



The Mystery of Ven House, Millborne Port, or the Fortune of the Swiss Kurt Wagner

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Characters

- Kurt Wagner, German teacher from Switzerland
- Kim Ashley, librarian
- Joanna Hutchinson, landlady
- Tyron Marmaduke Grimsworth, insurance detective
- Margaret Boland, medium
- Simon Flowerdew Eliot, headmaster
- Miss Barnsby, secretary
- Sir William and Lady Elizabeth of Carent

Setting

- Milborne Port, east of Sherborne, Somerset, UK

A Journey to Sherborne, Dorset

Anyone heading towards Sherborne is led by the A30 through the delightful landscape of Blackmore Vale. At times you are in the north of Dorset, then again in the south of Somerset. The border does not run straight, and the A30 – still a dual carriageway near London – becomes a two-lane country road here. Hedges line the way everywhere; here and there herds of black-and-white cows grazing, and countless sheep dot the fields. The houses seem to have stood since time immemorial, most likely built on the foundations of Roman villas. There is peace here between people and animals, and nature and weather create unique moods.

I was on my way to Sherborne, a small town in the county of Dorset in the south-west of England, on the River Yeo, about four miles from Yeovil. With fewer than 10,000 residents, Sherborne – part of the West Dorset district – stands out for its eventful history, its many historic buildings, and its wealth of top-tier schools. The best known is Sherborne School. The town's name derives from *scir burne*, meaning “clear spring”. Its origins reach back to the 7th century. It was once an important town and the religious centre of Wessex, one of the seven kingdoms of ancient Britain. King Alfred's older brothers, Æthelbald and Æthelberht, are buried in the abbey. In 1075, the church buildings were converted into a Benedictine abbey. During numerous local conflicts, the town was partially destroyed several times and rebuilt repeatedly. In the 12th century, Roger of Caen, Chancellor of England and Bishop of Salisbury, had a fortified

palace constructed, which was destroyed in 1645. In 1594, Sir Walter Raleigh built a manor nearby, now known as Sherborne Castle. Although a national hero, he was executed in 1618. There was already a school in Alfred's time – he himself was educated there; in 1550 the present-day Sherborne School was re-founded in the abbey buildings.

I was on my way to Sherborne to take up my post as a German teacher. From Henstridge to Sherborne is only a short distance; along the way you pass the small village of Milborne Port. Known as a minting site in Saxon times, it has since led a rather unnoticed existence as a small market town of about 2,000–3,000 inhabitants. Three pubs invite you in for a pint: The King's Arms, The Chetnole Inn, and – unmissable on the main road – The Tippling Philosopher (originally "The Tippler"). In German, a "Tippler" is a brewer. As a Germanist and beer lover, I could not pass up a visit.

As I took the last bend before Milborne Port, a massive manor house on the left-hand side of the road immediately caught my eye: imposing, multi-storey, built of dark brick in the William and Mary style (late 17th century). My curiosity was too great to simply drive past. With a quick turn to the left, my hire car was soon in front of a large wrought-iron gate. It would have sufficed for the driveways of several typical detached houses – yet it led to the approach of a manor owned by a wealthy family. Naturally, it was locked and clearly posted "No Trespassing". Being a well-brought-up Swiss, I obeyed the rules and only took out my mobile for a souvenir photo. Oddly, as I focused, a tingle ran over my skin and I got goosebumps – sure signs that something here was not quite normal. But what? The house looked uninhabited; no flag flew from the roof. All around, though, bore traces of diligent gardeners. It was already 6 p.m. and growing dusky. I had to hurry if I wanted to check in at the Eastbury Inn in Sherborne on time. The next day would be busy: meeting the headmaster, a tour of the school, and taking over the German classes. I also needed to find lodgings. My wallet would not support a long stay at the comfortable Eastbury.

So, I drove on. In the rear-view mirror I caught the silhouette of the manor one more time – and felt as if I was being watched.

Room Hunt

Dinner was excellent, and I especially enjoyed Dorset Knob, a wonderful amber ale – lightly malty with a fruity hop finish – that paired beautifully with steak and kidney pie. Exhausted from the long day, I sank into bed. The last thing I saw was the moon peeking through the window – as if wishing me good night.

Headmaster Simon Flowerdew Eliot received me at about quarter past nine. His receptionist made me wait and left me high and dry at first. She elegantly ignored her stiff greeting – “What does this stranger want here?” – especially when she had to serve tea and biscuits at the headmaster’s request. I made a mental note to bolster my charm offensive next time with a bar of Swiss chocolate. Simon Flowerdew Eliot spoke about the school’s history, founded by St Aldhelm (639–709), a member of the Wessex royal family like Alfred, who was educated here. Tradition is held in high esteem, and today there are even branches in Qatar. Sherborne is a typical boys-only boarding school with eight houses of around seventy boys each, spanning a range of ages. The houses are distinguished by uniform colour codes; green and black, for instance, stand for Digby Manor. Sports like cricket and rugby are typical of an English elite school; the arts are also especially encouraged. Overall, Sherborne School is among Britain’s leading boarding schools. “We want our boys to become men with a strong sense of identity, able to think and learn independently; men of integrity, committed to leadership and service,” Mr Eliot explained convincingly.

I nodded in agreement – what else could I, a product of Zurich’s state schools and later the gymnasium, with a successful German studies degree from the University of Zurich, really add? In Zurich we had less tradition, but we were politically progressive and kept both the student body and the city police on their toes.

