The Secret of Ven House, Milborne Port

or The Good Fortune of the Swiss Kurt Wagner

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Synopsis

When Kurt Wagner takes up a post as a teacher of German in Sherborne, England, he expects a fresh start in idyllic surroundings: ancient abbeys, venerable school buildings, gentle hills, and the shifting light of Dorset. Yet even on the drive to the little town, a gloomy manor house near Milborne Port exerts an inexplicable pull on him.

Ven House appears deserted — and yet meticulously maintained. A mysterious light flickers in its windows, and before long the signs begin to mount that something unresolved has been left behind in that place. Together with the eccentric scholar Tyron M. Grimsworth, the charming librarian Kim Ashley, and the sensitive Joanna Hutchinson, Kurt is drawn ever deeper into a centuries-old mystery surrounding the Carent family, a vanished village, a plague cross, and the spirit of a woman who cannot rest.

What begins as a journey into a new life becomes an uncanny search for answers between past and present, love and loss, guilt and redemption. And while Kurt tries to solve the riddle of Ven House, he comes to realise that his own fate has long been bound up with this place.

An atmospheric novel full of English landscape, quiet ghosts, hidden family secrets, and a love that endures even death.

The Protagonists

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

The setting

- Milborne Port, east of Sherborne, Somerset, UK

Journey to Sherborne, Dorset

Anyone travelling towards Sherborne is led along the A30 through the gently undulating landscape of the Blackmore Vale. At one moment one is in the north of Dorset, at the next in the south of Somerset. The boundary between the two counties does not run in a straight line here, but seems to lose itself among hedgerows, hollows and fields, as though it had never been conclusively fixed. Even the road appears to adapt to this peculiar state of suspension. What is still a major traffic artery in London becomes here a narrower two-lane country road winding through the landscape as if it knows its way by force of old habit.

Dense hedges line the carriageway on either side. Behind them, black-and-white cows graze with untroubled calm, and sheep stand scattered across the meadows like pale flecks upon a green sea. The houses one passes look as though they have stood there longer than anyone can remember. Some seem scarcely to have changed since they were first built; others bear the traces of centuries without it being possible to say from which age they truly come. Perhaps they stand upon the foundations of Roman villas, perhaps on older remains of which no one speaks any more. Over the whole landscape there lies a peace that is beautiful, though not entirely reassuring. The light changes quickly. A shaft of sunshine falls across one meadow, while farther back a grey veil is already drawing over trees and rooftops. Nature and weather conjure moods here that cannot be held scarcely have they appeared before they have already become something else.

I was on my way to Sherborne, a small town in the county of Dorset in the south-west of England. It lies on the River Yeo, only a few miles from Yeovil, and has fewer than ten thousand inhabitants. Yet, as is so often the case in England, size says little about the significance of a place. Sherborne is old, steeped in history, and possessed of a dignity that does not thrust itself forward, but is simply there. The town boasts numerous historic buildings and is known for its first-rate schools, above all Sherborne School. Even its name sounds as though it belongs to another age: it derives from ‘scir burne’, the clear spring stream.

Sherborne’s origins go back to the seventh century. Once, the town was an important religious centre of Wessex, one of the seven kingdoms of ancient Britain. King Alfred’s elder brothers, Æthelbald and Æthelberht, are buried in the abbey. In 1075 the church buildings were converted into a Benedictine abbey. Over the centuries the town was partially destroyed and rebuilt more than once, as though it had never quite been able to escape its fate. In the twelfth century Roger of Caen, Chancellor of England and Bishop of Salisbury, had a fortified palace built there, which was destroyed in 1645. In 1594 Sir Walter Raleigh built a manor house nearby, now known as Sherborne Castle. That, too, is part of England: that men become heroes and yet still end on the scaffold. Raleigh was executed in 1618. It is said that even in the time of King Alfred there was already a school in Sherborne; in 1550 the present Sherborne School was re-established in the buildings of the former abbey. History was nothing remote there. One had rather the feeling that it lay just beneath the surface and re-emerged when the light was right.

I was travelling to Sherborne to take up my post there as a teacher of German. From Henstridge to Sherborne is only a few miles, and on the way, one passes through the small village of Milborne Port. In Saxon times it was known as a mint; today it leads a quieter existence as a small market town with perhaps two or three thousand inhabitants. There are three pubs there: The Kings Arms, The Chetnole Inn and — impossible to miss on the main road — The Tippling Philosopher, originally ‘The Tippler’. I liked the name. As a Germanist and a lover of beer, I immediately felt the urge to stop there one day. It struck me as one of those places where time passes more slowly, and where one easily stays longer than one had intended.

As I took the last bend into Milborne Port, my eye was immediately caught by a large manor house on the left-hand side of the road. It stood slightly set back, half concealed behind trees and a massive wrought-iron gate. The building rose over several storeys, built of dark brick in the William and Mary style, stern and imposing, with that mixture of elegance and coldness that some old houses possess. It was not beautiful, at least not in any welcoming sense. And yet it drew the eye.

My curiosity was too great simply to drive past. I turned off, drove a little closer, and at last stopped in front of the gate. It was broad enough for the driveways of several modern houses, and yet it led only to this single estate. Naturally, it was locked. A clearly visible sign forbade entry. As a well-brought-up Swiss, I had not the slightest intention of disregarding it. So, I remained outside and merely raised my mobile phone to take a photograph as a memento.

As I framed the shot, I suddenly felt a faint tingling at the back of my neck. It was not a gust of wind, nor a chill, but rather a fleeting bodily unease of the sort that comes over one when something does not fit, without one being able to say exactly what. Gooseflesh rose on my arms. I lowered the phone for a moment and looked more closely.

The house seemed uninhabited. No window stood open, not a soul was to be seen anywhere, no flag flew from the roof. And yet everything was well kept. The gravel on the drive looked freshly raked, the bushes had been neatly trimmed, and there was no sign of weeds at the edges of the beds. It did not look abandoned. It looked rather as though one simply was not meant to know who was caring for it.

It was about six o'clock, and dusk had already begun to drain the colours from the landscape. The light lay wanly on the bricks of the house, and in the windows, there gathered a dull sheen behind which nothing could be made out. I had the indistinct feeling that the building was not merely standing there but waiting. For what, I did not know. Perhaps it was only the weariness after the long drive. Perhaps the strangeness of the country. Or perhaps merely the effect of an old house in the evening light. Even so, I was quick to get back into the car.

I had to check in at the Eastbury Inn in Sherborne in good time. The next day would be demanding meeting the headmaster, a tour of the school, my first introduction to my duties as a teacher of German. Besides, I urgently needed accommodation. My budget would hardly allow for a prolonged stay at the comfortable Eastbury.

I drove on without looking back again. Only when the manor house had almost disappeared did I glance at it once more in the rear-view mirror. Its silhouette lay black against the pale evening sky. For a moment, it seemed to me as though someone were standing at one of the upper windows. I blinked, and of course there was nothing there anymore. Even so, I could not rid myself of the feeling that my departure had been noticed.

Looking for a Room

Dinner at the Eastbury Inn was excellent. I particularly enjoyed the Dorset Knob, an amber ale with a lightly malty note and a fruity hop finish, which went wonderfully well with the steak and kidney pie. After the drive and the many impressions of the day, I was exhausted. The room was pleasant, the bed soft, everything seemed designed to lull the guest into rest. And yet I found it harder than expected to relax completely.

When at last I switched off the light, the moon hung beyond the window, large and pale, casting a wan rectangle onto the floor. For a while I heard nothing but the muffled sounds of the house: somewhere a creak in the timbers, a brief rustle in the pipes, then silence once more. The last thing I saw before falling asleep was the moon looking in through the pane, motionless and cool, as though silently observing the arrival of a stranger.

Headmaster Simon Flowerdew Eliot received me the following morning at about a quarter past nine. His secretary first made me wait. She did so with that perfectly polished courtesy behind which rejection shows more clearly. Her greeting was impeccable, and yet it unmistakably carried the question of what a stranger like me was doing here at all. When, at the headmaster's request, she had to bring tea and biscuits, her expression altered only by the faintest degree. I resolved that my next charm offensive would be supported by a bar of Swiss chocolate.

Simon Flowerdew Eliot spoke with quiet assurance about the history of the school. It had been founded by St Aldhelm, he explained, a member of the royal house of Wessex. Alfred, too, had received his education here. Tradition was held in high esteem at Sherborne; by now there were even branches of the school in Qatar. Sherborne was a classic boys-only boarding school with eight houses of around seventy boys each, of different ages. The houses differed, among other things, in the colours of their uniforms; green and black, for instance, stood for Digby Manor. Cricket and rugby were of central importance, though the arts, too, were especially encouraged. Sherborne School was one of Britain's leading public schools. «We want our boys to grow into men — with a strong sense of identity, able to think and learn independently; men of integrity, committed to leadership and service», said Mr Eliot.

I nodded. What else was I to say? I came from the Zurich state school system, later the Gymnasium, then the University of Zurich, with a completed degree in German studies and an understanding of education shaped less by venerable walls than by discussion, contradiction and the occasional degree of unrest. In Zurich there was less tradition and more noise. The past there was usually something to be criticised; here it seemed rather to be the foundation on which everything still stood.

During the tour of the venerable buildings we passed numerous pupils, all so neat and well turned out that they would have satisfied even the headmaster's sternest glance. They greeted us politely, perhaps from habit, perhaps only because Mr Eliot was walking at my side. The buildings were impressive: dark wood, cold stone, high windows, corridors in which footsteps echoed even when one walked quietly. Order seemed to reign everywhere. And yet more than once I had the feeling that there was something intimidating about that order, as though it tolerated only what submitted to it without protest.

My future classroom was plain yet possessed of a dignified austerity. Wood panelling testified to its age; on the wall hung a blackboard, beside it the most modern communication and presentation equipment. I would teach here on a fixed basis; the pupils would come to me. I was to look after ten-year groups from eight houses, from the youngest to the oldest just before their final examinations. Afterwards I was shown the dining hall, the sports fields and the music rooms. As the person to contact for all administrative matters, Simon Flowerdew Eliot recommended his assistant, the reserved Miss Barnsby. She spoke little, but whenever she looked at me, I had the curious feeling that she had already formed an opinion of me and saw no reason to share it.

