

The Green Lady – Fragments from a Longer Tale

One – An Invitation

The journey, which had started so inauspiciously, got a little better as it went on. By the time we passed Berwick in the gathering gloom the carriage had mostly emptied, and an old lady who appeared to be in her eighties sat down across the table from us. She was impeccably dressed in that frozen-in-time, formal 1950s way which many well-to-do elderly people choose, and greeted my seven year old niece, Emily, with a warm and genuine smile and a cheerful hello to us both. She had a noble face, lined with age but still striking; bobbed silvery grey hair and an energetic and spry demeanour. Her smile only faded for a brief moment as she winced with discomfort just after she had taken her seat. The thought crossed my mind that she probably wasn't well, despite appearances. Emily soon buried her nose in her tablet computer – a must for travelling with under-tens these days, although she wanted to show the old lady the game she was playing on it, and handed it to her; it was soon handed back with a polite nod.

Having recovered my composure from the chaotic rush back in Euston, I was happy to chat a little when she made some vague comments about the drizzle outside the window. I told her about the reason for my journey north, and a little of my background, which amounts to spending my academic life buried in books and papers on antiquarian books and on Scotland's old homes and castles - and she, as it turned out, was in fact the owner of just such an old Scottish Baronial pile in Morayshire. It was a family estate which, by the end of the train journey, I (and Emily) had been invited to visit and inspect privately, and, if I liked and could spare some time, help while I was there to make an inventory of the library and family archives. This was all done via an immaculate visiting card offered to me by Mrs Catherine Colquhoun's bejewelled hand, which was translucent with age. I was often to regret this chance encounter in the months which followed, wishing that it had never happened at all, but I suppose curiosity and a lack of anything more pressing made it a certainty at the time that I would visit her sooner rather than later. What I didn't expect was that it would end up frightening me half out of my wits. I am, however, still here to tell you the tale, which I am thankful for.

After decanting Emily at her mother's, with some not-very-warm greetings there, and her mother's refusal to let her come to see Mrs Colquhoun's castle with me, which prompted a tantrum and a slammed door, I arrived in freezing Edinburgh by myself to look up an old friend. On arrival he was finishing some work, so I was invited to make myself comfortable in the warmth of the New Town living room, a real fire burning, and books lining the walls. The light of day was fading outside, the temperature on the street was already well below zero, but the frost glinting in the crescent now looked pretty rather than bitter, on the warm side of a window. Dr. Stephen Rattray, until recently of the University of Edinburgh, appeared in a paint smeared boiler suit from down the ladder leading to his attic space, and offered me a coffee. He had, apparently, been engrossed in sculpture work in his studio. On the

rare occasions I have seen his pieces I have always been impressed, but none of them are ever sold, or shown in public. No-one is ever allowed in the studio either: the pieces are only very rarely given away to friends and family, and I am very pleased to own a little faun in bronze. I'd love to have one of his paintings, but these days he has leaned much more to objects, so the chances are diminishing.

Anyway, we sat down to catch up on a couple of month's news, Stephen running his hand through thinning but still sandy brown hair and smiling as he listened to my chat; a couple of papers accepted for publication, the end of the London stay. In general I tried not to sound too self satisfied about how things were going, with the usual British reserve, but he was pleased to hear of any small victories. Stephen's own private life never yielded any news, as he lives a sheltered, somewhat isolated existence, never marrying, although I did suspect a series of both male and female lovers had passed through his life over the years without ever being introduced, or even mentioned to anyone. At the University, where he avoided teaching in favour of his own obsessive research, writing, painting and sculpting, his reputation as a specialist in Scottish history was excellent and he was generally treated with reverence which I, I am afraid, couldn't help but maintain, even though we now met firmly as friends and no longer as a teacher and pupil.

He is around twice my age, at around seventy, and has (or had) excellent connections, seeming to know an amazing number of people and families despite his own semi-reclusiveness. Perhaps that is why, given the approximation of generations with the lady on the train, that he remembered some of her story straight off when I mentioned her name and the invitation to her home. His patchy recollection was provided: "Ah yes, an unhappy tale, I think – she had two daughters, both of whom died young, one of a rare condition of something or other, the other by suicide, and there was some kind of scandal with the husband – he disappeared, or at any rate, left her all alone in the big old house. She must have been alone there for years and years now. It made the papers when he left because at the time – still in the 60s – that kind of thing was a big story, and I think he was caught up in some shady dealings. Can't remember what, though".

