



THE
**BEST
CELLAR**

*Murder and Mystery at the
Werner-Bok Library*

**CHARLES
GOODRUM**

author of Dewey Decimated and Carnage of the Realm

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Charles Goodrum

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THE BEST CELLAR

ALSO BY CHARLES GOODRUM

Werner-Bok Mysteries

Dewey Decimated
Carnage of the Realm

Humor

I'll Trade You an Elk

Nonfiction

The Library of Congress
Treasures of the Library of Congress

(with Helen Dalrymple)

Guide to the Library of Congress

THE BEST CELLAR

Chapter 1

ON Monday afternoon, the guide came out of her neat little brick building and bent over the Next Tour clock. She advanced the hand to three, straightened up, adjusted her uniform, and said, "Those of you who would like to join me in the mansion may assemble here on the walk, and we'll go up together."

The scattered couples all beamed their eagerness at the idea and started to drift toward the guide. Six, she counted. Three couples. She guessed two retired members of the Antique and Garden Club, an editor and his wife on their way to a convention in Washington, and a pair of blue-jeaned graduate students. The students were holding hands, with difficulty, in the boy's pocket. Sweet, she thought. I wonder if they're living together, and if so, how long will it last? The "editor" was looking at the guide and thinking what a shame it was to put such a splendid figure into such a flat uniform, and his wife was looking at the same uniform and thinking, God, that must be hot in the summer.

"As you can see, the house is one of the most beautiful

Georgian buildings in the country," the guide was saying. "It was built in 1741 and it still looks almost exactly the way it did when it first went up. Like all the great homes of Tidewater Virginia, it was oriented to the river. The owner came up the water looking for some land. He selected this promontory, and he brought in his workmen by boat. They cleared this spot out of the forest and built this terribly sophisticated building, which could have sat quite comfortably in Hyde Park, England." She was now turned a quarter toward their center of interest, but she was still standing firmly on the oystershell walk. Nobody was going anywhere until she was ready for them to move.

"The rivers were to the Tidewater plantations what the interstates are to us. Everything that was really going anywhere went by water. Every one of the three hundred great Virginia plantations had its own dock, and ocean-going ships would come right up to their own landing. The planter would walk out of his front door, go down his own walk and on to the ship—and when he stepped off again, he was in Bristol or London. It had a powerful impact on his thinking."

She smoothed the skirt across her hips, conscious of the editor's attention, and then started slowly toward the building.

"Practically everything you see came out of the land around us. The bricks were made of the clay dug out of the basement, and they were fired right over there." She pointed to a smooth stretch of well-mowed lawn. "The oak floors and the hemlock joists and beams came from the woods here. Even though it all looks terribly European, only the window glass and the locks and hinges were brought in. The doors and windows—everything—was made right here on the spot. Everything fit into its own hole. Nothing's the same size as anything else even though it all looks perfectly symmetrical."

She told her story very well, and while it was clear that

it was far from the first time she'd given it, she said it like it mattered. As she drifted toward the building, she timed her points to an exact match with the length of the curved driveway. At a discreet distance from the entrance she stopped and said, "Now I'd appreciate it if you would stay fairly close to me when we go inside. The house is still lived in by relatives of the original owners, and they have only made the downstairs available for our viewing."

This was too much for the students. "Wait a minute," the man said. "What do you mean, 'still lived in'? I thought this belonged to the state."

"Actually it does. The family gave it to Virginia about three years ago, but the two elderly ladies can live in it as long as they want to."

"Are they alone in there?" the retired wife asked.

"No, there's also a nephew living with them—but no servants, if that's what you mean." The guide's formality slipped slightly into a giggle, and she said, "Actually, the nephew disappeared over the weekend, and there is a slight flap going on. If someone comes out and looks at you very closely, don't be too surprised." She smiled to signal that it was of no great moment.

"Is the state giving the ladies something to live on?" the editor's wife asked.

Another broad smile. "No, that's hardly necessary. These are Brents, and though the family had a little difficulty after the Civil War—the plantation was down to about two thousand acres by 1880—they at least had their land, and they've been selling it off through the years and investing the money in more modern things. A Brent was the president of Southern Seaboard at one time, and they're all big in textiles. There's been a Brent on the board of Virginia Electric for generations. They are . . . very wealthy."

"Then why did they give up the house?"

The guide hesitated, apparently rejected a more politic

answer, and said, "When their brother died, the inheritance taxes would have been such a scr—such a shock, they unloaded the Hall to save themselves an enormous amount of money. Are there any questions about the mansion itself?"

"Yes," the editor said. "The house looks like Williamsburg. What is there about Williamsburg that always looks the same? We come from New England and our Salem and Deerfield houses were built at the same time these were, but they don't look like this. What makes a Williamsburg house look like Williamsburg?"