As we toured the venerable buildings, many boys greeted me, all neatly in uniform – presumably because the headmaster was present. Mr Eliot then showed me my future workplace. The classroom was simple; wooden panelling testified to its age; a classic slate board hung on the wall – but there was also state-of-the-art communication and presentation equipment. I would be stationary here, with pupils rotating through. I was to teach ten year-groups across eight houses, from the youngest (Year 1, about seven years old) to the 18–20-year-olds on the cusp of leaving. We then visited the dining hall, sports fields, and music rooms. As a point of contact for all my needs, Simon Flowerdew Eliot recommended his assistant, the reserved Miss Barnsby. With that I was dismissed for the day; my official start was the following Monday. That left ample time to find somewhere to live and set up my classroom.

Harling & Taylor, a letting agency in the town centre, recommended several rentals, and I set out. As a spoiled Swiss, I had standards that often did not match those of English flats – especially regarding bathrooms or heating. I had almost given up. One of the last places on my list was a charming two-room flat in the home of Mrs Joanna Hutchinson on London Road: bright, sunny, with a garden promising restful hours after work; Mrs Hutchinson seemed well educated. Her husband had been a teacher at the local girls’ school and had sadly passed away far too early. We quickly reached an agreement: £385 per month – extremely affordable. I could even walk to the school from there. “Call me Joanna,” she said. “Gladly – I’m Kurt,” I replied. “You can move in as early as

tomorrow, if you like.” I did not need to be told twice, took my leave politely, and returned to the Eastbury Inn.

Tyron M. Grimsworth (TMG)

The next morning brought typical Dorset weather: rain from a clear sky, and ten minutes later sunshine again. The constant breeze off the coast is to blame for these quick changes. The English seem long accustomed to it: either carrying an umbrella or wearing a waterproof jacket – the hardy ones stoically let the rain fall. The savvy foreigner learns quickly starting with the English breakfast: baked beans, ham, bacon, eggs and more. A hearty breakfast keeps out the cold and rain and conveniently saves you from an expensive lunch snack.

I sat in the dining room drinking the kind of English coffee you must get used to – tea would likely have been better – along with breakfast sausages. Meanwhile, I scrolled through emails on my mobile. My friend Roger from Kloten had sent the latest Swiss football and ice hockey results, and on WhatsApp an old friend checked in with holiday photos of colleagues in Ibiza. I considered sending some pictures to my family and looked for suitable shots. While scrolling, I came across the photo of the manor in Milborne Port that I had taken the day before. Strangely, that same tingle and goosebumps came over me again, as if an icy shiver ran down my back. I looked closer and thought I saw a glow in one of the house’s rooms. Impossible – at the gate I had seen no light. Probably a reflection. I shook my head.

Then I noticed another guest across the room: perhaps a business traveller, conservatively dressed, well turned out in Harris Tweed, early fifties. I pictured him driving a green Land Rover and selling farm equipment to farmers.

“Looks like bad news, sir,” he said to me. “For a moment, your face turned rather pale.”

“I actually felt a chill for a moment,” I answered.

“And you’re new to the area, right?”

“Yes. I arrived last night and start on Monday at the boarding school as a German teacher. My name is Kurt Wagner, from Bülach in Switzerland.”

“Tyron M. Grimsworth, humanities scholar – the M. stands for Marmaduke, thanks to my late grandfather. We’re from Yorkshire,” he introduced himself. “I’m spending a few days here in Sherborne to look into a strange matter on assignment.”

I told him about my luck with the teaching job and the affordable lodging I had already found.

“So why did you suddenly go pale?” he pressed, peering at me sharply through his round lenses.

“To be honest, I can’t explain it. The same thing happened yesterday when I stopped in front of the manor in Milborne Port and took a photo. A few minutes ago, I looked at the picture again – I meant to send it to friends.”

“You must be talking about Ven House,” Grimsworth said meaningfully. “Show me the photo. Yes, that’s the one. Remarkable. A stranger comes here and senses that something is off.”

“Mr Grimsworth, first, I’ve never been here before; second, the name Ven House means nothing to me; and third, I don’t believe in wacky stories. Your countrymen are famously imaginative when it comes to the paranormal – and tourism loves to market that. Every town has its ghost tour,” I joked.

“There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy – Shakespeare,” Grimsworth countered. “If I had more time, I’d happily chat on. But I have a ten o’clock with the abbey archivist. Perhaps a warming glass of Scotch this evening? I can tell you a few things.” He stood and took his leave.

I pondered a few minutes more and then decided to visit the local library to learn more about the manor.

Kim Ashley

“How can I help you?” breathed the very attractive librarian at the public library. She brushed a red strand of hair back and seemed pleased to assist a handsome visitor. At last, a truly pretty librarian, I thought; most are as dry as old books. I beamed at her and said, “Mrs – or is it Ms Ashley? I’m looking for information on Ven House.”

“You can call me Kim,” she replied, leaving her marital status open. “Yes, we have a lot. Are you more interested in the architecture or the history of the estate?”

“Actually, everything about the owners since its construction, including newspaper reports,” I answered. “I’m Kurt, from Switzerland.”

“There are a few rumours about the house that have never been proven. A few days ago, someone else asked me about it – an Englishman doing some research.”

“You must mean Mr Grimsworth.”

“Yes, that’s the name. He was looking into an incident said to have occurred in the 19th century.”

Kim disappeared among the shelves; I heard her searching until she returned with old folios. “Here are clippings from the *Sherborne Herald*. This will keep you reading for a few days. If I can help – my shift ends at 4 p.m., and I know the region’s history well.”

“Wonderful,” I said. “Maybe we could meet at Oliver’s for tea and continue chatting.” Her auburn hair and matching freckles had me smitten.