For the first day, that was the end of it. The official start of term was not until the following Monday. There was therefore ample time to find somewhere to live and to prepare the classroom. Even so, I left the school grounds with a peculiar sensation. Everything had been

friendly, orderly, correct — and yet I did not feel welcome. Rather, I felt merely tolerated for the time being.

Harling & Taylor, a letting agency in the town centre, recommended several rental properties to me, and in the afternoon, I set off to view them. As a pampered Swiss, I had certain expectations that could not always be reconciled without difficulty with English housing standards, especially where bathrooms and heating were concerned. Some flats were cramped, others damp, while others again smelt of stale carpet and years that could no longer be aired away. I very nearly gave up.

One of the last addresses finally led me to a delightful two-room flat in Joanna Hutchinson's house on London Road. The house was cheerful, the flat bright, with a small garden that promised peace and quiet. Sunlight fell through the windows and cast bright patches upon the floor. After the other viewings, everything seemed almost too suitable, too unexpectedly fortunate. Mrs Hutchinson herself was an educated, pleasant woman. Her husband, she told me, had been a teacher at the local girls' school and had died far too young. She said it without pathos, yet with that calm which reveals that a loss has long since become part of the house.

We came to an agreement quickly: £385 a month — remarkably cheap. I could even walk to school. «Call me Joanna», she said kindly.

«Gladly. I'm Kurt», I replied.

She smiled. «You can move in tomorrow, if you like. »

I accepted the offer gratefully. As I took my leave and stepped back out into the street, I felt for the first time something like relief. And yet there it was again, that scarcely explicable feeling that had been accompanying me since my arrival: that beneath the friendliness, the history and the rural peace of this region there lay something else as well. Something that did not reveal itself so long as one looked only in passing.

With that thought I returned to the Eastbury Inn.

Tyron M. Grimsworth (TMG)

The next morning brought the sort of weather that may fairly be called typical of Dorset: rain out of a clear sky, ten minutes later sunshine again, then a wan gust of wind as though the day wished to think better of itself. The proximity of the coast produced those rapid changes to which the locals were evidently accustomed. They moved through wet and light with a stoical composure that both impressed and unsettled me. Either they carried an umbrella or wore a waterproof jacket; the hardier sort did not seem to regard the rain as an inconvenience at all, but rather as another whim of the heavens to be accepted without comment. The wise foreigner learned quickly. And he did best to begin his learning process with an English breakfast: baked beans, ham, bacon, eggs, sausages and everything else suited to fortifying body and will against cold, wind and unexpected damp. Such a breakfast made one weatherproof and at the same time spared one the overpriced midday snack.

I was sitting in the breakfast room of the Eastbury Inn, drinking a coffee that reinforced my conviction that in England tea was fundamentally the more sensible choice. Before me steamed breakfast sausages, fried bacon and eggs, and while I ate, I was reading my emails on my phone. My friend Roger from Kloten had sent me the latest results from the Swiss football and ice hockey championships; on WhatsApp an old friend had written with holiday photographs of colleagues in Ibiza, whose sun-browned carelessness stood in a curious contrast to the shifting grey beyond my window. I considered sending my family a few impressions of Dorset and began looking for suitable images.

As I scrolled, I came across the photograph of the manor house in Milborne Port that I had taken the day before. The moment the image appeared on the screen, that strange tingling which I had already felt at the gate ran through me again. It was as though a cold finger had passed down my spine. I paused and looked more closely at the photograph. In one of the upper rooms I now thought I could make out a faint glimmer of light — not bright, scarcely more than a pallid brightening in the glass, and yet distinct enough to make me hesitate. That was impossible. I could have sworn that I had seen no light the evening before. Probably a reflection, I told myself. Nothing more than a whim of the camera, perhaps of the slanting dusk. Even so, my gaze lingered on the image a moment too long. At last, I shook my head and set the phone aside.

Only then did I notice another guest sitting diagonally opposite. He was seated alone at a small table, carefully dressed, in good Harris tweed, conservative but not old-fashioned. He may have been in his early fifties and had that bearing which suggests not vanity so much as habit. I immediately imagined him driving a dark green Land Rover and selling agricultural machinery to farmers who had trusted him for years.

He had apparently been observing me for some time.

«Looks like bad news, Sir», he said, inclining his head slightly. «For a moment, your face turned rather pale. »

I smiled awkwardly. «As a matter of fact, I felt suddenly rather chilled. »

«And you are new to the area, are you not? »

«Yes. I arrived yesterday evening and on Monday I shall be taking up my post at the boarding school. As a teacher of German. My name is Kurt Wagner, from Bulach in Switzerland. »

«Tyron M. Grimsworth», he said. «Scholar. The M. stands for Marmaduke — thanks to my late grandfather. We come from Yorkshire. » He said it with a dry self-mockery, as though he had had to give that explanation many times before. «I am spending a few days in Sherborne in pursuit of a rather singular affair. »

I told him in a few sentences about my new post and about the unexpected good fortune of having already found somewhere to live. While I spoke, he listened attentively, yet I had the feeling that his real interest lay elsewhere.

«And why», he asked at last, «did you go pale so suddenly? » Through the round lenses of his spectacles, he studied me with a precision that would almost have been rude had he not carried it off with such perfect composure.

«To be honest», I replied, «I cannot explain it. The same thing happened yesterday when I stopped in front of a manor house in Milborne Port and took a photograph. A few minutes ago, I looked at the picture again because I wanted to send it to friends. »

Grimsworth placed his fingertips together. «You are presumably speaking of Ven House», he said with striking deliberation. «Show me the photograph. »

I handed him the phone. He studied the image for longer than I had expected.

«Yes», he said at last. «That is the place. Remarkable. »

«Remarkable? »

He gave me back the phone. «A stranger comes here, takes a casual photograph, and yet still senses that there is something wrong with that place. »

I laughed, perhaps a little too quickly. «Mr Grimsworth, firstly, I have never been in this area. Secondly, until a few seconds ago the name Ven House meant absolutely nothing to me. And thirdly, I do not believe in absurd stories. Your countrymen are extraordinarily inventive when it comes to hauntings and the paranormal. Almost every village now has its own ghost tour. »

A faint smile passed over his face. «There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy», he replied. «Shakespeare. » Then he glanced at his watch. «I am sorry, I have too little time now to explain myself more fully. At ten o'clock I am meeting the abbey archivist. But perhaps we might meet this evening? A glass of Scotch whisky would not be inappropriate in this climate. I could tell you a good deal. »

He rose, bowed almost imperceptibly, and left the breakfast room with the noiseless determination of a man accustomed to following his own thoughts rather than other people's explanations.

I remained seated for a few more minutes. Then I decided that a visit to the local library could hardly do any harm. If there really was a history attached to that manor, perhaps something more reliable might be found there than the hints of a tweed-clad scholar with Marmaduke in his family tree.

Kim Ashley

«How may I help you? »

The voice came softly and almost too quietly, as though it had adapted itself to the subdued tone of the library. The librarian behind the enquiry desk brushed back a strand of red hair, and for a moment I had the impression that she was genuinely pleased to be able to assist a visitor. That was by no means a given. Libraries often possessed their own kind of coolness, a dryness of mind that seemed to mingle with the smell of old books. This young woman, however, seemed anything but dry.

«Mrs — or is it Ms Ashley? » I asked. «I'm looking for information about Ven House. »

The faintest smile passed across her face. «Please call me Kim», she said, leaving the question of her marital status unanswered with that elegance only women possess who have learnt how to let curiosity run politely into the void. «Yes, we do have some material on it. Are you more interested in the architecture of the house or in its history? »

«In fact, in everything», I said. «Above all in its owners since it was built. And in any newspaper reports, if there are any. I'm Kurt. From Switzerland. »

«There are a few stories about the house», she said. «Not all of them are reliable, and some of it probably belongs more to the realm of local rumour. But you certainly won't go away empty-handed. » She tilted her head slightly. «A few days ago, someone else was here asking questions. An Englishman. He seemed to be looking for something very specific. »

«Mr Grimsworth? »

«Yes, exactly. He was researching an incident from the nineteenth century. »

She disappeared between the shelves, and for a while all I could hear was the soft scraping of books, the rustling of old folders and her footsteps on the floor. When she returned, she was carrying several folios and several files of newspaper cuttings in her arms. The smell of dust, paper and dry linen followed her like a faint breath from another age.

«Here», she said, placing the material before me. «Newspaper cuttings from the *Sherborne Herald*, together with a few notes on the architectural history. That should give you enough to read for the time being. And if I can be of any help: my shift ends at four o'clock today. I know the history of the area rather well. »

«Splendid», I said. «Perhaps we might meet later at Oliver's for a cup of tea? Then you could tell me a little more. »

I said it as casually as possible, yet her auburn hair, her pale freckles and the lively alertness of her gaze did not make it easy for me to remain entirely matter of fact.

«That can be arranged», she said.

With the papers I returned to the hotel and began to read. Ven House had originally been built by the Carent family and had later passed to the Medlycotts, who enlarged the estate in several phases of construction. In the 1950s the last of the Medlycotts sold the house to an unnamed investor. Formerly an extensive garden had dominated the property, but through new roads and the drainage of the surrounding fields part of it had been lost. Alongside its impressive architecture, the reports repeatedly mentioned the generous orangery. The entire estate was enclosed by a brick wall almost four metres high, as though it wished not merely to mark possession, but to create distance. The name of the house probably went back to a small hamlet that had already existed in the thirteenth century.

Then the tone of the reports grew darker.

According to one tradition, Sir William Carent had been broken by grief after his wife had died suddenly of some dreadful illness. He had been warned not to build on that site, it was said, yet he had ignored the objections of the local people. What was meant by «the wrong place» remained unclear, as did the nature of the illness. Since then, so various sources reported, passers-by had repeatedly claimed to see the silhouette of a darkly dressed woman on the

grounds or at the windows. Nothing was ever confirmed. The authorities found nothing, and the police certainly found nothing either.