"Two things," the guide said. "Part real and part social. The reality is that Tidewater houses are built in a part of the country that is brutally hot most of the time. The houses had to have high ceilings and big windows and cross-ventilation to keep the heat from wiping out the owners. Mount Vernon still gets to over 100 degrees on the second floor most of the summer. The ground comes in here, too. Virginia houses are all built on clay, and they dug out the cellars to get material for the bricks. This also gave them a cool place to store food and wine, and by the time you put in a few windows so you can see in the cellar, you've jacked up 'Williamsburg houses' so they look sort of tall and patrician.

"New England houses were built for cold climates. Low ceilings, small windows. It's cold more of the time than it's hot. They sit on rocky soil and very few of them could have basements, so they sit low and rather firm on the ground. But there's a social element here, too. The Williamsburgers were very sympathetic to the English and they wanted to look as much like prosperous, well-heeled British as they could, so they copied the landed gentry's houses. Most of the New Englanders wanted no part of England—they'd fled from religious persecution or the Civil War or something, and wanted to look as different as

possible. They went in for local materials built in utilitarian designs.”

The guide looked toward the visitors’ parking lot and frowned slightly at the sight of two tourists getting out of an expensive sports van. The pair started toward the house, making a wide arc along the trees, and the guide decided to add a few paragraphs to give the tourists a chance to join the group.

“The colonial Virginian tried to make everything neat and orderly. His houses are always balanced, his drives come right down the middle of the lot, the gardens are always symmetrical. He tried to keep all the social classes neat, too.”

The editor smiled, and asked, “And would you say it worked?”

The guide laughed. “No better than our way. The colonial Williamsburg papers are loaded with local crime, the economy was just as confused as ours . . . but I don’t know . . . at least the clothes and the food and the furnishings were more graceful.”

“But no murders, rapes, and muggings.”

“Oh, yes. All three. I was reading George Wythe’s biography just last week,” the guide said. “You know, the Wythe of the Wythe house in Williamsburg—Jefferson and Marshall’s law teacher. Did you know he died in agony? A teenage nephew found he was in Wythe’s will and tried to hasten the bequest. He got a slave to help him poison the old man by pouring lye down his throat. Wythe lived a couple of weeks in incredible pain, long enough to disinherit the nephew. That was all, though. You couldn’t be made to testify against yourself even in those days, and a slave’s testimony didn’t count, so the nephew got off scot-free!”

She looked toward the latest tourists to see how they were progressing and was surprised to find they had disap-

peared completely. Pivoting around, she could find no sign of them in any direction.

"Hmmp," she said. "All right. Let's go in."

She started up the half-dozen steps to the portico. "Why don't you join me in going back into the eighteenth century? Let your mind slip. Everything really is almost the same. This sharp smell of boxwood would have filled the air two hundred years ago just like it does now. The sound of our steps on the oystershells would have been the same. If we had been only men, we would have come on horseback and there would have been the smell of leather and sweaty horses. If we women had been along, we would have come in a cart or a coach and these would be creaking on their straps behind us, but still the smell of horses and box. There would have been seamen's shouts coming up from the river, and the rumble of tobacco barrels being rolled across planks into a ship down below . . ."

She inserted a huge brass key into the polished lock and turned the handle.

Chapter 2

ON Tuesday, Betty Crighton Jones sat at her desk in the vaulted depths of the Werner-Bok Library and thought, "God, what a sublime way to get through life. And to think they're paying me for this."

She looked across at her work table, where six cans of the first motion pictures ever made were sitting, and she shook her head. "There's Fred Ott's *Sneeze* and I can run the frames through my fingers." Monday, Efram Perzach had kissed her hand, and she had gushed her thanks for his graceful introduction to the library's facsimile of the Brahms Violin Concerto. He had replied, "Ah, yes, Miss Jones. A lovely piece of music. I played it in Hamburg just last week. Hamburg is the very best place to play Brahms. Cold and foggy and damp. I was honored to help with your project." There were three Dürer etchings signed by the artist lying loose by the film cans. Jesus. What a way to make a living.

Yesterday, it was true, hadn't been so hot. She'd been hammered by incessant phone calls from people working the institution over for its acquisition of the Ransome fam-

ily papers. Six big names from the Green Book had threatened to take *their* family records back, but by dint of low-keyed and patient diplomacy, everyone seemed to have calmed down, for the moment at least. While it was true that the Ransome family lived in a plywood teepee outside Taos and had deliberately torched a nursery school for publicity, all the kids had gotten out in time, and if you're trying to capture the story of American culture, surely the Ransomes represented the sixties as well as anyone. Think what the scholars could have done with the James family papers, if someone had saved them in time. Jesse, of course, not William and Henry. The Werner-Bok already had theirs.

No, the mix was marvelous. The curse, Crighton thought, was guilt and the pressure from her peers. She was twenty-nine. She'd brought off her first job with class but she'd been in it for three years now. Everyone said it was time to quit and move on. Why? If you don't, everyone will think you can't. You owe it to your career. Nobody works *for* you; you need supervisory experience. And when you're forty what will you wish you'd done today? Do you really want to spend your whole life being a public relations officer working in a Washington basement?

