RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Footsteps in the Dark

Georgette Heyer

Contents

About the Book

The Priory may be ramshackled in appearance, but Peter, Margaret and Celia, who have inherited it from their uncle, love it for its rambling charm. But there’s more to this house than is at first apparent: for years hardly a single person has set foot in the place, and even their uncle chose to live in a different house, far away from this particular property.

Local wisdom says that the house is haunted. And when things start going bump in the night, it certainly seems as if something ghostly is walking the Priory’s halls. Then a murder is committed. Does the key to solving the crime lie in the realm of the supernatural? Or is the explanation much more down to earth?

About the Author

Author of over fifty books, Georgette Heyer is one of the best-known and best-loved of all historical novelists, making the Regency period her own. Her first novel, *The Black Moth*, published in 1921, was written at the age of fifteen to amuse her convalescent brother; her last was *My Lord John*. Although most famous for her historical fiction, she also wrote twelve mystery novels. Georgette Heyer died in 1974 at the age of seventy-one.

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Footsteps in the Dark

Georgette Heyer

arrow books

One

‘AND I SUPPOSE this is the approach-course,’ said Charles Malcolm. ‘Full of natural hazards.’

His wife, Celia, replied with dignity: ‘That is the tennis-court.’ Charles made a derisive noise. ‘All it needs,’ she said, eyeing him, ‘is a little levelling.’

‘All it needs,’ said Charles rudely, ‘is a hay-cutter and a steam-roller. And this is the place you wouldn’t sell!’

His sister-in-law took up the cudgels. ‘It’s perfectly lovely, and you know it. As soon as Celia and I set eyes on it we fell for it.’

‘That I can believe,’ said Charles. ‘A mullioned window or two, and a ruined chapel, and I’d expect you two to go over at the knees. But Peter was with you. What did he fall for? Beer at the local pub?’

‘There’s a trout-stream at the bottom of the garden,’ Margaret pointed out.

‘So there is,’ Charles agreed. ‘And another in the servants’ hall for wet days. Bowers showed it to me.’

‘Simply because there was a pane of glass out of one of the windows!’ Celia said hotly. ‘Of course the rain came in!’

Margaret tucked her hand in Charles’ arm. ‘Wait till you’ve seen your bedroom. It’s got linen-fold panelling, and there’s a cupboard which is all part of it, and which takes you ages to find.’

‘That really is jolly,’ Charles said. ‘Then if anyone burgles our room he won’t be able to find my dress-coat. I suppose I can mark the place with a cross.’

‘No, you have a compass, and take bearings,’ retorted his wife. ‘Come on in, and we’ll show you.’

They turned away from the tennis-court and began to walk back towards the house down one of the neglected paths that wound between flower-beds to the terrace on the south side of the building.

‘Chas, can you look at it with the sun on that heavenly grey stone, and blame us for refusing to part with it?’ Margaret exclaimed.

‘I’ll wait till I’ve seen my room,’ Charles replied.

But he had to admit that this house, which had been left to his wife and her brother and sister, was artistically all that could be desired. Built originally many hundreds of years before of grey stone, much of it was now ruined, and much had been added at different periods, so that the present house was a rambling structure, set in wooded grounds where oaks, which had been there when the Conqueror landed, reared up huge gnarled trunks from out of a tangle of undergrowth. A drive of about a quarter of a mile in length twisted through the trees to the gates that opened on to the road which led to the village of Framley, a mile away if you went by road, but much less if you walked across the fields at the back of the house.

Down the road towards the village, but set back inside the Priory grounds, were the ruins of the chapel which had so captivated Celia’s fancy. Dismantled during the Reformation, and later battered by Cromwell’s cannon, not much of it now remained, but fragments of the walls rose up crumbling out of the grass. Here and there part of the walls remained to show the Gothic windows, but for the most part they were no more than a few feet in height.

The Priory itself had been restored so that the many rebuildings and additions had left little outward appearance of the old home of the monks. Celia, who had acquired a book on Old Abbeys, declared that the library, a big room giving on to the terrace, was the original refectory, but she admitted that the panelling was probably of later date.

The place had come to her quite unexpectedly. An uncle whom she, in company with Peter and Margaret, had visited at dutiful intervals during his lifetime, had bequeathed the Priory to his nephew and his two nieces. No lover of rural solitudes, he himself had never occupied the house. In his turn he had inherited it some five years before from his sister, who had lived there through marriage and widowhood. As she left it so it now stood, and no sooner had Celia Malcolm, and Peter and Margaret Fortescue seen it, than they declared it was just the place they had dreamed of for years. At least, the two sisters said so. Peter was less enthusiastic, but agreed it would be a pity to sell it.