My interest was really in the house and its collection of art and books, but the lady's unhappy family history piqued my curiosity more than a little too. Stephen produced, from the excellent library which filled the walls of two rooms in his flat, some information on the buildings and the estate, facts which were possibly well out of date with regard to the art collection, but again, more than enough to keep me keen on going. When I told him I intended to travel north to visit and perhaps even stay a few days to get a good long look at the house, the art (if any remained) and the family archives, Stephen was quite interested too, and said offhandedly that perhaps he would join me. Fine, I said, I'll let you know when I am going and we can go there together. When I phoned up the following week, though, he was laid low with a cold and decided against a joint expedition. I put the phone down with an odd feeling of regret, as though a chance to draw him out into the world and enjoy his company had been missed.

The journey to the house was uneventful, a drive up through the heart of Scotland on the always constipated, often dangerous A9, in steady drizzle which annoyingly negated the views in Perthshire of autumnally forested hills and valleys. It's not far

north of Scotland's two big cities and the depressing sprawl of industrial parks and high rises around them, but the swathe of country from Stirling north to Aviemore is just wonderfully handsome and for the most part empty (for sad historical reasons, of course, apart from the occasional sturdy old town now and again along the way. The topography changes a lot as you travel through too, from moorland to forest to farmland, to bare, forbidding mountains.

Eventually I found the old stone gatehouse to the estate a few miles from the old Royal Burgh of Forres, and turned off the main road and up a driveway overarched with an avenue of old trees, long grasses at their feet hinting that there was no gardener around here any more. The driveway swung to the left after a couple of hundred yards, and the house then came into view, a large nineteenth century Baronial style house, of three grand storeys, with mock battlements and a couple of turrets (the six-year old castle enthusiast who still lives on somewhere in my mind is always impressed by turrets and battlements, however fake they might be). Most of the bottom half of the building was covered in ivy, and from a distance it looked in reasonable condition. As I parked the car over beside some slightly dilapidated stables past the house, I saw the front door opening in my mirror, and a young woman in an elegant pea-green dress stood in the doorway at the top of the steps.

The housekeeper, Adrienne, was a very pretty blonde in her mid-twenties. She disarmed me with a big smile as she said hello, and as she showed me the ground floor of the house, she sashayed down the hallway and into the library on one side and the drawing room on the other, seemingly completely unselfconscious of her beauty. "Mrs Colquhoun told me you might stay for a few days, Mr James, is that the case?", she enquired in a clipped Edinburgh accent. I said that it was, and wondered if five nights would be convenient. "Oh, yes, that won't be a problem – we have plenty of rooms here, and.... (she added, pausing with a slight uncertainty then resolving to continue).... Mrs Colquhoun doesn't often have company here. I am sure you are more than welcome. I'll show you your room".

The room I had been given was on the top floor of the house, a large bedroom with furnishings which looked for the most part to be around one hundred years old. I was to sleep in a four poster bed for the first time in my (obviously disadvantaged) life, and would be pulling some very heavy dark crimson velvet curtains over the windows which looked like they retained the original panes. The bed was in the right hand near corner as I came in the door, and the rest of the room was surprisingly comfortable given its genuine period features – a large fireplace, sadly bricked up, in the middle of the wall on the left, an old-master style portrait of an enigmatic looking raven-haired young woman painted in oils hanging over it, and on either side of that, an enormously heavy looking oak chest of drawers and dresser respectively. Lastly there was a very ornate gold leaf mirror, rather dusty on the wall, between the bed and the window, which looked slightly out of place, isolated from the rest of the pieces somehow. Looking out of the window, there was a wonderful view of the overgrown grounds with copses of trees and the line of trees marking the driveway, and in the distance hills tumbled and rolled.

Adrienne, smiling, said "The bathroom is across the hall. Do you like the room? Nice view too, from all these top floor ones". Very much so, I confirmed, and she, looking from side to side and with a comic whisper, added "People say the house is

haunted... And this room too. Will you risk it?" Laughing, I said I would try to be brave. She shivered, and walked out, stopping to say "Oh, and Mrs Colquhoun takes tea at eleven in the drawing room downstairs. She said that she would greet you then. Twenty minutes, I think, to make yourself presentable". She looked at me with a little grin, perhaps guessing that I didn't have many options beyond the jeans and jacket I stood in. I did have a pair of proper trousers and some smarter shoes, so they had to suffice as I found my way back along the corridors and down the staircase to see my hostess for tea.

"Max! I'm delighted you found time to come and visit. I wasn't sure you would".
"My pleasure, already glad I did. The house is wonderful!"
"And you haven't even had a proper tour yet, have you? Adrienne probably showed you down here, and wandered off?"
"Yes, that's right".

As this was being said, she had got to her feet from her chair and moved towards me to offer me her hand. She appeared more frail now than when we had met in the train – tired, and despite her smile, perhaps less pleased to have a visitor than I had hoped she would be.

