

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?



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Can You Believe It?
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“I do believe the time calculator is functioning correctly again,” said Dr. Who, glancing up from the control panel of his marvelous time and space craft, TARDIS.

“That’s really good,” enthused his handsome young travelling companion, Edmund Leigh. “Are you able to say right away what year we’re going to arrive in, or do we have to land first and then have a look at the indicator?”

For a Victorian, Edmund was learning to ask some very pertinent technological questions, thought the Doctor, not necessarily with wholehearted approval.

“Well, young man, since a little test is undoubtedly called for, we shall attempt to elicit a prediction from the device, shall we, h’mm?”

“Yes,” Edmund concurred, without a trace of suspicion that the old man was anything other than delighted by the prospect.

With an air of supreme confidence, Dr. Who began to adjust the controls.

Edmund had decided that, for the time being at least, he was content to traverse what the Doctor sometimes referred to as the byways of infinity, delaying a return to his native Liverpool. Since his rescue from Bone Island, where the sea had deposited him after the shipwreck, and a hair-raising struggle against emotionless metal giants on board an isolated space station, he had been left with an unaccountable yearning for more exploration and adventure, despite being aware of the associated dangers. Whatever happened to him next would be the outcome of his own choice and he was determined to accept it with equanimity.

He thought of his domineering Aunt Caroline, the pinchpenny owner of the Grenville Shipping Line. She would presume, naturally, that he lay at the bottom of the sea. His death would not, however, be her main concern. He imagined her, seated at the big desk in her private office, harassing Dunster, her much put-upon chief clerk, for an accounting, right down to the last farthing, of how much she was out of pocket.

Dr. Who straightened up from his perusal of the control panel and tugged at the lapels of his black coat.

“The TARDIS will materialise during the 1930’s,” he stated in a firm voice, daringly burning his boats but niftily allowing himself a decade’s worth of leeway.

Edmund was about to raise a further query, then changed his mind. He had become aware that the old fellow could become tetchy if repeatedly questioned.

On this occasion, however, the Doctor seemed to have perceived both the abandoned enquiry and the subject of it.

“The ship is, I believe, returning us to Earth,” he offered, mildly enough.

Edmund smiled. “I’ll be very interested to see somewhere in the world seventy years after my own time,” he responded.

Dr. Who looked gratified. If there was anything he really appreciated, it was a healthy curiosity.

Shortly afterwards the high-pitched grinding sound of the craft’s engines filled the gleaming room as the TARDIS came to rest.

“It’s rather chilly outside, but the air is normal for Earth,” the old Doctor interpreted from a semi-circular dial.

Edmund was pleased. “We can leave the ship then.”

Dr. Who switched on the scanner-screen and stared at a curtain of damp autumn foliage. A patch of red brickwork could be glimpsed through it.

“Let’s find you something suitable to wear,” he proposed, turning towards the big, carved Elizabethan chest that stood against one of the pale green walls.

Edmund was soon looking as smart as paint in a grey pinstripe suit, knitted waistcoat and white shirt. A chocolate-coloured tie complemented the silk-banded trilby. He adjusted his dark socks, put on a pair of polished brown shoes and tied the laces.

The Doctor enveloped most of his usual eccentric costume in a long cloak. Only the lower part of his black and white check trousers, plus his elastic-sided boots, were visible. He took his astrakhan hat from its peg and put it on.

“Open the doors, will you, my boy?”

Edmund looked for a little black switch on the control panel and turned it. He watched with quiet satisfaction as the great doors opened. It was childish of him, he knew, but he felt terribly proud to have performed this simple procedure.

Dr. Who was experiencing a surge of contentment himself. Sometimes, of late, he had wondered if age was catching up with him. Now he dismissed the notion as nonsense. There was so much more to see, he reminded himself, and it simply wouldn’t do to miss it.

Moments later they were both standing outside the dark blue police telephone box that was the exterior form of TARDIS. As Dr. Who locked up the ship with his brass key, Edmund pushed his way through wet branches that retained a modest covering of dying leaves in shades of brown and orange.

“We’re behind a building, Doctor,” he called back.

“Confound these wretched branches!” was the old man’s response.

Edmund hastened to hold them out of his way.

The building turned out to be a timeworn edifice called The Matching Inn. It somehow conveyed the impression that nobody ever went in, came out or stayed there. At right angles to it was a block of stables.

“I believe there’s a small town called Matching in Yorkshire,” said Dr. Who.

“It does feel like England here,” Edmund remarked.

On the opposite side of the street was a somewhat ramshackle premises. In the grubby window a large notice - in English - advertised shoe repairs.

The Doctor and Edmund exchanged a significant glance.

A few yards from the cobbler's stood a baker's, its signboard bearing the name G.B. Congleton. The enticing window display made Edmund realise how hungry he was.

The Doctor put on his spectacles and peered further along the largely deserted thoroughfare.

"I do believe I can see a newsagent's," he declared, rubbing his hands together. "Come along, young man."