It had been to let for quite a long time, but ever since the first tenants who rented the house two years after the death of its original owner, had left, no one had made even the smallest offer for it.

‘Your uncle had a good deal of trouble over the house,’ had said Mr Milbank, the solicitor. ‘When she lived in it his sister never made any complaint, but she was an eccentric old lady, and it’s conceivable she wouldn’t have cared. But the fact of the matter is, Mrs Malcolm, the house has got rather a bad name. The people your uncle let it to took it for three years – and they left at the end of one. They said the place was haunted.’

‘Oo!’ said Margaret. ‘What a thrill for us!’

The lawyer smiled. ‘I shouldn’t build on it, Miss Fortescue. I think you’ll find that it’s nothing more thrilling than rats. But I thought I’d warn you. So that if you feel you’d rather not take possession of a reputedly haunted house you might like me to follow up this offer.’ He lifted up a sheet of note-paper that lay on his desk, and looked inquiringly at Peter.

‘Is that the offer you wrote to us about?’ Peter asked. ‘Some fellow who saw the board up when he was motoring in that part of the world, and wanted to know particulars?’

Mr Milbank nodded. Celia and Margaret turned anxiously to their brother, and began to urge the desirability of

owning a country house so near to town, and yet so ideal in situation and character.

The trout stream won Peter over. Charles, a young barrister with a growing practice, had no time to waste, so he said, in going to look at a house which his wife was apparently set on inhabiting whether he liked it or not. He placed his trust in Peter.

‘And nicely you’ve abused it,’ he said, over tea in the library. ‘For two months you three have dashed to and fro, doing what you called “getting it ready to live in.” Incidentally you lulled my suspicions with lying stories about the house, till I almost believed it was something like your description. You’ – he pointed an accusing finger at Margaret – ‘said it was the ideal home. The fact that there was only one bathroom and a system of heating water that won’t do more than one hot bath at a time, you carefully concealed.’

‘Do you good to have a few cold baths,’ remarked Peter, spreading jam on a slice of bread and butter. ‘It isn’t as though we propose to live here through the winter. Moreover, I don’t see why we shouldn’t convert one of the bedrooms into a second bathroom, and put in a better heating arrangement. Not immediately, of course, but at some future date.’

Charles eyed him coldly. ‘And what about light? Oh, and a telephone! I suppose we can wire the house while we’re about it. This must be what Celia called “getting a country-house for nothing.” I might have known.’

‘Personally,’ said Celia, ‘I prefer lamps and candles. Electric light would be out of place in a house like this, and as for a telephone, that’s the one thing I’ve been wanting to escape from.’ She nodded briskly at her husband. ‘You’re going to have a real holiday this year, my man, quite cut off from town.’

‘Thanks very much,’ said Charles. ‘And what was it you said just before tea? Something about going to the village to order bacon for breakfast?’

‘Well, you can take the car,’ Celia pointed out. ‘And you might try and get hold of a gardener in the village. I think the garden is rather more than you and Peter can manage.’

‘It is,’ said Charles, with conviction. ‘Much more.’

The door opened at that moment to admit a middle-aged lady of comfortable proportions, and placid demeanour. This was Mrs Bosanquet, the Fortescues’ aunt. She accepted a chair, and some tea, condemned a solid-looking cake, and embarked on bread and butter.

‘I have unpacked my boxes,’ she announced, ‘but I twice lost the wardrobe.’

‘What, have you got one of those little practical jokes?’ Charles demanded.

Mrs Bosanquet turned an amiable and inquiring countenance towards him. She was deaf. When Charles had repeated his question, she nodded. ‘Yes, dear, but I have stuck a piece of stamp-paper on the catch. A very quaint old house. I was talking to Mrs Bowers, and she tells me you could lose yourself in the cellars.’

‘That’s nothing,’ said Charles, getting up. ‘I lost myself getting from our room to my dressing-room. Of course it would simplify matters if we locked a few of the empty rooms, but I agree it would take away from the sporting element. Are you coming to the village, Peter?’

‘I am,’ Peter replied. ‘I will introduce you to some very fine draught beer there.’

‘Lead on!’ Charles said, brightening.

The lane that led to Framley was wooded, and picturesque enough to draw a grudging word of approval from Charles. Peter, negotiating a hairpin bend, said: ‘Seriously, Chas, the place has possibilities.’

