



The Secret of Crickley Hall

By James Herbert

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Would you live in a place where ghostly things keep happening? Where a cellar door you know you locked the night before is always open the following morning? Where hushed whimpering is heard? Where white shadows steal through the darkness? Where the presence of evil is all around you?

Would you? Should you?

The Caleighs did, but they had their reasons. They should have known better though. As the terror mounts, they begin to regret their decision. As the horror rises, they realize their very lives are at risk....and so is their sanity. For the secret of Crickley Hall is beyond all nightmares.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for *The Secret of Crickley Hall*

“This is a powerfully disturbing read...two pages in, the reader is hooked, and Herbert has done his job. The horror. The horror.” —*The Guardian*

“A chilling classic haunted house tale.” —*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

“A new James Herbert novel is always a mesmerizing experience.” —*Fangoria*

“A literary Steven Spielberg.” —*The Sunday Times*

“Herbert is regarded as Britain’s Stephen King, and for good reason...taut, unflinching, compelling, and downright disturbing, Herbert is a name to remember.” —*Charleston Post and Courier*

About the Author

Horror writer JAMES HERBERT was born in London, England. Before becoming a full-time writer, he worked as a singer and an art director for an advertising agency. His novels have sold more than forty-two million copies worldwide and have been translated into thirty-three languages, including Russian and Chinese. Besides writing his novels, he also designs the book covers and handles the publicity.

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Secret of Crickley Hall, The
THEN

They scattered into a darkness scarcely tempered by oil lamps, the soft glow easily repressed by the deep shadows of the house.

The shrieks and cries of the fleeing children rose above the noise of the storm outside. The sound of their stockinged feet was soft on the hard stone floor of the cavernous hall.

Some of them took to the stairs, scurrying past the tall, almost ceiling-high window at the turn, rain beating at its glass, the fierce wind rattling the frames, lightning flickering outside and casting darker shadows across the stone floor.

The children found refuge wherever they could - behind furniture, beneath tables, inside cupboards, anywhere they might sink into the umbra and be hidden while they prayed they would not be found. There in their hopeless sanctuaries they held their whimpers but were unable to control the chattering of their teeth and the nervous fidget of their limbs, for they knew that eventually he would find them, that he would seek them out one by one.

Silent tears drenched their cheeks and glacial fingers seemed to squeeze their small hearts.

He would snatch them from their hideaways and punish them. And this time, a cruel knowing voice whispered in their minds, this time it would be the worst punishment of all ...

They heard his approach even though he wore no shoes, for he swished something through the cold damp air, each swishending in a sudden violent thwack, the beating of cane against bare flesh. Swish, then

thwack, *cane on flesh*, swish, *then thwack, two individual sounds that could be clearly heard over the raging storm outside*. Swish-thwack! *Louder*, swish-thwack! *Louder, coming closer*. Swish-thwack! *Almost becoming one sound*.

They tried to be very, very quiet ...

1: ARRIVAL

Although the rain had ceased for the moment, single thick globules, as if too heavy to be held by the blanket cloud overhead, splattered against the windscreen like miniature water bombs, and were quickly reduced to smears by the intermittent sweep of the wipers. Eve's spirits had felt as low as the weather during the earlier part of the five-hour journey (including the break for lunch) from London, and now they dropped to an even lower level.

The big grey-stone house on the other side of the narrow rushing river looked grim, more like an ancient sanatorium or resthome for the indigent elderly than a family home.

Gabe had parked the Range Rover in a small clear area beside the lane that led a mile or so downhill to the harbour village of Hollow Bay. Despite the miserable weather, Eve had felt her heart lift a little (as much as it was capable of lifting these days) once they'd left the motorway - interstate, Gabe, her American husband, kept calling it - and reached the West Country; she had almost enjoyed travelling through sheltered lanes with close beech hedges that frequently gave way to wide sweeping moorlands of fine heather and bracken, distant woodland-clad hills their pastel backcloth, not even the dark louring skies spoiling the splendour. Rather than announce nature's retreat towards winter, the autumn colours- the reds, greens, browns, golds and yellows - of woodlands and fauna boasted their glory as the Range Rover sped through deep valleys and crossed rough-stone bridges over tumbling streams.

Gabe had promised them healthy long walks (much to the exaggerated groans of their daughters, Loren and Cally), especially along the beautiful deep-sided and tree-lined gorge - he called it a ravine and the map called it Devil's Cleave - in which their new temporary home was situated; they would either follow the river down to the sea or climb towards its source on the high moors. It would be fun. On weekends they could explore the craggy coastline, the rugged clifftops and the small sheltered bays and sandy coves. Weather permitting, they could even take out a sailing boat and ride the waves. Or maybe do some horse riding (because his homeland was the States, Gabe had convinced their youngest daughter, Cally, that he had once been a cowboy, a fib for which he would have to answer when she discovered he'd never been on a horse in his life, Eve had thought wryly). If the weather was bad, they could just explore the countryside by car. There'd be plenty to keep them occupied on weekends, he had assured them. And it might help the healing, he told Eve when they were alone.