Edmund was quick on the uptake. "A newspaper will give us the exact date," he realised.

The Doctor beamed approvingly, like a schoolmaster at a favourite pupil, and walked off. Edmund hastened to catch up with him.

In the poky little shop the Doctor picked up a newspaper at random from the selection on the dusty counter. With a glance at the front page of the Daily Mirror, he quickly established the date. The sharp-featured old newsagent watched suspiciously as he took a small collection of coins from his pocket and began to pick out a number of English pennies bearing suitable dates. He chose a bar of Cadbury's milk chocolate, having noticed Edmund's longing look at the baker's tantalising wares. When he handed over the exact money required, he received a curt nod from the surly fellow behind the counter, which he returned in kind before shepherding Edmund from the musty-smelling place.

"Service with a scowl," observed Edmund, as he unwrapped the chocolate and handed a few squares to the Doctor.

Dr. Who dismissed the aged vendor with a wave of his Daily Mirror.

"Today is Monday, the twenty-first of November 1938," he announced proudly. "My 'yearometer' forecast correctly, did it not, h'mm?"

"It was astoundingly accurate," Edmund replied, for he had learned that a measure of praise now and then kept the Doctor reasonably affable.

"I think we're about to have some company," said Dr. Who. "Congenial this time, I think."

A rather dodderly old man, snowy-haired and rheumy-eyed, with pink cheeks and an agreeable expression, was approaching them. A clerical collar left his vocation in no doubt.

"Good afternoon. My name is Guy Ridley," he articulated, in a welcoming tone.

"You're the rector here, I presume?" the Doctor returned, with equal affability.

"I have been for nearly forty years. I came to Matching in the spring of 1899."

"A most commendable length of service."

"Have you just arrived; may I ask?"

"Yes, indeed."

"I'm afraid Matching Road Station is all of eight miles from here," revealed the ancient clergyman. "I hope you didn't find the journey too tiring. I suppose you came with Samuel Tockwick in his dog cart?"

"The journey was quite tolerable, thank you," evaded Dr. Who. "May I introduce my young friend, Mr. Edmund Leigh?"

Edmund shook hands with their new acquaintance. The Doctor, he reflected, had so far managed to avoid introducing himself.

"Would you care to see the church?" asked the Reverend Ridley, looking from Edmund to the Doctor. "It has some interesting features. I'm going in that direction."

Edmund hesitated, but Dr. Who was all eagerness.

"That would be delightful," he answered.

The three set off together.

"Is the vicarage close to the church?" Edmund asked, conversationally.

Ridley sighed. "Alas, no. I've walked from there. It never used to seem far from one to the other, but with my old legs..." His voice trailed off as he briefly recalled the days of yore, when his back had been straight and his thick hair chestnut-coloured.

"Do you live by yourself?" pursued Edmund.

"Except for the housekeeper. I lost my dear wife, Elsie, to pneumonia, eight years ago."

Edmund was embarrassed. "I'm so sorry."

"One gets used to it," observed the Reverend, philosophically.

The Doctor changed the subject. "Are you on your way to conduct a service, h'mm?"

"No, no. I have tea with Miss Sim on Monday afternoons. She runs an academy for young ladies. I do religious education there on Tuesdays and Fridays."

"I suppose, given your position, you have a full calendar that keeps you very busy," the Doctor commented.

"It varies, really," old Ridley answered, then brightened as he recalled something. "Do you know, the girls in one of my classes seemed exceedingly interested last week when I touched upon a fascinating question," he confided.

"What was that, my friend?"

"Whether or not it is permissible to use the word 'crikey'," said the Reverend, very solemnly.

Edmund struggled to prevent himself from giving way to a snigger. The Doctor gave him a sharp look, which helped.

"Some years ago I was fortunate enough to attend an ecclesiastical conference in Lucerne, where more than a hundred and fifty of us debated that issue. The discussion became very animated indeed."

"Really?" contributed Dr. Who.

"Is that the church spire I can see?" Edmund interposed, desperately.

"Oh, yes," confirmed Ridley. "The church stands in Matching Park, the entrance to which is around the next bend."

A smartly dressed woman was walking in the other direction and the three men removed their hats courteously. She greeted the rector by name as she passed them.

"The ladies of the town are very sociable, generally speaking," the Reverend said with a smile.

"What about the men?" Edmund queried.

"Ah, well, they do tend, I find, to be rather taciturn," Ridley admitted.

"Yorkshiremen often are, I find," the Doctor put in.

The wide park gate was of wrought iron. Edmund opened it and soon they were traversing the road beyond. The church could be seen to their right.

"The parish burying-ground is amidst the ruins of the old priory," explained the Reverend, indicating an area a short way ahead of them. The road bisected the ruins and continued through an archway. On the other side of this, Ridley went on, was the nineteenth century house that bore the name Matching Priory.