Back at the hotel, I started reading. The house was originally built by the Carent family and later passed to the Medlycotts, who expanded it in several phases. In the 1950s, the last Medlycott sold the entire estate to an unnamed investor. A magnificent garden once dominated the grounds, but new roads and drained fields cut part of it off. In addition to its impressive architecture, the house was known for a generous orangery. The estate is surrounded by an almost thirteen-foot-high brick wall. The house name likely goes back to a hamlet that existed in the 13th century. Tradition holds that Sir William Carent died of grief after his wife suddenly succumbed to a terrible illness. He had ignored the locals’ warnings and perhaps built in the wrong place. Since then, travellers have repeatedly reported the silhouette of a darkly clad woman. Authorities could never confirm anything. In the late 19th century, the *Esquire* reported that the Medlycott family had been struck by tragedies over the centuries, with female members always the victims. The last incident was reported in 1947 – again a dark silhouette at a window. Soon afterwards the last Medlycott sold the house and land and moved to London. Nothing is known about the new owners, supposedly an investor from Australia.

Strange, I thought: what kind of terrible illness affects only the female members? Probably village exaggerations – or envy. I’d ask Kim about these old tales; she was born here and must know the ghost stories. Should I tell her about the optical illusion, the shadow at the window? Nonsense, really. There are more important things to talk about with a charming librarian, aren’t there?

Right on time, she showed up with more documents and said, “You can bring these back tomorrow.”

Wonderful, I thought. She means it – and wants to see me again. I was captivated: a navy three-piece suit, white blouse, discreet jewellery, a necklace with a ring pendant, a diamond in the earlobe, mid-height pumps – and those legs. Stay on it, Kurt. She’s exactly your type.

Kim told me she was born here but moved to Bath early with her mother. There was a secret her mother Beth never wanted to reveal, and they had been supported for years by an unknown benefactor. When her mother died, she left her only a gold ring engraved “Pro Deo et Patria WCV”. Kim had never discovered who “WCV” was – likely her father; her mother steadfastly refused to speak.

I could have listened for hours – I loved her voice and gentle gaze. We set a date for the next day. Again, that odd tingle came over me – this time of a different kind – and I had trouble falling asleep.

Fact-Finding Tour

I met Tyron Marmaduke Grimsworth for breakfast. He was in fine spirits, beaming. “Good morning, old chap – how are you today?” Just as cheerful, I told him about yesterday’s successes found lodging, met an attractive woman, and learned a good deal about Ven House.

“I gather you were at the public library,” Grimsworth teased. “You’ve fallen for the extraordinary charm of Lovely Kim. Redheads have always had a special allure. But to business: what did you learn?”

I gave him a detailed account. One thing stood out: every document mentioned a “terrible illness”, but none described it.

“We should consult the old parish registers. Milborne Port once belonged to the parish of Chorlton Horethorne. That’s where we start!” Grimsworth said decisively. Apart from returning the library materials, I had no plans; we arranged to meet at one o’clock in front of the abbey.

At the library, Kim greeted me with a broad smile, eyes nearly closing, two playful dimples forming on her cheeks.

“Kurt, I brought the ring. Maybe you can photograph it. Since I was born here, my mother obviously had a connection to someone local. Maybe we can find out who together?”

It was a simple ring set with a few semi-precious stones. Along with the motto and the initials, a small crest was engraved: a shield with three circles bearing arrow-like symbols – arrows or trees? A beautiful piece that struck me as quite old.

“Maybe we can find more time tonight?” Kim asked and blew me three air kisses. “But now I really have to get to work.” Who could resist?

“I’ll be in touch. Today I’m off with T. M. Grimsworth to Chorlton Horethorne and the surrounding area. He wants to look through some old parish registers. Could be interesting – and I’m slowly getting to know the area.” My heart thumped as I left. How are you supposed to read old parish books when a dream is waiting to be won right here? I thought wistfully.

T. M. G. did indeed drive a green Land Rover Defender. My phone showed a thirteen-minute drive. We took Castle Town Way to the B3145, past Poyntington, and into Chorlton Horethorne. *Chorlton* means “farmers’ settlement”, *Horethorne* “grey thornbush”. Its origins trace to the Bronze Age; what is certain is that the Romans farmed here. Today it’s a picturesque dormitory village of about 600 people. The

Romanesque church dominates the centre, standing on the foundations of a Romano-British temple.

Our results were meagre and pointed us on to Henstridge. We drove east via South Cheriton, then south through Templecombe to Henstridge. At the junction with the A30 we parked by the Virginia Ash free house. Time for a pint of Badger Best Bitter. It wasn't far to the parish hall. Curious villagers peeked from behind curtains. Who visits Henstridge at this hour when respectable folk are out working the fields or shopping in Yeovil?

Grimsworth managed to dig up information about a long-vanished village. Ven Village apparently existed until the mid-14th century. It's believed its population was wiped out by the plague, which reached England in 1348 via the port of Melcombe Regis.

"Can you imagine, dear Kurt, that about two million of the six million inhabitants of the British Isles died of the plague within two years? Whole regions were depopulated, villages abandoned, castles fell into ruin," T. M. G. explained. "Ven Village must have lain somewhere between Henstridge and Milborne Port. I wouldn't be surprised if Ven House was named after the lost village. It makes sense that the Carent family took control of the fallow land and secured it by building the house. They already held property thanks to their connection to the Stourtons – for instance Toomer Park, a Carent estate. According to old documents, the builder was warned by villagers not to settle on the land. Cursed ground, unhealthy – and the wall remains were to be avoided day and night."

The superstitious villagers had good reason to worry: the Black Death returned repeatedly, raging in London as late as 1665.