‘I don’t deny it. But what’s all this bilge about noises and hauntings, and footsteps in the dark?’

‘God knows. In the village they all but cross themselves if you mention the Priory. I daresay there are rats. Milbank said . . .’

‘Look here, do you mean to say you knew about this haunting before you came down here? And not one word to me?’

Peter said in some surprise: ‘I didn’t think anything of it. You aren’t going to tell me you’d have refused to live in the place if you’d known?’

‘Aren’t I?’ said Charles grimly. ‘If you’d left as many desirable residences and hotels at a moment’s notice as I have, all because Celia “felt something queer” about them, you’d never have come near the place.’

‘She says she doesn’t believe there’s anything wrong with the house. All village superstition.’

‘Does she? Well, I’ll lay you six to one in sovereigns that the first rat heard scuttling overhead will spell our departure. Especially with Bowers shivering round the house.’

‘What’s the matter with him? Been listening to village gossip?’

‘That, and natural palsy of spirit. He unpacked my things and gave a life-like imitation of the mysterious butler of fiction while he did so. “All I know is, sir, I wouldn’t go down those cellar stairs after dark, not if I were paid to.” Oh yes, and I need hardly say that the first night he and Mrs Bowers spent alone in the house before you came down, he heard footsteps outside his door, and a hand feeling over the panels.’

‘Silly ass!’ Peter said. ‘You can console yourself with the thought that it would take more than a ghost to upset the redoubtable Mrs Bowers. Allow me to tell you that we are now approaching the Bell Inn. Genuine fourteenth century – in parts.’

The car had emerged from the tree-shadowed lane into the outskirts of the village, which stretched aimlessly along one narrow main street. The Bell Inn, a picturesque and rambling old hostelry built round a courtyard, was one of the first buildings on the street. Peter Fortescue ran the car up

to the door and switched off the engine. ‘Opening time,’ he grinned. ‘Take heart, Chas, I can vouch for the beer.’

They entered into a long, low-pitched taproom, with a beamed ceiling, and little latticed windows that gave on to the street. Oak settles formed various secluded nooks in the room, and behind the bar stood a landlord of such comfortable proportions and such benevolent mien that he might well have stepped from the pages of Dickens.

Leaning against the bar, and apparently engaging Mr Wilkes in desultory conversation, was his very antithesis, a thin, wiry little man, with a very sharp face and pale eyes that darted from object to object with a quickness that gave a disagreeable impression of shiftiness. He glanced at Peter as Peter crossed the threshold, and at once looked away again.

‘Evening, Wilkes,’ Peter said. ‘I’ve brought my brother-in-law along to try that draught bitter of yours.’

Mr Wilkes beamed upon them both. ‘Very glad to see any friend of yours here, sir. Two half-cans, sir? You shall have it.’ He took down a couple of pewter tankards from a shelf behind him, and drew two half-pints of frothing beer. Having supplied his patrons with this, he wiped down the bar with a mechanical action, and said affably: ‘And how are you getting on up at the Priory, sir, if I may ask?’

‘All right, thanks. We haven’t seen your ghost yet. When does he usually show up?’

The smile faded. Mr Wilkes looked at Peter rather queerly, and said in an altered voice: ‘I wouldn’t joke about it, sir, not if I was you.’

Charles emerged from his tankard. ‘Has my man Bowers been in here at all?’ he demanded.

The landlord looked surprised; the small stranger, who had edged away a little when the newcomers first entered, shot a quick look at Charles.

‘Yes, sir, several times,’ Wilkes answered.

‘I thought so,’ said Charles. ‘And did you tell him that the ghost prowled round the passages, and pawed all the doors?’

Wilkes seemed to draw back. ‘Has he heard it again?’ he asked.

‘Heard my eye!’ Charles retorted. ‘All he heard was what you told him, and his own imagination.’

‘Joking apart, Wilkes, you don’t really believe in the thing, do you?’ Peter asked.

The small man, who had looked for a moment as though he were going to say something, moved unobtrusively away to a seat by one of the windows, and fishing a crumpled newspaper from his pocket began to read it.