Like, as it turned out, all of the ground floor rooms in Colquhoun Castle, there was a heavy feel to the space, full of dark wood furniture and panelling and various (sadly fading) portraits peering out from their dark gloomy backgrounds. We went for a tour and I must admit I was quite disappointed at the quality and condition of the paintings and the general atmosphere of tiredness. It's often the case in these old houses, but I always hope for something different – some vitality, colour, a magnificent lost Van Dyck or Breughel, that sort of thing. Not to be on this occasion. There were consolations though – the house itself was full of interesting nooks and crannies – there were apparently not one but two secret passages, said Mrs Colquhoun – and I was already looking forward to getting my teeth into the library, its walls completely covered from floor to ceiling in handsomely bound books, among which were bound to be some rare and fascinating ones.

Mrs Colquhoun did brighten up as she showed me the library and the rest of the ground floor rooms, with the inevitable stag's head over the grand fireplace, and a century's worth of family photographs as well as the paintings. "Did you know that there is a small family church in the grounds?" she asked. I had done some brief research before coming out but no, I hadn't realised that. After donning wellies (mine borrowed from an unknown owner, perhaps some long-lost guest who had left them behind years ago – they were covered in dust, I noticed, as I put them on), we walked slowly out of the scullery door, and off into the woods which encroached up to around fifty yards from the house.

We proceeded through the mixed woods at a stately pace, and came to a clearing maybe ten minutes later. There, I was astonished to find what looked like a medieval church with a small walled graveyard adjoining it. I was shown her husband's tombstone (Henry Colquhoun 1899 – 1975) while resisting the temptation to ask any questions since she volunteered no information, and could see another two dozen or more headstones in varying states of illegibility (the church had once catered for a small parish). The whole place had a wonderful atmosphere, though – overgrown but

noble, and absolutely quiet apart from occasional birdsong; somehow a contented place. At her request, I left her on a bench by the church wall, and walked back to the house myself.

When I reached the gardens again, a man who I assumed to be either the village idiot or the gardener was at work in some shrubs. He had a sort of scarecrow chic about him, right down to the piece of grass which he chewed and which protruded from the corner of his mouth like a medieval cigarette. He wore filthy dungarees and a battered hat. Seeing me, he came over and offered me a very dirty hand and a broad smile from a friendly, if weather-beaten, face. Expecting some sort of Doric peasant chat, I was put in my place when he spoke up quite normally and, I suppose, sanely.

“You must be our visitor, Max? I’m Charlie – been here forty two years. Had a look around yet?” He coughed intermittently, and it didn’t sound good. I had looked around, yes, and added some insincere compliments on the grounds. “Oh, I can’t keep up, I am sure you can see that, Max. But I do my best. (More coughs). Have you been down to the church?” When I said I was just back from it having left the lady of the house there, he put his hand on my shoulder, and in a lowered voice, added “If you go back, take a closer look around. You might find a few surprises”. He winked – for a moment I thought I had added this detail in to what I was seeing, but I am sure it happened – then went back to his work.

With that he was gone, and I shook my head and went back indoors. Charlie was certainly a colourful character; the ground were obviously way too much for him by himself, but maybe I would have a little look around down at the church in the next few days. I wanted to get some shelf browsing underway in the house as soon as possible though, and I soon forgot all about what he had to say – which, in any case, sounded more like a treasure hunt or a practical joke than any kind of real warning.

I started, in the library, to inspect the lines and lines of volumes, which covered several hundred years and included, as I had hoped, some good, unusual, rare antiquarian Scottish works published in Edinburgh in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and rarely seen these days either in libraries or at auction. My attention was diverted by some large old albums full of photographs and press clippings. Henry Colquhoun and his father, Charles, both featured in various social pages and reports of good days’ hunting, that kind of thing. There was also an excellent article from the local press about improvements to the house (or ‘castle’, as they referred to it) with the addition of a wing. Perhaps most intriguingly, I found a report of Henry’s funeral and an obituary, which made interesting reading – if only because it shed no light whatsoever on Stephen’s recollections of a family scandal, when I had told him I was coming here. I supposed that that kind of thing didn’t get mentioned in broadsheet obituaries.

That evening Mrs Colquhoun was indisposed, and Adrienne was nowhere to be seen after bringing me some dinner on a tray, an action performed so efficiently and quickly that before I could strike up much of a conversation, she vanished in a flurry of activity. I had noticed that my phone had no signal, and found that strangely calming. I spent the evening reading and was soon overcome with tiredness, the sort

of weariness which is sometimes felt after a period of not doing much at all. My bedroom was lit by various small side lights, electric mock ups of old fashioned gas lanterns, and these indeed produced the same dim light you would have expected from the originals. I switched the four of them on, and undressed, readying for bed. In my boxer shorts and a t-shirt I walked over to the windows, from which were visible only the faintest outlines in the night of the trees in darkness moving in the wind, and pulled the heavy curtains closed, with a series of sneezes punctuating the silence in my room, as they were very dusty.