On the way back to Sherborne we stopped at the Ven House gate. As on my first visit, it was locked. The garden was immaculately maintained, but not a soul was to be seen. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling we were being watched. "Kurt, you're a sensitive one," Grimsworth said, "but I think you're right. There's an unresolved story here." He shifted into reverse. It seemed to me there was light again in the house; I thought I saw dark shapes at a window. Then we drove off.

Ven House Garden

The next morning, I was at breakfast unusually early. I'd slept fitfully; in my head, images shifted between lovely Kim and a woman in black with a ravaged face. Were they both trying to tell me something? I didn't feel the unknown woman wanted to harm me – rather, she seemed to be seeking help. The tea did me good; porridge and toast with orange marmalade fortified me further.

T. M. G. showed up bleary-eyed and immediately apologised. “Sorry, Kurt, I hardly slept and went through my notes again. We should pay the house another visit and explore the surroundings more closely. I’m convinced we’ll find clues in the fields and on the Ven House grounds. Let’s take wellies – the terrain’s a bit boggy. Do you have a camera?” My mobile had a good one, plus a GPS app. “By the way, we should keep an eye out for a crest – a shield with three circles.”

“How do you know that crest?” Grimsworth asked, baffled. “It belongs to the Carent family. They’re related to the Stourtons. The name comes from Caerwent, probably of Irish origin; they appear early in records on the Isle of Purbeck. The Carents built Ven House!”

“Well, I just had a feeling I’d seen it before,” I said – careful not to mention I’d seen it engraved inside Kim’s ring. Could she be a descendant of that old family?

We left the hotel earlier than usual. I wanted to be back in time to move into Joanna Hutchinson’s flat that afternoon. I settled my bill, loaded my luggage, and followed Grimsworth’s Rover. We parked before the iron gate of Ven House and used a hidden, ivy-covered side entrance to slip onto the vast grounds. We kept close to the wall and headed south. In this section, the garden was overgrown and marshy; apparently the current owners only kept up the formal areas around the house to save costs.

English manor houses are often surrounded by different types of gardens: a formal garden, a kitchen garden, a large wild garden, and an orangery. We moved through the wild garden now, where nature grew undisturbed – a paradise for photographers, painters, or writers seeking inspiration. The ground grew boggier; here and there the remnants of old walls jutted out – likely former outbuildings or stables. We picked our way carefully through open woodland; the ground was carpeted with thorny plants and ivy climbing up into the trees.

“Grimsworth, up there by those dark trees – that looks like a very old grave,” I called. He went straight to the stone. “You’ve got a good eye, young man. This place seems to have been abandoned for ages. Maybe there’s something left to read.” He cleared the stone of vines and centuries of grime. “Here lies a Medlycott from the 18th century. Where there’s one, there are more.”

Not far off we found other broken headstones, no longer legible – neglected for too long. They appeared to be even earlier burials. T. M. G. was in his element; I, on the other hand, shivered at the thought of walking over graves. Like a bloodhound following an inner compass, he ranged through the leaves until he came upon the remains of foundations.

“Come here, Kurt – I think I’ve found one of the keys to the riddle.” It was the first time he’d used my first name so informally.

“Coming, Tyron,” I replied.

In the Manor

Grimsworth had indeed found wall remains suggesting a medieval building – perhaps the chapel of the vanished village of Ven? If so, we were not only on sacred ground but in the middle of a plague cemetery. There were no visible gravestones – likely a mass grave under a thick layer of earth. Could the Carent family have known about this cemetery? They’d acquired the land when the village had long since vanished and the burial ground had fallen into decay. Was it possible that Lady Carent had contracted the plague more than two centuries later – by a rat bite? The same could have happened to women of the Medlycott family. I pictured noble ladies gathering herbs with wicker baskets – ivy-leaved toadflax that grows in wall cracks, rich in vitamin C and valued as a remedy. Perhaps they were bitten while collecting.

Grimsworth headed purposefully towards the manor. I paused at a section of wall, swept aside moss and ivy with a stick for no reason, and uncovered a slightly lighter stone slab underneath. A real Swiss always carries a penknife: I carefully cleared more of the sandstone. I couldn’t make out much – except for a single letter, a “t”, and directly below its part of a crest. It looked like a shield with rings. Was a Carent buried here? The documents from Henstridge made no mention of family graves on the property. Could this be the grave of the ill-fated Lady Elizabeth, who likely died young of the plague?

Noticing I’d fallen behind, T. M. G. doubled back, looked over my shoulder, and exclaimed, delighted, “My dear friend, that’s a clue to the Carents. Kurt, you’re a genius! I’d love to know whether a family member is buried here – why here and not in the abbey, where the other Carents are interred? Such a remote spot would only be chosen for someone unbaptised – or accused of witchcraft. Come on, maybe we can find a way into the house. I know it’s not the most gentlemanly approach, but sometimes the end justifies the means.”

I still didn’t love the idea of breaking in, but his reasoning convinced me, and I followed without further protest. On the east side of the house, we found a cellar entrance. The wooden cover was rotten and barely secured, so we climbed down. Grimsworth had apparently planned this “break-in” and produced a powerful LED torch from his jacket. We passed through storerooms that smelled damp and musty. No light, only the rustle of tiny feet and cobwebs. Eventually, we reached a steep staircase leading up to the

service rooms and the kitchen. As in the cellar, there was nothing here but a large hearth with various hooks for pots, some work benches, and a stone sink.

