

July 14, 1947.

THE HOUSE OF OBLIVION.

Though its door was closed and its windows were veiled by drawn blinds, the huge empty house seemed to yawn widely in the twilight. It hid, and, at the same time, it beckoned. And quite naturally and inevitably, George Arbuthnot and his wife, with young Buckley, when they saw it, stopped the car, got out and walked up the path, grass grown between its cracked flagstones, and mounted the steps to the veranda.

The Arbuthnots went ahead and tried the handle of the door. They had scarcely touched it when ~~the door~~ swung open, revealing a dark hall, wherein a stair rail lit by the fading daylight, gleamed faintly through the gloom. They entered, but Buckley hesitated, and seated himself on the upper step. Somehow, notwithstanding his curiosity, he felt a strange reluctance to explore this seemingly commonplace and characterless vacant house. ~~He lit a cigarette, and sat sideways, in an attitude instinctively cautious and wary.~~ Out of the corners of his eyes he commanded an equal though partial view both of the gloomy hall and of the darkening out-of-doors.

The figures of his companions disappeared into the darkness of the interior; though their voices chattering cheerfully, and the click of their footsteps on the bare boards echoed in the emptiness and floated out to him. He could follow their progress through the lower rooms, and his sidelong glance caught the partial raising of one of the blinds which told him of their whereabouts. He was aware of their mounting of the stairs and their inspection of the upper storey by their somewhat muted but still distinct voices.

He was halfway through his cigarette when their voices suddenly stopped in the middle of a word, as though cut off by the silent closing of a door. The house resumed its original stillness: no further sounds of their presence reached him. The evening slid quietly toward nightfall. He lit a second cigarette from the butt of the first. He sat until it too burnt itself down. He became bored by his uninteresting wait, and grew impatient to get back to the car and push on to their destination. Absent-mindedly he threw away the ~~stub~~ of his exhausted second smoke, its glowing tip tracing a meteor curve in the fast-gathering darkness and lighting for a moment the grass blades where it fell.

He rose and turned toward the dark rectangle of the open doorway, and stepped across the threshold into the blackness of the hall. He called to his invisible companions, swallowed in the emptiness and silence: "Ahoy there, Arbuthnot, let us get on!" There was no answer. Feeling his way cautiously into the gloom, he shouted again, "I say, Arbuthnot His voice echoed loudly in the heavy silence. A step or two further, and his foot struck the bottom of the staircase. He called still again, this time more loudly and rapidly: "Hello Arbuthnot, where are you? I say, Arbuthnot, Arbuth..." His voice broke off abruptly before the word was finished, as had those of his companions.

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The darkness deepened into the blackness of night. There were no stars in the cloudy sky, no breath of wind stirred. Thereafter through all the slow hours no sound broke the stillness. When tardily came the dull dawn, it revealed the empty house, its open door, its windows all vacant, save one, which under its partly lifted blind, seemed to leer furtively out upon the garden.

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Two days later the highway police towed away the empty car from the roadside nearby. Of its occupants they found no trace. The house stood hiding and beckoning and silent as ever.