For a moment Wilkes did not reply; then he said quite simply: ‘I’ve seen it, sir.’ Peter’s brows lifted incredulously, and Wilkes added: ‘And what’s more, I’ve seen as reasonable a man as what you are yourself pack up and leave that place with two years of his lease still to run. A little over five years it is since I took over this house, and when I first come here the Priory was standing as empty as when you first saw it. I suppose old Mrs Matthews, that used to own it, had been dead a matter of a year or fifteen months. From all accounts she was a queer one. Well, there was the Priory, going to ruin, as you might say, and never a soul would go near the place after dark, not if they was paid to. Now, I daresay you’ll agree I don’t look one of the fanciful ones myself, sir, and nor I’m not, and the first thing I did when I heard what folk said of the place, was to make a joke of it, like what you’re doing now. Then Ben Tillman, that keeps the mill up to Crawshays, he laid me I wouldn’t go up to the old ruin after dark one night.’ He paused, and again wiped down the bar with that odd air of abstraction. He drew a long breath, as though some horror still lingered in his memory. ‘Well, I went, sir. Nor I wasn’t afraid – not then. It was a moonlit night, and besides that I had my torch if I’d needed it. But I didn’t. I sat down on one of those old tombs

you'll find in the chapel, half covered by grass and weeds. I didn't think anything out of the ordinary for some while. If I remember rightly, I whistled a bit, by way of passing the time. I couldn't say how long it was before I noticed the change. I think it must have come gradual.'

'What change?' asked Charles, unimpressed.

Again the landlord paused. 'It's very hard to tell you, sir. It wasn't anything you could take hold of, as you might say. Things looked the same, and there wasn't more than a breath of wind, yet it got much colder all at once. And it was as fine a June night as you could hope for. I don't know how I can explain it so as you'd understand, but it was as though the cold was spreading right over me, and into me. And instead of whistling tunes to myself, and thinking how I'd have the laugh over Ben Tillman, I found I was sitting still – still as death. It had sort of crept on me without my noticing, that fear of moving. I couldn't have told you why *then*, but I knew I daren't stir a finger, nor make a sound. I can tell you, with that fear in my very bones I'd have given all I had to get up and run, and let Ben say what he would. But I couldn't. Something had got me. No, I don't know what it was, sir, and I can't explain it anyhow else, but it was no laughing matter. Do you know how it is when you've got the wind up, and you sit listening like as if your eardrums 'ud burst with the strain? Well, that's how I was, listening and watching. Whenever a leaf rustled I strained my eyes to see what was there. But there was nothing. Then it stole over me that there was something behind me.' He stopped, and passed the back of his hand across his forehead. 'Well, that's a feeling anyone can get if he's properly scared, but this was more than a feeling. I *knew* it. I'd still got some of my wits left and I knew there was only one thing to be done, and that was turn round, and look. Yes, it sounds easy, but I swear to you, sir, it took every ounce of courage in me. I did it. I fair wrenched myself round, with the blood hammering

in my head. And I saw it, plain as I see you, standing right behind me, looking down at me.'

'Saw *what*?' demanded Peter, quite worked up.

The landlord gave a shiver. 'They call it the Monk round here,' he answered. 'I suppose it was that. But I only saw a tall black figure, and no face, but just two eyes looking out of blackness straight at me.'

'Your pal Tillman dressed up to give you a fright,' said Charles.

Wilkes looked at him. 'Ben Tillman couldn't have vanished, sir. And that's what the Monk did. Just disappeared. You may say I imagined it, but all I know is I wouldn't do what I did that night again, not for a thousand pounds.'

There was a slight pause. The man by the window got up and strolled out of the taproom. Peter set his tankard down. 'Well, thanks very much,' he said. 'Cheery little story.'

Charles had been watching the thin stranger. 'Who's our departed friend?' he inquired.

'Commercial, sir. He's working the places round here with some sort of a vacuum-cleaner, so I understand, and doing a bit of fishing in between-whiles.'

'Seemed to be interested in ghosts,' was all Charles said.

But when he and Peter had left the Bell Inn, Peter asked abruptly: 'What did you mean by that, Chas? Did you think the fellow was listening to us?'

'Didn't you?' Charles said.

'Well, yes, but I don't know that that was altogether surprising.'

'No. But he didn't seem to want us to notice his interest, did he? Where's this grocer we're looking for?'

At the grocer's, which turned out to be also the post-office and linen-draper, after the manner of village shops, the two men were accosted by a gentleman in clerical attire, who was buying stamps. He introduced himself as the Vicar, and told them that he and his wife were only waiting until the

newcomers had had time to settle into the Priory before they paid a call on them.

‘One is glad to see the Priory occupied once more,’ he said. ‘Alas, too many of our old houses are spurned nowadays for lack of “modern conveniences.”’