Now they were here and this was her first sight of Crickley Hall, which was not quite large enough to be called a manor, but was much too big for a normal home. Gabe had visited twice before, the first time in summer when he'd scouted the locale for a property close to the job to which his engineering company had been sub-contracted, and a second time a week ago when he'd hired a van and, with Vern Brennan, a fellow-American buddy of his, had delivered most of the bulky items the family would need for their stay (the house itself was already furnished with old-fashioned stuff, according to Gabe, which was good enough to get by with).

Through the Range Rover's windscreen, Eve saw that a sturdy wooden bridge traversed the swift-moving, boulder-strewn Bay River, which Gabe had described as no more than a wide, gentle stream when he had returned from viewing the property a couple of months ago. But then, it had been late August; now the boisterous waters threatened to overspill the raised banks. The bridge itself was made of rough timber, the sides crosshatched with thin lengths of rustic logs beneath thick rails; while it appeared strong, the structure was not wide enough to accept the Range Rover - nor any other largish vehicle - hence the parking bay on this side of the river.

On the opposite bank, the house - or Hall, as it was called - occupied a level expanse of cut grass and shrubbery with the odd tree here and there (one tree near the front had a child's swing dangling from a stout branch). The far thickly foliated side of the gorge loomed impressively steep, high over the stark building.

'It looks a bit grim,' she found herself saying, immediately regretting the criticism; Gabe had tried so hard. Her husband looked across at her from the driver's seat, his wide tight-lipped smile concealing any disappointment.

'Guess it looked a little different in summer,' he said.

'No, the weather doesn't help.' She touched his hand on the steering wheel and made herself return the smile. His wonderfully blue eyes, darkened by the gloom of the car's interior, examined her own for reassurance.

'It's just a change, hon,' he almost apologized. 'We all need it.'

'Can we get out now, Daddy?' came Cally's impatient voice from the back seat. 'I'm tired of sitting.'

Switching off the engine and thumbing open his seatbelt, Gabe turned and gave his younger daughter a grin.

'Sure. It's been a long haul and you've been pretty good all the way.'

'Chester's bin a good boy too.' The five-year-old squirmed in her seat, searching for the seatbelt button.

The black, lean, coarse-haired dog, who slumped on the back seat between the two sisters, sparked to attention at the sound of his name. When Gabe and Eve had picked him out at the south London dogs' home six years before, they had been told that the year-old puppy was a crossbreed, something of a Patterdale in there somewhere, but Gabe reckoned the scruffy orphan was all mongrel, without an ounce of breeding in his runty little body.

Chester (Gabe had chosen the name) had grown to almost fifteen inches high: he was cow-hocked with turned-out feet, back and front, and there was too little angulation to his hind legs for dog show events; there were now grey and brown hairs among his short black fur, especially under his muzzle, chest and the untidy tufts around his neck. Seven years old, those dark-brown eyes still held their puppy appeal and, even though he was generally a happy-natured dog, his turned-down mouth gave him a perpetual cast of sadness. When they lost Cam almost a year ago, Chester had howled for three nights running as if he knew more than they did, as if he were aware their son was gone for ever.

Gabe acknowledged the now-alert dog with a slight upward tilt of his chin, the opposite to a nod. 'Yep.

Chester's been pretty tight. Not even a small leak all this way.'

'Only because I told you every time he looked uncomfortable,' reminded Loren, who had that pretty but gangly appearance of many twelve-year-old girls, pre-teenage and just beginning to take a greater interest in what was worthy of 'cool', be it in music, clothes, or Mother's make-up. Sometimes she assumed a maturity that should not yet have been learned, while at other times she was still his 'princess' who loved her dolls and frequent hugs (the latter more occasional than frequent these days).

Loren had been adamant that no way was she leaving her friends and school in London to live in a place thousands of miles from anywhere, a place where she didn't know anybody, a place she'd never even heard of. It took some persuasion, plus a promise of having her very own cell phone so that she could keep in constant touch with all her girlfriends, to convince her things would be okay down in Devon. That and the quiet one-to-one chat Gabe had with her where he'd explained that the deal was to get Mummy away from their regular home and its constant reminders of Cameron for a while, just long enough maybe to allow Eve some closure to a year that had been horrendous for them all. Loren had understood immediately and had put aside her reluctance to leave - until the last few days, that is, when imminent departure had drawn out long goodbyes and floods of tears between her and her closest friends.

'Good thing you decided to come along then,' Gabe responded with only mild teasing.

'Thank you,' he added seriously, looking directly into his eldest daughter's eyes, and she knew he was thanking her for more than just watching over Chester.

'Okay, Dad.'

He realized at that moment that he missed the extra 'd' and the 'y' at the end of 'Dad' and wondered when it had started happening. Was Loren, his princess, growing up so fast that he hadn't noticed? With a jab of melancholy that perhaps only fathers of growing daughters can know (sons were way different, except to doting mothers), he swung back in his seat, glancing at Eve as he did so. There was a moistness to her gaze as she studied the big house on the other side of the bridge.

'You'll like it more when the sun comes out,' he promised her softly.