An article from the late nineteenth century further reported that the Medlycott family had, over several generations, been afflicted by a peculiar succession of tragedies — and that those affected had always been female members of the family. The last incident mentioned was in 1947: once again a dark figure at a window. Shortly afterwards the last Medlycott sold house and land and moved to London. Very little was known of the later owners; it was said that an investor from Australia had acquired the estate.

I leant back and stared at the papers for a while. What sort of illness was this that supposedly affected only women? And why was it described more precisely in none of the documents? It might well have been inherited village fantasy, perhaps elaborated gossip of the kind that lingers obstinately in rural places. But perhaps there was also something true in it, something that had merely lost its name over time. I decided I would ask Kim about it. She had been born here; if anyone knew the old stories, surely it would be her. Should I also tell her about the glimmer of light in my photograph, about the shadow at the window? Probably not. There were more sensible things to talk about with a charming librarian.

As arranged, she appeared punctually. She brought yet more documents with her and laid them before me with a brief, almost confidential smile.

«You can bring those back to me tomorrow», she said.

I took the folder and thought: Splendid. She means it seriously. She wants to see me again.

She had changed, and was now wearing a navy-blue three-piece suit, with a white blouse, discreet jewellery, a delicate necklace with a ring-shaped pendant, and a single diamond in her earlobe. The medium heels lent her appearance something decisive, though without hardness. Everything about her seemed carefully chosen but not stiffly arranged; beautiful, without offering itself up. I had to remind myself not to let my gaze rest too long on her legs.

Stay focused, Kurt, I thought. She is exactly your type.

Over tea and subdued conversation Kim told me that although she had been born in Sherborne, she had moved with her mother to Bath while still young. There was, she said, something in her family history that her mother Beth had never wished to reveal. All those years they had been supported by an unknown benefactor. When her mother died, she had left her nothing except a gold ring engraved with «Pro Deo et Patria WCV».

«I've never been able to find out who WCV may have been», said Kim, turning her cup absent-mindedly between her fingers. «I suspect he was my father. But my mother remained silent about it all her life. »

Her voice had a warm, dark timbre, and as she spoke there was something in her gaze that both attracted me and made me cautious. Not mistrust, not sorrow alone — rather the feeling that in her life a door had been closed behind which there remained a truth that no one any longer spoke aloud.

I could have listened to her for hours. That afternoon I almost loved the sound of her name, the calm movement of her hands, the gentle seriousness of her eyes. We arranged to meet the next day, and when I later returned to my room, that strange tingling overcame me again.

This time it was of a different kind.

And yet sleep did not come any more easily.

A Tour of Enquiry

The following morning, I met Tyron Marmaduke Grimsworth at breakfast. He was in excellent spirits, almost excessively spruce for a man who allegedly spent his nights bent over dusty documents, and greeted me with a radiant:

«Good morning, old chap, how are you today? »

I returned the greeting in equally good humour and told him of the successes of the previous day: I had found accommodation, met a remarkably attractive young woman, and in addition discovered quite a good deal about Ven House.

«As I was able to ascertain, you were at the public library», observed Grimsworth with a sidelong glance in which mockery and goodwill were neatly combined. «You do not seem to have proved entirely resistant to the extraordinary charm of Lovely Kim. Red-haired women have always exerted a particular influence upon the male imagination. But let us come to the point: what did you find out? »

I described to him in detail what I had read. What struck me most was that several reports referred to a «dreadful illness» without a single document explaining more precisely what that illness was supposed to have been.

Grimsworth nodded slowly. «Then we ought to consult the old parish registers. Milborne Port belonged in those days to the parish of Chorlton Horethorne. That is where we shall begin. »

Apart from returning the borrowed papers, I had no fixed plans for the day, and so we arranged to meet at one o'clock in front of the abbey.

Before then, I went once more to the library. Kim received me with a broad smile that almost closed her eyes and made two small dimples appear in her cheeks. It was the kind of smile that makes a man believe that, for a moment, he is the only visitor in the world.

«Kurt», she said, «I've brought the ring with me. Perhaps you can photograph it. Since I was born here, my mother must evidently have had some connection to someone from the area. Perhaps together we can find out who that was. »

She placed the ring in my hand. It was a simple, old piece, heavier than it at first appeared, with a few small semi-precious stones. Beside the engraving «Pro Deo et Patria» and the initials WCV, there was a tiny coat of arms worked into the inside: a shield with three circles containing arrow-like signs — or were they stylised trees? The gold had grown dull with age, and yet there was something curious about the ring, as though it carried not merely an origin, but a memory within it.

«Perhaps we might find a little more time for one another this evening? », Kim asked in a tone half playful, half serious. Then she sent me three fleeting air-kisses. «But now I really must work. »

There are invitations to which one can scarcely refuse, and this was unquestionably one of them.

«I'll be in touch», I said. «Today I'm meeting T. M. Grimsworth in Chorlton Horethorne. He wants to consult old parish registers. It could be interesting — and in the process I shall get to know a little more of the area as well. »

As I left the library, my heart was beating faster than any purely factual interest could have justified. How, I asked myself, is a man supposed seriously to examine old parish registers when elsewhere such a dream is waiting to be won?

Grimsworth did indeed drive a green Land Rover Defender. At the very first sight of the vehicle, I had the feeling that a quiet suspicion had been confirmed. My mobile showed a driving time of thirteen minutes. We left Sherborne by way of Castle Town Way, turned on to the B3145, and drove past Poyntington to Chorlton Horethorne. The landscape lay beneath that shifting light which makes Dorset seem at once peaceful and indeterminate: one field in sunshine, the next already under a grey, moving shadow.

On the way Grimsworth explained to me that Chorlton meant something like «farm settlement», while Horethorne referred to the «grey thorn bush». The origins of the place probably went back to the Bronze Age; at any rate Roman agricultural use was certainly attested. Today the village lay still and almost picturesque, with its few hundred inhabitants, as though it had slipped free of time. At its centre rose the Romanesque church, built on foundations said to go back to a Romano-British temple. Such layers of history seemed nothing unusual in this part of the country. Everywhere the present stood upon something older, and it was not always clear whether what lay beneath was truly at rest.

Our enquiries at first produced only meagre results. Entries were missing, names had become illegible, and more than once the clues seemed rather to point in another direction than to clarify anything. At length we were directed onwards to Henstridge.

We drove by way of South Cheriton and then south of Templecombe to Henstridge. At the junction with the A30 we parked by the Freehouse Virginia Ash. Grimsworth insisted on first having a pint of Badger Best Bitter before applying oneself to archival matters with proper mental stamina. I did not object. From there it was not far to the parish hall, and on the short walk there I had the feeling more than once that we were being watched from the windows. Curtains moved almost imperceptibly, as though the villagers were wondering who on earth should be coming precisely here at such an hour. Who visited Henstridge on a weekday, after all, when decent people were out in the fields or doing their shopping in Yeovil?

In the end Grimsworth succeeded in unearthing several indications of a village long vanished. Ven Village had apparently existed until the middle of the fourteenth century. After that its trace was almost entirely lost. It was assumed that the population had been wiped out by the plague, that pestilence which reached England in 1348 by way of the port of Melcombe Regis.

«Can you imagine, my dear Kurt», said Grimsworth, laying his forefinger against his beer mug with schoolmasterly solemnity, «that within only two years some two million people died — out of a total population of barely six million in the British Isles? Whole regions were depopulated. Villages disappeared. Fields lay fallow. Castles fell into ruin. There are parts of England that may never have fully recovered from that blow. »

He continued speaking with evident satisfaction, as though the very horror of history were what made it truly alluring.

«Ven Village must have lain somewhere between Henstridge and Milborne Port. It would not surprise me if Ven House took its name from that vanished place. It would make sense for the Carent family later to have brought the abandoned land under their control and, by building the house, to have sealed it in a manner of speaking. Through their connection with the Stourtons, the Carents already possessed land in the area — Toomer Park, among other places. In old documents it is said that the builder was expressly warned. He was told not to settle there. The ground was said to be cursed or unhealthy. And ruins — whatever exactly that may have meant — were to be avoided by day and by night. »

The superstitious villagers of earlier centuries, I thought, probably had their reasons for such warnings. The Black Death by no means ended with a single outbreak; it returned, and later again, and even in 1665 the plague raged in London. What had once inspired fear often lived on longer in people's memory than in the chronicles.

On the way back to Sherborne, we stopped once more in front of the gates of Ven House. As on my first visit, they were locked. The garden looked impeccably kept, yet there was not a soul to be seen anywhere. Nevertheless, I could not shake off the feeling that we were not unobserved.

«Kurt, you are something of a sensitive soul», Grimsworth remarked drily. «But I believe that in this case you are right. There really is a story here that has not been cleanly ended. »

He engaged reverse gear. In one of the upper windows, I thought once again that I saw a light glimmering, very faintly, as though behind a heavy curtain. In the next moment I even fancied I could make out dark outlines behind it. Perhaps it was nothing more than an illusion caused by the changing sky. But perhaps not. Then the Rover moved off, and the house disappeared behind us.

The Grounds of Ven House

The following morning, I was sitting at breakfast unusually early. I had slept badly. Again, in my dreams, the images had overlapped: Kim's open face, her warm eyes, the delicate curve of her smile — and between them the ravaged, pallid countenance of a woman in black, whose features seemed at once veiled and disfigured. Both, so it seemed to me in that half-sleep, wanted to tell me something. Strangely enough, I did not have the impression that the unknown woman wished to harm me. If anything, she seemed to be seeking help — or remembrance. The tea did me good; porridge and toast with orange marmalade lent the morning at least a semblance of order.

Grimsworth appeared later than usual and looked sleepy. For the first time he did not seem perfectly turned out, but slightly crumpled, as though the night had not spared him either.

