Mabel. Paul hoped that the ghost would give his aunt a fright, but she showed not the slightest sign that she had seen the ghost or the threatening gesture. As scared as Paul was of the ghost, he wished he could have given it an okay sign as a sign of support. He figured that if he and the ghost had a common enemy, maybe he didn’t have to be too scared of it. Paul took a long sip of water. By the time he had put his glass back down, the ghost was gone, and the chair with it.

A cup of raspberry sorbet was served for dessert, but as soon as Paul dug in with his spoon, Aunt Mabel gave him another cold stare. “Paul, move your spoon away from yourself when you scoop your sorbet,” said Aunt Mabel.

“Yes, Aunt Mabel.”

Paul worked hard to concentrate on the sorbet and not let Aunt Mabel spoil it. While Cornelia was taking the sorbet dishes away, Aunt Mabel folded her hands and looked at each child in turn in such a way that they knew she was going to tell them something important that they probably wouldn’t like.

“The two of you will be attending the Pettijohn Preparatory School starting on August 16. In the meantime, you will not waste your time in frivolous play. I expect each of you to spend a minimum of one hour per day in study and to spend a minimum of one hour per day practicing the piano. Mr. Markham, one of the finest pianists in Chicago, has agreed to be your teacher. He will give you your first lessons two days hence. He also happens to be a childhood friend of your Uncle Tobias and of your father, for which reason he has consented to this arrangement as a personal favor for your benefit. Now I will ask you to entertain your uncle and me briefly to demonstrate your proficiency.”

Later, when the children told me what their uncle had said, I thought Tobias had a lot of nerve calling me a childhood friend after what had happened between us. The phone call was an unpleasant blast from my past for me, and I was hardly inclined to do him or Mabel a favor. Neither did I need or want his money. But when I thought of what life was going to be like for two children living in that house after being raised by a father and mother who would leave them behind for a year, I decided I should at least see if I could make life better for them, if they weren't already too far sunk into the family freezer.

With their futures outlined for them, the children were marched into the living room. Meg held back and nodded to Paul. Seeing that Meg was freezing up, Paul moved past the pianos to the organ and looked longingly at it.

“Organs are not for kids,” Uncle Tobias grunted.

“That organ belonged to your uncle's grandmother,” Aunt Mabel explained.

Paul got the message. He sat down at one of the pianos and played the *Fantasia in D Minor* by Mozart. He chose the piece because its dark and brooding tone fit his mood. The music calmed him down some, and he almost felt better about his situation.

While Paul was playing the Mozart, Meg saw the image of an old woman materialize at the organ bench with the shape of a small child behind her. Although the old woman's face was distinct (though transparent) the child's face was a blur. Meg thought she even heard faint tones from the organ, but she wasn't sure. The vision made her wonder what she had really seen outside the forbidden door near her room, and she shuddered. By the time Paul had stopped playing, the vision had disappeared, much to Meg's relief.

There was no applause when Paul got up from the piano and took a seat. Uncle Tobias was reading the *Wall Street Journal*, so perhaps he wasn't even listening. Meg dragged herself to the piano somehow but could only give a halting performance of “A Song Without Words” by Mendelssohn.

“Now you may amuse yourselves with a *quiet* game or retire to your rooms,” said Aunt Mabel.

“I believe we shall retire,” said Paul while Meg gave a confirming nod.

“Very well. Breakfast will be served at seven on the dot. Same place as dinner and all other meals.”

When the children reached to top of the stairs, Meg thought about saying something to her brother about the blurred child and the old woman at the organ bench, but she was getting tired of Paul being so protective of her because she was a girl, and she didn't want to take a chance of making her brother think she was going crazy their first night in this crazy house. At the same time, Paul thought of asking Meg if she had seen anything strange, but he didn't want to take the chance that his sister would think he was going crazy their first night in Swiss Castle.

Not surprisingly, both Meg and Paul endured a restless night. The canopies above their beds were strange and suffocating. They could only worry about how many more ghosts might appear in the middle of the night after what they had seen already.

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Paul and Meg both came down to breakfast bleary-eyed and scared. Heavy rain was beating against the large round windows in the dining room, the perfect weather for ghosts. They had a filling breakfast with scrambled eggs mixed with mushrooms and bacon, which they ate in silence while Uncle Tobias and Aunt Mabel read the paper.

