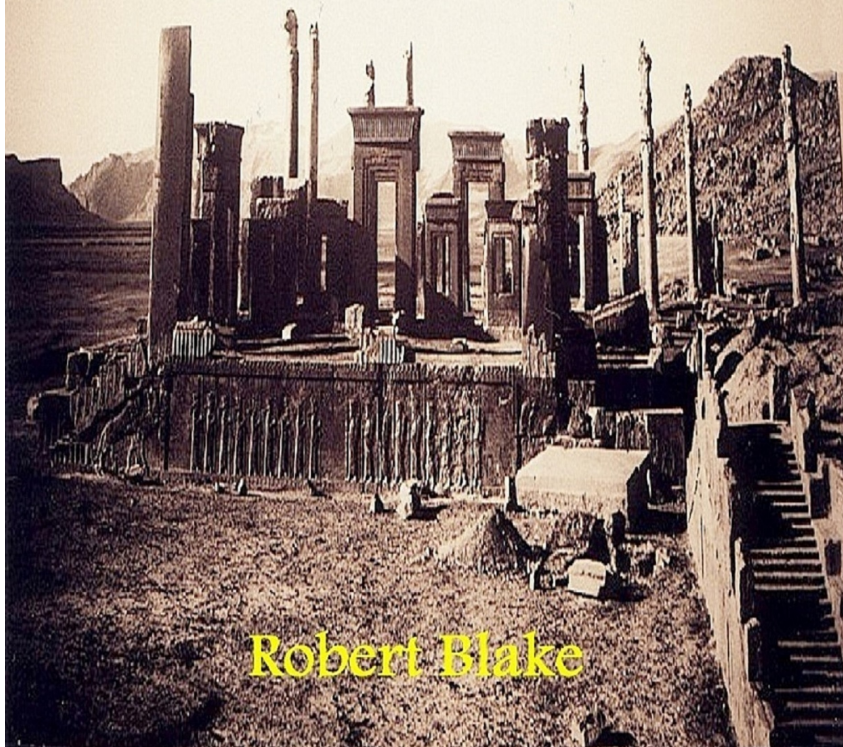




# LOST HERITAGE



Robert Blake

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## Lost Heritage

### Аннотация

A vibrant thriller of adventure, suspense and mystery set in the last quarter of the XIX century and the First World War.

A prominent archaeologist disappears under strange circumstances during the First World War as armies battle an endless front engulfed in bloody battles and enormous hardships that wreak havoc on both sides.

At the end of the war, a shrewd journalist intrigued by the surprising disappearance of the archaeologist will undertake a complex investigation, which will take him to travel different continents in a fast-paced search until he can unravel an unusual episode in the history of the British Empire.

Immerse yourself in a fast-paced thriller where you can discover some of the most famous finds from the golden age of archeology.

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Lost  
Heritage  
Robert Blake



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Translated by: Paul Bowen  
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**LOST HERITAGE**

# Prologue

Thessalonica, 1912

‘We’ve been waiting for more than half an hour in this suffocating heat,’ the Oxford professor growled as he looked at his pocket watch. ‘When is that ferryman going to turn up?’

He kept looking into the distance, but the dawn mist was so thick that no one could see hardly anything in front of their faces. Only the sound of some bird diving into the water in search of fish broke the profound silence.

‘I don't think he'll be long,’ I replied as I took a look at the old parchment map once more.

‘Do you think we'll find the exact place in this mist,’ added the professor.

Kalisteas, our Greek guide, seemed to be biting at his lip. He was growing weary of the old man's complaints.

‘As soon as the first rays of the sun come out, the mist will begin to evaporate and the lake will be visible.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I've been here lots of times,’ he replied smugly.

The professor looked him up and down. He couldn't stand arrogance.

‘I hope you're right,’ I said looking him in the eyes. ‘We must have a bright clear day to be able to interpret this map.’

‘As long as it's not some crude copy of the original made

centuries later,' added the professor with a half-smile.

'Then our journey to Thessalonica will have been in vain,' I replied wryly. 'I've never undertaken an expedition without having evidence first. This parchment is from the 4th century AD.'

'I know. That's why I decided to leave my library behind. Even so, allow an old man to still harbour doubts,' he sighed softly.

Suddenly, the ghostly shape of a ferryboat appeared from out of the mist. The ferryman greeted Kalisteas and waved for us to get on board.

'They were thinking you weren't going to come,' Kalisteas told him. 'My companions were starting to get nervous.'

The ferryman stared at him. He didn't like either being given orders or being held to a particular time.

'It's difficult to navigate in this mist, even for me' replied the ferryman.

Kalisteas looked at him in surprise.

'Let's go,' he added bluntly. 'It will take us twice as long to get there in these conditions.'

On one knee, the ferryman began to brandish his long oar from top to bottom, while the rest of us sat in front of him, trying to distinguish anything through the dense mist on that hot morning in which the water looked like a mill pond. Only the sound of birdsong broke the golden silence of the dawn.

The first rays of sunlight finally began to appear, penetrating through the clouds and punching holes in the mist, allowing us

to glimpse the splendid morning in that extensive wetland.

The grotto to which we were heading looked like a simple gap in the rocks from a distance, but as we approached it became larger.

‘The water level hasn’t dropped down far enough!’ Kalisteas shouted while pointing. ‘Half the cave must still be flooded!’

Only the top part was dry. The water still reached up to three quarters of the height of the cave wall.

‘The parchment clearly states that this is the only month of the year in which the water level will drop far enough down to make the cave accessible,’ I replied.

‘Last month it rained a great deal. The water level is much higher than usual.’

‘So now what do we do?’ groaned the professor.

‘We swim, my friend,’ Kalisteas announced with a wry smile. He seemed amused by the situation.

The ferryman took us right up to the very entrance of the cave, so that we only had to jump into the water and swim a short distance to reach a rocky ledge running along the inside.

‘Have you paid the ferryman?’ the Greek asked after we had reached the ledge.

