

A HOUSE OF HAUNTED PEOPLE

St Mary's, the church from which I first came, had gradually fallen out of use. In the church's heyday, people had chosen to live at that point in the valley because it offered natural shelter and a point for gathering water. Roads mattered little in those days. Life was governed more by woodland paths and bridleways.

Gradually people came to settle two miles down the valley where the roads crossed and a substantial bridge had been constructed over the river. By then some water was being piped into people's houses and bricks and mortar did their job of protecting against the elements more precisely.

People still walked the length of the valley to their church until the advent of the working week; then they demanded worship closer to the place they called home. That was the point at which St Mary's was abandoned, becoming a refuge for owls and bats and vermin. During the summer months, the children of the village, those who ventured that far down the valley, dared one another to spend long minutes in the main body of the church building or to go in there for a piss, incurring God's wrath.

Without maintenance, the church crumbled and begged for demolition. That was how Fenby saw it, going past it daily with his horse and cart on the way to his stone yard. He knew the building was over four hundred years old; and he knew it would last only a few more seasons.

"There are good building materials in St Mary's," Fenby told his brother-in-law, George Ashcroft, "wonderful seasoned timber, quality stone and bricks."

"Why don't we take it?" Ashcroft asked in his usual direct manner. "We could buy some land and build our own house."

"We can't take the stuff because it belongs to the church and the law will chase us down," Fenby told him wearily. His brother-in-law's feckless ways tired him

"And who of the modern clergy ever goes out to St Mary's these days? They'll never know," Ashcroft asserted. He had a point, a very persuasive one.

As luck would have it, Lord Huntley's estate had let it be known that they were looking for a builder to construct a house for the estate's new gardener to live in. Fenby had heard about this during a drinking session at The Cock and Feathers.

“Could we do that – build a house from scratch?” Ashcroft asked him.

“I believe we could,” Fenby said.

“We could use the materials from St Mary’s,” Ashcroft said, leaning in closer and lowering his voice, “That would be one hell of a saving.”

“I don’t want to get in law trouble – for stealing,” Fenby told him. He had had more than his share of run-ins with the local constable, Benjamin Tapett, mainly about drunken behaviour.

“Listen, leave the materials to me,” Ashcroft said, “You look around for someone who can architect us a house.”

Reluctant as he was to play along with anything proposed by Ashcroft, this seemed to be the basis of a fair idea.

Ashcroft hired two rogues from the burgeoning village on the other side of the river and, by cover of night they made three runs down the valley in order to recover wood, stone and brick. A further dividend was the state of two of the window frames: they were near perfect and Ashcroft patiently eased them out of the wall with his builder’s tools.

“You must carry these on top of our load so they do not get damaged,” he told the meaty youths from East Harlington who were moonlighting for him.

For each run down the valley, Ashcroft, in a scouting capacity, rode his pony a hundred yards ahead in case Tappett should be out and about.

There was a small copse at the bottom of his own garden and that is where he asked the men to tip each load. Ashcroft made sure he was in position to rescue the window frames on that particular run. He realised that Makepeace and Quibell, the two hired youths, were full of cider and unlikely to remember his concern for the windows.

Fenby found an architect called Austin Lincoln. He had been one of the area’s finest until a nagging wife sent him to the consolation of the bottle. Lincoln was a regular at the Cock and Feathers, where he had a niche respected by all and sundry from the hour of eight till closing.

“Mr Lincoln, I am in need of an architect,” Fenby said, approaching him slyly from an obtuse angle.

Lincoln responded by way of a coughing fit that threatened to empty the entire frame of his body of any liquid contents. When the cough had racked his body into submission, Fenby spoke again.

“My brother-in-law, Ned Ashcroft and I have put in a tender for the building of a gardener’s house by the weir of the Chalk River on the Huntley Estate. We are worried by the prospect of flooding and would value the involvement, knowledge and experience of a man such as yourself. We have sought you out because of your good name.”

Little of this statement bore any truth. For a start no tender had as yet been submitted. Nor had mention been made of flooding between Ashcroft and Fenby, and finally the involvement of Lincoln was pure chance. Fenby happened to see him when he had visited the pub for a late night drink.

“Didn’t the feller over there used to be an architect?” he had asked landlord Bertram Jones.