“Paul, Margaret, whichever of you is not taking your turn at practicing the piano will study in the library, which Cornelia will show you,” Aunt Mabel decreed as the dishes were being cleared away. “Today, the weather does not permit going outside and walking in our fine garden. Perhaps the weather will so permit tomorrow if your behavior has not prohibited it by that time.”

The children dutifully followed Cornelia into and through the living room. When she opened the doors to reveal a room filled with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, both children held their breath. Ladders leaned against two of the walls to help readers get to the top shelves. Large, round windows with padded window seats were the only things that broke up the shelves. The overstuffed chairs on the dark blue carpet seemed likely to swallow any child who sat in them. Cornelia fixed a solemn look on Paul and Meg. “You must respect this place,” she said. “I am the one who has to clean it. Mrs. Honeysuckle expects decorum from you befitting a place of this nature.” With that, Cornelia glided away, presumably to clean some other part of the house.

“Who’s first?” Paul asked his sister.

“At what?”

“At either, I guess.”

Meg peered into the library and shrank back a little. “I’ll start with the piano if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t care.”

Paul sauntered into the library and closed the door. He didn’t expect to find anything he wanted to read there, but it looked like an interesting place to explore. He doubted that the books on the top shelf were better than those lower down, but climbing the ladder was fun, so that was what he did. The desks and chairs and round windows with rain beating on them made the library look like the sort of magical room where a ghost could appear any second. Paul shuddered at the thought, unable to make up his mind if he wanted the excitement of seeing the ghost again or not. Turning his attention to the books, Paul looked at the spines in vain for an interesting title. He recognized some names like Plato and Aristotle, but nothing he had learned about them in school motivated him to ditch his comic books and adventure novels for them.

A tingling feeling followed by a wave of sorrow and anger warned Paul that the ghost was back and close to him. He slowly turned his head and saw the ghost with the blurred face sitting on the rung of a faint ladder at the top shelf next to his. Paul grabbed the side of his ladder to keep himself from falling. Another wave of sorrow and loneliness and anger blindsided Paul so suddenly that he was sure the ghost was causing these feelings in addition to his own sorrow, loneliness, and anger. He was torn between waving to the ghost in an effort to be friendly to a possible ally in this horrible house and telling the ghost to stop making him feel so bad. Before

Paul could bring himself to do anything, the ghost disappeared and the wave of sorrow lifted. A sour note from the piano followed by some odd-sounding chords startled Paul. Meg usually didn't make such spectacular mistakes, not even when practicing. In the silence before Meg resumed playing, Paul thought he heard the organ, but that was impossible. Aunt Mabel would never have allowed Meg to touch even one key of that instrument.

What had caused Meg to play a sour note was hearing some weird chords from the other piano in the living room. She lifted her hands and looked to the other piano, where she saw the faint outline of a child sitting on the other piano bench. Meg was too fascinated to look away, much as she wanted to. Again she was overwhelmed by feelings of loneliness and even despair. She tried to say something to the ghost to comfort it, but she couldn't make her voice box work. When the ghost faded out, Meg felt free to work on her music in spite of her shaking fingers until her time was up.

When Meg came into the library to tell Paul it was his turn to practice, she couldn't find him. For an awful moment, she was afraid the ghost had come into the library and carried her brother off, but then she heard a rustling sound above her.

"Is it time?" Paul asked from his perch.

Meg could only nod and tap on her watch. She stared out into the rain as her brother climbed down the ladder, left the room, and started to play Bach. She stuck to looking at the books close to her level but with little interest. Even when she found an old travel book and sat down to leaf through it, she could hardly see the pictures for all the questions about the phantom child flooding her mind.

Playing some Bach Inventions and then the Mozart Fantasia relaxed Paul a little. He thought of his teacher back home with regret and worried about what kind of teacher his aunt and uncle had picked out for him and Meg. In spite of the way his parents treated him, Paul was genuinely fond of music, as was Meg. Apparently music was in their genes. When Paul had played enough Mozart, he tore into a piano rag by Scott Joplin. He was about half-way through it when a shadow fell over him. Paul's fingers froze, and he slowly lifted them off the keyboard.

"Music of that sort is not worthy of a sophisticated musician," said Aunt Mabel.

At least six solid arguments to the contrary flowed through Paul's brain, but he knew they would be wasted on his aunt.

"Would you prefer more Mozart?"

"Yes, I would."