‘We didn’t have time. We had to jump into the water straight away.’

Kalisteas shook his head again and again.

‘I’ll pay him when we get back,’ I replied.

‘He was expecting to be paid then and there. How can you

be sure that we'll make it back?' he added angrily and started walking towards a shaft off to his left.

'Why is he so angry?' asked the professor whispering in my ear when the Greek had gotten a few yards ahead of us.

'Not paying the ferryman brings bad luck,' I replied. 'Greeks are very superstitious.'

We lit the way with the kerosene lamps we had carefully wrapped up in our backpacks and Kalistead led us down a narrow passageway that meandered left and right, as well as up and down. As we began to descend, the heat became even more stifling, until we came to a fork in the passageways with two separate shafts leading off in different directions.

'This is as far as I know,' Kalistead said quietly. 'Now it's your turn.'

We carefully looked over the walls of this crossroads, until the professor recognized some inscriptions engraved at the bottom of one of the shaft walls. Turning towards us with a triumphant smile on his face, he announced:

'This is the way. I have no doubt about it.'

While we continued down the narrow shaft we could hear the fluttering of bats behind us, until the passage came to an abrupt end.

After using the lamps to look all around us, we could see a narrow opening on our left through which only one person at a time could just about squeeze through.

'The secret entrance,' the professor announced.

Kalisteas stooped and entered the narrow opening while we followed.

We had to squat down and even at times crawl our way along the tunnel, our legs beginning to go numb as we advanced, until finally, we reached the foot of a rough spiral stone staircase, which went down further still.

On reaching the bottom of the staircase, the professor was panting.

‘Are you all right?’

‘Of course I am. Don’t worry about me. I may be an old bookworm who’s not used to exercise, but there’s no way I’m giving up now.’

Kalisteas smiled on seeing this spirit of adventure in the professor while he was hunched over trying to catch his breath.

‘I think we’ve reached the end,’ the Greek announced as he pointed ahead.

There in front of us was a dark underground lagoon. As we approached the edge of it, we could distinguish a very small altar at the opposite end of this grotto.

‘We’ve only got two options,’ I exclaimed, turning to my companions. ‘We either cross the lagoon or we turn around and try one of the other tunnels.’

‘There’s something I don’t like about this cave,’ declared the professor.

We began to look around the lagoon’s edge. There was only a tiny area of solid ground flanked by a huge rock wall about 30-

foot high that extended all around the lagoon.

‘The altar on the other side doesn’t seem that far away,’ said Kalisteas. ‘I’m a good swimmer. I think I could get across without much of a problem.’

‘There’s no trace of any human presence. It’s as if no one has ever been here’ added the professor.

We both stared at him as if he had read our minds. The Greek began to remove his clothing and prepared to enter the water.

‘Are you sure you can swim over to there?’ I asked him.

He smiled with a nod.

Kalisteas got into the cold water and began to stroke away. He had been swimming for just a short time when we heard a splash in the water and a small wave forming some distance away from him.

‘Look over there,’ said the professor pointing.

‘Swim back as fast as you can!’ I yelled to him instantly. ‘There’s something in the water!’

Kalisteas looked over to his left and saw the ripple in the water approaching him.

‘Shine the light over there, professor!’ I said as I took out my revolver from its waterproof wrapping and started shooting in that direction.

The shots seemed to make the creature hesitate and change direction, giving Kalisteas the time to get back to us safe and sound.

‘We now know why no one seems to have crossed this lagoon,’

the Greek said as he was drying himself off.

‘And now what?’ asked the professor.

‘I have no idea’ I replied, looking around that sinister cavern once more.

We spent some time scrutinizing the place trying to find a solution. At first we thought that the best idea was to turn around and come back another day with the right equipment, but we were far from the nearest town and the entrance to the cave would be submerged again in a couple of days. That would have meant waiting a whole year to try again.

Having run out of ideas, we sat on the outcrop of rocks at the water's edge. Despite the darkness, the torches were reflected in the water of the lagoon, drawing a starry sky over the grotto's vaulted ceiling.

That vision reminded me of a time a few years earlier when I had gotten up before the break of dawn to undertake the tough climb of one of the Alpine mountains during my holidays in Switzerland.

‘That wall,’ and I pointed to the left, ‘runs right along the grotto. It starts here on our side and ends right at the little altar over there. If I can manage to climb along it, I wouldn't have to get wet.’

‘You've gone mad?’ the professor declared as if he were teaching back in his Oxford classroom.

‘I can cross that wall from one end to the other. Look!’ I said pointing at it. ‘There are cracks and fissures all along the rock

face. Anyone could climb along it without too much trouble.'

'It's too risky,' added Kalisteas. It was the first time I had seen fear in his eyes.

'I haven't come this far just to turn back. We're on the point of the greatest archaeological discovery in history,' I replied angrily.

They both lowered their heads and kept their mouths shut.

I took one last look all along the rock wall face, trying to envisage my route. There were certainly enough cracks and fissures that could provide hand and foot holds for someone who was as experienced at climbing as I was. After a last look, I began the ascent.

The first section was relatively easy. I climbed to a not too excessive height, around 20 feet above the level of the lagoon, high enough to ensure that nothing could attack me from the water. I inched my way along searching for a crack that could provide first a handhold and then a foothold, taking one step after another with great care. The humidity in the underground cavern had made its mark on the walls over the years, creating a large number of cracks and fissures.

Upon reaching halfway, I was beginning to feel tired but on looking down, I saw the water gently stir in the centre of the lagoon; something that gave me more than enough motivation to carry on.

As I neared the altar, its close proximity renewed my strength. However, the biggest obstacle came a moment later as the number of cracks into which I could put my hand or my foot had

become much fewer and further between. There were only a few feet left to go and I could already clearly see that relic.

‘What is it?’ Kalisteads yelled when he saw me stop.

‘There aren’t enough cracks in the wall for me to hold on to!’

I replied.