“You’re talking a good 15 years ago, Mr Fenby.”

“But he was a good draughtsman, was he not?”

“They say he was the very best. He designed the Millers Arms out at Everly, you know.”

That was indeed a testimony to Lincoln’s skills. The Millers Arms was mainly a summer pub frequented by the well-off and demanding a horse and trap for the journey.

Following his proposal, Fenby waited a good five minutes, but no response was forthcoming from Lincoln. He decided to jolly him along.

“So what say you that you attend a meeting tomorrow at my house on Hungate? Let us set it for three’o’clock.”

Lincoln made a light moaning noise and then caught himself falling forward. Neither ‘yea’ nor ‘nay’ did he mutter.

“So, three’o’clock tomorrow. I expect to see you at 14 Hungate, Mr Lincoln,” Fenby repeated more in hope than expectation.

Fenby went home circuitously by way of his brother-in-law’s house. He excitedly told him that his mission was complete – an architect had been found – and that all three of them were to have a meeting the following day.

The Wednesday found Ashcroft sitting in Fenby's living room listening to the clock ticking its way to a quarter past the hour.

"Ned, tell me who is this draughtsman we are waiting for?"

"He is called Lincoln. He was the architect behind the Miller's Arms over in Everly."

"Lincoln? So that would be Austin Lincoln?"

"The very same."

Without further ado, Ashcroft pulled together the various personal possessions he had placed in front of him – paper, pencils, plans – and headed for the door.

"George, where are you off to?"

"Austin Lincoln is nowt but a drunkard and a wastrel, Ned. I'm surprised at your lack of judgment here. I am going."

He eased open Fenby's front door and there, standing before him, was Lincoln. Furthermore Lincoln had a large leather case under his arm which appeared to carry materials.

The truth of it was that Lincoln had retained nothing of Fenby's exhortations the previous night, but the landlord, Lincoln's brother-in-law, had overheard the talk and scribbled down the details. Once the drunkard awoke from his alcoholic reverie, it was impressed upon him that this was an appointment he must keep. Ashcroft returned to the room.

For two hours the three men scribbled plans and ideas on paper, talked and argued animatedly and finally shook hands on a deal. What had amazed both Fenby and Ashcroft was the manner of Lincoln's awakening. It had seemed like the world had abandoned the former architect-cum-draughtsman and this sudden wanting of his skills and abilities had breathed life into the old dog.

The following day Fenby trudged through a foul winter's morning to Lord Huntley's estate office to find a tweedy, ridiculously bewhiskered official of the Lord's and slip an envelope in his hand.

"Mr Fenby, isn't it?" said Huntley's man, Cawthorne. "And what have I got in here?"

“It’s Ashcroft and Fenby’s tender to build the gardener’s cottage on the bend of Chalk River.”

“Ashcroft and Fenby?” Cawthorne repeated, “I never knew that you were a company, a business.”

“Newly formed,” Fenby answered rather grandly, “and with our own architect.”

Four weeks later Fenby was told he had won the contract, (his price being a good £15 less than the nearest competitor), and, dear reader, my walls took shape.

Lincoln became a renaissance man and even developed a clever scheme for diverting the river along a lower, wider course to dispel the danger of flooding.

Lord Huntley’s man had been impressed by Ashcroft’s building materials and never thought to ask the whys and wherefores relating to their acquisition. Rather than perceiving they came from a church, he thought the materials were those being used in railway properties that were big business throughout the north of England at the time. The livery in particular looked like that favoured by the railway companies.

It was a mistake repeated by others over the years, but right then it had the advantage of clearing Fenby and Ashcroft of any suspicion that they had been stealing from the Church of England.

“This stone will impart a classic line to the cottage, Mr Fenby. I have spoken to Lord Huntley and he is prepared to increase the building sum in order to obtain the very best construction.”

So it was that I took on my new life, away from religion and the blessings of the clergy. I became a quite distinctive cottage, a home to the kind of people who previously visited me on a weekly basis for worship.

As Ashcroft’s hired men hacked out my foundations, I became aware of the soil’s coldness; colder than normal because of the river’s proximity. But Lincoln was clever with his diversion of the river. On top of that he gauged the work carefully, ensuring that the foundations were significantly above the river’s level even in its most swollen course.