I urged we hurry on; an unpleasant chill was creeping over me. We searched the ground floor to no avail and then climbed to the first floor. There were the reception rooms, the library, the ladies' sitting room, the games room, and more. All empty, damp, and cold, with no sign of recent occupancy. The same upstairs, where the private bedrooms and chambers were. At the top, under the roof, reached by narrow stairs, were the servants' rooms. The entire house was empty, apart from a few old, decaying pieces of furniture. Dust everywhere, bird and bat droppings. The grime of the last five decades; a faint ammonia smell hung in the rooms.

I remembered the light I thought I'd seen in a first-floor room – from outside, that would have been the west wing. We checked those rooms as well and finally entered a very large, bright room at the end of the corridor. It had a window facing the gate and a balcony overlooking the garden. From here you could see the garden and almost the entire estate to the edge of Milborne Port. This must have been the mistress's bedroom, I thought. But again, no furniture – only a huge mirror on the wall, partially blind or perhaps merely clouded by the dust of ages. Tyron stood on the balcony admiring the garden, while I pulled silly faces in the mirror.

Suddenly the room grew noticeably colder. Outside it was around 20°C, the balcony door stood open, yet in here it was distinctly chillier. Reality or imagination? Just as I was about to call Tyron, my voice caught in my throat. In the mirror a shadow slowly appeared, grew larger, and took the shape of a woman – clothed in the style of the 17th century, dark and elegant. Her face: deathly pale – and then, before my eyes, it changed; beauty gave way to a ghastly, disfigured mask with black buboes. A shudder ran through me, my pulse pounded. I heard her speak, faintly: "Help me, save me, and release me."

Then the apparition dissolved – and I lost consciousness.

Help

I don't remember how I got back to Sherborne. T. M. G. must have parked the hire car in front of Joanna's house. Apparently, he laid me on my bed and brought my things to the room. When I awoke, the concerned Mrs Hutchinson was sitting at the bedside. "Don't worry, Kurt, everything's fine. Mr Grimsworth brought you here and said you passed out from hunger. Would you like a sandwich?" There was something very kind about her; despite the years, she still seemed youthful. "A strong coffee – uh, tea – would be good.

And yes, I'm hungry," I stammered, jumping out of bed. "Let's meet in the kitchen. Freshen up first," she said, and left.

Joanna's house was a little jewel box. After the death of her husband Archibald, she had transformed it: the heavy traditional furniture and the worn Chesterfield sofa Archie loved were gone. Laura Ashley and Beatrix Potter moved in; the house became a pastel doll's house. I had to get used to it; the floral duvet would certainly have appealed to my sister. I preferred a more minimal, straight-lined style. Joanna could live comfortably on Archie's pension, supported local charities, and worked the till every Wednesday at the Castle Garden Centre – beloved for her knack for matching plants to people. Her hobby was parapsychology, and she was open to esoteric topics.

The sandwich and strong Dorset tea did me good; I recovered quickly. "Kurt, I think you had a very unpleasant experience today," she began carefully. "When I met you a few days ago, you had a very positive silver aura. Such people are exceptionally gifted, empathetic, and develop wonderful abilities to understand others. That's why I wanted you as a tenant right away. But when Grimsworth brought you here unconscious today, I saw some black spots in your energy field. That told me you'd had an extremely unpleasant experience. You seem to be on the mend now." I liked her confidential manner. "Joanna, I don't really know what an aura or energy field is, but I suppose it has to do with our presence – and whether people feel drawn to us. I'll gladly tell you what happened."

I told her about Grimsworth, about Kim, and about the strange apparition in the mirror at Ven House. "Hmm," Joanna mused. "That's a lot at once. It seems Grimsworth will be a great help to you. Your connection to Kim has enormous future potential. Both relationships are mysteriously linked to the woman at Ven House. The reason you alone can see her is your extraordinary sensitivity. The woman with the ruined face hasn't managed to pass over. She still has something to accomplish and is seeking help. Her appearance has scared off everyone who has seen her, preventing a solution. Most people assume the worst first and then do nothing."

I sat there like a first-grader, mouth agape.

"Kurt, we should all come together and hold a séance to contact the Carents. That way we could learn more about the fate of Lady Carent, wife of William Carent. Perhaps we can reunite the two departed," Joanna suggested. I felt queasy – summoning spirits and that kind of hocus-pocus wasn't my worldview. We all know how those experiments end in Hollywood films. As a Zwinglian, I take a sober view of the world. Of course, I believe in life after death, but ghost stories had no place in my life. In the end, though, I agreed, and we set the séance for the following evening.

Sir William

We met at half seven in Joanna's parlour. Tyron was raring to go; Kim seemed a bit unsure and wore the ring around her neck; Joanna arrived with Margaret Boland, a sturdy woman in her forties who would serve as the medium. "Margaret's a natural and a devout Christian; we've worked together before," Joanna explained. "We'll sit at the round table, hook our little fingers, and touch our neighbours' thumbs. Then we relax, close our eyes, and focus on the target person. I'll lead; if it works, the deceased will speak directly through Margaret. Don't be alarmed – sometimes the spirit will also materialise in the room and use the medium as an amplifier."

I sat beside Kim, who looked at me nervously. "Don't worry – look at me and hold my hand; it helps." I couldn't admit I was uneasy myself. Joanna likely noticed a change in my aura and nodded. "He's right, Kim. You can trust him." Grimsworth added, "I'm glad Kurt is with us. From day one I suspected he could be a key figure in my studies. I'm investigating, on behalf of a London firm, the history of Ven House and the causes of the tragedies there – and I'm searching for unknown Carent descendants. The Carents sold to the Carterets, who sold to the Medlycotts. There are hints that an object from the time of the vanished village of Ven is hidden in the house and brought misfortune. They say a woman with a disfigured face shows the seeker the hiding place. Kurt, I think you saw her – that's why you fainted, right?" I couldn't deny it. Kim looked at me in disbelief; Joanna only nodded: "The change in your aura told me you had a paranormal encounter. Let's begin."