That was enough to make Paul wish he was a ghost who could haunt Aunt Mabel himself.

When Paul and Meg went up to their rooms after lunch, Paul stopped to eye the door he was not supposed to open. Meg stood behind him to see what he would do.

"Dare me?" Paul asked her.

"Not yet."

Paul shrugged and went into his own room

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The next morning was so sunny and the garden looked so inviting from the dining room window that the children could almost believe they wouldn't have to worry about any more ghosts.

“*After* you have practiced the piano,” said Aunt Mabel, “and vulgar music does not count as practice,” she added with a sharp eye at Paul, “and *after* you have each spent an hour in the library, you may spend time in the garden in our backyard. I expect you to conduct yourselves sensibly, as befits a garden such as ours. Any horseplay will surely come to my attention and will result in your being banished from it.”

“Your turn to practice first,” said Meg as they left the dining room.

Paul shrugged. That was okay with him. He sat down at one of the pianos and went to work. This time he stuck to the classics, but he sneaked some jazzy elements into Mozart for the fun of it. He was in the middle of a Bach prelude when some discordant music from the other piano interrupted him. Assuming that Meg had come along to louse him up, Paul opened his mouth to tell her to stop it only to realize that it wasn’t Meg sitting at the other keyboard; it was the blurry child playing a boogie-woogie. Paul listened to the faint but hearable music with his mouth hanging open. Paul almost wanted to say something about how much fun it was to play a bit of jazz when Aunt Mabel hated it so much, but he couldn’t get the words out. All he could do was pick up where he had left off with the Bach he was working on. When Paul worked up the nerve to look at the other piano bench again, it was empty.

An hour later, Paul and Meg were free to explore the garden until lunchtime, having both survived their library time by smuggling their electronic readers into the room. It only took them a few seconds to see how stunning the garden was. The flowers were laid out in colorful crisscross patterns. A path that twisted and turned through the garden made things even more interesting. The only problem the children had with the garden was that it was too orderly. Paul thought that the roses, irises, and bushes looked like they had been reined in and locked up, just like Meg and him. A gardener was on his knees pulling weeds and trimming plants. He didn’t look up at the children. Meg and Paul were quite sure that he would report any untoward behavior to Aunt Mabel. Past the garden’s edge was a lawn crisscrossed with paths that extended to the lake. The surf was still rough after yesterday’s bad weather. That suited Paul’s mood. Not as interested in flowers as Meg, Paul walked along the shoreline and watched the waves crashing in.

Meg was looking at a bed of white roses when she saw the blurred ghost up ahead leaning over to sniff a ghostly flower. An old woman appeared behind him, the same woman Meg had seen on the organ bench. The woman held out a nearly transparent sunflower to the child while her lips moved without a sound, but the child seemed not to hear her. A moment later, both were gone. Meg stood where was, frozen to the spot. After a while, she told herself that she shouldn’t be all that scared of a ghost smelling a flower, and the ghostly woman standing behind the child had looked like a nice ghost. Strengthened by those thoughts, Meg continued along the path, looking for sunflowers. She found none.

Meanwhile, just as a squirrel ran across the path Paul was on, he saw the blurred child some twenty feet away throwing stones into the lake as far as he could. This time the ghost looked so boyish that Paul decided it was a boy.

“Who . . .” Paul started to ask, but again the words were jammed back down his throat.

The ghost turned to face him. The face was still a blur, but there was the faintest hint of a pair of angry eyes. Losing his nerve, Paul turned around on his heel and walked swiftly up the path toward his sister.

When, after lunch, Meg and Paul found themselves together in the upstairs hall, Paul stared at the forbidden door. Meg looked down at the beige carpet.

“Dare me this time?” Paul asked in a whisper.

Meg thought about it for a few seconds.

“Not quite yet.”

“Then I’ll have to dare myself,” said Paul.

“Your funeral.”