They crossed an expanse of grass to reach the church. Built around 1470, it had been restored in the early 1840's by George Plantagenet Palliser, the tenth Duke of Omnium, often referred to as the 'Great Duke'. The Doctor much admired the three-light Perpendicular window, on each side of which a statue stood in a niche with a tall finial. The square bell turret was surrounded by a crenellated parapet with a gargoyle at each corner.

From the church they set off for the priory ruins. The damp ground was covered with fallen leaves. The Doctor paused to examine a free-standing Celtic cross.

"This may predate even the old priory," he pronounced.

“How old do you think it is?” Edmund enquired.

“Circa eighth or ninth century, I should say.”

Edmund looked at Ridley. “Do you know when the old priory was built?”

“It’s mentioned in the Domesday Book, but as to before that...”

The Reverend lifted his thin shoulders regretfully

Edmund grinned. “Your cross is still winning by a couple of centuries, Doctor.”

Ridley’s face lit up. “You’re a Doctor? I don’t suppose you could give an opinion on my rheumatism? Sometimes it’s almost more than I can...”

Dr. Who, with a reproving frown at Edmund, cut in with, “I am a doctor of science, not of medicine.”

The old clergyman’s face fell.

After a few moments they moved on to the ruins. Many of the cloisters were still standing and the stone pavement was intact. The old cruciform chapel was roofless, but the walls remained. The top of the large window, with all its tracery, was gone, and three broken upright mullions of uneven heights were all that was left of this beautifully crafted feature. By the priory gateway, which Edmund thought looked splendidly Gothic, a legless statue regarded the three of them with undiminished pride.

“Who is that fine gentleman, h’mm?” the Doctor asked Ridley

“It’s Sir Guy de Palisere. The surname was amended to Palliser near the end of Elizabeth’s reign by a later head of the family when he was created Duke of Omnium.”

“This fellow looks very pleased with himself, even without a dukedom,” Edmund contributed.

“He had good reason to be content,” said the Reverend.

Dr. Who darted a questioning glance at Ridley, who smiled and resumed with:

“On the road from the station is Matching Oak, beneath which Sir Guy met Richard the Lionheart when the latter came home to England from his crusading. Sir Guy took out his brandy flask and offered it to the king, who immediately gave him all the land hereabouts, as far as Littlebury. It was a very good return on a swallow or two of liquor, wasn’t it?”

The Doctor, who had parted on bad terms with King Richard the First in twelfth century Palestine, nodded his agreement. “The monks were here in the priory then, of course, and would remain for another three hundred years and more.”

“Until avaricious Henry had them shown the door,” Edmund added.

“Quite,” the Reverend agreed, sadly.

Divided from the ruins by a narrow path was a burial area enclosed by low iron railings. They went over to look down at the gravestones within.

“There’s the ‘Great Duke’ - died 1875,” indicated Ridley. “Then his nephew’s wife, Glencora, Duchess of Omnium. She was born a M’Cluskie. You can see her bedroom window from here, I understand.”

He glanced across at the present Matching Priory, a large, gabled house with an attractive façade, which stood about two hundred yards away.

Edmund read out the next inscription - a commemoration of Plantagenet Palliser, Duke of Omnium.

“He survived her by many years,” the Reverend resumed. “His nickname was ‘Planty Pal’. He was a studious fellow and served as Chancellor of the Exchequer, then as Prime Minister. His second wife was the widowed Lady Laura Kennedy, whose interest in politics matched his.”

“You’re very knowledgeable,” Edmund told him.

“I’ve had nearly four decades in Matching to become so,” Ridley answered, looking pleased, nevertheless. “I have to join Miss Sim for tea now, I’m afraid, but you will come and meet her, won’t you? She’s a most cultured lady.”

“Her school is here, then?” queried the Doctor, with a look at the house.

“Oh, yes. Didn’t I say that? The current Duke, son of ‘Planty Pal’ and Glencora, faced huge death duties when he came into his title and inheritance, so he saved on the upkeep of Matching Priory by presenting it to the National Trust, who then leased it to the Sim sisters for use as a school.”

“So where do the family live now?” asked Edmund.

“Oh, at Gatherum Castle in Barsetshire, though they occupy what used to be the servants’ quarters - refurbished, of course.”

“Of course,” Edmund echoed.

“The main rooms are open to the public, as they are here. A trifle inconvenient for Miss Sim sometimes, but she rises above it.”

“Very practical of her,” observed the Doctor.

A diminutive little maid answered the doorbell and stood aside to allow them to enter the paneled hallway. The staircase had a finely carved newel post representing various fruits and a long case clock stood on the half landing, ticking its way into the future. There were a couple of Tudor portraits in gilt frames, each depicting a Palliser ancestor. The maid took their hats, hung them on a stand, then approached the polished double doors that were set into a sculpted archway. She was about to open them when she was saved the trouble by the appearance of Miss Honoria Sim from the room beyond.