«I am sorry, Kurt», he said before he had even sat down. «I scarcely slept and worked through my notes until late in the night. We ought to pay the house itself a visit and, above all, explore the grounds more closely. I am convinced that we are more likely to find clues in the fields and the old garden than in the papers. Let us take Wellington boots — the terrain is bound to be boggy. Have you a camera? »

I told him that my mobile had a good camera and a GPS app besides.

«Very good», he said. «And one more thing: we should keep an eye out for a coat of arms. A shield with three circles. »

I looked at him. «How do you know that coat of arms? »

Grimsworth stopped in mid-movement and looked at me in surprise.

«The coat of arms belongs to the Carent family», he said. «As I mentioned before, they are related to the Stourtons. The name is probably derived from Caerwent, presumably of Irish origin. The Carents appear early on the Isle of Purbeck and are regarded as the builders of Ven House. » He drew his brows together. «But how do you know it? »

«It merely struck me as though I had seen it before», I replied, and did not tell him that I had discovered the emblem on the inside of Kim's ring.

Could she be a descendant of that old family? The thought was bold, perhaps even absurd. And yet it lodged itself in my mind.

We left the hotel earlier than usual. I wanted to be back in good time to move in with Joanna Hutchinson that afternoon. So, I settled the bill, loaded my luggage, and followed Grimsworth's Defender out once again towards Milborne Port. We parked in front of the main iron gates of Ven House, got out, and after a short search found a narrow side entrance, half concealed behind an overgrown wall that had been almost entirely swallowed by ivy. In that way we gained access to the grounds.

Keeping close to the enclosing wall, we made our way southwards. In this part of the estate the garden was wild and marshy; evidently the careful maintenance was confined to the more presentable area around the house. Farther out, nature had reclaimed its rights.

English country houses are often surrounded by several distinct garden spaces: a formal ornamental garden, a kitchen or productive garden, an orangery and, not infrequently, an extensive wild garden. We were now moving through such a wild garden, in which everything seemed to be running riot that had long been left to itself. For painters, photographers or writers this might have been a small paradise; for two men in Wellington boots pursuing a sombre history, it was rather a place in which every step had to be chosen with care.

The ground grew softer. Between ferns, thorny brambles and nettles, fragments of old walls protruded here and there from the undergrowth — probably remnants of former outbuildings or stables. Ivy crept everywhere, across the ground as well as up the trees, as though it wished slowly but inexorably to cover over the last traces of human order. The light filtered down only brokenly through the branches. At some moments it was so still that I thought even our breathing was too loud for that place.

«Grimsworth», I called softly, «over there, by those dark trees — that looks like an old grave. »

He went towards it at once, with a determination that proved he had entirely left behind both fatigue and his morning ill humour.

«You have sharp eyes, young man», he said. «This part of the grounds seems to have been abandoned for ages. Perhaps something may still be deciphered. »

With his stick and his bare hands, he cleared the stone of creepers, crusted earth and moss of decades. After a while he stepped back.

«A Medlycott lies here», he said. «Eighteenth century, if I am not mistaken. Where there is one, there are often more. »

And indeed, not far from it we found several broken grave slabs, half sunken into the earth, half gripped by roots. On some, nothing at all could still be read. The inscriptions had been almost wholly erased by rain, frost and neglect. They must have been older resting places still. I shivered as we walked across them. It was as though we were moving not merely through an abandoned garden, but through a layer of time that had never quite allowed itself to be buried.

Grimsworth, by contrast, was now wholly in his element. Like a bloodhound he followed some inner compass through the sparse deciduous wood, until he suddenly came to a halt among the trees. Before him the remains of old foundation walls emerged, scarcely higher than the grass, yet clear enough to suggest a former ground plan.

«Come here, Kurt», he called without turning round. «I think I have found a key to the mystery. »

It was the first time he had addressed me so familiarly.

«Yes, Tyron», I replied. «I'm coming. »

In the Manor House

Grimsworth had discovered remains of walls which clearly pointed to a medieval building. Perhaps it had been the chapel of the vanished village of Ven. If that were true, then we were standing not only on what had once been consecrated ground, but possibly in the middle of an old plague burial ground. There were no visible gravestones. But that meant little. If the dead of an extinguished village had indeed been buried here, they were presumably lying long beneath a thick layer of earth, roots and the silent deposits of centuries.

The Carent family, I reflected, had acquired the land only after the village had already disappeared and the churchyard had fallen into ruin. Perhaps by then no one had any longer known exactly what had once stood here. Or perhaps people had guessed and chosen deliberately to repress it. Was it conceivable that Lady Carent, more than two hundred years later, had contracted the plague — triggered by a single rat bite? And that something similar had later recurred among the women of the Medlycott family? In my mind's eye I saw noble ladies in long dresses walking through the garden on warm afternoons, carrying little baskets, gathering herbs, perhaps plucking ivy-leaved toadflax from the cracks in the walls, valued as it was for its healing properties. How easily something might have been lurking in such undergrowth. A sudden bite. A small wound. Fever. Then that which people later referred to only as a «dreadful illness».

Grimsworth was already moving purposefully towards the manor house, while I remained behind by a half-collapsed stretch of wall. Almost without thinking, I used a stick to push aside moss and ivy. Beneath them something lighter came into view: a flat stone slab lying almost entirely sunk into the ground. A true Swiss, I thought involuntarily, always carries a pocketknife. I unfolded the blade and began carefully to expose the sandstone.

There was little left to make out. The surface was weathered, the inscription almost entirely erased. And yet in one place a single letter remained visible — a small «t» — and directly below it the fragmentary remains of a coat of arms: a shield, within its circular devices. I stared at it, and for a moment forgot the wind, the boggy ground, even the house behind me.

Was a Carent buried here?

In the documents from Henstridge there had been no mention whatsoever of a family grave on the estate. Why should a member of that family have been buried here of all places, and not in the abbey, where the other Carents rested? An unpleasant thought forced itself upon me. Could this perhaps be the grave of the ill-fated Lady Elizabeth — dead young, far from the others, as though even death had wished to bind her to the place where her fate had begun?

Grimsworth noticed my hesitation, turned back, and looked over my shoulder. No sooner had he seen the stones more closely than he cried out with that excited delight which scholars sometimes display when a suspicion is confirmed:

«My dear fellow, this is a clear indication of the Carents. Kurt, you are a genius! »

He knelt beside me, ran his fingertips over the brittle outline of the coat of arms, and murmured more to himself than to me: «I should like to know whether someone from the family truly lies here. And above all: why here? Why not in the abbey, where the other Carents were buried? So, remote a place is usually chosen only for someone who was unbaptised — or to whom witchcraft, uncleanness, or something similarly offensive was attributed. » Then he rose abruptly. «Come along. Perhaps we shall find an entrance to the house. I know it is not the most elegant course of action for gentlemen, but from time to time the end justifies the means. »

The thought of breaking into an abandoned manor house did not please me in the least. But his logic was difficult to dismiss. If answers were to be found anywhere, then more likely in there than in further yellowing registers.

On the eastern side of the building, we found a cellar entrance. The wooden covering was rotten, already broken through in one place, and scarcely secured. With some caution we lifted it and climbed down. Before I had even reached the bottom, a smell rose to meet me — damp earth, decay and stale stone. Grimsworth produced from his jacket a powerful LED torch, whose cold light did not truly dispel the darkness so much as carve it into harsh segments.

We passed through several storage rooms. The air was heavy; moisture glistened on the walls. Somewhere in the darkness there was a rustling, small and quick, and dense grey shreds of cobweb hung between old shelves. Each of our footsteps echoed dully, as though one were moving not through a cellar, but through the interior of a body that ought long since to have been dead and yet had not quite come to rest.

At length we reached a narrow, steep staircase leading up to the former service rooms and kitchen. There still stood an enormous hearth with iron hooks for cooking pots, several workbenches and a stone sink. Nothing else. No pots, no crockery, no sign of later life. Only emptiness. It looked as though the house had not been properly abandoned, but as though at some point people had simply stopped living in it.

A chill came over me, and I urged Grimsworth to move on.

The ground floor yielded no new discoveries. We found reception rooms, a former dining room, a library, a ladies' sitting room, a games room — all empty, damp and cold. No sign of any recent occupants. No fresh footprints. No dust that had lately been disturbed. The same picture met us on the first floor, where the private bedrooms had been. Above that, beneath the roof, narrow stairs brought us to what had once been the servants' rooms. There too there were only rotting furniture, dust, bird droppings, bat filth, and that faint, sharp ammoniac smell that settles into long-uninhabited houses like a second, invisible masonry.

It must have been dirt of fifty years or more.

I remembered the supposed light which I thought I had seen from outside in a room on the first floor. By my reckoning it must have been in the west wing. So, we went there and inspected room after room. At the end of the corridor, we entered an exceptionally large, bright room. The windows looked out towards the front, to the entrance gates, and on the other side a pair of double doors led onto a balcony overlooking the garden. From there one could survey the whole estate, right across to the first houses of Milborne Port.

Surely this had once been the mistress's bedroom.

And yet here, too, almost nothing remained. No furniture. No fabrics. No pictures. Only on the wall hung an enormous mirror in a heavy frame. The glass had clouded over, mottled in places, and in others was covered by so fine a film of dust that it gave back shadows rather than reflections. Tyron stepped out onto the balcony, lifted his head, and admired the overgrown garden with visible interest. I remained in the room and, half out of nervousness, half out of foolishness, pulled a few faces at the mirror.

Then the air changed.

It did not happen suddenly; it was more as though something were imperceptibly being drawn out of the room. Outside it must have been nearly twenty degrees, the balcony door stood open, and yet within a matter of seconds it became markedly colder in there. Not cool, but peculiarly cold — a cold that touched the skin less than it crept through one's clothes and lodged itself beneath the ribs. I told myself it was imagination. Old houses have draughts. Cold corners. Differences of temperature. Nothing more.

I had just been about to call to Tyron when my voice stuck in my throat.

In the mirror a dark shadow appeared behind me.