Driven by Ashcroft, a harsh taskmaster indeed, the hired hands built me in the space of 16 weeks, spanning winter and spring. By May it was time for Ashcroft to take the window frames out of their muslin wrapping in his garden shed and supervise their installation.

At front and back there was first the main window by which the dwellers could view the river on one side and the wildlife on the other. Adjacent to this main window were smaller cabin-sized windows into which a person might squeeze head and shoulders only. He or she could sit at such a small bay and use the light of day to read a book or undertake embroidery. Ashcroft judged that such a quaint additional feature would meet with great approval for originality and he was right. Even Lord Huntley himself singled out this feature to Cawthorne when he was taken round the newly built premises.

Of course, not one of them knew the true function of these window frames during their church days. That was a secret known by no living man.

“We will use these men again, Cawthorne,” the Lord observed, “They do a good job.”

But things had not gone smoothly in the builders’ camp. Austin Lincoln had identified with the project so strongly that his plans had gone way over budget. Ashcroft and Fenby stood to make a greatly reduced profit and could ill afford to pay their architect anything.

All came to a head on a Saturday afternoon when the three sat down to review the project in the front room.

“Mr Lincoln, we are only able to pay you half the sum agreed,” Fenby said.

“But I have worked longer and harder than anyone asked,” Lincoln said, slurring his speech due to a long Saturday lunchtime in the Cock and Feathers. “I have even helped with the construction on days we were a man short.”

“We don’t question that,” Ashcroft butted in, “but you have built in expensive features that were not in our plan.”

“And they are the features that will make the house noticed and bring you more work,” Lincoln insisted, banging the table.

“You may be right, you may be wrong,” Fenby told him, “but it’s caused us to lose money and made this contract hardly worth the winning,” (which was not strictly the truth).

One aspect of Lincoln that Fenby and Ashcroft had never found out about was his infamous temper. In truth, it wasn’t just the constant nagging of his wife that had made Lincoln turn to the bottle. Lincoln had lost so much work through his vile temper. His wife’s bouts of nagging had come about as a result of Lincoln’s irresponsibility in this regard.

“I will have the payment in guineas that you promised me and I will have it now,” Lincoln said, standing up in the alcove, but wobbling slightly.

“Don’t be ridiculous, man,” Ashcroft said, “we don’t carry money like that with us. We will pay you half of what we agreed and you can receive the money in notes and coins tomorrow.”

It was the moment at which Lincoln bypassed that part of his brain that suppressed anger and restored balance. Lincoln made for the cottage doorway where one of the hired labourers had left a hammer the size of a man’s forearm on the floor.

In no time he stood directly in front of Ashcroft, raising the hammer above his head.

“You pay me now, or I pay you,” he threatened.

Ashcroft, a little too cocky about the power of his own personality, turned towards Fenby grinning.

“Take the hammer off the clerk, Ned,” he said, making his disrespect clear in both word and tone. Fatally, he turned away from his would-be assailant and that was the moment that the hammer crunched down on bone and soft tissue.

The screams of agony from a grown-man are the most resonant, most piercing. The aura that radiated from this terrible act was absorbed by my walls and fabric. This was serious damage to my very heart at just the point where so much had occurred in the past. Here was an alcove, a delicately constructed seating point that had been created by men without knowledge of its terrible history. Now that history had been added to, and I wondered whether humans could ever live peaceably inside my walls.

Ashcroft was indeed dead, felled by a single blow. Fenby fled the building, leaving his partner’s mangled remains and two local constables arrested Lincoln that night at the Cock and Feathers.

The blood from Lincoln’s crime had not even been scoured from the floor of Chalk View when Lord Huntley’s new gardener, William Binns and his family arrived.

William’s wife Amelia screamed as soon as she entered and caught sight of the blood that had dried to deep crimson. She grabbed her children and turned their eyes away from the offending mark. William, equally shocked, but demonstrating masculine indifference, spoke up.

“Amelia, take the children outside and I’ll clean out this room. We cannot have this stain on our family life.”

In human years it was 1888 and William Binns and his young family had taken up the rental cottage that had been Lord Huntley’s promise nearly a year earlier. Lord Huntley, a frequent visitor to Castle Howard, had heard much about the creative gardening skills of William Binns at the Castle estate.

