

BRIEF ENCOUNTERS



The Ties That Bind



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The late evening darkness was overshadowed by that inhabiting the house. It spread through the ancient building, prying into sombre corners intent on snuffing light and joy. This house belonged to inky gloom. In the entrance hall a mouse, driven by hunger, peered from behind wooden packing cases. Whiskers twitching, it steeled itself to dash for the kitchen. Sensing the feeble challenge to its dominion, the dark turned a malevolent gaze on the rodent. The moment lost, the mouse wisely retreated and the sepulchral stillness resumed.

There is perhaps nothing so still as a house in mourning, for that is what Hampton Lode was. Never the happiest of places in life, in death it had given itself entirely to introspective decay; kept alive only by an ailing heir-less Lord whose bedridden form counted down the end of this world with every beat of his stopwatch heart.

The disquiet was disturbed by a black-suited man as he strode across the hall towards another mournful timekeeper, an ornate long-case clock whose carved wooden curls fell lankly around a sorrowful face, every tick and tock tumbling where they may for only such an unenthusiastic entity could keep time here. Fry the butler, for such was the dark-suited presence, opened the glass and inserting the life-giving brass key, that would see the sorry specimen through another twenty-four hours, proceeded to wind. The task finished to his satisfaction he closed the face and turned to see a young maid in the traditional black dress with white pinafore and cap. She hovered uncertainly as he ran his eyes over her.

"You may be new to service, Florence, but it is customary to shine ones shoes," he said reproachfully.

"Yes sir," she acknowledged nervously, I was just going to collect the master's supper things, sir."

"You are not to go near his Lordship until you have attended to your footwear," he remonstrated. "I shall collect them. Finish up here then return to the kitchen."

"Yes sir," came the relieved response. Fry sighed inwardly, Lord Hawke was not the easiest of men to find oneself in service to and few staff remained nowadays; Florence, newly arrived, needed as much polishing as her shoes.

"Remember we are receiving visitors tomorrow so his Lordship will be wanting an early breakfast."

"Yes sir," she acknowledged as she attended the curtains.

Fry made his way upstairs and along the main corridor to his Master's room where he wrapped firmly upon the door.

"What is it?" came the sharp reply.

"It's Fry sir," he returned. "I've come to collect your supper tray."

"Well don't just stand there dithering," he called gruffly.

Used to his Master's curt demeanour, Fry pushed open the door and entered the grave chamber.

The darkness loomed ominously as Florence moved from place to place half-heartedly waving a duster over once lustrous ornaments. In a vain attempt to brighten the gloomy entrance a large mirror had been hung on the wall facing the windows. It was the last positive gesture made and its failure symbolised the general mood, the battle lost; hope extinguished.

Florence stopped, what was that? She could have sworn she'd heard a noise, yes there it was, a faint rattling sound coming from the wooden crates. No-one knew exactly what they contained, just treasures from Master Edward's archaeological expedition. Cautiously moving over, she gently ran her hands over the rough surfaces, there, one was definitely trembling.

The crate began to vibrate alarmingly, frightened, Florence backed away. Before she could call for Fry the box stopped moving. Suppressing fear she took a step nearer. As her fingers once more traced the knots in the wood she heard a sound behind her and sprang guiltily to her feet.

In the dim light at the foot of the stairs she could make out the shape of a tall figure. For a brief moment Florence thought Fry had returned. Then, as though suddenly aware of her gaze, it turned towards her.

The primal terror pierced every area of Hampton Lode from the kitchens below to the bedroom of Lord Hawke above. No-one who heard the sound would ever forget it. Even the darkness recoiled as if acknowledging for the first time a force more powerful than itself. The second thing no-one would forget was the silence that then descended, freezing everything into immobility.

Echoes of the incident still permeated the house many hours later. Defying the tense atmosphere Rosalie, the cook, hummed a comforting family lullaby as she prepared breakfast, resenting the extra workload the absence of Florence imposed on her busy routine.