At first, it was only a thickening in the clouded glass, something that with an effort one might still have dismissed as a stain. But the shadow grew clearer, deepened, detached itself from the background and slowly took on the outline of a woman. She wore a dark dress, elegant and heavy, in a style I would have assigned to the seventeenth century. Her bearing was upright, almost proud. For one dreadful instant I thought I was looking into the face of an unusually beautiful woman — pale, grave, with large dark eyes.

Then the face began to change.

It was as though some invisible poisons were running through her features. The skin turned grey, stretched unnaturally across the cheekbones, seeming in places almost to split open. Black swellings emerged, at the neck and temples, one after another, as though they were growing before my very eyes. The mouth twisted, not into a scream, but into a kind of desperate plea.

What had only a moment before been beauty became within seconds a mask of such agony that my heart began hammering in my chest.

A shudder ran through me to the marrow. My pulse raced. The air would no longer enter my lungs.

And then I heard her speak.

Not loudly. Not even distinctly. More like a voice that reached not the room but my head directly — far away and yet near, fragile and shot through with infinite misery:

«Help me ... save me ... release me ...»

The next instant the apparition dissolved. The image in the mirror became clouded and grey once more. The room tipped sideways before my eyes, the balcony door, the light, the blurred walls all running together.

Then I lost consciousness.

Help

How I got back to Sherborne I later did not know. My memory returned only in fragments: the sound of a door, the smell of lavender, a soft mattress beneath my back. Apparently Grimsworth had parked my hire car outside Joanna's house, brought me inside, laid me on the bed and even carried my luggage into my new room.

When I opened my eyes, Mrs Joanna Hutchinson was sitting on the edge of my bed, looking at me with a mixture of concern and maternal calm.

«Don't worry, Kurt», she said softly. «Everything is all right. Mr Grimsworth brought you here and said you had collapsed from hunger. Would you like a sandwich? »

There was something deeply soothing about her. Despite her age, a certain youthfulness clung to her, though it had less to do with her face than with her manner of giving a person space without crowding him.

«A strong coffee — no, better tea — would be good», I stammered. «And yes, I really am hungry. »

I sat up, perhaps rather too quickly, and had to keep still for a moment until the pounding in my head subsided.

«Then let us meet downstairs in the kitchen», said Joanna. «You can freshen up at your leisure. »

She rose and left the room.

Her house was a little jewel box. After the death of her husband Archibald, she had transformed it completely. The heavy, traditional furniture and the worn Chesterfield sofa that Archie had loved were gone. In their place Laura Ashley and Beatrix Potter had moved in. Everything was light, cheerful, gently shaded towards the pastel, almost like a doll's house. I had to get used to

it. The duvet cover with its delicate floral pattern would have pleased my sister; I preferred a rather plainer, more straightforward style. Joanna, however, seemed entirely in her element amid these fabrics, colours and tender patterns.

She lived comfortably on Archibald's pension, involved herself in local charities, and worked on Wednesdays at the till in the Castle Garden Centre. People liked her there, not least because she possessed an astonishing instinct for which plants suited which people. Her real hobby, however, was parapsychology. She had an openness towards esoteric and supernatural matters which until then I would probably have mocked.

The sandwich and the strong Dorset tea did me good. My circulation steadied quickly, and the world ceased to sway slightly every time I moved my head.

Joanna waited until I had eaten a mouthful, then said carefully, «Kurt, I believe you experienced something extremely unpleasant today. »

I looked at her. Her voice was gentle, but not vague.

«When I met you a few days ago», she continued, «there was something very positive about you. A silvery aura. Such people are rare. They are sensitive, sincere, and often endowed with a special gift for understanding others. To be quite honest, that is exactly why I wanted you as my tenant straight away. » A faint smile passed across her face. «But when Grimsworth brought you here unconscious today, there were dark patches in your energy field. Black inclusions. That told me that you must have gone through something which deeply shook you. It already seems to be getting better now. »

There was nothing ridiculous about her confidential manner. On the contrary: precisely because she spoke so naturally, it was difficult to dismiss her out of hand.

«Joanna», I said, «I do not know exactly what aura or energy field are supposed to mean. But I assume it has something to do with one's presence. With the way people affect one another. » I hesitated. «And yes — I shall gladly tell you what happened. »

So, I told her about Grimsworth, about Kim, about the investigations, the garden, the grave slabs — and finally about the apparition in the mirror at Ven House.

Joanna listened without interrupting me once. When I had finished, she was silent for a moment and folded her hands around her teacup.

«Hm», she said thoughtfully at last. «That is a great deal all at once. But to me it sounds as though several threads are crossing here. Grimsworth will probably be a great help to you. Your connection with Kim has, as I would put it, considerable future potential. And both relationships are evidently linked in some mysterious way to that woman in Ven House. »

I stared at her.

«The fact that only you can see her», Joanna went on calmly, «probably has something to do with your exceptional sensitivity. The woman with the ruined face has evidently not managed to cross over. She still has something unfinished. A task. Perhaps a request. Perhaps a guilt. Her dreadful appearance has probably frightened people away rather than awakened their sympathy. Most people see the uncanny first and turn aside. That is why no one has helped her up to now. »

I sat there like a schoolboy who has unexpectedly found himself in a lecture for which he lacks every scrap of prior knowledge.

Joanna set down her cup and looked at me with a seriousness that suddenly made her kindly features seem almost stern.

«Kurt, we ought all to come together and hold a séance. In that way we may be able to contact the Carents. Perhaps we shall learn more about the fate of Lady Carent, William Carent's wife. And perhaps we may even succeed in reuniting the two dead. »

I felt distinctly uneasy. Summoning spirits, tables, candles, half-darkened rooms and all that hocus-pocus did not belong to my world. One knew the results of such undertakings more from Hollywood films than from an orderly life. I was a Zwinglian, accustomed to regarding things soberly. Certainly, I believed in life after death. But ghost stories had hitherto had no place in that belief.

And yet I had seen the woman in the mirror.

In the end I agreed.

We arranged the séance for the following evening.

Sir William

We met at half past seven in Joanna's sitting room. The room was small, warm and soothing in an oddly particular way: floral curtains, subdued light, a low lamp in the corner, porcelain figures on the windowsill which in the half-dark seemed almost watchful. Yet despite this domesticity, there was from the outset a tension in the air, as though the room itself were waiting for something that would not quite submit to its peaceful order.

Tyron was full of eagerness. His eyes shone behind the round lenses of his spectacles, and his fingers drummed impatiently on the arm of his chair, as though even time itself could not pass quickly enough for him today. Kim, by contrast, seemed quieter than usual. She wore the ring on a fine chain round her neck and touched it from time to time almost unconsciously, as though wanting to assure herself that it was still there. Joanna did not appear alone. At her side stood Margaret Boland, a solidly built woman in her forties with an open yet unusually grave face. Her hands were broad and firm, the hands of a woman who in life had tended rather to tackle things than to hesitate.

«Margaret is a natural talent and at the same time a devout Christian», Joanna explained with that calm matter-of-factness which smothered every objection at birth. «We have worked together several times before. We sit at the round table, hook our little fingers together, and with our thumbs each touch the hand of the neighbour beside us. Then we relax, close our eyes, and concentrate on the person we wish to reach. I shall take the lead. If it succeeds, the deceased person will speak directly through Margaret. So do not be alarmed if her voice changes. And sometimes» — here Joanna made the slightest pause — «a spirit also materialises in the room and uses the medium, as it were, as an amplifier. »

I took my seat beside Kim. She looked at me, and in her gaze, there was an uncertainty which she was otherwise skilful at concealing.

«Don’t be afraid», I said quietly. «Look at me and simply hold my hand. It helps. »

Naturally I did not mention that I felt anything but comfortable. The thought alone that within a few minutes a dead person might speak through the throat of a strange woman contradicted almost everything I had hitherto considered reasonable. Yet Joanna, seated opposite me, studied me with a look that seemed to see more than mere nervousness. Then she nodded, as though something she had already suspected were being confirmed.

«He is right, Kim», she said gently. «You can trust him. »

Grimsworth cleared his throat. «I am, incidentally, extraordinarily glad that Kurt is with us this evening», he remarked. «From our very first day it was clear to me that he might be a key figure in my research. I am investigating, on behalf of a London firm of solicitors, the history of Ven House and the reasons for the tragedies associated with the estate. At the same time, I am looking for hitherto unknown descendants of the Carents. The Carents once sold to the Carterets, who later sold to the Medlycotts. There are indications that an object from the time of the vanished village of Ven was hidden in the house — an object that brought misfortune. And it is said that a woman with a disfigured face shows the seeker the hiding place. Kurt, I believe you saw her. That is why you fainted in the house. Or am I mistaken? »

I could not contradict him. Kim’s gaze moved incredulously from him to me; Joanna, however, merely nodded slowly.

«The change in your aura was enough for me», she said. «It was an encounter. Not an illusion. Let us begin. »

We closed the circle. My hand lay in Kim’s, warm and slightly damp with tension. After a few moments I felt a faint tingling in my fingers, slowly spreading across my palms. Kim pressed my hand a little more firmly. Perhaps she was seeking support, perhaps she was giving it to me; in that moment the distinction was scarcely perceptible.

In a calm, deep voice Joanna began to speak. She asked whether a spirit could hear her. She repeated the invocation several times, each time with a slightly altered intonation, as though feeling her way towards an invisible boundary. At first nothing happened. Then the ceiling light began to flicker faintly.

I opened my eyes involuntarily.

Margaret’s face had changed. Her eyelids were only half closed, and the eyes beneath them seemed rolled back — not completely, but far enough to make a sudden revulsion rise within me. Her breathing had grown shallower, her chest rising and falling more quickly. When at last she opened her mouth, it was no longer Margaret Boland who spoke.

The voice that came out of her sounded young. Astonishingly young. Almost that of a boy.

«I am Keith Ashbury. Who disturbs my rest — and what do you want? »

For a moment I was convinced Margaret was play-acting. Perhaps Joanna was too, perhaps even Grimsworth. Yet the sound of that voice fitted the body from which it issued in so disturbingly unsuitable a way that the thought of deception quickly became distasteful to me.