'Daddy, can we get out?' came Cally's pleading voice again. Cally was seven years junior to Loren and now the same age as Cameron when he'd disappeared almost a year ago. Five. They'd lost their son when he was only five years old.

'Put your hats on first. It might pour again.' Eve was instructing them all, Gabe included. He reached into the glove compartment for his woollen beanie, pulling it down half over his ears against the chill he knew waited beyond the cosy warmth of the Range Rover. Eve checked their daughters were following suit before pulling the hood of her rainproof jacket over her own dark hair.

Beneath her untidy fringe lay deep-brown eyes that until a year ago had reflected warmth and a sly humour; but now grief had shadowed them and dulled their vibrancy so that feelings were no longer exposed, were curtained by perdurable sorrow. As the girls obeyed hat orders and reached for door latches, Chester standing on the seat and pawing at Cally's shoulder to get past her, Eve stepped out of the SUV and surveyed Crickley Hall once more.

She heard Chester's yelp and Cally's whoop as they tumbled out of the other side of the vehicle and something bit into her heart as child and pet headed straight for the wet bridge.

'Gabe,' she said apprehensively, drawing in a sharp breath.

'S'okay.' Louder, at Cally: 'Hey, rein in, Scout. Wait for us.'

Cally skidded to a halt on the wet planks of the short bridge, but Chester continued, yapping with pleasure at the sudden release, only pausing when he was halfway across the lawn. The child's swing close by stirred in the slight breeze. The dog looked back over his shoulder uncertainly.

Eve eyed the rough latticework of the bridge, then the beleaguered riverbanks. They would all have to keep a watch on Cally: the diamond-shaped openings between the diagonal struts were wide enough for a child to slip through on the deck made greasy by rain and spray, and the riverbanks were not fenced, their edges unstable. Cally would have to be warned never to use the bridge or go near the water on her own. They could not lose another child. Dear God, they mustn't lose another child. Eve raised a hand to her mouth as a latent sob caught in her throat.

Gabe hunkered down in his black reefer jacket, collar turned up round his ears, which were mostly covered by the beanie, and hurried towards their youngest daughter, while Loren followed just behind. Cally waited midway across the bridge, unsure whether she'd been silly or naughty. She looked questioningly at her approaching father and smiled when she saw him grinning. He scooped her up in his arms and together, Loren pausing to wait for Eve, they left the bridge and walked towards the tall grey house.

The building was constructed of simple dull-grey granite blocks, even the quoins at each corner and the windowsills of the same drab shade. Most of the other old and largish residences they passed in the last half hour or so of their journey had been built with limestone or sandstone, even flint: none had been as plain, nor as dour, as this place. The only embellishment, such as it was, seemed to be the shallow pilasters on either side of the huge nail-studded door, these bridged by an equally plain stone lintel which offered precious little cover for any visitor waiting in the rain on the two meagre cracked steps that led up to the entrance.

There were four sizeable windows to the ground floor, with six smaller windows along the upper storey, and four more even smaller dormer windows jutting from the slope of the slate roof, the slope itself quickly squaring off to accommodate four brick chimney stacks.

Eve frowned. Crickley Hall's architect either had a limited imagination or was hindered by budgetary constraints.

A rough-edged, sparsely gravelled pathway angled from the end of the bridge towards the house's main entrance, joining with a perimeter walkway which was also a mixture of mud and thinly layered stones. The sheer gorge wall of lush vegetation that towered over the grey building somehow should have cowed it, yet failed to do so: Crickley Hall's brooding presence was unequivocal.

Eve kept the thought to herself: this place was not just grim - it was ugly.

A little way off to the right, with bushes and tree branches on the gorge wall looming over its flat roof, stood a small garden shed whose weather-worn planking was turned dark by the rain.

'Come on, Mummy!' Cally and Gabe were almost at the front door to the house and Cally had called over her

shoulder. The two of them waited for Eve and Loren to catch up.

Chester, who was still poised by the gently swaying swing, lingered until they drew level, then trotted alongside.

'Have you got the key ready?' Eve called out to Gabe, a drop of rain spitting against her cheek.

'The key will be in the door. The estate manager had cleaners in this morning to make sure the place is bright and sparkling.'

As they stood together on the two long but low steps, Eve realized that the broad, nail-studded, worn oak door seemed to be from a different era than that of the plain building and she wondered if the wider than usual portal had been designed to accommodate it; the door might well have been reclaimed from some ancient demolished manor house or monastery, with its almost gothic leopard-head iron door knocker. She watched as Gabe made great ceremony of pressing the big china-white doorbell that was surrounded by a ring of discoloured brass between the wall and right-hand pilaster. They all heard a rusty electric brurr from inside.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

'Just letting the ghosts know we're here, hon.'

'Dad, there's no such thing,' chided Loren, indignant again.

'Sure of that?'

Eve was impatient. 'Come on, Gabe, open up.' She wondered if the inside was as austere as the exterior.

Gabe pushed at the huge central doorknob with his right hand and, without a single creak, the heavy door swung open.

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Users Review

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