I went around the room once more to switch off each lamp and then climbed into bed, fell asleep almost immediately, and woke at around 2am when I thought I had heard a man shouting – either from somewhere nearby on my floor of the house, or (almost certainly) in an unremembered dream. The voice was male and hoarse and sounded like he was booming out indistinct orders to someone, before suddenly stopping as I woke. Of course, on waking up and as I lay awake in my unfamiliar room, all was silence. I couldn't get back to sleep and tossed and turned for maybe an hour, and just as I was drifting off again at 3am I became aware of a scratching sound from the far corner of the room. Mice? No, this noise was louder and somehow bigger than that. Wide awake again, I got up in the darkness and cautiously walked across to switch on the lamp. The scratching got louder, and louder, and then stopped when I was just about to reach the switch; when the room was filled with light, there was of course nothing to be seen. I left the light on, and scampered back to bed, sleeping fitfully until the morning.

I was given a big surprise when I sat down to breakfast and Emily appeared at the dining room door with a young woman ushering her in. I had thought that Adrienne was Mrs Colquhoun's only help, but Emily confused me further from the off;

“Hi, Uncle Max – here I am again!”

My niece grinned, obviously pleased to be on an adventure with me again so soon, and away from the atmosphere at home. The lady who had brought her in, a brunette with short, bobbed hair, high curved cheekbones and a serious demeanour, quickly added:

“Your sister-in-law just dropped this young lady here with her apologies and drove off – she gave me this note for you”.

I thanked her, and asked her name, to which she immediately looked puzzled and tilted her head.

“Adrienne, of course, you met me yesterday! Did I make no impression on you at all? How depressing!”

I stammered a little that I liked her hair today, having realised that the dark bob had completely transformed the green eyed, long blonde haired beauty of yesterday. She also had less, if any, make up on today. And, I was still half asleep.

“Thank you – you're in a charming mood this morning, Mr. James”.

“Adrienne's going to show me my room”, said Emily, and the two of them walked briskly out of the breakfast room. I was onto my second round of toast and marmalade when they came back and joined me at the breakfast table.

“Mrs Colquhoun always breakfasts at 7am”, said Adrienne. “She doesn’t sleep well. She’s off for her morning walk round the grounds now, so we might see her quite soon. You two know each other already, don’t you, Emily?”

“Yes”, said my niece, “We were on the train together. I showed her how to work my tablet, and she told me some stories about the places we were travelling through on the train”.

It was true that the two of them had hit it off, and so unusually for Emily, she had warmed to a new person quickly, and a very ancient lady at that.

“Well, and what would you like to do today?” Adrienne asked me.

“I was hoping I might look through some of the family archives Mrs Colquhoun has in the library, and take a closer look at the portraits and the house, if that is okay?”

“I am sure that’ll be fine. If I’m not mistaken she showed you where the archives were last night and told me to tell you to go right ahead after breakfast”.

I said that was thoughtful, and was thinking of a way to ask Adrienne more about herself, as so far she’d been elusive round the house, when Emily, after downing the last of a large glass of orange juice, said:

“Can we go for a walk this morning, Adrienne?”

With that, plans were made and I decided to try to get talking to Adrienne – this new bobbed brunette version - later on. She sounded agreeable to keeping Emily occupied while I nosed around the house in a semi-academic manner, which I considered was good for all concerned. The note which had accompanied Emily’s arrival didn’t tell me much – plans changed, here she is, hope you don’t mind, but the school holidays are tricky, that kind of thing – so I let that one go too. The girls went out the back door towards the woods half an hour later, and I renewed my wanderings inside the house.

I passed through the drawing room en route to the library and noticed that the fireplace’s mantelpiece had some grand looking framed photographs on it, with a couple more on a small side table beside the sitting chair which was pulled near the fire. Probably Mrs Colquhoun’s favourite spot, it was where she’d been when I first arrived at the house. The sun lit up the room and in the strong morning rays of light I could see the dust swirl in the air. I picked up the picture in the centre of the display and saw a family portrait of four well-dressed people taken on the front steps of the house, in winter clothes. It was in faded 1950s colour, and on the left side, I thought that I just about recognised a young Mrs Colquhoun and husband. The other couple struck me with more of a jolt though – because as my eyes scanned to the right, the blonde woman at the end of the four, arm in arm with an unknown gentleman, looked very much like Adrienne – or, at any rate, the Adrienne who had met me when I arrived, not the brunette Adrienne at breakfast today. It couldn’t possibly be her, of course – the picture must have been almost sixty years old, with the now-aged Mrs Colquhoun in her early twenties – but perhaps her grandmother or a great aunt? I resolved to ask about the photo later on, and put it back in its place at the centre of the display, before wandering through to the library.