‘You should have paid the ferryman,’ he growled angrily.

I pretended not to hear him. I climbed down the wall as stealthily as I could as there was no other way to get over to the other side than to enter the water. I silently and very gently slipped my body into the cold liquid until it came up to my neck. There was no turning back, and I started to swim towards the altar with all my strength.

Although the distance was very short, as I stepped onto the ground on the other side I heard a snapping sound behind me. Without thinking twice, I took out my revolver and emptied the magazine without seeing exactly what I was firing at. I could only see ripples in the water that drifted back in the opposite direction.

Having regained my calm, I was at last able to reach the small altar. It sat on a tombstone in the middle of a small square cut into the rock. On the tombstone itself had been engraved the depiction of a procession of mourners, and beneath them was what looked like a tomb displaying letters that were barely readable, having been worn away by the humidity and the passing of the years. I ran my hand over both the engravings and the inscription and immediately felt a sensation that even today I cannot describe using mere words alone.

I was paralyzed, rooted to the spot as I kept staring at them, until a loud buzzing noise shook me out of my trance-like state. I looked out over the lagoon, but saw nothing out of the ordinary.

‘You have to come back quickly!’ Kalisteas began to scream at the top of his lungs.

‘Not now! Not now that I've finally found it!’ I replied.

‘Forget it if you don't want it to be the last thing you'll ever see in your life! A storm is coming and in a short time the cave will be completely under water!’

Those words stabbed me in the heart.

‘Alright!’ I replied with resignation.

I knew I would have to set off back along the wall using the gaps in the rock face that were much nearer the surface of the water, even allowing my foot to go below the surface of the water once or twice. So, I shouted across to Kalisteas.

‘Do me a favour, Kalisteas. Start distracting the creature!’

‘How?’

‘Throw rocks into the water to attract our friend's attention! As soon as you see him approach you, tell me!’

‘Got it!’

A few moments later on seeing the creature approach, Kalisteas shouted. From the ripples in the water at the other side of the lagoon, it was clear that he had attracted the creature's attention. At that moment, I got into the water and started to swim the short distance to the point where there were an abundance of gaps in the wall close to the water's surface.

I did not look back as I emerged from the water and immediately started ascending the rock face. Just as I had cleared my feet from the water's surface, I could hear a swishing sound in the lagoon close behind me; a sound that grew more ominous as I started to put a few more inches between myself and the lagoon surface below.

With my heart pounding and with a greater familiarity of the handholds and footholds I had already used to get to that point, I climbed back along the wall at more than twice the speed I had come. All my previous caution had been thrown to the wind as I now started grabbing hold of any crack, or putting my foot in any gap I could, as pure adrenaline was pumping through my veins.

The thunderous noise outside continued to increase as I reached the other side, my hands torn and bleeding through the effort I had made and the chances I had taken.

The Greek hurried us back through the shafts, passageways and tunnels until we reached the cave. The water had risen so high that as we entered the water to swim out, our heads barely protruded above the surface as there was only just enough room between the water and the cave ceiling.

We were already in sight of the exit when the cave became completely submerged. Just before the exit, we all took a final deep breath and had to dive below the surface in order to cover the final stretch. Finally, we emerged into the sunlit lake overcome with relief as we saw the ferryman waiting for us.

The trip back had a bittersweet taste. We had made the

greatest archaeological discovery in human history but had brought back no evidence to support this. And worst of all, we would have to wait for a whole year in order to try again.

# Chapter 1

London, 1922

I was on my way to an exhibition being held in the main function room of the British Museum. Unfortunately, I was running late and had had to catch a taxi on the corner of White Hart Lane. All the writers and reporters for the most prominent newspapers were going to be there to cover the news of the year. For the first time, the most acclaimed archaeological discovery of recent years could be seen in London. No reporter worth his salt would miss this event.

By the time we had reached Piccadilly Circus we had run into a horrendous traffic jam, and for ten minutes we barely advanced twenty yards.

If I was late, I could consider myself fired.

‘How much?’ I asked the taxi driver.

‘Two shillings and tuppence’ he replied turning to me.

I paid him and got out.

After walking across Trafalgar Square in the drizzle, I hurried down several side streets until I came to Great Russell Street.

The atmosphere of expectation was even greater than I would have imagined. Hundreds of photographers, policemen and multitudes of onlookers were crowding around the entrance to the British Museum. Despite its enormous dimensions, even the museum appeared to be too small for the occasion.

Luxury Rolls-Royces kept pulling up out the front. I could not recall such a stir since Valentino had made an appearance at the Albert Hall a couple of years earlier.

Two large spotlights made the impressive Doric columns of the building's façade shine as the statue of the goddess Athena at the front seemed to come to life. The building sparkled that night as if it were the most beautiful neoclassical jewel.

I went to the front gate, presented my press accreditation and, after an exhaustive search through the lists of invited newspapers, the museum's officials finally let me in. Apparently, imposters had been constantly trying to sneak in using all manner of false press passes. I then climbed the wide staircase and stood at the designated spot on the corridor overlooking the main entrance.

'Hey Paul! You're wet through!' exclaimed Tom, the *Northern Star* correspondent.

'It was impossible to get anywhere near this place by taxi and I left my umbrella at home,' I answered glumly. 'Has the man of the moment arrived yet?'

'No. Just the mayor, but that's nothing to shout about!' he replied smiling.

In the background a great murmur was heard as even more people began to crowd at the main entrance.

'I think that may be our man now,' Tom announced as he reloaded his camera.

We did not have to wait too long. A few moments later, we saw an Aston Martin convertible come to a stop outside the front

steps carrying the star of the day.

A shower of flashes immortalized the moment as people shouted the name of the most sought-after man on the planet as he was getting out of the car. Howard Carter, accompanied by his beautiful and elegant lady friend, stepped onto the red carpet rolled out for the occasion, and proceeded to greet cheering fans and well-wishers on either side as if they were two movie stars in the age of the silent film.