We closed the circle and relaxed. A pleasant tingling in my hand; Kim's squeeze said she trusted me. In a calm voice, Joanna asked whether a spirit could hear us. She repeated the invocation several times. After a few minutes, the ceiling light began to flicker. I opened my eyes: Margaret's eyes were slightly rolled back – trance. Then she opened her mouth, and a young person's voice said, "I am Keith Ashbury. Who disturbs my rest, and what do you want?" At first, I thought she was putting on an act. Joanna replied steadily, "Keith, can you connect me with an honourable man?" – "We are all in contact in this dimension. Those who have grievously sinned I cannot reach. They suffer in eternal darkness for their shameful lives until Judgement Day." – "Keith, we seek Sir William Carent, former Sheriff of Somerset, husband of Elizabeth Luttrell Carent, Lord of Ven House. We need his help." – "I will do my best," Margaret murmured in trance. Then silence for a few minutes. Finally, her lips moved and she spoke in a deep male voice with an old English dialect: "Who disturbs the honourable William Carent of Ven? Speak."

My heart nearly stopped; I struggled with the dialect. Wisps of ectoplasm escaped Margaret's mouth like cigarette smoke. Behind her, a cloud formed with the outlines of a man's face.

"My apologies, your Lordship," Grimsworth said calmly. "I am Tyron Marmaduke Grimsworth, a humanities scholar from York, engaged to research your family's history and to seek missing descendants. I trust this is in your Lordship's interest?" Sir William was silent for a moment; the apparition moved about the room, grew brighter. In life he must have been a tall, strong man with a well-kept beard. Then he spoke in a deep, firm voice: "Listen well to what befell my family."

Sir William told how he purchased the land despite warnings from the locals, who called it cursed because Ven had fallen to the plague in the 13th century. At first the dead were buried near an early Christian chapel, later in a mass grave. By his time, the chapel was nearly in ruins, and most headstones were gone or broken. Construction on the house went smoothly, but the locals shunned the land. He lived happily with his wife Elizabeth, had children, and ran successful cattle and dairy operations. One day, while collecting herbs, Elizabeth found an iron cross near the chapel ruins. When she tried to dig it out, insects stung her and large black rats crawled from a hole. The next day, she could no longer rise. Her body was covered with buboes, and she suffered terrible pain. After thirty-six agonising hours, she died. In his despair, William threw away the plague cross and secretly buried his wife near the chapel. He sold the house and land and never returned.

Margaret's pulse and breathing were heaving, and Joanna wanted to end the séance. Grimsworth thanked Sir William; but before Margaret could be brought out of trance, the voice added: "Search for a gold ring. It bears the insignia of the Carents and will help you solve your questions." Then the mists dissolved, it grew quiet, and we broke the circle.

That evening, I took Kim home. She was utterly exhausted by the experience, held my hand tightly, and asked me not to leave her alone that night.

Kim's Ring

I woke up on the sofa, wrung out; my neck was stiff, my head still buzzing with impressions. It seemed Lady Elizabeth had spoken to me in the night: "Find the cross, have it blessed. Then find my grave and fasten the cross at the head." Strange.

Dishes clinked in the kitchen. Kim was making breakfast. “So – how do you feel?” she asked with a smile, planting a shy kiss on my cheek. “Better now – after a greeting like that.”

“I heard you talking in your sleep. You said something like, ‘Yes, I’ll look,’ but you didn’t say what,” she said as she turned the bacon in the pan. “I was dreaming wildly and woke confused. For a moment I thought the Black Lady stood in the room – her face flawless. She wanted me to find Lord Carent’s cross. Odd, right? Maybe I should talk to Tyron today.”

Kim seemed recovered from last night’s events, but the whole story still preoccupied her and me. What was the deal with the ring? What had the late lord said? Why should a ring be the key?

“Can we change the subject? It’s so nice here with you. Tell me about yourself – I do take in strange men overnight,” she laughed. Indeed: I’d barely sat on her sofa before my eyes closed, instead of paying attention to her. What else could she do but cover me with a blanket?

Kim told me she’d been born in Sherborne but moved to Bath young with her mother, where she stayed through her training as a librarian. She didn’t know her father and didn’t even have a photo. Her mother blocked all questions – there must have been an unhappy love; perhaps her mother wasn’t of the right station, perhaps the father died young. She didn’t know. Her mother wore a ring that meant a great deal to her; on her deathbed she asked Kim to take it, care for it, and always wear it. After the funeral, Kim discovered that money had been transferred monthly from a London law firm to her mother, with additional funds for Kim’s education. Every enquiry led nowhere; she was told client confidentiality applied. Among the papers she found photos, mostly of Sherborne and surroundings – her mother in front of the abbey or at the castle. In one photo she stood at the gate of Ven House with a companion. Shortly afterwards, Kim learned of an opening at the town library and successfully applied. That was a few years ago.

“You know, Kurt, I’ll soon be thirty. I couldn’t find out anything about my origins or my father. I think it’s time to forget the old stories and look ahead. There are nicer goals in a young woman’s life – for instance, you.”

I think I blushed. English women can be very direct; she hit the bull’s-eye. “Kim, darling,” I began a bit uncertainly, “it’s lovely to hear that. I’ve fallen in love with you, and I’ll do everything I can to be with you, to uncover your origins, and to resolve the Carent affair. There are still a few days until I start teaching.”