I think what happened in the library was when I first realised something was amiss in the house and that I was being pursued in some way, or at any rate that I was picking up on something very strange in the air. I had found the photo a little unsettling, and found I couldn’t really concentrate on the papers I had spread out in front of me. I sat at a large oak desk looking out of the windows at the end of the room, and had started

to list what I thought were the best volumes I had come across, with some of them piled up around me, when I shivered and felt the hairs on the back of my neck standing up... someone was watching me from the doorway. I turned around and saw the shadow of someone abruptly pulling away and then heard footsteps. Light, female footsteps with clicking heels which were sharp on the wooden floors then muffled in a few seconds as they reached a carpet. I walked over to look and there was no sign of anyone there.

Perhaps an hour later, when I'd made a few pages of handwritten notes, I looked out of the window at the forest, parked at the garden's edge as though it was ready to advance, and in the glass of the window, against the darkness of the trees, I could see my own reflection. Behind me, my heart leapt as I also saw the dim outline of a woman standing a few paces behind me in the middle of the room, her figure and features unclear in reflection against the leafy view. I couldn't quite make her out and again, turned around, sharply this time. Of course, no one was there.

Two – A Visit

Adrienne was a little more talkative over dinner. She, Emily and I sat in the dining room by ourselves, Mrs Colquhoun's apologies having been sent downstairs again as she was still unwell. I asked whether I should look in on her, but Adrienne declined the idea, saying that Mrs Colquhoun was a stickler for appearances and didn't like to be disturbed when she wasn't dressed for visitors. That was okay with me, given that I hardly knew the woman, and on wondering aloud whether I should cut short my stay and perhaps return another time, Adrienne, with Emily's enthusiastic support, insisted that I remained in the house.

"Mrs Colquhoun said that she hoped to see you tomorrow, and failing that, she would send a message about some specific work you might be leaned upon to do in the library for her".

"Fine", I replied, feeling in no hurry and beginning to acclimatise to the slow pace of life here. We continued to eat a fine roast beef dinner.

"Adrienne and I are going riding tomorrow!" piped up Emily.

"Oh? I didn't realise there were horses in the stables here?"

"There aren't", said Adrienne, "but I ride nearby at a farm, we know the owners well, and Emily will be welcome. I was going to ask you first, of course".

"Well, I...".

"Uncle Max – pleeeeeease!"

"Yes, yes, okay – I suppose your mother wouldn't mind. Make sure she comes back in one piece, Adrienne".

"Of course! She can have a small pony if she hasn't done much riding. I'll look after her – you can count on it".

Emily beamed at Adrienne and Adrienne smiled back. Maybe it was the smile which jogged my memory, and I suddenly remembered the photograph I had picked up on the mantelpiece.

"Oh, Adrienne – to change the subject... do you mind if I ask, is a relative of yours – your grandmother, maybe – in some of the old photos Mrs Colquhoun has?"

Adrienne's smile faded quickly.

"Um... No, I don't think so – we don't have family connections – I've only worked here for her for a year or so".

I couldn't help but raise my eyebrows in surprise. She immediately changed the subject, and I decided that I would take another look after dinner, in case I had imagined the whole thing, or exaggerated the likeness in my mind.

"So, you're an academic, Max?"

“Yes, I’m lecturing and doing some research down south just now, but I’m hoping to come back to Scotland to stay soon. How about you – do you plan to stay here at the house a while?”

“Oh, I think so – it’s lovely here. I’d always been in cities before – and Mrs Colquhoun isn’t very demanding. She’s a great... boss”.

“Do you get to ride horses a lot?” interjected Emily.

“Yes, actually I do – most days. Another good reason to be here”.

She smiled and looked thoughtful for a moment, her dark bobbed hair shining with health in the dim lighting of the room. I noticed that Emily was looking at her in not a little awe. They talked about horses for a while, and eventually Adrienne took Emily upstairs to her room at around nine. Unlike at home, I imagined, there was no protesting – she was happy to do whatever Adrienne said.

I nursed a glass of Benromach, a local Speyside malt unusual for its smokiness, at the table until Adrienne came back down but when she did so, it was obvious that her mood had changed, and rather than the late night chat by the fire I was hoping for, she set to clearing the table and was polite but cold in her replies when I made any conversation. I made for bed, but went to the drawing room to look again at the photograph. I picked it up and as my eyes scanned it, I found I had to refocus them. The picture was as I remembered it except that in the place where I remembered the Adrienne lookalike to be, now stood an elderly lady, accompanied by an equally elderly man.