‘Mr. Carter! Mr. Carter!’ all the correspondents shouted in unison.

‘A few words!’ I shouted to him as he climbed the staircase and approached my position.

As Howard Carter came over, I put down my camera and took out my notebook from my coat pocket.

‘Tell me, Mr. Carter, what was the most difficult part of the whole expedition?’

‘The hardest part was finding the tomb,’ he joked.

Everyone laughed out loud.

‘Seriously though,’ he added, ‘the hardest thing was to maintain the intense search over a number of years.’

‘Thank you, Mr. Carter.’

Carter and his companion then approached the Prime Minister, the Director of the British Museum, and other dignitaries who were waiting to shake his hand.

During the visit, he explained to all those present how the discovery of the chamber that housed Tutankhamun's tomb had

come about. They were able to admire photographs and some of the smaller pieces from the burial chamber, while most of the larger pieces remained in Egypt.

Afterwards, Carter and the rest of the dignitaries went off to a cocktail party they were throwing at one of the city's most fashionable restaurants. Meanwhile, we were able to examine the photographs taken inside the burial chamber of the incredible discovery that Carter had made. Judging by the photographs, the objects within the chamber appeared to be in perfect condition. It was a true miracle that grave robbers had not desecrated such an incredible treasure throughout the centuries.

That night I went back to the newsroom to prepare the article that would appear on the front page, trying to give it a personal touch so as to differentiate it from those of my fellow professionals.

The next morning, I returned early to the newspaper offices housed in a modernist five-story building constructed at the turn of the century. I went up its wide staircase to the second floor and found, as ever, an incessant movement of people who were all coming and going. I crossed the hall filled with the deafening noise of typewriters, the sound of telephones ringing nonstop, the continuous shouts of correspondents and a strong smell of tobacco that had made the atmosphere almost unbreathable.

I opened the door and entered the chief editor's office, a sixty-year-old Scotsman with an aquiline nose, thick sideburns and a lean face. On that morning he had assembled several reporters.

‘Come in and close the door,’ he said sulkily. ‘Since I’ve stopped smoking, I can’t bear the smell of tobacco.’

‘Yes, sir,’ replied Sarah, the feature writer.

She had overdone it with her French perfume that day.

‘We’ve got a lot of work on this morning. Sales of the newspaper’s Sunday Edition have dropped alarmingly in the past two months,’ he said banging his fist on the table. ‘If we continue like this, the Sunday Edition will collapse. We need something new to boost sales.’

‘We could add a police story,’ said one reporter who had recently come over from a rival newspaper.

‘Too hackneyed,’ said the Scotsman. ‘That’s already been tried at other newspapers and it has been a failure. All the writers think they’re the next Arthur Conan-Doyle.’

A young correspondent who had started work the week before took out his pipe, filled it with tobacco and lit a match. The Scotsman went over to him and took the pipe out of his mouth.

‘Weren’t you listening before?’

The boy turned pale and we all held back our chuckles. He didn’t know who he was messing with.

‘Any other ideas?’ he growled.

‘Maybe a gardening section,’ Sarah added.

‘Everyone in this country is a gardener,’ he replied with a dismissive gesture. ‘If you’ve got nothing worth saying, keep your mouth shut,’ he added with a threatening look. ‘We need something innovative.’

They all fell silent for a few minutes without knowing what to say. I went to the teapot and poured myself a cup of tea. I had had an idea the night before, but I was uncertain about saying it out loud. Finally, I plucked up the courage.

‘I may have something interesting,’ I announced as I put the teacup down on the table.

‘Let’s hear it!’

‘Carter’s discovery in Egypt could turn out to be a gold mine. It has made people forget about the horrors of the war.’

‘What are you getting at?’

‘People have an insatiable appetite for reading about the stories of our great explorers.’

‘Chronicles of those expeditions can be found in any public library.’

‘That’s true, but we could surprise them with some little-known accounts. There must be thousands of interesting stories just waiting to be published.’

‘Hmmm. I’m not sure,’ he replied as a look of doubt crossed his face. ‘And where do you plan to unearth these little gems?’

‘We could start with the British Museum Library,’ I suggested.

He was silent for a few moments, pondering the idea, after which he added:

‘Well, if nobody has a better idea, see what you can come up with over the next few days.’

The meeting was adjourned and we left the office to get on with our normal daily work.

The next morning when I awoke, the window was covered in a white blanket of snow. It was the first snow of winter and the streets were full of children throwing snowballs at each other. As I made my way to the British Museum, I saw a couple of passers-by slip on the treacherous surface; the ice had made several streets impassable and workmen had already begun to scatter rock salt on the ground.

Despite this, the museum's library was crowded as usual. An endless stream of people were coming and going through its doors: students, readers, tourists and researchers, all of whom would spend hours within its walls.

I climbed the front steps carefully so as not to slip, then crossed the main hall and arrived at the atrium: a large circular reading room with space for more than a thousand people. Some of the oldest volumes in the country could be found there.

I had to wait in the queue at the reception desk until a pretty librarian with medium-length blonde hair and wearing a navy blue suit pointed out where I could start my search.

'We have three types of inventory,' she explained, peering above her tiny pebble glasses with her pretty eyes, 'topographical, chronological, and business.'

'I'm searching for any journals detailing archaeological expeditions from the last fifty years.'

The librarian sighed and said:

'You can start your search by looking under "SUBJECT". Then, you could proceed by looking up "CARTOGRAPHICAL

STUDIES". From there, you could refine your search chronologically. In other words, to the period of time that you wish to investigate.'

'Does that mean I have to search through more than one whole classification or section?'

She nodded with a half-smile.

This was going to take more time than I had bargained for.

I went up to the second floor and after walking down several aisles full of bookshelves, I found a section replete with manuscripts.

I asked the person in charge of that section for the documentation I was looking for, and he proceeded to deposit a mountain of files on the table that exceeded my height.

'Will that be all for today?' he asked without a flicker of emotion.