“Good afternoon, Vicar,” she trilled, her gracious tone instantly conveying her deep approval of all things tasteful. She wore a long skirt, a ruffled blouse, a dangling amethyst necklace with matching earrings, a number of antique rings, an elaborate bracelet and a pair gold pince-nez. The neat curls and graceful waves of her marcelled grey hair were something of a work of art.

“Good afternoon, Miss Sim,” returned the Reverend, who seemed to be in a transport of delight at the sight of her. “Please allow me to introduce two newcomers to Matching, Mr. Edmund Leigh and Doctor...”

He stopped, then looked at Dr. Who, but received only a vague smile. Edmund, fortunately, had seen this difficulty coming and interposed quickly with an alias he had created for the Doctor on a previous occasion:

“Dr. William Grenville.”

“Delighted, I’m sure,” responded Miss Sim, with a small, dainty gesture in their direction.

“Likewise,” the Doctor assured her, with a little olde-worlde bow. “Now we must leave you and the Reverend to your tea.”

“Oh, but you must join us, of course,” Miss Sim insisted.

“My dear lady, I hesitate to impose...”

But she waved this aside in a most hospitable manner and addressed the still-hovering maid: “Bring more cups and tea-plates, if you please, Edith.”

The maid scurried away, and Miss Sim motioned for her guests to follow her into the drawing room. She seated herself by the tea table and the three men settled themselves into nearby chairs.

“Edmund Leigh. I like the name,” Miss Sim announced, smiling at its owner in a somewhat dotty way. “It balances well, I think. I adore names that balance.” Suddenly she looked concerned. “Do you possess any other Christian names, Mr. Leigh?”

Edmund, who was quite desperate for sandwiches and cake, played along patiently and revealed that his supplementary appellation was Matthew.

She emitted a sigh of relief. “Edmund Matthew Leigh. The balance is still there, I believe. Your parents exhibited considerable discernment, if you’ll permit me to say so.”

Edmund remembered little of his parents, who had died in a carriage accident when he was three, leaving him to be raised by his flinty Aunt Caroline. He refrained from mentioning this, though, and thanked Miss Sim politely.

Edith, looking flustered, returned with the extra crockery, put it on the table, then made herself scarce.

“Do have something to eat,” Miss Sim urged Edmund, glancing quickly at the others as well. She took a salmon and cucumber sandwich herself to get the ball rolling, as it were.

Edmund stood up. “It all looks absolutely delicious,” he told her, enthusiastically.

The Doctor bent a repressive look at him, which Edmund pretended not to notice.

When they all had sandwiches, minus the crusts, plus fragrant orange pekoe tea in a delicate bone china cup decorated with a lady in a yellow crinoline, the conversation teetered on the edge of extinction. The Doctor, however, quickly saved the day by asking Miss Sim when her academy had been established.

“My late sister Amelia and I founded the school in 1925.” She placed her hands together as if about to pray. “Hopeful as we were of its success, we never dreamed that it would one day be the veritable arcadia of young womanhood that it is today.”

“A shining beacon of pastoralism and harmony,” enthused the Reverend Ridley, obviously well-versed in the manner of response that was expected.

“My dear vicar, you’re too kind,” gushed the ecstatic educator.

Ridley, the Doctor thought cynically, had just put down a deposit on convivial afternoon teas yet to be enjoyed. The balance, no doubt, would be remitted in the form of similar dollops of flattery. Perhaps, after all, there were no flies on this vague-looking old padre.

Edmund, who was again struggling manfully against a metaphorical tickling of his ribs, frantically sought diversion.

“That’s a rather pleasing portrait over there,” he commented, eyeing a well-executed depiction of a young woman with wavy blonde hair and blue eyes that shone with high spirits. Her dress was white with a black collar. The background consisted of an understated representation of mountains and alpine flowers.

“That’s Lady Glencora Palliser, as she was known before, she became Duchess of Omnium,” Ridley told him.

“By Dalrymple, I understand,” added Miss Sim.

“I saw another painting of his, some time ago,” said Dr. Who. “The subject, as I recall, was a young man dying of consumption.”

“How depressing,” opined Miss Sim. “Lady Glencora looks as though she’d be rather fun, doesn’t she?”

“The priory ruins were her great delight, they say,” supplied the Reverend, glancing at them through an attractive leaded window that was complete with a padded seat. “She loved to wander there, especially beneath the moonlight and a starlit sky.”

“They present a splendidly Gothic view from this room,” the Doctor put in.

Ridley leaned forward, confidential of aspect. “There are a few local people, you know, who claim to have witnessed Lady Glencora’s wanderings fairly recently.”

Edmund rose from his chair and smiled charmingly at his hostess. "Have you seen her, Miss Sim?" he enquired, as he took a piece of chocolate cake.

"Oh, dear me, no," she fluttered, taking advantage of his proximity to pat his arm in mock reproval for asking the question. "But then, do you know, I've never looked for her!"

Edmund was slightly startled when she gave way to an immoderate peal of laughter.