I had nightmares that night, most unusually for me. Strange shadowy figures lurched towards me in the library downstairs as I sat working and although I knew within the dream that it was a dream, I was nevertheless scared. I woke up with my heart pounding, and lay awake, agitated and unused to facing demons in the dead of night. It was then, after I had lain awake for a short time, that I heard the scratching again, the same sound from the previous night, somewhere in the pitch darkness of the room. I didn’t move straight away this time; I felt somehow lethargic and tense at the same time. Then, all fell silent. I had kept my eyes open, sleep now having left me altogether, so that I could now see the faint outlines of the furniture in the room, and the big curtains were a black mass directly ahead of me past the posts of my bed.

Then, in the crystal stillness which had fallen, I heard a tapping noise from behind the curtains. It sounded like something metal on the old glass of the windows. I tried not to dwell on the fact that it also sounded like fingernails. Rat-a-tat, in little groups of three, perhaps half a dozen times, but with a patient gap in the middle.

I felt a wave of fright flood over me as I lay in the dark listening, and reluctantly resolved to get out of bed and approach those heavy, dusty, dark curtains. As soon as my feet hit the floor, the tapping stopped, and I padded carefully in the darkness over to the window, feeling very much alert and on edge. Just as I lay my hand on the heavy curtains, there was a RAT-A-TAT twice as loud on the panes behind it. I jumped, and again my heart fluttered for a moment as a cold chill went down my back. I pulled the curtains open. Right there in front of me in the dimness of the room, on the other side of the glass, was Adrienne, with her long blonde hair and face so close that they were almost pressed to the glass, and hands both now tapping, very loudly. Her eyes peered directly into mine, but at the same time were completely

blank. Was I still asleep? I felt dizzy and couldn't take in what I was seeing; the darkness of the room and the night outside somehow amplified the pale tones of her skin and hair, and it was definitely her. She mouthed something which I couldn't make out, and then, as I took a step back and reached to switch on a lamp to my left, looking briefly away as I did so to find it, she had vanished with the flood of electric light when I looked back and saw my own reflection instead. My room was of course three stories up – there was no way she could have been standing on the outside of my window! And yet – I was awake, I was now sure of that - and I *had* seen her.

Nothing more happened that night, but I probably only got another hour or so of dozing as dawn was breaking. I am a rational person and don't believe in supernatural things – but my own eyes had seen a woman outside my window, where she had no physical right to be, so far off the ground - and I had heard plenty of strange noises in this room. I resolved to have a proper conversation with the 'real' Adrienne in the morning as soon as possible – provided I could get Emily out of the way for long enough to do so, as I already felt pretty foolish about being so spooked. It would be best to keep any questions about visitations and spooky noises away from her young ears.

By half past seven I was washed, dressed and downstairs for an early breakfast, as I knew the girls were going for their horse ride early. Sure enough, they were already at the breakfast table, and Emily was piling dollops of marmalade onto her buttered toast while telling Adrienne (who sat in her riding gear, with her hair in its black bob, of course) about the horse she had learned to ride on down in Glasgow, a chestnut called Rufus. Both looked up when I came in and greeted me with relaxed smiles (well, Emily's was perhaps more manic than relaxed, due to the imminent riding). I had my tea and toast and some fruit, and waited for Emily to go back upstairs to get ready, which she eventually did.

“Adrienne – can I tell you about something strange which happened last night?”

“Sure”, she replied, maintaining eye contact and looking healthy, non-ghoulish and incapable of levitating.

“Well, it's my room. I've been woken up the last two nights by strange noises, and last night...”

“Really? Wow – well, I did warn you it's said to be haunted”, she said with a little laugh and an incredulous look.

“Did you see anything or just hear stuff?”

“The first night I just heard scratching noises – but last night, someone or something sounded like it was tapping on the window”.

Adrienne's eyes widened. “Goodness! That would have freaked me out. I wasn't joking when I mentioned haunting - I really have heard one or two stories from Mrs Colquhoun, you know – about the house”

“Oh – I would love to hear them – having tapped into the spookiness myself”, I said, forcing a smile and a laugh of my own, to show that it was all a bit of fun and that I wasn't in the least worried.

“I'd need to ask her again for the details, but there was a story about a young lady who walks the corridors at night, and something else about shadows. I didn't think she was serious though. If I had, I would be scared working here”

“Well, I was a little shaken myself. I... to be honest Adrienne, I thought I saw *you*”, I blurted out, not having intended to.

Adrienne smiled and blushed a little. She looked straight at me – almost straight through me, in fact, and went quiet for a few moments.

“Was it a dream or a nightmare?”

I was held by her gaze, and with a little relish, slowly replied:

“Nightmare, I’m afraid. This time, anyway...”.

We both laughed, but then Emily came back downstairs more quickly than we were expecting, eager to go, and the girls went out for their ride.