'I hope so,' I replied, the tone of resignation quite obvious in my voice.

'If you don't manage to get through it all, we have some shelves in reception where researchers can store any materials they are working on for the following day.'

'Thank you very much. That's most kind of you to suggest it.'

I turned on the small green lamp that was present on each table and opened the first dossier; a process I repeated many times over the following days.

After a few days into the research, I was beginning to regret my proposal. This wasn't going to be as easy as I had imagined.

The information seemed endless, and it would take years to study it properly.

I found out about all manner of explorers, from those who had discovered the most remote places in Africa, to archaeologists who had unearthed the historical legacies of the Middle East.

Around mid-morning, while turning a few pages, I looked up and noticed a man watching me from a few tables further up. I wasn't sure if I knew him, or if he was looking at me for some other reason. A moment later, I looked up again, but he was gone.

After lunch, I went through the library shelves. It felt like a real privilege to run my fingertips over those volumes that held so many centuries of history: Stanley's personal diary of his odyssey through Africa until he found the sources of the Nile and his subsequent encounter with Livingstone; the hardships of Arctic explorers led by Shackleton when his ship was trapped in the ice for months and they had nearly frozen to death; the race for the conquest of the South Pole between Amundsen and Scott in which he tragically ended up losing his life; as well as various archaeological discoveries made by our most acclaimed explorers.

This investigation was getting me nowhere and I needed to come at it from another angle.

'Excuse me, miss,' I said to the librarian with whom I had spoken on the first day I arrived.

'You said that in addition to written documentation, there were also certain maps which I could take a look at.'

‘Not only do we have maps, we also have newspapers and photographs that you can examine.’

For the cartography section, I had to go down to the basement in order to study different maps and newspapers from the 19th century. Although some of the material was interesting, most of the information was already known to the general public. My job was to discover something new and in those few days that I had been there, I had only found a couple of stories worth reviewing.

I was absorbed in newspapers that still gave off a strong smell of ink. I closed my eyes and the odour emanating from the ink gave way to a pleasant perfume I instantly recognised.

‘Adriana!’ I exclaimed with my eyes still closed.

‘Have you turned into some sort of a psychic?’ she asked smiling.

Adriana was Sicilian with intense green eyes, an easy smile and the best dancer I had ever seen. She had migrated to the UK with her parents while still a child.

‘What brings you here?’ she asked, sitting down opposite me.

‘You know what it’s like. When you’re a newspaper correspondent, you can be in Parliament one day and in a library the next.’

‘I’m quite jealous. I spend all day at the hairdressers.’

I nodded with a smile.

‘They told me at your newspaper office that you would be here. I come to find out if you’re coming to dance class this Saturday. I need a partner,’ she asked.

‘Of course!’

She laughed with delight. Those at the next table shot us a disapproving look.

‘I’d better leave you to your research. I’m going to see the latest Gloria Swanson movie tonight. Are you coming?’

‘Not a chance. I’ve got a lot of work to get through. I’ll see you on Saturday.’

She gave me a peck on the cheek and then walked off smiling.

After quite a while searching among the shelves, I spied that same man who had been watching me for the last three days. So, I decided to go over to him and ask him what he was playing at, but on reaching the table where he had been sitting, I found no one there. I scoured some of the adjacent aisles but could not find him. It was as if the earth had suddenly swallowed him up. I was starting to get a bad feeling about him.

On Friday, rumours had reached me that my boss was not satisfied with how my investigation was progressing. I had repeatedly told him that I needed a research assistant, but he would not take my recommendations seriously.

The responsibility for the whole research had fallen on my shoulders. The most frustrating thing was that if the article turned out to be a success, all the credit would go to the newspaper and its editor. For me there would only be a small credit at the end of the article bearing my name. However, if it was a failure, I would have to take the entire blame.

After a week of investigation, Mr. Dillan sent for me. By the

time I had reached his door, I noticed that the glass panes around his office had been changed and his name now appeared in much bigger letters.

‘So, what do you have for me today?’ He asked sceptically. He already knew from my colleagues that I had not discovered anything new. ‘Have you dug up anything that we can publish?’

I took off my raincoat and hat and hung them up next to the umbrella stand. Then, I sat down on a worn oak chair.

‘I have a couple of stories about explorers who have discovered rivers on Africa’s west coast.’

The Scotsman shook his head over and over. He went to the radio and turned off a rather boring government speech.

‘By adding a little adventure and embellishing the article, we could publish it,’ I added.

‘And is this all that you’ve come up with after a week?’ He replied staring at me. ‘You could’ve been at the pub with that brunette, for all I know.’

I shook my head.

‘I spend all day working in the museum,’ I replied. ‘Adriana is just a good friend who teaches me how to dance the Charleston.’

‘That brazen American dance?’

‘It’s fun,’ I said, smiling. ‘You should try it.’

Mr. Dillan fixed his eyes on me with a stern look on his face, forcing me to look down.

‘We’ve been allowed into the Royal British Geographical Society to go through the accounts of expeditions at their

facilities,' he announced, handing me a document. 'From tomorrow, you'll be carrying out your research there.'

'That's excellent, sir!'

'You'd better bring me some good news next time. Now get out of here. I've a lot of work to do.'

The next morning, I got up and made myself a strong cup of tea feeling more refreshed than ever. It was my first day at the library of the Royal British Geographical Society, the most important department in the organisation's headquarters when it came to accounts of expeditions. Normally, only high-ranking academics and influential figures from Oxford and Cambridge Universities were allowed into the place to study their records. Luckily however, Mr. Dillan was the nephew of one of the institution's most notable patrons, and he had managed to obtain permission for me to investigate there for two weeks.

The Society's library was smaller than that of the British Museum, but it held some real treasures. The first few days of my inquiries continued along similar lines to those at the British Museum. The accounts were all written by the most famous explorers in the history of the British Empire.

But then I found something that could be of use in an article. I was going through some expeditions to the Middle East when I came across the same surname both in the discoveries made in the Mesopotamian area, and those made in Egypt. The surname was Henson.