Paul looked down the stairs to make sure Cornelia wasn’t prowling where she could see him and then put his hand on the doorknob. If he had been alone just then, he might have chickened out, but with Meg watching him, he couldn’t undo his dare. He turned the knob and opened the door. The hinge squeaked. Paul put himself in position to run if Cornelia or Aunt Mabel appeared at the foot of the stairs or if the ghost attacked him, but nothing broke the silence smothering Swiss Castle. Paul carefully opened the door a little more and looked in. Several ancient stuffed animals lay on the pillow of a canopied bed. Against the wall was a bookcase. Paul took a deep breath and walked into the room to examine the books. Meg took a step back into the hall but kept her eyes riveted on her brother. The books were so worn they looked a century old. Judging by the titles, they were boys’ books and had been published back when his father was a boy if not earlier. Carefully, Paul pulled one book off the shelf. The dust made him sneeze. Its title was *Buster Bear*, and the cover pictured a bear robbing a beehive and getting attacked by bees. Paul put the book back exactly where he found it. It was kind of spooky seeing all these things in the room as if they were being saved for the boy’s return from a camping trip or from boarding school. A shiver ran through Paul’s body, the kind of shiver he’d felt each time the ghost appeared to him. *Is this the ghost’s room?* Paul asked himself. He hastily stepped out of the room and closed the door slowly and quietly. Paul and Meg looked at each other but said nothing.

* * *

It felt unpleasantly strange to approach the door of the house whose architecture I hated and whose occupants had given me bitter memories for many years. I could only hope that the children would make my sacrifice worthwhile. When Cornelia answered the door with her stony face, I realized everything about the household would be the same as it had been the day I walked away from it. Mabel rose from one of the couches and greeted me as warmly as she would have greeted a delivery man bringing a package she didn’t want. The two children rose from their seats and stood a few feet behind their aunt. They looked even more shell-shocked from coming to this place than I expected. I saw few traces of their father as I remembered him after so many years, which was probably just as well.

“Children, this is Mr. Markham,” Aunt Mabel announced. “Denys, this is my nephew Paul and my niece Margaret.”

I extended a hand to Paul first and tried to look friendly. With only a brief hesitation, Paul took it.

“Hello,” said Paul.

“You should say ‘Hello, Mr. Markham,’” Aunt Mabel corrected him.

That made me wince.

“Hello, Mr. Markham,” said Paul.

“Hello, Paul Honeysuckle,” I replied with exaggerated politeness.

A spark in Paul's eye suggested he had noticed my sarcasm. The girl hesitated a bit longer to shake hands with me, but she did it.

"Hello, Mr. Markham," she said with a curtsy that almost made me laugh.

"Hello, Margaret Honeysuckle."

The girl frowned at me. Not knowing what the trouble was, I looked over to the pianos and rubbed my hands nervously.

"Well, shall we begin our lesson?"

"I think we should begin our lesson, Mr. Markham," said Paul, again exaggerating his politeness.

"You can leave them to me, Mabel," I said. "I think I can handle these two."

As soon as Mabel was gone, I made a face that made the children laugh and clearly relaxed them in my presence.

"Shall we sit for a minute to acquaint ourselves before making any music?" I suggested.

"If you wish, Mr. Markham," said Paul with exaggerated politeness that made me and his sister laugh.

Paul sat on a piano bench while Meg and I each took a nearby chair.

"There is something I want to establish with you right from the start," I began.

"Mr. Markham, sir?" Paul interjected.

"Yes, Master Paul."

"My sister prefers to be called Meg."

That explained Meg's frown earlier.

"Ah! No surprise there. Quite understandable. Meg it is."

Meg smiled a little, and her shoulders loosened up.

"Now, I want the two of you to know that as far as I am concerned, these lessons are between you and me, and the three of us will work out what we shall do. First things first: Are the two of you really interested in having a barrage of piano lessons before school starts?"

"Yes, if you're good," said Paul with a startling frankness that I found refreshing.

"Same here," said Meg.

"How do you like Chicago so far?" I asked them.

Paul and Meg exchanged uneasy glances.

"Except for the ride from the airport, this place is all we've seen," Paul finally said, "and no offense, but I don't like it."

"Ah! I see! Well, this house isn't the greatest architectural specimen in Chicago."

"I call it Swiss Castle," said Paul.

That broke any ice that was left, and the three of us had a good laugh at the expense of Tobias and Mabel and their whole family.

"There are many interesting things to see in Chicago besides Swiss Castle," I said.

"Maybe I can get permission to take you to the Field Museum or the Sears Tower if I can give your aunt and uncle a good report."

"I would like that," said Paul.

"Likewise," said Meg.

I proceeded to give Paul and then Meg their piano lessons. I must say I was quite impressed with both children, and they responded well to the pointers I gave them.

"Mr. Markham?" Paul asked when I was packing up my music.

"Yes?"

“Is it okay with you if I play some ragtime?”