The visit lasted another twenty minutes, during which Miss Sim plied her guests with a second serving of orange pekoe and spoke of a play called *A Maiden's Reprieve* that her dear girls ('They're so talented') would be performing for the townsfolk at Christmas. Then the Reverend Ridley rose creakily, gave the Doctor and Edmund a significant look and announced that they really had to be leaving, reluctant as they were to part with such scintillating company. Miss Sim appeared to be quite devastated ('Do stay a little longer') but rang for Edith briskly enough, the Doctor noted with amusement, and instructed the mouse like girl to bring the gentlemen's hats.

"A lady of - err - character, your Miss Sim," the Doctor said to the Reverend when they stood outside the house after the three of them had bid a collectively gallant farewell to the effusive headmistress.

"An ornament to the town," agreed Ridley, with unintentional humour.

Edmund glanced at the ruins, still damp from the recent rain but now glistening a little in the weak November sun. "Does the thought of encountering Lady Glencora keep people away from the old priory?" he asked the Reverend.

"Oh, I don't think so. She was an agreeable, if somewhat volatile woman, I gather, and visitors almost hope for a sighting of her, fortunately for the National Trust's finances. A place that does tend to be avoided, though, is Hastings Ascham, a large residence at the far end of Main Street. The secrets that house conceals have puzzled many for more than half a century. They've proved to be utterly impenetrable."

Edmund noticed the light of real interest dawn in the Doctor's almost fiercely intelligent eyes.

"I would very much like to hear the details," the ever-curious old-time traveler told Ridley.

The Reverend obviously liked the idea of telling the story, and of further company, for he immediately asked Dr. Who and Edmund to join him at the vicarage for dinner.

"We don't want to put you to any trouble," the Doctor assured him, making a token protest.

Ridley smiled mischievously. "I won't be put out in the slightest, I assure you. Admittedly, on a less positive note, my cook-housekeeper, Mrs. Rothwell, does have an aversion, no doubt justifiable, to last-minute changes and will scarcely bother to hide it. Fortunately, she also dislikes being found wanting and will produce, as always, an excellent meal, absolutely on time. If you can both endure her long face, you will be rewarded by the quality of her cooking."

"It's a deal," replied Edmund, and the Doctor didn't even frown at him.

"I dine at seven-thirty. I hope you can make that."

"Certainly, certainly," answered Dr. Who.

"Where are you staying, may I ask?" queried the Reverend.

Edmund left the task of prevarication to the Doctor, who responded to Ridley quite plausibly with: "I'm afraid a prolonged fuss at the station concerning the hopefully temporary loss of our luggage delayed us to the point where our booked rooms had been allocated to others. We have not yet settled the problem of finding some alternative accommodation. It's all been very tiresome; I have to say. Would you oblige us by recommending a suitable hostelry, h'mm?"

The Doctor deserved a prize, Edmund thought admiringly, for covering all the loose ends of their situation in one well-constructed statement, or at least he did if the regrettable level of mendacity was overlooked.

“My dear sirs, you must spend a night or two at the vicarage,” the Reverend returned, without hesitation.

“No, no, Edmund and I couldn’t possibly take advantage of your good nature in such a manner,” the Doctor insisted, shaking his head to accompany this fine sentiment.

“Nonsense, nonsense,” Ridley said firmly. “Of course you must stay. I’ll relish the company. Yes, indeed. We shall be quite a convivial little group, I feel certain.”

Edmund felt that the spirit of Mr. Pickwick was now hovering somewhere close at hand.

“What will your housekeeper say to this?” he put in.

“Her considerable fortitude is, I believe, equal to even the most vexatious of trials,” came the Reverend’s comfortable reply.

The vicarage was gabled, with mullions, but nonetheless a simply constructed and unostentatious edifice. The strait-laced Georgian architect, Ridley informed his guests, had viewed excessive ornamentation as the architecture of paganism.

Mrs. Rothwell, a sharp-eyed woman with a voice like gravel, was, as predicted, most displeased by the unexpected arrivals. The personification of resentment, she conducted the Doctor and Edmund to guest rooms and informed them tersely that anything they found lacking, due to the absence of notice, would be provided shortly. She then departed huffily. Later on, in the gloomy, mahogany-paneled dining room, having enjoyed the thick oxtail soup and superbly cooked saddle of mutton, they both complimented her on the quality of the fare and were rewarded when a brief smile surprisingly transformed her customary expression of disapprobation.

“She’s a wonderful woman, Mrs. Rothwell, despite the starchy element,” said the old Reverend, when she had left the room to fetch the sweet. “Quite congenial, in fact, when she isn’t vexed, and especially when compared to her aunt, who lives in Littlebury. Miss Parkin is a real martinet, and still very sharp-witted, despite her age. She hasn’t lost any of her tail feathers, I can tell you. Until her retirement she was personal maid to the present Duchess of Omnium, the former Isabel Boncassen, who was an American heiress.”

Ridley took a sip of water, then leaned back in his chair.