Joanna remained entirely calm.

«Keith», she said, «can you establish contact for me with an honourable man? »

A scarcely audible hiss came through Margaret's teeth, then the strange voice replied:

«All of us in this dimension relate to one another. But those who have sinned grievously I cannot reach. They suffer in the darkness until the Last Judgement. »

Beside me Kim drew in her breath audibly.

«Keith», Joanna continued, «we are looking for Sir William Carent, former Sheriff of Somerset, husband of Elizabeth Luttrell Carent, lord of Ven House. We need his help. »

A pause followed. Margaret sagged slightly. Her hands grew heavy in ours.

«I shall try», murmured the young voice.

Then came silence.

It lasted perhaps only two or three minutes, but to me it seemed far longer. No one moved. Even the house itself appeared to pause. No creak in the wood, no sound from outside, not even the ticking of the little clock on the mantelpiece seemed to penetrate the suspension of that moment.

When Margaret spoke again, her voice was no longer young.

It was now deep, masculine, and full of a ponderous dignity. The tone sounded old, and although I could follow each word only with difficulty, it was instantly perceptible that another kind of presence had entered the room.

«Who disturbs the honourable William Carent of Ven? Speak. »

My heart missed a beat. I struggled with the accent; some of the words seemed to come from a time when even English itself must have sounded harsher and denser. At the same time, I saw a dim, whitish vapour beginning to issue from Margaret's mouth — at first scarcely more than breath in cold light, then denser, more viscous, almost like smoke. It rose before her and gathered behind her head, where it formed into a cloudy mass.

And within that cloud features began to emerge.

Not clearly, not completely — but sufficiently for me to think I could make out the contours of a man's face.

«My apologies, your Lordship», said Grimsworth with admirable composure. «My name is Tyron Marmaduke Grimsworth, a scholar from York. I have been commissioned to investigate the history of your family and to search for lost descendants. I hope this is not against your will. »

Sir William was silent for a moment. The apparition behind Margaret moved almost imperceptibly and grew a shade brighter. I thought I could discern a large, powerfully built man with a well-kept beard, the face stern, but not without nobility.

Then he spoke.

«Then hear what befell my family. »

The voice was now clearer, firmer, as though drawing strength from our astonishment.

Sir William said that he had acquired the land despite the express warnings of the local people. They had called it cursed, because the village of Ven had fallen victim to the plague in the fourteenth century. At first, the dead had been buried near an early Christian chapel; later, when the number of victims became too great, in a mass grave near the walls. By his own time, he said, the chapel had already lain half in ruins, and most of the gravestones had disappeared, been broken, or sunk deep into the earth.

And yet he had built there.

Work on the house had proceeded smoothly, and the local people had kept away from the land. He had lived there happily with his wife Elizabeth, had children, and run a successful livestock and dairy farm. For some years, said the voice, Ven House had been for him a place of peace.

Then one day Elizabeth had been gathering herbs in the garden. Near the ruined chapel she had discovered an iron cross in the ground. When she had tried to dig it out, insects had risen in a cloud, and from a hole in the earth large black rats had crawled out. The next morning Elizabeth had been unable to leave her bed. Her body had been covered with swellings; she had suffered dreadful pain and had died after only thirty-six agonising hours.

At these words Margaret's whole body trembled.

Sir William went on: in his despair he had thrown away the plague cross and buried his wife secretly by the chapel. Not in the abbey, not in the family vault, but there, where her misfortune had begun. Afterwards he had sold house and land and never returned to Ven again.

Margaret's pulse had by then grown so violent that I could almost feel it beating in her hand. Her breathing too had become jerky. Joanna threw me a glance which made it plain that she wished to end the sitting soon. Grimsworth, however, inclined his head slightly.

«We thank you, Sir William», he said. «You have helped us more than you can imagine. »

But before Joanna could break the circle or bring Margaret out of the trance, the voice spoke once more:

«Look for a gold ring. It bears the insignia of the Carents and will help you in the solving. »

Then Margaret collapsed into herself. The white vapour broke apart as though some invisible wind had torn it, and the cloud behind her dissolved soundlessly. The light ceased to flicker. All at once the sitting room was once more only a sitting room. Warm, small, quiet — and yet irrevocably changed.

We broke the circle.

That evening I walked Kim home. She was utterly exhausted, held my hand tightly the whole way, and at last asked me not to leave her alone that night.

I did not say no.

Kim's Ring

I awoke the following morning on Kim's sofa, exhausted, with a stiff neck and a head in which the images of the previous night were still circling like dark birds. In my sleep I had had the strange impression that Lady Elizabeth had bent down towards me and, in a voice that was scarcely more than a breath, had said:

«Kurt, find the cross. Have it blessed. Then find my grave and fasten the cross at its head. »

When I opened my eyes, I at first took these words to be merely the after-echo of a dream. And yet there clung to them something persistent, as though they refused simply to fade away again.

From the kitchen I could hear crockery rattling. Kim was preparing breakfast. The smell of fried bacon and toast spread through the little flat and for a moment lent the morning something comforting, almost ordinary.

«Well, how are you feeling? » she asked, when I came into the kitchen, and with a mixture of shyness and tenderness pressed a kiss onto my cheek.

«Much better now», I said. «Especially after such a greeting. »

She smiled and turned back to the frying pan. «You were talking in your sleep last night. Just one sentence. Repeatedly: ‹Yes, I shall search. › Nothing more. »

I was silent for a moment.

«I was dreaming confusedly», I said at last. For a moment, I thought the Black Lady was there, unscarred. Quite calm. She wanted me to look for Lord Carent's cross. Perhaps I ought to speak to Tyron about it today. »

Kim had visibly recovered, yet the events of the previous hours still lay over us like a shadow. Above all, the ring seemed to occupy both our thoughts. What exactly had Sir William meant? Why should this piece of jewellery help to solve the mystery?

«Shall we change the subject for a few minutes? » Kim said suddenly, with a slight laugh. «It's so lovely here, and I can feel that otherwise I shall go completely mad. Tell me something about yourself instead. After all, I seem lately to be letting strange men sleep overnight on my sofa. »

In fact, scarcely had I sat down the evening before than I had fallen asleep almost at once. What else could she have done but cover me up?

She told me about herself. That she had been born in Sherborne but had moved with her mother to Bath while still very young. That later she had trained as a librarian. That she had never known her father — indeed, had not even possessed a single photograph of him. Her mother Beth had refused every conversation on the subject. Perhaps, said Kim, it had been an unhappy love affair; perhaps the man had not been of the proper standing, or had died young. The only certainty was that her mother had possessed a ring which had meant infinitely much to her. On her deathbed she had asked Kim to take it and always wear it.

After the funeral, Kim had discovered that money had been transferred every month from a London firm of solicitors to her mother — enough to finance her education. But every attempt to learn more had foundered on polite silence and appeals to professional confidentiality. Among her mother's papers she had also found old photographs: mostly pictures taken in and around Sherborne. Beth before the abbey, Beth at the castle. And in one of those pictures, she was standing before the gates of Ven House — beside a man whose face was partly in shadow.

Shortly afterwards, Kim went on, she had heard of a vacancy at the town library and had successfully applied for it. Since then, she had returned to Sherborne, without ever being able to say exactly whether it had been chance or something else that had brought her back.

«Do you know, Kurt», she said, looking at me with an expression at once open and vulnerable, «I shall soon be thirty. Perhaps it is time not to make everything dependent on my past any longer. Perhaps I ought to stop chasing old stories and look ahead. There are better aims in the life of a young woman. » She hesitated for the briefest moment. «For instance, you. »

I felt myself blushing. Englishwomen could possess a directness that disarmed a man in the most agreeable way imaginable.

«Kim, darling», I said, somewhat awkwardly, «that is... lovelier than I can express. I have fallen in love with you. And I shall do everything to be with you, to uncover your origins and to solve the Carent case. We still have a few days before my duties begin. »

Then I gathered all my courage, drew her gently towards me, and kissed her. What followed was not noisy, not stormy, but of that deep, almost startled intensity that comes upon two people when they suddenly realise that they not only desire one another but already need one another in some strange way. For a long moment I had the feeling that all the unrest of the past days dissolved in that embrace.

I had not been so happy for a very long time.

England, I thought, may well be a stroke of good fortune. A wonderful woman, a lovely flat, a task full of riddles — and during it the dark adventure of Ven House. At that time, I still believed that happiness and danger could be kept apart. Today I know that they sometimes use the same door.

«Kim», I said at last, when we were sitting side by side once more, «may I have another closer look at your ring? »

She took off the chain and placed the ring in my hand. Outwardly it looked simply, despite the inset stones. The gold seemed old, heavy, perhaps twenty-two carats, rubbed smooth in places by long wearing. Along the outside ran fine grooves, scarcely visible. Inside were the engraving «Pro Deo et Patria WCV» and the little coat of arms.

«Have you any thin paper and a pencil? » I asked. «The ring is worked so finely that the inscription will show better through a rubbing. »

Kim brought both. Carefully I rubbed the paper over the ring. Slowly the coat of arms appeared: a shield with two circles above and a third below. Within the three circles were outlined three inverted Vs.

«Looks like stylised fir trees», I said.

«Or arrows», said Kim. «And ‹Pro Deo et Patria› of course means ‹For God and Country›. But WCV still means nothing to me. »

For hours we searched through the British heraldic register and in old records accessible online. At last, we came upon a reference that made us both sit up: a Sheriff of Dorset, more than four hundred years earlier, had borne a coat of arms identical to the one on Kim's ring — a Carent.

That proved nothing conclusively, of course. But the questions grew more pressing. How old was the ring really? What did «WCV» stand for? And above all: how had it come into the possession of Kim's mother?

I laid the paper with the rubbing aside and looked at Kim.

«Kim», I said slowly, «I think I am beginning to understand. ‹WC› very probably stands for William Carent. And the ‹V› could stand for Ven. When Tyron and I were in the garden, we found a similar coat of arms among the ruined walls — weathered, but unmistakable. And Sir William told us that Elizabeth lies buried somewhere on the estate. If that is true, then this ring may not merely be a family heirloom. »

I paused briefly.