What was notable about this was that the name of Henson only

appeared in documents attached to the original written accounts, but it never appeared in the official journals of the expeditions; something which caught my attention.

I continued on for two days without finding the name in any further official journal of any other expeditions. I had no idea if the reason for the name being omitted from the official account was due to either his death, or his disappearance. Or perhaps due to some other factor. This unusual case had piqued my interest and I decided to focus my attention on it.

I performed a detailed search, first alphabetically via the Browser Index, and later chronologically by date, but still nothing turned up.

So, I decided to try a new approach and asked the person in charge of the files' section if he knew of this man Henson. Unfortunately, he had only been in the job for a couple of years and had never heard of him.

After lunch, I went back to the newsroom and asked among some of my long-serving colleagues if the name sounded familiar, but none of them had heard of him.

That afternoon I returned to the library of the Geographical Society and continued my search. Once more, I went to the Explorer Index, then to the personal diaries of some explorers and, finally, I searched through the Topographical Index.

It was in this last index where I managed to find the name, but this time it was associated with an expedition to South America. This seemed even more implausible since few British explorers

had ever embarked on expeditions to those remote lands.

The unusual thing is that although I had found his name in an attached document, it did not appear in the expedition's official journal, just like the other two expeditions.

I now had three references: two in the Middle East and one in South America, but the information was still insufficient. It was as if Henson had vanished into thin air.

I was beginning to feel demoralised. The readers of our newspaper might have to settle for some small discovery on the African continent, after a certain amount of embellishment by yours truly, of course.

That evening I left the building dejected. It was pouring down outside as I opened up my umbrella. Numerous puddles had formed and the lamppost in front of the building kept blinking.

Sam, the concierge with whom I had struck up a friendship approached me.

'How's the investigation going?' He asked as the raindrops splashed onto my umbrella.

'Not great. I can't find anything about this Henson fellow.'

'Funny you should mention him. I ran into the old caretaker from here yesterday, and I asked him about the fellow you've been looking for. He says that he remembers a Henson from years ago.'

'Of course! How had I not thought of it before? I should have asked among former employees,' I said to him amazed at my own absentmindedness.

Sam walked over to the lamppost, gave it a couple of kicks at the base, and the problem seemed to be solved as the light stopped blinking. On rainy days blackouts were frequent.

‘How long ‘til closing time?’ I asked Sam.

‘About half an hour. On Fridays we close earlier than normal.’

I hurried back up the stairs and searched through volumes prior to the date I had previously investigated. The most fruitful and productive activity of the Geographical Society was from 1870 onwards, the date from which I had begun my research. But it was founded in 1850, meaning that there were twenty years which I had overlooked.

The volumes pertaining to that period had nothing to do with those that I had already studied previously. I was also right about something else: the exploratory activity of the society’s first twenty years had been much less than its activity after 1870.

I decided to start by looking at the foundation of the Geographical Society. Right there in the first few pages was his name: Philip Henson. He had been one of the co-founders of the Geographical Society, originally from the north of England, more specifically from an area just outside of Newcastle.

After a while, Samuel came to tell me that it was closing time. I greatly appreciated his information, because without it I could not have carried on. Now I had something solid to go on that would buy me more time to investigate further.

I spent the next few days in the library studying the history and background of this Henson, whose wealthy family had made

their fortune in the mining industry. He had served in the army at Jaipur in India, where he had met his wife Maureen while she and the rest of her family had also been stationed there. After returning to England, he continued in the family mining business and dedicated the little spare time he had to his great passion: geography.

He had kept in touch with his university colleagues who had subsequently convinced him to become part of the newly created Geographical Society. But after a while, he became a symbolic partner due to having to dedicate a lot of time to his business, and only attended the Society's meetings when time permitted. He had a voice and a vote in them, but did not participate in any organised expedition. It was only when he moved to northern Spain where he founded a branch of the geographical society that he became more actively involved.

As far as I could see, Henson's biography stating that he only attended meetings seemed at odds with the fact that I had found his name linked with three expeditions.

I left the library and went to look for Samuel, who was going over the day's visitor log.

'I need the address of the former caretaker. I would like to pay him a visit this evening.'

'That won't be necessary. Mr. Mason spends all day and night in the Two Swans, a pub at the end of Kensington Road.'

I didn't give it a second thought and went straight to the pub to chat with Mason.

The Two Swans was an old-fashioned black-fronted building. Upon entering I discovered that it was quite lively inside. I also discovered that they distilled their own gin and that it was strong enough to knock out a horse. As I got closer to the bar the smell became more intense.

‘Do you know a Mr Mason?’ I asked the barman.

‘Hey! Did I hear you asking about Mason?’ Shouted a tall, thin guy with thick bushy eyebrows sitting at a table near the bar.

‘Is that you?’

‘Depends on who wants to know. It also depends on who buys me a drink.’

I turned to the barman and asked him for two pints. The barman nodded with a knowing smile.

‘I’m a newspaper correspondent for the ...’

‘I know who you are,’ he interrupted me. ‘Sam has already told me there’s been a reporter sniffing around the old place,’ he said dryly. He took a swig of his beer and then set the glass on the table. ‘I only remember one Henson. I used to see him once a year.’

‘Why didn’t he come to many of the meetings?’ I asked. ‘I understand that he was one of the co-founders.’

‘It’s quite simple. He had a business up north, and then he moved to Spain because of business over there. He was into mining as I recall, and only came to the Geographical Society when he was here on holiday.’

At a nearby table there was a commotion over a card game.

A little further on could be heard the incessant sound of darts thudding into a dart board.

‘Do you know anything else?’

Mason shook his head.

‘Thanks for the information,’ I said as I shook his hand and left for home.

Philip Henson's life didn't seem interesting enough on which to base an article. After a week of research, I still had nothing decent to publish.