“What a pleasant day it has been,” he resumed. “Do you know, I haven’t felt so relaxed for some time. The thought that Hitler - such a militaristic fellow - might be spoiling for another war was a dreadful one. I thank the Good Lord for inspiring Mr. Chamberlain to meet the man face to face. There’s nothing that can’t be brought to a satisfactory conclusion by a sensible discussion, is there? Germany didn’t want another war any more than we did, as it turned out. I was so thankful, though my poor nerves have been slow to recover. They’ve been fragile since I was a very young man, you see. I remember how affected I became when the South African War began, only a few months after I came to Matching, and when the Great War broke out. But the dark days of conflict are over now, and peace is certain.”

The Doctor offered the Reverend a token smile. His eyes were somber. Edmund, who hailed from 1865, had no foreknowledge of the 1930’s and the 1940’s to be depressed about and was able to share in Ridley’s misplaced contentment.

The housekeeper reappeared with a plum duff, the third course of her delicious but decidedly ‘stick to your ribs’ meal.

“Coffee by the drawing room fire, please, Mrs. Rothwell,” the Reverend requested. He turned to his two visitors. “We must make ourselves comfortable before I commence the tale of Hastings Ascham,” he declared. “In the meantime, let us apply ourselves to this excellent dessert.”

The drawing room was far more cheerful than the dining room. The merry blaze in the inglenook fireplace threw colour into the shadows, the only other light being from the two gas

lamps - the old vicarage had never been converted to electricity. The Doctor's long white hair shone, illuminated by the blue flame above the wing armchair in which he had placed himself. The Reverend was seated opposite him.

The night had become wild and rain lashed at the windowpanes as if in anger. Mrs. Rothwell placed the coffee tray on the round George the Third table near the hearth and took her leave.

Edmund, who was feeling sleepy, hoped that Ridley's story would be interesting enough to keep him awake, for it would be unpardonable to doze off. He was relieved when the Reverend began to pour out the coffee.

Dr. Who, sipping his steaming beverage appreciatively, gave Ridley an expectant look.

"Hastings Ascham was the home of the Ushgrave family," the Reverend began. "They were well-to-do, but in trade, so their ascent of the social ladder was by no means an easy one. Caleb Ushgrave, a lean-faced, exceedingly stiff and formal sort of man, was a mill owner. His wife Selina was a very beautiful woman, though her manner was cold and haughty. They had five children, four daughters and a son."

"The two elder sisters, Miriam and Vivien, were afflicted with mental problems from an early age and were secretly committed to the Campden Hayman Asylum for Idiots, as it was called in those days, where they lived out the rest of their lives and received no visitors. Their parents never referred to the unfortunate girls and considered them dead. The next two daughters were perfectly normal, thank the Lord, as was the boy, whose name was Gilbert. The Ushgraves were distant with Margot and Jemima, but doted, at least to some extent, on their son."

"In 1883 Gilbert disappeared from the house at the age of seven and was never seen again. He had been observed in the nursery playing with his toys only ten minutes before he was missed. The police were involved, naturally, but they unearthed not a single clue as to what had occurred, and the case remained unsolved."

"A pretty, very lively young housemaid, Sarah Pollinger, vanished shortly afterwards. The cook and the scullery maid were the last to see her, having noticed the girl leaving the servants' hall in the basement carrying a tin of furniture polish and several dusters. The law investigated once more, but were defeated again, having chosen to dismiss the below stairs talk of Caleb Ushgrave's attempts to seduce the girl as malicious gossip."

"Margot Ushgrave married a young man called Harold Greystock, who had studied law at Cambridge, and moved to London. Years later Greystock was the presiding judge in that appalling Webster case. Jemima's wedding took place a year or two after her sister's. She and her husband Oliver Flinch had agreed to live at Hastings Ascham, having been urged to do so by the widowed Mrs. Ushgrave."

"It was in 1910, twenty-seven years after the disappearance of Gilbert Ushgrave and Sarah Pollinger, that another maid went missing from the house. I remember Alice Porret myself - a tall, well-built young woman with freckles."

She went upstairs to clean the nursery, which was being converted into a guest room, and didn't return. As with Sarah Pollinger, all her clothes and possessions were still in her bedroom, so the idea of her suddenly deciding to abscond without notice was disregarded. She, too, was never seen or heard from again.

"Five years ago Mrs. Flinch's married nephew, Vincent Greystock, a solicitor, the son of her deceased sister Margot, came to stay with his widowed aunt for a few days while he attended to some business in the area. On the third day of his stay he dined with Mrs. Flinch but has been missing ever since he left the dining room to study some paperwork in his bedroom, which was

the former nursery on the first floor. His wife has refused ever since to visit Hastings Ascham or bring her children there, for which one can scarcely blame her.