Lord Huntley made a point of checking the topiary, the flower beds, how glass was used to grow vegetables on a large scale. Huntley had even visited Binns and his wife at their estate cottage. He did not belittle the poverty of Binns’ then residence for that might prove counter-productive, but he did promise him “a more substantial house with a spectacularly panoramic river view.”

“I have builders working on this house even as I speak to you now,” Huntley had told him.

Binns was flattered. No one had praised his gardening skills so much, much less a member of the nobility.

He had accepted Huntley’s offer and now he had arrived at his new home in this most auspicious of manners.

Many visitors to my walls have singled it out as a place of atmosphere? All dwelling places have atmosphere, though with many it is understated. Atmosphere is the totality of colour, of light and shade, of mood and temper, of life and death. Yet still there remains the indefinable, for houses, like people, have souls.

Formerly I had been a church building, but Fenby, Ashcroft and Lincoln transformed that. They subverted my purpose, even though the materials involved in my construction were unchanged. I was brick, stone, oak, yew and stained glass and brass.

From being a spiritual home, a place of repose and prayer, I had become the physical shelter for a family of people. Marrying the two functions was impossible. The screaming of those three children – whether in torture or play – could only be soaked up by my walls. A house can hurt beyond what people feel. A house can bruise and even the glass in its windows cries.

I did not mean to bring about a reign of terror. I merely reflected what my progenitors had said about reaping what they had sown. The mulberry coloured mark that now stained my

floor was the doing of man; my only spillage until then had been the flow of skytears from my gutterless roofs. Try as they may, those who through the years scrubbed and scoured this mark could make no inroads.

Sleep did not come easy for the Binns. The baby girl, Letitia, cried incessantly through the night. The crying became screams of terror and the mother, Amelia, woke and sat up firmly in bed. For a fleeting second she caught sight of the pale cornflower blue face bent over her baby's crib, staring, staring into the baby's eyes.

"William, you must wake. William, the baby is in terror."

She described what had broken her sleep, the blue-faced visitor who communed with their baby girl, but the gardener thought the nocturnal mirage had been an imagining of his wife.

I knew the truth. The blue-faced one had been a visitor from the past, but not any past shared by people in this house; a past known only to those who frequented St Mary's.

"Amelia, you must forget the past of this house and live within its present. You are nervous at living so far from your old home. Time will pass."

"I will try, William," the wife said miserably.

The son Richard and his younger brother Nathaniel had been playing in a beck of the river.

"I don't like you playing there," the boy's mother told him at supper time, "it's dangerous."

"Mother, we fish with our little nets. Today I caught seven bullheads," Richard told her.

"Other children go fishing, mother; we make friends," Nathaniel, the younger child, said.

"The water's very deep at some points," their father declared, a chunk of bread in his mouth, "Do as your mother bids."

Soon the boys registered at the newly-established village school and their circle of friends grew ever wider. The summer months were best of all and at last the Binns family seemed to have found peace within my walls.

One July day, the boys rushed back from school, dropped their outer coats on the kitchen floor and headed for the beck. Barefoot they waded out to a point where the water was up to the elder boy's knees. He stooped in the water to catch sight of a fish; suddenly he fell

forward and hit his head on a rock. He was not out of his depth, but his head remained under water for some time. Two or three of his classmates grabbed hold of his shirt and trousers and hauled him out of the water.

They lay him on the river bank on his side and water gushed out of his mouth, his lips pouting like a fish's. The boy's father and a gang of three workmen saw the incident from a nearby orchard. The four of them sprinted in the direction of the river.

"I told you to stay clear of the water, boy," Binns snapped, picking up the boy's prostrate body and striding towards the sanctity offered by my walls.

As soon as William was inside, he put the boy's body on the floor. The distraught mother bent over the dying child while the father alternately shook and squeezed the lifeless form.

There was little that could be done. This was still a time when men believed that death was fated; that the moving finger writes and, having writ, moves on. Resuscitation techniques were unheard of, except by a tiny coterie of those at the medical forefront.

Eventually, all hope of revival gone, Amelia bent over her son and gave his ice cold lips a final kiss; a kiss of death, not a kiss of life.