I asked my boss if an interview with his uncle would be possible since he was the only person who had ever met Henson. However, I was told that it was impossible as his uncle was elderly and in poor health.

I still had a week left, but I didn't know where to go next. The only clue I had was that Henson's family came from near Newcastle and that he was part of the North Scale Foundry Mining Company.

The next morning after a cup of tea, I set about finding out the address of the mining company. It turned out that they now had their headquarters in London. So, I decided to pay them an impromptu visit.

It was an impressive building on the banks of the Thames with excellent views of Big Ben. There I was greeted in an elegant Victorian office by Mr. Harris, an experienced accountant with deep dark circles under his eyes. The room was filled with photographs of various mining enterprises, as well as a pair of

porcelain vases.

‘Come in and take a seat,’ he said politely. ‘How can I help you?’

I took off my hat and scarf and sat down. It had been windy that day.

‘I’m looking for information about someone who held a prominent position in your company; a Mr. Philip Henson.’

‘I’m afraid I never had the pleasure of meeting him. Mr. Henson passed away several years ago.’

On the table was a gleaming miner’s helmet and a huge piece of coal inside a glass jar. I made a movement towards it in order to touch it but stopped when I saw Mr Harris frowning at me.

‘Could you tell me something about Henson?’

‘I only know that his family came from a place just outside of Newcastle.’

Suddenly, the door was opened and his secretary informed Harris that a number of people were waiting for him.

‘Does his wife still live there?’

‘I’m sorry, I couldn’t tell you,’ he said as he was getting up from his chair.

‘Thank you very much, Mr. Harris. It was most kind of you to receive me.’

I said goodbye with a handshake and left.

At the end of the street was the tram stop on my route home. While I looked from a distance at the passengers boarding, I spotted the same man who had been watching me at the British

Museum.

Without thinking twice, I ran towards the stop; a couple of passers-by rebuked me after I had pushed them out of the way. The distance seemed short, but the more I ran, the more out of breath I became, and I suddenly realised how unfit I had become.

I managed to grab hold of the rail at the rear door of the tram just as it was pulling away. I reached the interior of the tram exhausted. A small crowd gathered around me as I was bent double coughing, wheezing and gasping for breath in the middle of the aisle.

On lifting my head, I saw the man notice me and then he left by the other door at the next stop. Alas, I had no strength left to follow him any further.

The next morning before the sun had come up, I was at King's Cross Station and had bought a train ticket to Newcastle. It was my last option and I wasn't going to waste it.

Although it was a long trip, it felt much shorter thanks to the fantastic views I was afforded of the verdant English countryside during early springtime along the way.

I arrived at Newcastle train station just after noon. Newcastle-upon-Tyne is a grey industrial city with row after row of terraced houses, and not somewhere one would choose for a holiday. Fortunately, I was not on vacation and would spend a day or two there at the most.

As soon as I got off the train, I headed for the nearby bus station. A multitude of buses seemed to be coming and going,

and I felt a little bewildered by the unfamiliar place names. So, I approached a man in uniform who I presumed was in some sort of official capacity there and showed him the name of my destination. In his north-east accent, he told me where to go and what bus to catch.

As we weaved our way through the drab streets and eventually left the city behind, the landscapes were just like those portrayed in novels: misty moors with little vegetation, small hills eroded by strong winds and a coldness that could chill a man to the bone. All this was accompanied by an incessant rain which seemed even more intense than anywhere else I had ever visited in the country.

I spent the night at a guest house in the town closest to the Henson estate. The dinner was exquisite, and afterwards, the owner showed me how to get to the Henson place.

The Hensons lived on a large estate just a short distance from where I had spent the night. The house was a formidable double-storey mansion built in the 18th century from dark granite over which long thick vines of ivy stood out like veins, winding their way around its large windows. On the right-hand side of the house, a small lake surrounded by birches could be seen where several white swans swam majestically.

The butler bid me wait at the front door for a long time before then motioning me to follow him through to a garden at the back of the house. There, an elderly lady was tending to some splendid rose bushes.

It was Philip Henson's sister Emma, an elderly spinster with

silver hair and a wide smile who wore an elegant white dress.

‘Nice to meet you,’ she said as she took off one of her gardening gloves and shook my hand.

‘Likewise.’

‘I’ve been told that you have come all the way from London and have been inquiring about my brother.’

‘That’s correct. I’m a news correspondent. We wish to put together a series of articles on all things to do with the expeditions of the Geographical Society.’

Emma Henson gestured to the butler and within a few minutes we were served tea and cake.

‘We know that your brother was one of the co-founders of the Geographical Society and that he later left for Spain.’

‘That’s where he founded a subsidiary of the London branch of the Geography Society. It was common in those days for many in this field to station themselves in other countries and establish new associations similar to the original.’

At the other end of the garden there was the sound of a gardener trimming a beautiful hedge.

‘Could you tell me what expeditions were carried out by the Spanish branch of the Society?’

She shook her head.

‘What about expeditions to South America and the Middle East? Do these ring any bells?’ I asked.

‘I am unaware of any such expeditions. This is the first I have heard of such.’

Insects began to flutter around our table, no doubt attracted by the smell of the cakes, but Emma Henson quickly shooed them away.

‘Would it be possible for me to speak to your sister-in-law? Maybe she has more information.’

‘Philip's wife passed away some time ago. She had been ill for most of her life, barely able to spend time with her husband.’

I put a piece of cake to my mouth while the aroma of jasmine tea wafted to my nostrils. I decided to take my time and enjoy our conversation as the information I was receiving was leading me nowhere.

It was at that moment that I saw Emma smiling.

‘Do you think you may have misread or misunderstood the information held at the Geographical Society?’

‘I don't understand what you're driving at.’

‘Are you sure you're looking for the right Henson?’ she asked me.

I pondered the question for a moment before asking:

‘Is there another Henson that I'm unaware of?’

‘Yes. Perhaps you are looking for James Henson.’

‘Who is James Henson?’