She sighed and looked up to see a stylish young woman step through her open door. Designer stuff if I've ever seen it, Crighton thought. Class. No garret scholar this.

"Miss Jones?" the woman asked. "I'm Durance Steele, and the folks at the Library of Congress suggested I come down to see you."

Crighton smiled and jumped up to pull the only other chair in the room away from the work table and set it beside her desk. She waved toward it. "Please sit down. What can I do for you?"

The woman eased into place, striking the long-legged

pose of a hosiery ad so gracefully that Crighton wondered if she were a model.

"My problem is," the woman said, "I need shelter." She flipped her hair back with a practiced snap. "I've come up to do a few weeks' research at the Library of Congress, and I need someplace I can stay without bankrupting myself in hotel rooms. I'd heard in Charlottesville that LC had rooms for scholars scattered around Capitol Hill, but now that I'm here they tell me everything's taken." Steele opened a sleek leather purse and extracted a slip of paper. "A Miss Claasson said that you might know of something here at the Werner-Bok."

"Lynda Claasson. Yes. Good kid. We trade thinking bodies back and forth." Crighton frowned and let her eyes go out of focus. "I think everyone on our list is full, too, but there's a grandmotherly type behind the Folger who's going to open up the middle of next week. We've placed a medievalist there and he's about to pull out." She laughed. "He's a funny little man. He's been creeping through one of our books of hours for a month now and either he's finally gotten to the end of it or his eyes have given out. Would you believe, he's been doing it a word at a time with a magnifying glass as big as a pie plate? Just lovely. What's your project?"

"I think I may have found a real time bomb in one of our national myths. Something quite startling, really."

"What period?"

"Jefferson Federal."

"Oh? What are you going to do with it? Is it a book? A paper?"

"No, I hope to roll it up and shove it into the conventional wisdom."

"Ummm." Crighton had never been overly sympathetic with the icon breakers, and she felt little interest in tripping a smarter-than-everybody lecture at this time of day.

On the other hand, the woman *was* rather unusual. She seemed totally miscast as a Jefferson scholar. She was beautifully made up, expensively dressed, and carried herself with the assurance of a Seven Sisters class president. "Where did you do your work?"

"U. Va."

"Really? I'd have guessed Vassar."

No response at all. No change of expression. Freeze frame silence.

Crighton found herself pricked with curiosity. What the hell, she thought, let's take a chance. Broaden the horizons.

"How does this grab you?" she asked. "What do you say you go up and check out the little old lady on the Hill, and if it looks right, go ahead and sign up for it, then stay with me until the room opens up. I've got an extra bedroom and you can get started on your research while you wait. I live out Massachusetts near American U. You can get in and out by bus quite easily. Do you have a car with you?"

"Yes, I drove up. It's in a lot near the Library of Congress."

"Good. Let me give you the address and you can check out the room, then come back here and we'll go to dinner. Either way you can tell me what you've decided while we eat. Does that make sense?"

"That would be most gracious of you, Miss Jones. I'll accept without a moment's hesitation. I'm assuming it wouldn't be too wildly inconvenient or you wouldn't have suggested it. Thank you. It's lovely of you."

"No strain. Let me get the details and you can get on with it."

Crighton copied off the essential data, handed it over, and Durance Steele disappeared, promising to be back in the basement office by five.

With the room cleared, Crighton checked the clock.

Three-thirty. She looked again at the day's correspondence and was reassured that she had either answered everything or gotten the queries into the right hands for an appropriate response. Only a single letter remained to be resolved. She took it in hand and started down the corridor for the elevator.

The Werner-Bok Library sits on the Mall exactly centered between the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum and the National Gallery of Art. Crighton took the elevator to the third floor where the various area studies reading rooms were distributed around the Great Hall. Stepping out of the elevator she turned left toward the National Gallery and the Capitol end of the building and headed for Asian Studies. Once inside she let her eyes become accustomed to the soft green from thick, hand-blown glass windows and headed for the division chief's office. Asian Studies had been designed with the rest of the building at the turn of the century, and to sustain the Far Eastern atmosphere, the architect had chosen Chinese Chippendale furniture, with lighted alcoves for porcelains and jades set at regular intervals along the walls. The effect had been good in 1898, and it had aged gracefully into our own time.

"Dr. Wu," she said, once seated opposite the chief, "we got a fairly nasty letter today from the Anglo-American Society of Oriental Studies. Here it is. As you'll see, they are insisting we stop referring to our Gutenberg as the earliest example of printing. They want all our guidebooks corrected, and a whole mess of publications worked on. You'll see." She waited until he had examined the letter, and then asked, "What's the deal? Have they got a case?"

Dr. Wu replied with a broad smile. "Of course. The Chinese and the Japanese and the Koreans were printing books six hundred years before Gutenberg was born."