‘We were rather under the impression, sir, that this particular house has been spurned on account of ghosts,’ Peter said.

The Vicar smiled. ‘Ah, I fear you must seek confirmation of that story from one more credulous than my poor self,’ he announced. ‘Such tales, I find, invariably spring up round deserted houses. I venture to prophesy that the Priory ghost proves itself to be nothing more harmful than a mouse, or perhaps a rat.’

‘Oh, so we think,’ Charles answered. ‘But it’s really rather a nuisance, for my wife had banked on getting a local housemaid, and the best she can manage is a daily girl, who takes precious good care she’s out of the place before sundown.’

Mr Pennythorne listened to this with an air of smiling tolerance. ‘Strange how tenacious these simple country-folk are of superstitions,’ he said musingly. ‘But you are not without domestic help, one trusts?’

‘No, no, we have our butler and his wife.’ Charles gathered up his change from the counter, and thrust an unwieldy package into Peter’s hands. ‘Are you going our way, sir? Can we drop you anywhere?’

‘No, I thank you. Is it your car that stands outside the Bell Inn? I will accompany you as far as that if I may.’

They strolled out of the shop, and down the street. The Vicar pointed out various tumbledown old buildings of architectural interest, and promised to conduct them personally round the church some day. ‘It is not, I fear, of such antiquity as the ruins of your chapel,’ he sighed, ‘but we pride ourselves upon our east window. Within the last few years we have been fortunate enough to procure a

sufficient sum of money to pay for the cleaning of it – no light expense, my dear Mr Malcolm – but we were greatly indebted to Colonel Ackerley, who showed himself, as indeed he always does, most generous.' This seemed to produce a train of thought. 'No doubt you have already made his acquaintance? One of our churchwardens; and an estimable fellow – a *pukka sahib*, as he would himself say.'

'Is he the man who lives in the white house beyond ours?' asked Peter. 'No, we haven't met him yet, but I think I saw him at the Bell one evening. Cheery-looking man, going grey, with regular features, and a short moustache? Drives a Vauxhall tourer?'

The Vicar, while disclaiming any knowledge of cars, thought that this description fitted Colonel Ackerley. They had reached the Bell Inn by this time, and again refusing the offer of a lift the Vicar took his leave, and walked off briskly down the street.

When Charles and Peter reached the Priory it was nearly time for dinner, and long shadows lay on the ground. They found the girls in the library with Mrs Bosanquet, and were greeted by a cry of: 'Oh, here you are! We quite forgot to tell you to buy a couple of ordinary lamps to fix on to the wall.'

'What, more lamps?' demanded Peter, who had a lively recollection of unpacking a positive crate of them. 'Why on earth?'

'Well, we haven't got any for the landing upstairs,' explained Celia, 'and Bowers says he'd rather not go up without a light. Did you ever hear such rot? I told him to take a candle.'

'To tell you the honest truth,' confessed Margaret, 'I don't awfully like going up in the dark myself.'

Charles cast up his eyes. 'Already!' he said.

'It isn't that at all,' Margaret said defiantly. 'I mean, I'm not imagining ghosts or anything so idiotic, but it is a rambling place, and of course one does hear odd sorts of noises – yes, I know it's only rats, but at night one gets

stupid, and fanciful, and anyway, there is a sort of feeling that – that one's being watched. I've had it before, in old houses.'

'Have you really felt it here?' asked Celia, wide-eyed.

'Oh, it's nothing, Celia, but you know how it is when you go to Holyrood, or Hampton Court, or somewhere. There's a sort of atmosphere. I can't explain, but *you* know.'

'Damp?' suggested Peter helpfully.

His sisters looked their scorn. 'No, silly,' said Margaret. 'As though the spirits of all those dead and gone people were looking at one from the walls. That's a bit what I feel here.'

Mrs Bosanquet put down her needlework and said mildly: 'You feel someone in the wall, my dear? I do hope to goodness there isn't a skeleton anywhere. I never could bear the thought of them, for they seem to me most unnatural.'

'Aunt!' shrieked Celia. 'A skeleton in the wall? Don't be so awful! Why should there be?'

'I daresay there's no such thing, my dear, but I always remember reading a most unpleasant story about someone who was walled up in a monastery, or a convent – I forget which, but it was something to do with monks, I know.'

'Oh Aunt Lilian, Aunt Lilian!' groaned Charles. '*Et tu, Brute!*'

'If I thought for one moment,' said Celia emphatically, 'that anyone had been walled up inside this house, I'd walk out here and now.'