It was at this moment that it occurred to her exactly where William had laid the boy's body when he brought it in from the river.

"You placed his body on the bloodstain" the mother pronounced, "Richard was cursed by what you did."

Everything went quiet and the three labourers who had been in attendance, exited the building, abandoning the crushed family. Mother, father and younger son sat on the floor weeping. From the next room could be heard the daughter, yelling desperately from the baby pen in which she was enclosed.

Each parent thought the other the transgressor in the tragedy. William believed Amelia had been careless in her attention to the boys playing in the river; she believed William had been pusillanimous in his attempt to discipline the boys for playing in the water.

But worse than all this was where the boy's prostrate form had been laid to rest: on the site of Ashcroft's spilled blood.

William tried to be modern and deny that such superstitious practice could have any bearing on the boy's fate, but his wife was strong in the old religious beliefs that had been an integral part of her upbringing in the Howardian hills. A strong belief in witchcraft, ancient curses and remedies still characterised that rural backwater.

The whys and the wherefores are irrelevant; the marriage was doomed from this day forth. My walls absorbed the battle cries as their harmony fractured. One day Amelia's father arrived with a horse and cart, carrying his daughter and two grandchildren away from the scene of her misery. She looked back only once as the cart pulled round the bend. Her last glimpse was of her husband, the Huntley estate gardener, framed in my doorway.

I knew he was not long for this world. Lord Huntley had contracted a terminal illness and the estate had fallen into disrepair. Binns' poor husbandry was seen as a principal component in the estate's decline and the managers gave William due notice. His body was eventually found bobbing up and down in the mill race on land belonging to Mortimer Prince's farm.

Word on the estate and in the village was that a curse had been placed on the Huntley lands by the killer of George Ashcroft before he was claimed by the gallows. To simple folk it explained the destruction of a family and a belief took root that River View Cottage was a place to avoid.

An agent arrived one day to secure a 'For sale' sign in my tiny garden. He came indoors with a locksmith to make me secure.

"I don't know where they will find a buyer," he said to the locksmith, "I have heard it said that this house will bring only misery to any dwellers within."

Two harsh winters was the length of my abandonment during which time my fabric was seriously eroded. Glass was broken, seals corrupted and the weakest of Ashcroft's brickwork crumbled.

One February night at the turn of the century a drunken vagabond who had been ejected from several nearby hostelrys saw the cottage as free shelter. He smashed his way into the property by damaging the rear door with stones and bricks and kicks.

He was a snivelling whelp of a man and threw up the contents of his stomach within minutes of gaining entry. That night the man suffered agonies as his stomach haemorrhaged and he

moaned and groaned till the early hours. It was a human life without purpose and by the morning he was gone.

By 1900, shops had sprung up in the village and the path people took to get to them followed the river and came past my front gate. That frosty February morning a group of workmen, loud and noisy in the crispness of morning, wended their way towards the main village, oblivious to the small tragedy that had occurred within my walls.

A house is without choice in the matter of contents. The wastrel of a man's corpse was my possession until chance intervened. I watched timelessly as flies gathered, settling on his lips and brow, burrowing into his hair and skating across his eyeballs. They delivered their cargo and the stripping of the carcass began.

Days and weeks passed; the smell of corruption invaded my walls. First rats burrowed into what sweetbreads were available and then mice scuttled about nasal cavities and vacant eye sockets. So much had been gorged by so many.

When what had been a man was reduced to bone, the early summer sun penetrated the special windows that Ashcroft had lovingly restored and those bones were bleached.

A bevy of local women paused at my gate, ostensibly to admire the early morning sun's reflections on the river.

The tall, gangly one told the others, "This was one of the first railway houses, but the train never actually came this way. Look at the small windows in the corner – they are of old railway stock."

Of course, it was not true, but it had now come to be a common belief. No one recognised the old church within my structure.

"I would not live there for free rent," said the rotund woman, who looked in danger of tipping down the river bank.

"You would not? Then you are a fool, Edith," said the one carrying a child, "I would not let nonsense stories about hauntings and curses turn me away from the chance of free rent."

"Br-r-r-r," Edith answered back, "a goose just walked over my grave. Stuff like that would stop me from ever getting a night's sleep."