I found a note about work from Mrs Colquhoun waiting for me at the desk I had been working at, and been surprised at, in the library the day before. It didn’t say much, In fact, in block capitals, which looked like they had taken some effort to form, it simply read: PLEASE CONTINUE YOUR WORK AS YOU SEE FIT. I LOOK FORWARD TO AN UPDATE WHEN I RECOVER. SORRY I HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO JOIN YOU. CC.

I worked all day that day, with a brief and welcome interruption from Emily and Adrienne in the early afternoon; I declined to join them for lunch, as I found I had no appetite at all, and decided to hear about their day at dinner. Nothing of note occurred and frankly nothing of huge interest was turned up in my inspection of the library, although as before, I found some nice pieces. At about 4pm, I had had enough and decided to go for a walk.

I went down to the graveyard again, in light drizzle. The air was wonderfully cool and clean after a dusty day indoors with the leather bound volumes, and I inhaled deeply of the trees around me as I tramped along the muddy path. There were a couple of sets of footprints, I noticed. I supposed that the gardener and/or Adrienne and Emily had already been down this way today, although I had no idea what other walking options there were in the area. The house had kept me interested since I had arrived and other than to excuse myself because of Mrs Colquhoun’s illness, I hadn’t felt the urge to go wandering locally.

I took one wrong turn where the path forked but the damp foliage wasn’t thick enough to get me lost and I soon realised I need to head more to my right. I found the right path again and was at the old church quickly. When I stopped at the gate to the overgrown churchyard with its low stone walls, little grey stone church and the bench we had sat on before, I paused, and in the silence could hear my own slightly heavy breathing after the walk, and also, faintly, the sound of my own heartbeat pulsing in my ears. The wood was absolutely silent, no birds sang, and the rain had either stopped or wasn’t getting through the green canopy above me.

Last time, in Mrs Colquhoun’s calm company, I had felt good here – the place was a happy one, or at least not ‘wrong’. This time though, the moment I touched the gate to go through, I had a feeling of dread and felt that someone was watching me. The silence and the fact that these thoughts had emerged in my mind from nowhere were more than enough to unsettle me. I almost went straight back to the house, but

instead, kept walking towards the church (which was a shell without a roof) and, at the far side, to its little graveyard.

I saw Henry's headstone and started to try to read a few others. There was one from the 1700s which looked like someone named Cameron, but it was badly faded by time and the elements. At the corner against the church wall, with grasses almost as high as the stones, were a couple of newer looking stones which I hadn't noted last time at all. I knelt down and brushed the grass away from the one on the left (they looked like two twin stones). I got a jolt when I looked and saw a plain marble stone, with no markings on it at all; it was entirely blank. I shifted towards the other stone, and when I parted the rough grasses around it, I read:

Here Lies
Mabel Henrietta Colquhoun
1950 - 1964
Beloved Daughter
Rest in Peace

And

Her Sister
Adrienne Mary Colquhoun
1948 - 1974
Forever in our Hearts
Rest in Peace

I felt a jolt when I read the second stone, and a little dazed. Not thinking about what I was doing, I hurried back to the house and by the time I had got there, I had developed a blinding headache. Perhaps it was a delayed reaction from the day indoors – although I vaguely thought to myself that it was odd that it had come on outside. I went straight to my room and must have fallen asleep after taking some paracetamol. The next thing I knew, I was being woken up by Emily, who was shaking my arm and telling me it was time for dinner. Groggily, I said I wasn't feeling well and would stay in bed. She shrugged, and left the room. As I came to, I heard her go downstairs. I groggily decided that she'd be alright without me.

Just then, I remembered the gravestone and sat up. It was a strange coincidence, that was for sure, as it's an unusual name, but nothing more. I got up, undressed properly, and went back to bed. This time I slept through until morning, with no night terrors, real or imagined, of any kind. I woke up late the next morning, and while brushing my teeth, I laughed to myself about how out of sorts I had been the day before. I was certainly letting this gloomy old house get to me.

Three – A Departure

Feeling that I had a responsibility to entertain my niece, Emily and I drove the few miles to Forres that day, climbed up Nelson's Tower for a good view of the town, while she raved about her riding lesson and dinner with Adrienne the previous day, and then rounded the trip off with a coffee and sandwich in a café on the main street. As I watched her across the table with her tablet, rarely looking up from it even to take a bite to eat, I realised I should have tried to persuade her to leave it at the house, if only to preserve her young mind from it for a short while. Never mind. That made it all the more surprising that without any lead-up, she put it down, looked me in the eye in a curious way, and said:

“Mummy will be back to collect me at teatime. She phoned last night”.

“How did she do that? There's no mobile signal”.

“She phoned the house phone. You were asleep, uncle Max”.