'Quite right, my dear,' agreed Mrs Bosanquet. 'One can't be too careful. I always remember how there was an outbreak of the plague when they disturbed the old burial place somewhere in London.'

'On which cheerful thought,' said Charles, as a gong sounded in the hall, 'we go in to dinner. Anyone any appetite?'

In spite of Mrs Bosanquet's gloomy recollections it seemed that no one's appetite had failed. Dinner was served in the

square dining-room at the side of the house, and though the undrawn curtains let in the soft evening light, Celia had placed shaded candles on the table, so that the room had a warm, inviting appearance. By common consent there was no more talk of ghosts or skeletons. They went back to the library after dinner, and while Mrs Bosanquet proceeded to lay out a complicated Patience, the others sat down to the Bridge-table. Even when a scutter somewhere in the wainscoting startled them all it did not need the men's assurances to convince the girls that the place was rat-ridden.

'I know,' said Celia, gathering up her cards. 'Mrs Bowers is going to set a trap.'

'I am not fond of rats,' remarked her aunt. 'Mice I don't mind at all. Poor little things. Ah, if that had been a red queen I might have brought it out. I once stayed in a farmhouse where they used to run about in the lofts over our heads like a pack of terriers.'

Margaret, who was Dummy, got up from the table and wandered over to the window. The moon had risen, and now bathed the whole garden in silver light. She gave an exclamation: 'Oh, look how beautiful! I wish we could see the chapel from here.' She stepped out on to the terrace, and stood leaning her hands on the low parapet. The night was very still and cloudless, and the trees threw shadows like pools of darkness. The shrubbery hid the ruins of the chapel from sight.

'You can see it from your bedroom, I should think,' called Peter. 'Come on in: we're two down, all due to your reckless bidding.'

She came in reluctantly and took her place at the table. 'It seems a pity to be playing bridge on a night like this. Does anyone feel inclined to wander up to the chapel with me?'

'Don't all speak at once,' Charles advised them unnecessarily.

‘Personally,’ said Celia, ‘I’m going to bed after this rubber. We’ll all go some other night.’

Half an hour later only the two men remained downstairs. Charles went over to the windows, and shut and bolted them. ‘Think it’s necessary to make a tour of the back premises?’ he asked, yawning.

‘Lord, no! Bowers’ll have taken precious good care to see that it’s all locked up. I’ll go and put the chain on the front door.’ Peter went out, and Charles bolted the last window, and turned to put out the big oil-lamp that hung on chains from the ceiling. The moonlight shone in at the uncurtained window, and as Charles turned towards the door he heard what sounded like the rustling of a skirt against the wall behind him. He looked quickly over his shoulder. There was no one but himself in the room, but he could have sworn that he heard faint footsteps.

Peter’s voice called from the hall. ‘Coming, Chas?’

‘Just a moment.’ Charles felt in his pocket for matches and presently struck one, and walked forward so that its tiny light showed up the shadowed corner of the room.

Peter appeared in the doorway, candle in hand. ‘What’s up? Lost something?’

The match burned out. ‘No, I thought I heard something – a rat,’ Charles said.

Two

THE VICAR AND his wife came to call at the Priory two days later. Mrs Pennythorne wore pince-nez and white kid gloves, and she told Celia that there was little society in the neighbourhood. There were the Mastermans, at the Manor House, but they never called on anyone, and there was Mr Titmarsh, at Crossways, but he was so very odd in his habits that Mrs Pennythorne could hardly recommend him as an acquaintance. Further questioning elicited the explanation that the oddness of Mr Titmarsh's habits was due to his hobby, which was collecting moths. Mrs Pennythorne said that his manners were sadly brusque, and he wandered about at night, presumably in search of specimens for his collection. Then there was Dr Roote, and his wife, and although Mrs Pennythorne was loth to speak ill of anyone really she ought to warn Celia that it was all too certain that the doctor drank. Finally there was Colonel Ackerley, at the White House, who neither drank nor collected moths, but who was a bachelor, which was a pity. Mrs Pennythorne went on to enumerate the failings of various farmers and villagers, and Charles, who, his wife was wont to say, was never backward in devising methods of escape for himself, suggested to the Vicar that he might like to stroll out to look at the ruins of the chapel.

The Vicar was nothing loth, and ignoring a look of mingled threat and appeal from his wife, Charles led him out.