I gathered my courage, held her gently, and kissed her. A tremor, a desire for more – I lost my breath. Had anyone seen us, it would have looked like two people fusing into a monument to love. I hadn't been this happy in a long time. England is a blessing, I thought: a wonderful woman, a lovely flat, an exciting challenge as a teacher – and the adventure of Ven House. We stood there for a moment and knew we were meant for each other.

"Kim, may I take a closer look at your ring?" I asked. She took off the chain and handed me the ring. Externally, it was quite simple despite the stones, apparently 22-carat gold. A few grooves on the outer surface; very old, probably valuable, worn in places from frequent use. Inside: "Pro Deo et Patria WCV", along with a tiny crest.

"Do you have a piece of thin paper and a pencil? The ring is tight; I can't quite make out the engraving like this." She handed them over. I carefully rubbed the paper over the ring. On it appeared a shield with two circles at the top and a third below; inside the circles, three inverted "V" s. "Looks like stylised fir trees," I said. "For God and Country – WCV," Kim replied. "But that doesn't tell me much. Maybe we can find something in the British armorial online."

After hours of searching, we found the crucial clue: a Sheriff of Dorset more than 400 years ago was a Carent, and his arms matched those on the ring. The questions remained: the ring's age, what "WCV" meant, and who had given it to Kim's mother.

"Kim, I think I've got it: 'WC' stands for William Carent, the 'V' for Ven. I'm almost certain – when Tyron and I were roaming the garden, we found old wall remains, and I saw a similar crest. Weathered and barely legible, but it fits. Lady Elizabeth must lie somewhere on the grounds – the ghostly lord said as much, didn't he?"

Plague Cross

I looked for Tyron at the hotel – he was poring over papers. "Hey, T. M. G., all right?" – "So, how was your night? Joanna was worried when you didn't come back," he grinned. I changed the subject – it was none of his business, and he didn't need to know how things stood between us. "Listen, Tyron, Kim and I spent hours in the British Heraldry Society database, trying to pin down the name behind this crest." I handed him the rubbing, which he examined before flipping through his files. "*Pro Deo et Patria* isn't unusual; several families use it. But I've seen that crest before – in the church at Henstridge. It must be the Carents' arms."

“We’ve come to the same conclusion – but we can’t explain how the ring ended up with Kim’s mother. I also think ‘WCV’ could mean William Carent, Ven – and the lord mentioned a ring last night.”

“Kurt, let’s drive to Henstridge – and then back to Ven House,” Tyron suggested – and needed little time to get organised. Then we set off in his Land Rover.

We picked up Kim on the way. In Henstridge we quickly found the cemetery and, in the church, the tomb of William II Carent and his wife Margaret, née Stourton. No doubt: the same arms. The Carents had lived in the region for a long time, held lands around Toomer Hill, and had ties to the influential Stourton family. “That’s enough for now. How about a bite at the Virginia Ash before we head to Ven House?” I suggested. Over lunch, I considered telling Tyron about my dream. My dream and Sir William’s hints lined up perfectly. The Virginia Ash was almost empty at that hour – unsurprising for a Thursday – and it was already one o’clock. Fish and chips for Tyron, a ploughman’s salad for me, and a vegetarian pie for Kim. We kept a clear head with homemade lemonade, nicely lemony. During lunch, I told Tyron about the Black Lady’s urgent message in my dream and Sir William’s clues.

From the pub to Ven House was only a few minutes. We parked in the same spot and went straight to the house. I figured our best chance was to start searching in the ladies’ room – that’s where I’d first encountered Lady Elizabeth’s spirit. I was uneasy, but what could happen? There were three of us, and my dream hadn’t been frightening. At last, we stood in the room and studied Sir William’s words on the wall – he had thrown the cross out of the window in fury and grief. We looked down into the expansive garden and wondered how far a cross might fly. William must have been a strong man. Tyron thought it likely the cross had landed in the pond and sunk into the muck.

Kim touched my hand and whispered, “Kurt, do you feel that chill in the room? Let’s go out into the sun.” I did feel the cold creeping up my back, and we turned round. Kim was on the verge of crying out, and my breath caught. In the large wall mirror, right where I’d seen the Black Lady before, dark veils formed and moved, then slipped over the gilded frame. We stood rooted to the spot, breathing hard, hearts racing. Tyron had turned, too. “What’s with you two? Are you seeing ghosts?” He seemed to see nothing. “Strange, it’s unusually cold in here. We should go.” I held a finger to my lips to shush him. Meanwhile, the black mist reached the floor and slowly grew into a medium-height figure. Within it stood a woman, elegantly and finely dressed, typical of her era. Her face was strikingly pale, her hair pulled back severely. Was this Lady Elizabeth? Remarkably, she bore a strong resemblance to Kim. Nothing about her suggested the dreadful disease – as if she were present in the flesh. “Kurt, you saw me, you heard my message, and you answered my call,” she whispered. I couldn’t reply; the longer I looked at her,

the more I saw how uncanny the resemblance to Kim was. A trick of the eye? Kim stood petrified beside me.

“And who is this young girl who could be my daughter? She wears my ring around her neck,” she said, and Kim instinctively grasped the chain, holding the ring protectively in her hand. “This ring belonged to my mother, Margaret,” Kim said defensively, “but I don’t know where she got it.”

“Kurt, I asked you to find the cross. You and Kim are the only ones who can see and hear me. Find the cross and fasten it to my earthly grave. It will banish the plague fleas and rats to the earth for ever. They have caused enough suffering – to the Carents, the Carterets, and the Medlycotts. If you succeed, I will finally find eternal rest and go into the light, where my beloved William awaits. This ring binds our love – and will bring you luck as well.” Everything was extremely strange, but our fear of the unknown had completely dissolved. We muttered a soft “Yes,” and the lady smiled contentedly. The mist receded and disappeared, and Lady Elizabeth’s apparition was gone. We still stood there as if enchanted, as if dreaming. Tyron shook us. “Are you two dreaming? I’ve been talking to you the whole time, but you just stared at the mirror, moved your lips, and nodded.”