‘James Henson is Philip's son. From an early age he had a passion for history and geography. He lived for a time in Spain when he was a teenager and later returned to England to study archaeology at Oxford University, but that was such a long time ago. He had an indomitable adventurous spirit,’ she declared.

This time, a huge grin now appeared on my face. Now I understood. The information I had found was from the expeditions in the first decade of the 20th century. It hadn't occurred to me before, but Phillip Henson would have been very old to have taken part in such expeditions, whereas his son would be of a more appropriate age.

'The dates I found would concur with someone who would be of his son's possible age. Could you tell me where I can find him?'

'I haven't heard from the boy since he went off to university. We lost track of him some years ago. The last news we had was that he was wounded during the Great War.'

'Could you describe him?'

He was a dark-haired boy with a dark complexion and blue eyes as intense as his father's. Tall and good-looking, with angular features,' she paused for a moment, excited at recalling the memory of her nephew. 'He was always an astute and intelligent boy.'

'Would you happen to have a photograph of him?'

'I'm sorry. I don't have any,' she replied.

'Well, thank you very much. You have been a great help. And now, I must catch the first train back to London.'

On the return trip I couldn't stop thinking about my investigation, which was finally beginning to take shape. Surely my boss would now agree to sanction further research into this matter.

I entered Mr. Dillan's office and told him the whole story. The

course that events had taken seemed surprising to him and he told me to take all the time I needed to solve this mystery. With no time to lose I set out for Oxford University to find out more about James Henson.

Compared with the grey city of Newcastle, Oxford was vibrantly coloured. The countryside around it seemed to stretch for endless miles criss-crossed by a multitude of rivers and lakes. It was a pleasure to wander through its streets consisting of centuries-old buildings that were true architectural gems and breathe in that university atmosphere where students from all over the world came to study.

I arrived around lunchtime and took the opportunity to have a sandwich and a pint of beer in a busy pub in the centre of Oxford before going on to the university.

The particular university college to which I was heading consisted of many Gothic-style buildings with large windows that flooded their interiors with light. As I walked through the extensive gardens, I passed several groups of students chatting under the shade of trees. There was a game of rugby being played in a wide meadow in the distance and, at the bottom of the path I was walking along, several oarsmen crossed carrying a couple of boats on their shoulders.

I had already met the caretaker from previous assignments. He was a chubby middle-aged Irishman with exquisite manners who always greeted me warmly.

‘Good afternoon, Richard. How is everything?’ I asked him.

‘I can’t complain. Tell me, what brings you here this time?’

‘I’m looking for information on a student who studied here during the last decade of the last century.’

‘That shouldn’t be too difficult. Do you know his forename and surname?’

‘Yes, James Henson.’

‘Go to the secretary and fill out the usual form.’

A few minutes after entering the building, I had completed the required paperwork and had managed to get hold of James Henson's record. He had studied archaeology between 1890 and 1895, and was an accomplished student, specializing in ancient cuneiform writing. That explained his expeditions to the Middle East, although I still did not understand what reason he would have for making an expedition to South America.

I sought out Richard the caretaker once more and asked him if he knew of anyone who could help me with this matter.

‘The Middle Eastern Antiquities faculty is the largest in this college. Most students would like to discover the mysteries of ancient Egypt.’

I nodded my head.

‘The most suitable person to consult would be Professor McKingley,’ he continued. ‘He may even have been in the same class or year group at that time as a student here and may well have known him. But this week, he’s attending the Middle East Archaeology Conference in Berlin. If you wish to ask him anything, you’ll have to wait for him to come back I’m afraid.’

At that moment, students began to file out of their classes causing a great hubbub.

‘Who could furnish me with information about expeditions to South America?’ I asked, having to raise my voice above the din.

‘You may be in luck. There aren’t many people here who specialise in that particular area. Our greatest expert in that field is Professor Margaret Spencer. Her office is on the second floor of the west wing.’

I walked through the building and, after crossing its imposing atrium, climbed the stairs up to a second-floor office where I knocked on the door.

Professor Spencer was wearing a green suit that further enhanced her piercing eyes. Her blonde hair was tied back in a chic bun that embellished her face and highlighted her prominent cheekbones.

‘James Henson? Yes, of course I knew him. We went on an expedition together to South America. We were looking for vestiges of pre-Columbian civilizations.’

‘When would that have been?’ I asked with a smile.

‘Around the beginning of the century.’

‘I was researching that expedition at the Geographical Society and found little information on him. I only came across his name, his last name, on the back of a piece of paper in the file.’

‘Maybe you didn’t do your research thoroughly enough,’ she replied brusquely.

I listened to her words somewhat perplexed; that answer was

unexpected.

‘You’ll have to excuse me, but I have a class in a few moments,’ she said, rising from her chair and picking up a couple of books. ‘If you wish to know more, you may stop by my house this afternoon.’

‘I would like that very much, Professor.’

‘You’ll find Corton House on the southern outskirts of the city. How’s four o’clock for you?’

‘Fine. I’ll be there.’

‘It’s the last house on the road out of Oxford. There are tulips at the entrance to the front garden,’ she added as we emerged out into the corridor.



## Chapter 2

Oxford, 1923

That afternoon Professor Spencer received me at her home. While she was serving tea in elegant china cups accompanied by butter pastries and Belgian chocolates given to her by a student, I was admiring her magnificent drawing room furniture. She must have spent years looking for each piece so that they all fitted together perfectly, as if it were the mechanism of a Swiss watch.

The walls were filled with numerous paintings, most of which were of grand hunting scenes. In the centre, a beautiful white marble fireplace presided over the room, and in front of it was a magnificent leather sofa flanked by two patterned armchairs in pastel colours. To the left of the fireplace there was a huge globe of the earth next to a walnut shelf containing some of the great classics of Russian literature. At the other end of the room, under the main window, a large grand piano completed the decor.

‘Why don’t you take a seat, and I’ll tell you everything I know,’ she said after sitting down in her armchair.

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