The Vicar discoursed on Norman and Early English architecture in the chapel, and strove to decipher long obliterated inscriptions upon the few tombs that thrust up

through the grass and weeds that had grown over the floor of the building.

They returned presently to the house to find that another caller had arrived. This was Colonel Ackerley, and he proved to be a more congenial guest than either of the Pennythornes, who soon took their leave.

The Colonel was a man of some forty-five years, or more, with a manner rather typical of the army, but otherwise inoffensive. He shook hands with great heartiness, and said that had he known of the presence of Mrs Pennythorne in the house he should have turned tail and run.

The girls promptly warmed to him. ‘You must stay and have tea with us,’ Celia said. ‘And does the doctor really drink, or is it drugs?’

‘Ah, poor old Roote!’ said the Colonel charitably. ‘Mustn’t be unchristian, I suppose. Leave that to the Vicar’s wife, what?’ His ready laugh broke from him. ‘Still, I must admit poor Roote is rather too fond of the bottle. A good doctor, mind you, and whatever they say I’ll not believe he was ever the worse for wear except in his off-hours. Wife’s a bit of a tartar, I believe.’

‘What about the eccentric Mr Titmarsh?’ inquired Margaret.

‘Not an ounce of harm in him, my dear young lady,’ the Colonel assured her. ‘Queer old bird: not much in my line, I’m afraid. Very clever, and all that sort of thing, so they say. Don’t be surprised if you run up against him in the dark one night. Gave me the shock of my life when I first found him in my garden. Thought he was a burglar.’ He burst out laughing again. ‘Told me he was putting lime on a tree, or some such flum-diddle. He’s a – what d’ye call it? – entomologist.’

Peter handed him his cup and saucer. ‘Well, I’m glad you warned us, Colonel. Otherwise we might have mistaken him for our ghost.’

‘You don’t mean to tell me you believe in that story?’ demanded Colonel Ackerley.

‘Of course we don’t!’ said Celia. ‘But our butler does, and so does the housemaid. Bowers swears he’s heard ghostly hands feeling over his door at night.’

The Colonel set down his cup. ‘Has he, by Gad?’ he said. ‘But you haven’t heard anything yourselves, have you?’

Celia hesitated. It was Margaret who answered. ‘Yes, I think we all have, but we put it down to rats.’

The Colonel looked from one to the other. ‘Footsteps, do you mean?’

‘That and other odd sounds. It’s nothing.’

The Colonel drank the rest of his tea in two gulps. ‘Well, it’s not often one comes across two such sensible ladies,’ he said. ‘I don’t mind admitting to you that if I were in a house and heard what you call odd sounds I don’t believe I could stand it. Bullets I can put up with at a pinch, but I draw the line at spooks. Yes, I draw the line at spooks, and I’m not ashamed to say so.’

‘I quite agree with you,’ Mrs Bosanquet said, bestowing her placid smile upon him. ‘I can’t approve of this modern craze for the supernatural. I once spent a whole hour with a ouija board, and the only thing it wrote was M about a hundred times, and then something that looked like Mother’s Marmalade, which seemed to me absurd.’

‘You ought to try again here, Aunt,’ said Margaret. ‘Then, if there’s anything in it, perhaps our ghost will tell you the story of his life.’

‘Who knows?’ said Peter flippantly, ‘he might even lead you to some hidden treasure.’

Mrs Bosanquet merely shook her head, but the idea seemed to take root in her mind, for when Charles and Peter came back from seeing the Colonel out, she suddenly said: ‘Though mind you, Peter, if there were a ghost here I know just what I should do.’

‘Of course you do, darling,’ said Charles. ‘You’d put your head under the clothes, and say your prayers, same as you did when your flat was burgled.’

Mrs Bosanquet was quite unabashed. ‘I should instantly summon the Vicar to exorcise it,’ she said with dignity.

Charles’ shout of laughter was broken off sharply. A sound, like a groan, muffled as though by stone walls, startled him into silence. ‘Good God, what’s that?’ he rapped out.

Celia had grown suddenly white, and instinctively Margaret drew closer to her brother. The groan had held a note almost like a wail, long-drawn-out and slowly dying.

No one answered Charles for a moment. Only Celia gave a little shiver, and glanced round fearfully. Mrs Bosanquet broke the awed silence. ‘What is what, my dear?’ she asked calmly.

‘Didn’t you hear it?’ Margaret said. ‘As though – as though – someone – gave an awful – groan.’

‘No, my dear, but you know I don’t hear very well. Probably a creaking door.’