«It may be evidence. Or a key. »

The Plague Cross

I went to look for Tyron at the hotel. As expected, I found him not in the garden or at the bar, but bent over a little mountain of papers, his elbows on the table and his forehead resting in one hand, as though the order of the world depended upon a single footnote in some yellowing register.

«Hallo, T. M. G.», I said. «Everything all right? »

He raised his head, blinked behind his round spectacles, and looked at me with an expression in which weariness and amusement oddly coincided.

«Well, », he said drily, «how was your night? Joanna seemed moderately concerned because you did not return. »

He grinned as he said it, and I saw that it would have been pointless to pretend either offence or misunderstanding. So, I changed the subject as quickly as possible.

«Tyron, Kim and I spent hours yesterday searching the database of the British Heraldry Society. Because of the coat of arms. »

I handed him the drawing of the ring. He took the sheet with the cautious attention other people might devote to valuable stamps or rare butterflies. Then he turned through his papers, compared, held the drawing up to the light, and laid it back on the table.

«‹Pro Deo et Patria› is not an uncommon motto», he said. «Several families have used it. But I know the coat of arms itself. I came across it in the church at Henstridge. This must be the arms of the Carents. »

«Then we have reached the same conclusion», I said. «But we still do not know how the ring came into Kim's mother's hands. And I am sure that ‹WCV› stands for William Carent of Ven. Lord Carent spoke explicitly of a ring last night. »

Tyron looked at me in silence for a moment, as though already calculating the next steps.

«Kurt», he said at last, «we are going to Henstridge. And afterwards once more to Ven House. »

On the way we picked up Kim. She seemed steadier than on the previous evening, though not really rested. The ring was hanging once more from the chain round her neck, and more than once she held it between her fingers, as though hoping in this way to wrench some truth from the cold metal.

At Henstridge we found the churchyard quickly enough. The church lay there in silence, grey and squat beneath a sky that was at once bright and overcast, as only in England seems possible. Inside it smelt of stone, dust and old cold. Before long we were standing before the tomb of William II Carent and his wife Margaret, née Stourton. At first glance there was no room for doubt: it was the same coat of arms. The three circles, the curious signs within them, the whole arrangement — everything matched.

The Carents had therefore lived in this region for a very long time. They had held land near Toomer Hill, related to the Stourtons, and left their traces in many places, without my having known their name until very recently. But now it seemed to appear everywhere, like a pattern that only reveals itself once one has recognised it.

«That will do for the present», I said at last, when we were outside again. «How about a light lunch at the Virginia Ash? »

Tyron did not object. Nor did Kim. It was shortly after one o'clock when we settled ourselves in the almost empty pub. The light fell slantwise through the windows, and somewhere behind the bar crockery clattered. Tyron ordered fish and chips, I a ploughman's salad, Kim a vegetarian pie. With it we drank homemade lemonade, pleasantly lemony, almost too cheerful for a day on which we were discussing plague graves, family arms and restless dead.

During the meal I told Tyron about the dream in which Lady Elizabeth had whispered her message to me and reminded him of Sir William's words. Tyron listened attentively, only occasionally laying down his fork and knitting his brow. Kim was silent for most of the time, but I noticed that she absorbed every word.

From the pub to Ven House was only a matter of minutes.

We parked in the same place as before and went straight to the house without hesitation. It seemed to me that the best point of departure for our search was the ladies' sitting room — that room in which I had first seen Lady Elizabeth. Although the thought made me uneasy, I asked myself at the same time what could really frighten us now. There were three of us. And my dream had held nothing threatening. On the contrary: it had been more a plea than a warning.

In the room we stood at last before the great mirror and tried to relate Sir William's words to the place itself. He had said that in anger and despair he had thrown the cross out of the window. We stepped to the balcony door, looked out over the garden, and tried to estimate how far a strong man might be able to hurl an iron cross. Tyron thought it might perfectly well have landed in the old pond and sunk there into the mud.

Then Kim touched my hand.

«Kurt», she whispered, «can you feel the cold? Let us go out into the sunshine. »

At that very moment I too became aware of a coldness creeping up my back — not sharp, but slow, like something cautiously approaching. We turned round.

Kim was on the verge of crying out.

As for me, my breath caught in my throat.

In the great wall mirror, precisely at the place where I had seen Lady Elizabeth before, dark veils were beginning to form. At first, they were no more than shadows in the clouded glass. But they moved. They thickened, detached themselves from the mirror, and glided out over the gilded frame into the room. We stood as if turned to stone. My heart was beating so violently that I could feel it in my throat.

Tyron now turned round as well.

«What is the matter with you? », he asked. «Are you seeing ghosts again? »

Plainly he saw nothing. And that made everything only uncanny.

«Strange», he muttered. «It really is unusually cold. Perhaps we ought to—»

I raised a finger to my lips.

By then the black mist had reached the floor. Slowly, almost solemnly, it gathered itself into a shape. And out of that dark vapour a woman stepped.

She was of medium height, finely dressed, elegant in that quiet, self-possessed manner that may once have belonged naturally to women of her rank in earlier centuries. Her face was strikingly pale, her hair severely drawn back. In that same instant I knew that this must be Lady Elizabeth.

And yet it was not only that.

The longer I looked at her, the more startling became her resemblance to Kim.

It was as though I were seeing two faces at once — that of the dead lady and that of the young woman beside me. There was no trace any longer of swellings, decay or disfigurement. Nothing recalled the «dreadful illness». She stood before us almost as clearly as though she had stepped bodily out of the past into this room.

«Kurt», she breathed, and her voice was softer than the wind moving through the trees outside, «you saw me. You heard my message. And you followed my call. »

I could not answer. Kim stood motionless beside me, her fingers at her chain, her eyes wide open.

Then the apparition turned towards her.

«And who is this young girl», said Lady Elizabeth, «who might be my daughter? She wears my ring about her neck. »

Kim instinctively reached for the chain and enclosed the ring in her hand, as though she must protect it from some invisible grasp.

«This ring belonged to my mother Margaret», she said in a trembling voice. «But I do not know where she got it. »

The Lady looked at her for a long time, and in that look, there was nothing of hostility — rather a quiet, deep recognition.

«Kurt», she said then again, «I asked you to find the cross. You and Kim — you alone can see and hear me. Find the cross. Fasten it to my earthly grave. It will banish the plague fleas and the rats for ever. They have brought enough suffering upon the Carents, the Carterets and the Medlycotts. If you succeed, I shall at last find rest and go into the light, where my beloved William waits for me. This ring binds our love together. And it will bring happiness to you as well. »

With every word our fear receded a little. What stood before us was no demonic apparition. It was grief bound to a place. Love that had not been allowed to run its course. At last, we both nodded and managed to utter a faint «Yes».

Lady Elizabeth smiled. It was a quiet, grateful smile.

Then the black mist slowly withdrew. The contours grew paler, the figure dissolved into fine veils and vanished once more into the mirror, until only the old, mottled glass hung before us.

We stood there as if enchanted.

Tyron stepped nearer, seized us almost roughly by the shoulders and gave us a slight shake.

«Are you dreaming? », he cried. «I have been speaking to you the whole time. You were staring at the mirror, moving your lips and nodding as though you were answering someone. »

«Come», I said. «Into the garden. We must go to the pond. If William threw the cross out, then it will be lying there in the mud. »

Lady Elizabeth

Tyron insisted on getting into the pond himself. He rolled up his trousers, removed his shoes with visible reluctance, and then waded into the cold, brownish water, heavy with decay, rotting

vegetation and mud that had lain undisturbed for decades. Kim remained standing on the bank and involuntarily gripped my hand while we watched him.

Suddenly Tyron let out a sharp cry.

«Damn! Something has stung me — perhaps a crayfish. Or a shard of glass. »

He lifted one foot out of the water. On the sole there was a small cut from which a little blood was clearly seeping. For one absurd moment I thought of Sir William's account, and of how quickly in that accursed garden death had once sprung from the tiniest wound.

But Tyron merely grimaced, bent farther down into the mud and continued to feel about.

«Pass me that large piece of pottery there», he said. «That one, on the left. As a shovel. I can feel something hard. »

I handed it to him. With remarkable persistence he dug into the mud, stabbed, tugged, muttered curses under his breath — until suddenly a rusted piece of metal became visible. Once more he drove in the potsherd, wrenched at it, and at last lifted it out of the water with both hands.

It was an old, completely rusted ring-headed cross, perhaps forty or fifty centimetres high.

Tyron stared at it as though he were holding sacred proof in his hands, then cried out with an enthusiasm that rang across the whole garden:

«Eureka! I've found it! »

Now only one thing was missing: the grave.

We tramped across marshy ground towards the small open woodland. Thorns caught at our clothes, ivy tugged at our shoes, and more than once we had to force our way through undergrowth that seemed to resist every step. At last, we were standing once more before the pitiful remains of the medieval chapel.

At the stretch of wall which I had already cleared of moss, we set to work again. Tyron tore the creepers aside, I stabbed at the roots with a branch, and Kim pulled away the thinner brambles with her bare hands. After only a few minutes of hard work, the outline of a half-sunken grave emerged from the earth. There, where my pocketknife had earlier exposed the surface, the Carent coat of arms was now clearly visible.

We still did not have absolute certainty.

And yet the remaining visible letters, the position of the grave, and everything we had learnt by then left scarcely any other conclusion possible.

«Who else could it be? » Tyron said softly.

For a moment we stood in silence around the grave. It was not a ceremonial silence, rather one imposed upon us when one suddenly feels that a place still holds something present which resists every loud movement.

Then I took the rusted cross in my hand. At the head of the grave, I looked for a suitable place, loosened the earth with a branch, set the cross into it, and pressed it firmly down with both hands.

At the very instant it took hold; we all heard it.

A long, deep sigh.

Not loud, not frightening. More like the release of a burden that had lasted for centuries.