“In 1935 Mrs. Flinch engaged a local cleaning woman, known to all as Vi Boone, who was reluctant to work in the house but needed the money. She arrived as usual one morning nearly three weeks later and commenced her tasks but could not be found twenty minutes later when Mrs. Flinch wanted to speak to her. A rather aggrieved Mr. Boone, whose evening meal had been conspicuous by its absence when he returned from his work at Pilsworths Woodyard, came in search of his wife. It gradually became clear that another name had been added to the list of those last seen in the house but of whom no trace has ever been found.”

Dr. Who stroked his chin thoughtfully. “A most vexatious conundrum. Yes, indeed. I would very much like to visit this house, and the old nursery in particular. Might that be possible, h’mm?”

Ridley considered. “Well, I have known Jemima Flinch for four decades and could approach her about it. She did say to me once that she wanted to learn the truth but saw little hope of doing so. Perhaps I’ll go and see her tomorrow morning, after breakfast.” He stifled a yawn. “I think I must retire now, if you’ll both excuse me.”

Edmund was desperate to sleep, and the Doctor seemed inclined to call it a day as well, so they all went upstairs. In his room Edmund found some pajamas laid out, probably a pair of the Reverend’s. He quickly undressed, put them on and slid into bed, where he plummeted into sleep like someone falling down a mineshaft.

In the morning a full breakfast of bacon, eggs, sausage, kidneys and buttered toast was served. The dining room was still gloomy, for the daylight was filtered through dark stained glass. Ridley went off to see Mrs. Flinch after finishing his coffee, leaving the Doctor and Edmund to await his return in the drawing room. Edmund looked through the newly delivered Daily Mirror and was soon drifting off to sleep again. The Doctor selected Volume One of *Can You Forgive Her?* by Anthony Trollope, signed by the author, from the old Reverend’s big, jam-packed oak bookcase. He sat down and began to leaf through the well-kept first edition.

Ridley returned with the news that Mrs. Flinch had acquiesced to his request and the three of them could visit Hastings Ascham after lunch. She did not wish to accompany her visitors around the house but would receive them in the morning room afterwards.

The frontage of Hastings Ascham was impressive, if overly Gothic, incorporating as it did a number of disturbingly countenanced statues set in unexpected alcoves and niches. They seemed to peer at callers through the tangle of ivy that clung to the house.

An octogenarian manservant admitted them, then disappeared. He had obviously been given his instructions.

Dr. Who and Edmund were immediately aware of the heavy atmosphere of the place. It pressed down on the mind, depressing the spirits almost to the point of dread. They glanced at the Reverend and realised from his expression that he was well aware of the sensation.

“How did Mr. and Mrs. Flinch stand living here for all those years?” Edmund asked Ridley.

“I asked Jemima exactly that on one occasion,” the clergyman answered.

“Really?” responded the ever-curious old Doctor.

“She explained that they had evolved a way of remaining detached enough to live a normal life, or something approaching one, in the house.”

Dr. Who’s brow furrowed in perplexity. “Quite an achievement, I’m sure. But why did they feel it necessary to stay here at all?”

“Mrs. Flinch has always felt that the unsolved mystery of the events that occurred here is in some way her cross to bear as an Ushgrave.”

They ascended the creaking stairs and Ridley pointed out an oil painting of a young boy, an angelic-looking child with a sunny expression, blue eyes and fair hair.

“That’s poor little Gilbert.”

“Dear, dear. What a tragic loss,” said the Doctor, with a sigh.

The Reverend led his two companions to a fair-sized bedroom. In one corner were a number of items appertaining to its previous use. A collection of teddy bears occupied the available surface of a folding table, the two leaves of which were collapsed. A grey and white rocking horse waited in vain to be ridden again. On the floor was a square wickerwork basket filled with red-coated toy soldiers and beside it lay a kaleidoscope and a couple of multi-coloured spinning tops. The puppet theatre, its stage long deserted, had a wooden box on top of it.

“Compared to the daughters, Gilbert was quite spoilt,” said Ridley.

He and Dr. Who moved across to the window, which was curtained in faded green velvet, and stared down into the large back garden, which nature was in the process of turning wild.

Edmund, meanwhile, picked up the old wooden box from the roof of the theatre, opened it and glanced inside. It was filled with puppets. One in particular claimed his attention. He lifted it out and gazed at it, despite feeling repelled by the toy.

The Doctor and the Reverend suddenly heard a startled cry and turned quickly to see the young man with his head and shoulders pulled back in recoil, for he was engaged in a terrible struggle against something by no means apparent to them.

They hurried over to Edmund. The Doctor took in the situation rapidly, reached out and knocked something out of his terrified friend’s hand. It clattered to the floor.

The two old men shepherded their shaking companion to the bed.

“Sit down, my boy,” urged Dr. Who.

Edmund did so. “I’m so cold...” he managed to say, through chattering teeth.

The Doctor took off his thick cloak and wrapped it around his fellow-traveler. Ridley sat beside him and put an arm around his shoulders.

“It was pulling me...” Edmund gasped, his eyes still wide with shock.

Dr. Who retrieved the fallen object from the floor.