I started to wonder how she had managed to find the number but quickly realised it was probably in the book. Fair enough; at least I would see her later and have the chance to gently berate her for landing me with Emily again without asking me first. As it turned out, I didn't even get that opportunity, as when we got back to the house and Emily went to her room to pack her little suitcase, I went to mine for a nap. When I woke up, discombobulated at about half past five, I changed my crumpled shirt and trousers and ventured downstairs, to be told by Adrienne that Emily had left and that they had thought it better not to disturb me! I was annoyed – yet again – with her mother, who had left a handwritten note of thanks.

That night was one of the most memorable, and terrible, of my life. Adrienne suggested that we dine together and that she would check, once again, on Mrs Colquhoun, to see whether she felt fit to join us. While I was keen to see and speak to my host again, I also found myself secretly wishing that she would still be indisposed, and so it proved. Adrienne and I therefore sat and dined opposite one another in the lovely panelled dining room, softly lit by dim sight lights which made the old family portraits look as though they floated in the murk. A few candles on the table also had the effect of making Adrienne even more attractive than usual, especially after I had enjoyed my third glass of Bordeaux. As I caught her eye, I wondered if the wine had the same effect on her, looking at me.

“Thanks for spending time with Emily while she was here”, I said, just to break the silence.

“Oh, it was my pleasure. You know how quiet the castle is most of the time. I usually only have Mrs Colquhoun for company – when you're not here, I mean; you've met Charlie and he's not exactly friendly, when he can be found, that is”.

“He seemed alright; a bit eccentric, though?”

“You could say that”, she smiled. “Anyway, if I am honest, I have never minded being by myself”.

“That’s fortunate, given your job... What do you plan to do in the future?”

“Oh, I really don’t know. I have a degree in fashion, actually. But I hate cities, and crowds. I’m more than happy here for the moment”. She paused, and our eyes met again, and locked. “Actually, I feel like I have been here a long while, and that I might stay a long while too. You know, that sense that you belong somewhere, even though you’re not sure why?”

“I’ve never really felt that myself. But yes, people often say that”.

We fell silent and finished our meal. Before I knew it, we’d done the washing up together, and were nestled on a sofa in the next room, which was similarly dimly – or even, romantically – lit. Adrienne had put some classical music on the stereo, and I realised with pleasure that the gaps in our conversation weren’t awkward. More wine was consumed, and by the time the music stopped, to reveal just the faint ticking of two clocks, one in this room and one nearby, it was nearing midnight. Adrienne had kicked off her shoes and was sitting facing me, her stockinged feet drawn under her on the sofa. When she moved to get up and change the music, having had more wine, she fell back to the sofa, laughing. I got up, uncertain on my own feet, and held out my hand to help her up. I remember that it was ice-cold. Poor circulation, I thought at the time, but also that it must have been really poor, as the room was very cosy.

I must admit that I only have a vague sense of what happened after that, but I do recall, or at least I *think*, that we kissed. I have some sort of memory of her cold lips. It must sound strange to be uncertain about that, but I can’t be sure whether it happened in real life or in a dream. In fact, I can’t be sure about anything after doing the washing up, the night Emily had been picked up. The reason for my recollection disintegrating at this point is mainly that nothing much makes sense from that point onwards. I don’t remember going upstairs to bed, but I think I was woken up at one or two o’clock by the same tapping noise I had heard at my window before. I felt wide-awake right away, but as soon as I swung my feet out of bed, I heard Adrienne’s voice whispering my name outside the door, and the tapping stopped abruptly at the same moment. I fumbled for my dressing gown and made my way to the door. When I opened it, I looked round and saw her in a white nightdress moving quickly away, but the strange thing was, she headed straight for Mrs Colquhoun’s room and disappeared into it, even though I didn’t see her open or close the door (which was closed when I followed). No-one answered when I knocked, softly, for fear of waking my aged host up. The even stranger thing is that she didn’t appear to be walking when she travelled up the corridor. You will laugh at me for saying this, but I could swear that she glided, without touching the floor.

I regret to say that the ending to this story doesn’t explain any of what I describe above. All I know is that, after a sleepless night from that point onwards, I searched the house, and could not find either Mrs Colquhoun or Adrienne. I never saw either of them again.

My friend Dr. Rattray listened to this tale when I called on him having driven back down the road, and although I asked him what he thought, made very little comment except that he thought I needed a rest. When I visited my brother and sister-in-law, Emily asked about my trip. She had been with them the whole time and had never

been to the castle. I hadn't thought to pick up the notes which I thought had been written to me, and which I had held in my hand and read. A few weeks later, I got an email from my brother with two attachments, photos he had found on Emily's tablet. One was a view of the castle from the driveway, with Mrs Colquhoun standing on the steps in the green dress I had seen Adrienne wear, and the other was of the room she had – I thought – been staying in. None of us could explain them.