So now I knew it for sure. Word was about that something evil slept within my walls and those women did not even know about the dead tramp.

During the autumn, a man entered who was so gross that he could barely fit his frame through my front door. I could hear his laboured breathing, his nasal snorts seconds before he unlocked the door. He was talking to himself as though in confidence.

“Come on, Albert. It’s only an old house. Mrs Child said it was a matter of checking whether...my God, Albert, what is this someone has left?”

Albert Freeman had seen the bleached skeleton lying, back to the floor.

Is it real, Albert? Was it a person? Is it a joke?

Just at that autumnal moment, the wind whipped up and disturbed a faulty catch on a side window. There was a sharp slap as wood met wood. To me it was nothing; a house is always flexing its timbers, stretching above its foundations, chafing where there exists a poor fit. To Freeman it was a sure sign that the dead had inherited the earth. He hyper-ventilated, dropped the door key and exited out of the front entrance.

More men came the following day in the presence of a vicar. They carried a coffin and after a long hard struggle they pieced together the skeleton inside the box. The vicar was left alone to recite mumbo jumbo about a collection of bones. Every few moments he would give an anxious glance over his shoulder.

A few days later two joiners arrived and fixed the broken rear door before encasing both doorways in heavy wooden frames. No drunken vagabond or chancing thief would pierce the shield that now surrounded my entrances.

Almost four years had passed since I was inhabited by the Binns family. The Huntley estate had fallen apart, being sold to various farmers and landowners. The man who next appeared – the new agent’s boy – was tall and fair, as softly spoken as a young girl. Like many who came within my walls, he was a bundle of nerves. With the boy was a man in a black stove pipe hat. The hat was all the more remarkable because it belonged to an outdated fashion. It threw shadow over the man’s face, creating a sense of mystery that also unnerved the agent’s boy.

“So here we are inside the house, Mr Monse,” said the agent, “it was built many years ago by local constructors using local stone.”

“There’s a not-very-nice smell in here,” Monse said, “Can you open t’windows?”

“Of course I can, sir.” The girlish young man attempted to open one of the casement windows, but failed abysmally.

“Just leave it, lad. I’ll prob’ly do better mesen. Now what was t’price?”

Sheepishly the agent’s boy said “I think it was one hundred guineas or the nearest offer.”

“Mine is a very near offer,” Monse said, “it’s one hundred pounds and I won’t go a brass farthing above that. I don’t do guineas.”

The agent’s boy was phased.

“Can I let you know in the morning, Mr Monse?” he asked.

“You cannot. I have another property to look at and I’ll be plain – it’s more suited than this, but more money. I need to know today, so if you can get yersen back to yer boss with my offer...”

“Yes, but where will I find you?”

“Well, just here, of course. I’ll stay in here, waiting for you. I can examine everything then while I wait, can’t I?”

“You’re staying in here – this house – alone, while I nip back to Mr Thwaites?” the agent’s boy said with an almost hysterical note of disbelief in his voice. Oh, I knew then I had him as afraid as the others.

“Are you not happy with that? Frightened I’ll run away with your house in me pocket?” said Monse, accompanying his words with a big throaty laugh.

“Er, it wasn’t that, sir,” said the agent’s boy.

“Good. On your way then and let me know,” Monse bade him.

Two hours later, the boy returned with Mr Stanley Thwaites, the agent.

“Never let a boy do a man’s work, eh, Mr Thwaites?” Monse said, shaking hands on a final deal of £101 despite his ‘brass farthing’ protest.

Monse was a vulgar man with strange ways, but I did not mind him as an inhabitant for he took no notice of what rumour-mongers said. To him I was a home and he pooh-pooed any talk of dark deeds in my past.

The village one mile downriver had begun to expand and young families had moved in. Their children explored the water and in the depths of summer two young girls were drowned close to the beck that had claimed the Binns boy.

Mr Monse bought himself a small terrier and it became a favoured pastime of his to walk up and down the river walking the dog and wearing his black hat pulled low down on his brow. The children of the village, having been warned about me by their parents, were so afraid of ‘the man in the black hat’ and created a whole mythology round his being and the house he lived in.