“You can have a very quick glance only,” he warned the Reverend. “Don’t dwell on its face, whatever you do. Edmund, look the other way.”

Ridley identified the wooden puppet as a representation of Jack Frost. One leg had been snapped off and glued back on very carelessly. The head was topped with a row of icicles. The face, which must originally have been that of a crafty and sinister mischief maker, chilled him to the heart, for some mishap, perhaps the one responsible for the damaged leg, had partly crushed it, producing an expression of malevolence and evil that he never wanted to see again.

The Doctor thrust the monstrosity into a pocket of his frock coat and stared at the others with haunted eyes.

“Was there always something foul lurking within that painted piece of wood?” he pondered aloud. “Or was something bitter, unnatural and twisted born in its fibers when it was broken, crudely repaired and then left in that box, perhaps never to take its place on the stage of the puppet theatre again?”

The Reverend could barely believe, didn’t want to believe, that such a thing could exist on God’s good earth.

Yet he had witnessed young Edmund struggling against its malignant influence.

“I was convinced that the nursery was the key to the problem, but couldn’t see how,” Dr. Who went on. “Gilbert Ushgrave was last observed there; Vincent Greystock slept there, probably

because it's location on the first floor rendered it more convenient than the main bedrooms; the housemaids and the cleaner went in to do their jobs. It all fitted, but the final piece of the puzzle eluded me."

"But why would Vincent and the three staff look at the figure? Gilbert, yes, if only while sorting through the puppets for the ones he favoured..."

"A passing curiosity, I would think, as to the box's contents. It cost them all dearly, I'm afraid."

The Reverend was about to ask him about the whereabouts of the bodies of the victims when the Doctor suggested that it was time they left the melancholy chamber and joined the mistress of the house.

Mrs. Flinch, wearing a very old-fashioned dress of black bombazine, rose from a green leather armchair by the fire. She was a handsome woman of regal bearing, with rather chilly blue eyes.

"I once heard my mother saying to my father that what happened to Gilbert was a judgement on them," Mrs. Flinch told the three men, without preamble. "She was referring to their treatment of my two oldest sisters, I feel sure, though I didn't realise it at the time. I only learnt of the existence and death of Miriam and Vivien after Mama passed away."

The Doctor showed her the puppet quickly, not allowing her eyes to linger on it for long.

"The 'Devil Patient'," she exclaimed. "Gilbert had trodden on the nasty-looking thing, I remember, and called it that afterwards. He tried to repair the damage, you see, and enjoyed pretending to be a doctor. When the novelty of that wore off, he ignored it completely and never played with it again."

"He ended up as its victim. Its first victim."

Jemima Flinch stared at him for a moment, then gave an angry, scornful laugh. Impatiently, she snatched the puppet from his hand and hurled it into the fire.

"That should close the case for good, then, shouldn't it?"

"My dear madam, you may mock but I do assure you..."

He broke off. She was staring down at the carpet and the Doctor, Ridley and Edmund followed her incredulous gaze.

The puppet lay there, charred and smoking.

The awful realisation of the terrible truth seized Mrs. Flinch then and she moved very quickly for an old woman. Furiously, she seized the toy and returned it to the flames, but this time she grabbed her walking cane from beside the fireplace and used it to pin the 'Devil Patient' in place amidst the glowing coals.

"Vile thing! Vile thing!" she raged.

Her body contorted suddenly but she wouldn't release her grip on the stick. At the same time a nebulous picture, or vision, partly obscured her struggle. The three observers perceived a wintry landscape. Skeletal trees. Dark figures. The brief impressions of faces, their mouths open in silent screams.

The scene began to twist and distort.

Mrs. Flinch dropped her stick and collapsed into her chair.

The puppet was nothing now but fragile black ash.

The vision, like the infernal world it depicted, snapped out of existence.

Ridley watched the Doctor examining Mrs. Flinch. The old scientist shook his head sadly.

She was at peace now, the old Reverend told himself desperately, like all those poor unfortunate victims.

It was then, as they stood there in the aftermath of horror, that they felt unexpectedly reassured. Their spirits, despite the circumstances, rose.

The reason why was almost tangible.

The oppressive pall that had for so long shrouded Hastings Ascham was, at long last, beginning to lift...

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS



Hastings Ascham, a Gothic house in the little Yorkshire town of Matching, is forbidding from the outside, with its gaunt, ivy-covered facade and malevolent-looking gargoyles that seem to regard the few visitors with brooding ill-intent.

Inside this cursed residence, the heavy atmosphere is almost a tangible presence, and is a constant reminder of a haunting, decades-old mystery. Five people have vanished without trace while within these walls, yet the determined Jemima Flinch continues to live there.

The Doctor and his new fellow-traveller, Edmund Leigh, accompanied by the Reverend Guy Ridley, rector of Matching, investigate and discover the horrifying truth about the so-called 'Devil Patient'.

How can they prevent an evil, twisted entity, born of rejection and consumed with spite, from drawing further victims into its bleak world of imprisoned souls?

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