My eyes lit up. “Of course! Can you please give me a sample right now?”

Paul tore into “The Maple Leaf Rag,” which gave me the satisfaction of seeing a precious poisonous look from Mabel when she came in to see what the children were doing.

* * *

When their reading and practice times were over that afternoon, the children took a walk about the garden. They weren’t out long before Paul saw the indistinct phantom walking along a path on the other side of the daffodils. He froze on the spot.

“What’s the matter?” Meg asked him.

Paul looked at his sister. As far as he could tell, she wasn’t seeing the ghost or anything else spooky. As much as Paul was bursting with the need to tell Meg about it, he knew he couldn’t stand it if his sister saw nothing and thought he was crazy.

“Nothing,” was all Paul said in reply.

As if taking the hint, the ghost disappeared as soon as Paul said that. Paul kept his head down as he continued his walk at his sister’s side.

Some ten or fifteen minutes later, Meg saw the ghost sitting cross-legged in front of the roses. She froze in place, and Paul almost plowed into her.

“Anything wrong?” asked Paul.

As much as Meg wanted to tell Paul what she was seeing, she knew she wouldn’t be able to stand it if her brother had seen nothing and thought she was crazy.

“Uh—just this place,” was Meg’s reply.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” said Paul

* * *

That night, Meg and Paul kept themselves awake asking themselves who the ghost was and what they could do about it. Paul kept stewing about what a lousy haunter the ghost was if he was seriously trying to haunt his aunt and uncle. After shaking his fist at Uncle Tobias at the table his first night, Paul hadn’t seen the ghost do anything that a haunting ghost should. He should be doing more than just hanging around. Meg asked herself over and over again what horrible thing must have happened to the ghost to make it haunt the house and spread such sad feelings to her every time it appeared. Had Uncle Tobias and Aunt Mable killed the ghost when it was a child? That thought gave her more chills than she wanted. Maybe they had just ignored the ghost when it was alive until it simply faded away.

While the children were tossing and turning and wondering, they heard the muffled sound of the piano downstairs. They both froze. The music sounded wild and discordant. Paul knew it had to be the ghost. Maybe this was his chance to give the ghost a lesson in effective haunting that would really teach Uncle Tobias and Aunt Mabel a lesson or two. Meg was frightened by the jangled music at first, but the frustration and anger it expressed convinced her that the ghost needed somebody to help. Paul unwound his body. That made him feel a bit braver. Meg swung herself over to the side of her bed. Paul grabbed his bathrobe and slippers, opened and then closed his door as quietly as possible, and tip-toed down the stairs. Meg did the same thing a

moment later. Paul found the ghost seated at one of the pianos looking as silvery and transparent as the moonlight streaming in through the gaping windows of Swiss Castle. The music was still faint, but its angry and raucous character came through loud and clear. Behind the ghost stood the fainter figure of a woman reaching out to the ghost with no success. Paul sat down on the bottom step, fascinated by the weird music and the faceless human shape making it. This was beyond playing a boogie-woogie; it was a torrent of discord, a temper tantrum on the piano. He stood up to go to the ghost to encourage it to play so that his aunt and uncle would have to hear it. Meg was frightened by the dark shape at the bottom of the stairs, but concern for the ghost kept her going. But when a shadow rose up right in front of her, she stifled a cry.

A soft cry behind him made Paul jump. The ghost of a girl stood a few stairs above him. The ghost leaned back in fright.

“Don’t hurt me I’ll try to help you,” said the girl’s ghost all in one breath.

Paul almost fainted with relief when he realized who it was. “Meg, it’s me,” he whispered. “Don’t be scared.”

“What about you? Are you scared?”

Pause. “What do you think?”

Paul was trying to steel up the nerve to ask Meg if she was willing to go up to the ghost with him to ask who he was when he and the old woman behind him disappeared

“We need to talk,” Meg whispered. “Now.”

“I know,” Paul agreed.

Paul led the way back up to his room with a lingering look at the forbidden door on the way. Paul propped himself up on his bed and offered his chair to Meg.

“Have you been seeing it too?” Paul asked.

“Yes, but whoever it is, it’s not an it.”

“I think it’s a boy.”

“You’re probably right. That room we weren’t supposed to go in must have been his room.”

“Looks like it.”

Paul told Meg about every appearance of the ghost he had seen, and Meg did the same.