Monse lived for 20 years within my walls. Most of the time he was a silent man, keeping his words within the privacy of his own skull. He only spoke aloud on two kinds of occasion: to curse when he cut a finger or once when he extracted two of his own teeth, and to share thoughts with his dog, Mungo. Even then they were bland and uninteresting expressions, nothing of a personal nature.

Monse appeared to have no bad habits, but he would spend long periods away from home. Before his departure for one of these periods, he always ensured that all curtains, upstairs and down, were drawn.

There were two unusual aspects to Monse: one was his vast collection of militaria, the other was the time he spent doing scribblings that consisted of letters and numbers and symbols. It took me a long time to combine these aspects with his air of secrecy and work out just what he did. That was when I knew why he had chosen my walls to dwell in.

He went away, presumably to die, as he never returned. I was only uninhabited for a matter of weeks though before a woman in her early thirties moved in. She came with an endless supply of bags and books, but nothing could conceal the nervousness she felt moving into River View cottage.

She was constantly looking around her even when indoors. Within days she had called in the electricity people to wire the building. The modern conduits of energy and light they constructed brought unaccountable change. I was now a far cry from those days when worshippers huddled within my fabric. Not only were my walls able to absorb, now they could convey messages and signals.

For Mary Ford, (that was her name and I learned she was Monse's niece and had inherited me), the illumination of the building came as a great relief. Still she was twitchy and uncertain, but the ability to throw light into a room before she entered brought immense relief.

Mary Ford was a teacher in the nearby town of Potgrave and each day a taxi arrived to convey her to the school. At night she would mark the children's work and constantly remark to herself upon its imperfections. Nothing could have been more marked than the contrast between her uncle's lengthy silences and Mary Ford's constant chatter to herself.

Within the year she had a lady friend, an accountant by the name of Miss Joan Groves. The newcomer sported a hairstyle known as the Eton Crop. The cut made people focus on the face and the shape of the head. It was a style associated with the boys who attended Eton School rather than young women. Clearly, Miss Groves belonged to a new style of self-confident female that sprung up during the 1930's.

Joan Groves was Mary Ford's lover and just before Christmas, she moved in with her. Once again my four walls were the subject of stories amongst the village people, many of whom thought lesbianism was confined to distant civilisations like the Ancient Greeks. The common people of the village believed it was the influence of where they were living that had led the two women astray. O how my floors creaked and my beams lurched the night after I heard Mary and Joan discussing this with much laughter.

There was another thing about the Groves woman though. She knew. She was on a higher plane than others who had lived within my walls. Mary Ford could not see the frequent glances her partner threw in the direction of the casement windows. For a self-possessed woman who was bursting with confidence, those occasional moments betrayed unease. She never pulled up a chair to either of the smaller casement windows even though she read often and light would have washed over her book.

"What's the matter, Joan?" Mary Ford asked her following many days of near silence.

“I am not well,” she said, “it’s hard to explain.”

“Is it the flu? I’ve heard it has come as far north as Yorkshire.”

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. It’s to do with...” Instead of completing the sentence, she raised a hand to her brow, touching one side with her thumb and the other with her index finger.

“You have a headache?”

“Oh, Mary, if only it was that simple.”

“Well then you must explain, because I have no idea what troubles you.”

Instead of facing up to Mary’s enquiry, the Groves woman went off at a tangent.

“I am tired of always having to go outside for the toilet,” she said. “Some nights when I am forced to go it’s like being drenched by buckets of water.”

“There is a plumber who serves the school where I work. I could ask him to take a look at our situation,” Mary said.

“Oh yes, please, I will even pay for it myself.”

Mary Ford duly contacted the plumber; a young man of immense good looks. He was skilled at his work and I could see that his attention was captured by Mary Ford. Did he know the nature of the relationship between the two women? Either he did not, or he did not care, for there was a confidence and an arrogance about this young man.

The plumber carried out most of the work during the long summer school holiday. He would visit the home on a regular basis, secure in the knowledge that Joan Groves was immersed in figures and company law. Of course, he tumbled into bed with Miss Ford, leaving her lover out in the cold.

The laughter and lust that echoed within my shell were unfamiliar sounds indeed. Sadly, I knew such joy must be the precursor of misery. It is always the same with humankind.

I believe Miss Groves sensed that her time of emotional content had drawn to a close. She threw even more intense glances at my casement windows during this time. Rather than seek

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