“Come on, let’s go into the garden,” I said. “We need to get into the pond. If William threw the cross there, it’s probably buried in the mud.”

Tyron insisted on wading in himself, trousers rolled up. The water was cold; the bottom, mud and rotting plant matter. Suddenly he yelped. “Something stung me – maybe a crayfish or a piece of glass?” A small cut on his sole, bleeding slightly. Then he reached into the muck and felt something sharp. “Hand me that big shard of pottery – like a shovel. There’s something hard here.” He dug and tugged until he finally held up a completely rusted ring cross (about 40–50 centimetres long). “Eureka! Found it!” Now we only had to make our way to the grave I’d found in the grove.

Lady Elizabeth

We trudged through boggy ground towards the open woods. Our clothes snagged on thorny bushes; we fought through smothering ivy until we stood before the meagre remains of the medieval chapel. At the bit of masonry, I had already cleared of moss, we started cutting back the brush. After just a few minutes of hard work, the outlines of a grave half sunken into the earth emerged. Where my penknife had scraped the surface clean, the Carent arms were now clearly visible. We had no absolute certainty, but the revealed letters suggested it had to be Elizabeth. “Who else?” Tyron observed.

We stood silently around the grave for a few minutes. Then I took the rusty cross, looked for a suitable spot at the head, loosened the soil with a branch, set the cross into the ground, and pressed it down until it would go no farther. Now it settled in place, we all heard a long, liberating sigh. A soft breeze brushed past us; an intense, pleasant violet scent surrounded us; above, the trees stirred and their leaves whispered. A ray of sunlight broke through the canopy and fell directly on the grave. Then calm returned – peace.

We looked up for a while, convinced that Lady Elizabeth had now found her way into the Eternal Light. The gravesite changed before our eyes: ivy, raspberry canes, and other creepers withdrew; moss on the stone withered and was carried off by the wind. Delicate violets pushed through the soil, their fragrance recalling Elizabeth. It was over: she had found her rest, back with her beloved William. The plague fleas and rats would be banished from the Ven garden for ever; no future lady of the house would need to fear that dreadful disease again.

Kim and I embraced; Tyron beamed and tossed his Sherlock Holmes cap in the air. “Hooray – it calls for a celebration! I need an ale. Come on, I’m taking you to the Eastbury. Not just you two – Joanna Hutchinson as well. The lady has impressed me greatly. I think she and I would make a good team,” he said with a mischievous smile. And so, we left that former place of horror – happy to have granted a great love eternity.

Shared Happiness

We all sat together in the Eastbury Inn dining room. Tyron ordered champagne, though he already had his beer and the food was on its way. Spirits were high, and the champagne helped. Kim sat close and held my hand under the table. Joanna couldn’t take her eyes off Tyron. “Now I can finally let the cat out of the bag,” he began.

“I came to Sherborne with the task of finding the descendants of Roger Armstrong Carent, who, more than thirty years ago, met and fell in love with a young woman in this town. He loved her so much that, after a little over a year, she realised she was expecting a child. Roger wanted to marry her, but a marriage to a woman of lower station was out of the question. Under family pressure, he withdrew and soon left the country. He sought peace and oblivion – in Australia without success, then in Canada without success – and roamed the world restlessly. Before he left England, however, his strict family decreed that the London firm Bigby, Bigby & Bigby should support the expectant mother with a monthly allowance – and provide additional funds in case the child pursued extended education. The family also decreed that Roger would be disinherited if, after his parents’ death, he married the woman. A broken man, Roger

Armstrong Carent left his beloved country. On his 65th birthday in Sydney he suffered a stroke and died months later – unhappy. Bigby, Bigby & Bigby engaged me on the deceased's behalf to find the mother and the daughter he never saw. It was obvious I had to start in Sherborne – where I happened to meet a young Swiss man who told me about a very unusual experience.

“Joanna, you could call it fate – his silver aura made me take notice. Hardly a day passed without him sharing observations. The spoke of a ring, then of a young woman around thirty, then of a crest and the Carents – and finally you, Joanna Hutchinson, called me.” Tyron took a deep breath, a big swallow of ale, and continued: “My client also asked me to verify what truth there was to the stories about Ven House. Roger's parents had bought back the ancestral seat from the Medlycotts after centuries. Ghost stories and unexplained deaths kept the Carents from returning to Milborne Port at the time. Later they sent Roger to Sherborne to learn more – and he fell for a simple shop girl.”

“That must have been my mother,” Kim said, tears running down her cheeks. “So, the late Roger Armstrong was my biological father. I'm a real Carent, then?”

Silence fell. I didn't know what to say; Kim sobbed softly; Joanna discreetly fished a hankie from her handbag; Tyron shuffled papers, embarrassed. “Yes, Kim, it appears so. A quick DNA test will confirm it. Then it's just formalities, and Bigby, Bigby & Bigby will handle the inheritance. You'll likely become the new Lady Carent of Ven.” Still teary-eyed, Kim turned to me and whispered, “Will you be my personal lord then?”

And so it happened that I didn't take up my post as a German teacher, Kim resigned from the library, and Joanna and T. M. G. founded a business together to help people with spiritual matters – with the help of Margaret Boland, the farmer's wife. I believe I made the right decision to stay in England and teach my future wife – Lady Carent of Ven – the German language.

Honestly, Sherborne is more than worth the trip.