Immediately afterwards a gentle current of air passed by us. The atmosphere changed. A strong scent of violets spread suddenly and distinctly, as though someone had laid fresh flowers among the roots. Above us the trees began to move, though only a moment before there had scarcely been any wind. The leaves rustled softly. And then a single shaft of sunlight fell through the canopy and struck the grave exactly.

After that there came a silence unlike the one before.

Not empty. Not threatening.

Peaceful.

We raised our eyes and looked at one another. None of us said it aloud, and yet we were agreed: Lady Elizabeth had at last found her way into the light.

Even stranger was what seemed, in the next few minutes, to happen before our very eyes to the grave itself. The ivy suddenly looked limp, as though it had lost its hold. Raspberry canes and creepers drew back from the stone, or at least so it seemed to us. The moss on the slab dried out in patches and came away in places, so that the wind carried it off. Between the clods of earth appeared small, delicate violets, as though they had been waiting only for this moment to arrive at last.

Their scent was the same as the one that had just drifted through the air.

It was over.

Lady Elizabeth had found her rest. She was with her William again. And with her, so we wished to believe, that curse too had been broken — the one that had run like a dark sickness through the history of the house. No future mistress of Ven House would again have to fear what had lurked in the garden beneath walls, earth and ancient debris.

Kim threw her arms around my neck, and I held her tightly, as though the embrace might confirm for both of us that all this had really happened. Tyron was beaming like a man who had not only solved a mystery but had also seen his own reason for existence triumphantly confirmed. With an almost boyish gesture he flung his Sherlock Holmes cap into the air.

«Hurrah! », he cried. «This must be celebrated. I need an ale. At once. Come — I'm inviting you to the Eastbury. Not only you, but Joanna Hutchinson as well. She has impressed me enormously. I can well imagine that we should make an excellent team. »

He smiled so roguishly as he said it that even Kim had to laugh.

And so, we left the former place of horror.

And for the first time since I had seen that dark manor house in Milborne Port, I no longer had the feeling that something unseen was watching us go. Instead, there remained only the deep, almost unreal peace of a place where, at last, something had been brought to its proper end.

Shared Happiness

We were sitting in the dining room of the Eastbury Inn, and for the first time in days I had the feeling that I was no longer struggling against some invisible resistance. The heavy, elusive tension that had accompanied me since my arrival in Dorset had lifted. In its place there was an exhausted, almost tender relief. Tyron already had his ale before him yet insisted with ceremonial determination on ordering a bottle of champagne as well. Dinner had been ordered, the mood was relaxed, and the champagne did its part to cast the day in a gentler, kinder light.

Kim was sitting close beside me. Under the table she held my hand, as though wanting to make sure that I was there and had not likewise become one of those apparitions that stepped out of mirrors and vanished again into mist. Joanna, meanwhile, could hardly take her eyes off Tyron. It was not an intrusive or coquettish scrutiny, but that quiet, watchful interest with which one person suddenly regards another who may unexpectedly have become important to them.

Tyron cleared his throat, smoothed the papers he had also brought with him that evening, and said:

«Well, my friends, I believe I can finally let the cat out of the bag. »

He leant back, took a sip of ale, and began to speak with that calm solemnity which was particularly his whenever he was announcing something he himself considered significant.

«I came to Sherborne with the task of tracing the descendants of Roger Armstrong Carent. More than thirty years ago Roger Carent met a young woman in this town and fell in love with her. Apparently, he loved her far more than his family thought desirable. After a little more than a year, the young woman discovered that she was expecting a child. Roger wanted to marry her. But to his family, the idea that a Carent might marry a woman beneath his station was unacceptable. They put him under pressure. In the end he withdrew, and shortly afterwards left England. »

By now Kim beside me was gripping my hand so tightly that I could feel her pulse.

Tyron went on:

«Roger sought distance and forgetfulness. First in Australia, then in Canada, then elsewhere again. But apparently, he found peace nowhere. Before he left the country, his family arranged for the London firm of solicitors Bigby, Bigby & Bigby to pay the expectant mother a monthly allowance — together with additional funds for the child's good education. At the same time, it was stipulated that Roger would be disinherited if, after his parents' deaths, he should return to that woman and marry her after all. It was, in other words, a family banishment in everything but name. »

His voice had grown more matter of fact.

«Roger Armstrong Carent left his country a broken man. On his sixty-fifth birthday he suffered a stroke in Sydney. A few months later he died, without ever having become truly happy. Before his death he instructed Bigby, Bigby & Bigby to search for the woman and child he had never been able to forget. The firm, in turn, engaged me to carry out that task. »

Tyron smiled faintly and looked first at me, then at Kim.

«It was only natural to begin my enquiries in Sherborne. And there I happened to meet a young Swiss man who, at breakfast on the very first morning, told me of a most curious experience. »

Joanna smiled quietly. Tyron noticed and nodded to her.

«Joanna would probably say that it was fate. Or a silvery aura. In any case, it quickly became clear to me that Kurt perceived things hidden from others. Hardly a day passed without his sharing some new observation with me. First there was a ring. Then a young woman of about thirty. Then a coat of arms pointing to the Carents. And finally, you telephoned me, Joanna Hutchinson — and everything began to fall into place. »

He took another sip and opened a different folder.

«My client, however, did not merely want me to find mother and daughter. He also wanted to know whether there was any truth in the stories about Ven House. Roger's parents had bought back the old family seat from the Medlycotts after centuries. But the ghost stories, the unexplained deaths and the dark rumours surrounding the estate had apparently long prevented the family from truly returning to Milborne Port. Later they sent Roger to Sherborne to investigate the matter. And there — instead of devoting himself to the house — he fell in love with a simple shopkeeper's daughter. »

Kim let go of my hand only to wipe a tear quickly from the corner of her eye with her fingertips. But at once new tears came.

«Then that must have been my mother», she said softly. «Then… then Roger Armstrong Carent was my natural father. »

No one spoke.

It was one of those rare kinds of silence in which even a laid table, glasses, lamplight and the distant clatter from the kitchen suddenly seem unreal. Joanna discreetly drew out a handkerchief and placed it before Kim without saying anything. Tyron leafed through his papers, almost awkwardly, as though wanting to give the moment time to understand itself.

At last, he said, with unusual gentleness:

«Yes, Kim. Everything points to it. A DNA test will provide final certainty. After that, probably only the legal formalities will remain. Bigby, Bigby & Bigby will deal with the inheritance. It looks very much as though you are the rightful heir of the family. In other words: you will most likely be the new Lady Carent of Ven.»

Kim sat there for a moment, closer to tears than to a smile, then slowly turned towards me. In her eyes there were exhaustion, happiness, disbelief — and something very tender.

Softly, almost only for me to hear, she whispered:

«Will you be my own personal lord, then? »

In that moment I would probably have promised her anything she had asked of me. Instead of a witty reply, I managed only a quiet, honest laugh, drew her to me, and kissed her forehead. It seemed to me that all the darkness that had led us to Ven House now lay definitively behind us — not erased but transformed into something that had found its peace.

And so, it came about that my life took a different direction from the one I had imagined on the drive through the Blackmore Vale. I never took up my post as a teacher of German. Kim gave up her work in the library. Joanna and Tyron found one another as well — at first, perhaps, in shared zeal, later, I suspected, in genuine affection. Together, with energetic support from Margaret Boland, they founded a small enterprise that assisted people in spiritual and emotional extremity. One might have mocked it, had I not myself witnessed things that could not be explained away by mockery alone.

As for me, I remained in England.

I remained with Kim.

And to this day I believe that it was the right decision: not only to help my future wife, Lady Carent of Ven, to put her inheritance and her history in order, but also to teach her the German language — and with her to begin a life that had grown in miraculous fashion out of love, chance, loss and redemption.

When I think back to Sherborne today, I see not only the golden-grey walls of the abbey, the hedges along the country roads and the restless light over the hills of Dorset. I see the black mirror in the silent room at Ven House, the grave beneath roots and ivy, the rusted cross in the damp earth, and the single shaft of sunlight that fell when a restless soul at last found peace. Above all, however, I see Kim. And then I know that my path to Sherborne did not lead me there by chance. I had travelled there to take up a post. What I found was love, truth and a new life.

Afterword

The origins of this story lie in a journey to England which the author undertook in 2017 together with his family. From a holiday accommodation in Henstridge, they explored Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire — landscapes full of history, quiet beauty and that atmosphere which makes the south of England so distinctive. Many impressions from those days have found their way into the present narrative: the gentle hills, the old houses, the churches, the gardens, the changeable light and, not least, the quiet nearness of the past, which can be felt everywhere in this region.

To these travel memories were added older images from a different period of life. As early as the 1970s, the author spent an extended time in England, whereas a young employee he worked for the British music company EMI. Certain observations, certain encounters and certain moods from that time found their way, decades later and quite unexpectedly, into this story.

Individual figures may remind readers of real people. In fact, some of the characters bear traces of former colleagues or resemble people still living. Such connections, however, have been shaped by literary treatment and form part of the author's imaginative creation.

In 2025, during his research, the author came across the MPHHG — the Milborne Port History and Heritage Group — by chance. The quality, seriousness and attention to detail with which this group documents and keeps alive the history of its region deserve the highest praise.

It is out of sincere admiration for this work that the present story is **dedicated to the Milborne Port History and Heritage Group.** May its members, and all those who take an interest in the history of this area, meet with kindness and pleasure the imagination of an Anglophile Swiss who has felt closely connected to the south of England for many years.

The Author

Thomas von Riedt, whose birth name is Thomas Braunwalder, was born in Zurich in 1952 and has lived since 1979 in Neerach, in the hamlet of Riedt. He is married and the father of two grown-up children. In 1976 he resolved to improve his English and took up a position within the EMI group. In the years that followed, his professional career took him repeatedly to England, most recently in 2003 for a stay of an entire year.

After 48 years of varied professional activity as an employee and entrepreneur, most recently as Chief Executive Officer of a German group of companies, he retired in 2016.

Today he devotes himself with pleasure to golf, cooking, travel, history and writing.