“We have to help him,” said Meg after they had finished telling their stories.

“That’s probably the only way to keep him from haunting this place,” said Paul.

Meg gave Paul a disapproving look. “It’s the right thing to do,” said Meg. “Don’t you feel his pain when he appears?”

“Yeah. It’s awful.”

“He must have had a miserable life in this place.”

“And probably a miserable death,” added Paul.

“That old woman I keep seeing seems to be the only person who was nice to him, and I’ll bet she died and left him all alone.”

“Could be. So how do we help him?”

“We have to try and find out who this ghost is and what happened to him,” said Meg. “Then maybe we can figure out how to help him.”

“He’s probably somebody in the family, and he doesn’t seem to like Uncle Tobias or Aunt Mabel any more than we do,” said Paul.

“Don’t blame him.”

“But we can’t ask Uncle Tobias or Aunt Mabel about anything, and we can’t write our parents to tell them we’re seeing ghosts here.”

“And Cornelia and the other staff here won’t say anything in a million years.”

Then Paul got an idea. “Our aunt and uncle said Mr. Markham knew them while they were growing up. We could ask him.”

“I suppose we could. But he’s not coming back until the day after tomorrow. I think we should try asking *him*.”

Paul turned pale at the thought, but he realized that was what they had to do. “Tomorrow then,” said Paul. “We’ll do it together.”

“Yes,” said Meg. “I think we can do it if we do it together. Maybe the ghost just needs to have somebody care about him.”

* * *

The next morning, Paul and Meg practiced together on a piano duet. They kept a lookout for an appearance of the ghost while they were practicing, but nothing happened. After an hour, it was time for the library. They both sucked in their breath when they stood before the door. Paul opened it slowly and peeked into the library. No ghost. At least not yet. He shook his head and entered the library with Meg close behind him.

“Any idea how to get him to come?” asked Paul.

“Just wait, I guess.”

They stayed close together and picked out a book to glance at. Right about when Paul thought the ghost was not going to come, the familiar chill and wave of sorrow blindsided him. He heard a quick rustle from Meg’s direction. Paul slowly turned his head until he saw the ghost sitting on a window seat with a transparent book in his hand.

“Hello,” said both children more or less together.

The ghost looked at them, or seemed to. No eyes were visible in the blurred face.

“I’ll bet you had a horrible time in this place,” said Meg.

The ghost did not speak, but Paul thought he nodded ever so slightly.

“W—we’re sorry you’re so sad,” Paul stammered.

“Can we help you?” asked Meg.

The faintest hint at a pair of eyes and a mouth appeared in the blurry face, but then the ghost shook his head and disappeared.

“No wonder he does such a lousy job of haunting,” said Paul. “He just mopes around and does nothing except disappear if you try to get to know him.”

Meg gave Paul a disapproving look that shut him up.

“I think—he’s too sad to do anything,” said Meg softly. “It happens to me sometimes.”

“Oh,” said Paul, startled that his sister had shared something she had apparently bottled up for many years. “Then maybe we have to cheer him up so that he can do something like drive Uncle Tobias and Aunt Mabel out of this house,” Paul suggested.

Meg laughed nervously.

“We can only try,” said Meg.

* * *

Feeling better for having made a start, the children took their walk in the garden after lunch, hoping to see the ghost again. They looked at the flowers with little interest while they waited. Almost as if he had made an appointment with the children, the ghost appeared just ahead of them on the path. The gardener was working some distance away where he wouldn’t likely notice anything.

“Can we help you?” Meg whispered.

This time the ghost stood still for some time and then pointed to where another ghost, a boy the same size as the one they were speaking to, was running along the path. Four more figures, who looked like teenagers, materialized just ahead of the second ghost. The garden went double, making it hard for the children to sort out what they were seeing. The four figures all looked vaguely familiar, but neither Paul nor Meg could figure out at the time who they were. No matter how fast or how hard the boy ran after the teenagers, he couldn’t catch up. Finally, the boy gave up and shook a fist at the older kids as they all disappeared. The double vision collapsed back to a single one, leaving the children dizzy and the blurry ghost facing Paul and Meg.

“Was that you?” Paul asked the ghost.

The ghost nodded.

“I’m sorry those people left you behind,” said Meg.

“Me too,” said Paul.

Paul and Meg were not sure if they were imagining it or not, but they thought a pair of eyes and a mouth became more visible before the ghost disappeared.