Charles recovered himself. ‘Not only probably, but undoubtedly,’ he said. ‘It startled me for the moment. Comes of talking about ghosts. I’m going round with an oil-can.’ He left the room, ignoring an involuntary cry from his wife.

‘Do you really think it was that?’ Margaret said. ‘I’m not being spooky, but – but it seemed to come from underneath somewhere.’

‘Don’t be an ass, Peg,’ her brother advised her. ‘If you ask me it came from outside. I’ll bet it’s the door leading out of the garden-hall. I meant to oil the hinge before, and it’s got worse after the rain we had last night.’

‘If you’re going to look, I’m coming with you,’ Margaret said firmly.

Celia half-rose from her chair, and then sat down again.

‘I shall stay and keep Aunt Lilian company,’ she announced in the voice of a heroine. ‘Whoever heard of a

daylight ghost? We're all getting nervy. I shall bar ghost-talk for the future.'

In the garden-hall, where Celia was in the habit of filling the flower-vases, Peter and Margaret found Charles with Bowers beside him, holding an oil-can in a shaking hand.

'Oh, so you thought it was this door too, did you?' Peter said. 'What's the matter with you, Bowers?'

Bowers cast him a look of reproach. 'We heard it, sir, Mrs Bowers and me. Seemed to come from somewhere quite close. It gave Mrs Bowers such a turn she nearly dropped her frying-pan. "Good gracious alive!" she said. "Who's being murdered?" And she's not one to fancy things, sir, as you well know.' Gloomily he watched Charles open the door into the garden. It squeaked dismally, but the sound was not the groan they had heard before. 'No, sir, it's not that, and nor it's not any other door in the house, though they do squeak, I won't deny. There's something uncanny about this place. I said it as soon as I set eyes on it, and I can tell you, sir, it's taking years off my life, living here.'

'Is there any other door leading out on this side of the house?' Peter said. 'I could swear it came from this direction.'

'There's only the long window in the drawing-room,' said Margaret. She stepped out on to the gravel-path, and looked along the side of the house. 'I can't see any other. I say, it is rather beastly, isn't it? Of course I know things do echo in these places, but . . . Why, who's that?'

Charles came quickly out to her side. 'Where?' he said sharply. 'Hullo, there's a chap walking past the shrubbery!' He started forward, Peter at his heels, and hailed the stranger rather sharply.

A man in fisherman's attire, and carrying a creel and a rod, was walking through the trees beyond the shrubs that ran close up to the wall of the house. He stopped as Charles hailed him, and came to meet him. He was a dark young man of about thirty, with very black brows that grew close

over the bridge of his nose, and a mouth that was rather grim in repose. ‘I beg your pardon,’ he said, ‘I’m afraid I’m trespassing.’ He spoke in a curt way, as though he were either shy or slightly annoyed. ‘I’ve been fishing the Crewel, and a man told me I could get back to the village by a short cut through your grounds. Only I don’t seem able to find it.’

Charles said: ‘There is a right-of-way, but you are some distance from it. In fact, your guide seems to have directed you to the wrong side of the house.’

The stranger reddened. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said stiffly. ‘Could you point out the way to it?’

Margaret who had come up, and had been listening curiously, said suddenly: ‘Why you’re the man who changed the wheel for me yesterday!’

The stranger raised his hat, slightly bowing.

‘Are you staying at the Bell?’ Margaret inquired.

‘Yes. I’ve come down for some trout-fishing,’ he answered.

‘There seems to be some quite good fishing here,’ Peter said, bridging yet another gap in the conversation.

‘Quite good,’ agreed the dark young man. He shifted his rod from one hand to the other. ‘Er – can I reach the right-of-way from here, or must I get back to the road?’

‘Oh no, I’ll show you the way,’ Margaret said, with her friendly smile. ‘It’s only just across the drive.’

‘It’s very good of you, but really you must not trouble . . .’

‘It’s no trouble. And this place is so overgrown with trees and bushes you can easily miss the way. Peter, you’d better go back and tell Celia it’s all right. Come on, Mr – I don’t think I know your name?’

‘Strange,’ said the young man. ‘Michael Strange.’

‘I’m Margaret Fortescue,’ she told him. ‘This is my brother, and this is my brother-in-law, Mr Malcolm.’

Again the young man bowed. ‘Are you staying long in this part of the world?’ asked Charles.

‘Just for a week or two,’ Strange replied. ‘I’m on my holiday.’