Fry had discovered Florence laying prostrate against the wooden crates. Gently patting her cheeks he'd roused her and she'd clung to him in sheer terror. Later, in Florence's room, Rosalie had sat at her bedside humming the old familiar lullaby to her until she'd fallen into a fitful sleep. When the doctor arrived later Fry would ask him to look in on her. Until then, they were a member of staff down with visitors due.

Checking the eggs, Rosalie shuddered remembering the haunted look in Florence's eyes, like she had seen something no mortal was meant to see. The lullaby soothed her, calming her troubled thoughts, the tune sending her mind drifting back over the years. She stopped basting the eggs in the pan before her and glanced nervously round the kitchen. Though she had ceased her humming, the lullaby continued around her.

A deep sonorous ringing punctuated the air. Fry, moving as only the most well-trained of butlers can, hurried without appearing to hurry towards the front door. The sight that greeted him on opening the large oak portal would have caused a less supreme servant to raise an

eyebrow. A small man clad in tan duffel coat, a straw hat perched on his head, leant on a red handled umbrella. Next to him was a short serious looking girl in a grey tweed two-piece consisting of a long skirt and belted jacket with matching hat angled stylishly over one eye.

"May I ask who's calling?"

"We're the Avengers," grinned the girl disarmingly.

"And we're needed," the man doffed his hat politely.

"I'm sorry sir?" Fry asked uncomprehendingly.

"No need to apologise," the man said, darting forward followed by the young girl. Without noticing it happen, Fry found himself in possession of a duffel coat, an umbrella and a straw hat. "Tell your master that the Doctor would like to see him."

"You are not the doctor we were expecting," said Fry stiffly.

"I seldom am," replied the small man enigmatically.

"Are you from the London clinic?" asked Fry. "I thought since his Lordship returned from his stay..."

"There was nothing they could do?"

"There was no improvement in his condition, then after his brother died he felt there was no point." He had no idea why he was being so indiscreet with this stranger, there was just something about the way this Doctor looked at him.

"So he's confined himself to await death." The Doctor shot a steely look into a particularly gloomy corner and just for a moment Fry could have sworn the darkness actually flinched. The events of the previous night had obviously unsettled him more than he'd realised.

"Would you mind telling me who you are sir, and the purpose of your visit?"

"I told you, I'm the Doctor, this is my assistant Miss McShane. We have business here and would like to talk to Lord Hawke, it isn't necessary but it would be both polite and easier." replied the Doctor. "It concerns his brother, Edward."

Fry tensed but recovered his usual poise as he felt the eyes of the young woman studying him intently; he returned her appraising stare. She had removed her hat, indicating that they were not about to leave, and was handing it to him. Dressed as she was, he found it hard to judge her age but suspected she was younger than had first appeared.

"Edward is dead sir," Fry stated simply.

"Yes but he led a colourful life," countered the Doctor. "Caused a great deal of trouble for others."

"Master Edward was certainly spirited, sir"

"A right wrong 'un I'd heard," added Ace tactlessly.

"Whatever else Master Edward may have been he was a good man," Fry said loyally gesturing them to follow him. He led them to a door which opened onto an anteroom. "Would you mind waiting in here sir while I inform his Lordship."

Before acceding to the butler's request the Doctor ran an observant eye over of the hallway, his gaze drawn to the wooden crates. Briefly catching his reflection in the large mirror he absently brushed at his brown jacket then followed his companion inside the panelled room. As the door closed behind them the Doctor gazed around thoughtfully.

"What a fine butler," he said. "Interesting too."

"What are we doing here?" asked Ace who hadn't found the uptight butler particularly interesting. She tugged irritably at her tweed suit. "And why do I have to wear the clothes style forgot?"

"I think you look very fetching."

"It itches," she complained. "So come on give me the heads up."

"Initiative test, what have you noticed?"

"I've noticed you've dragged me to another creepy old house."

"Interesting places old houses," murmured the Doctor as though to himself.

"What else?"

"Well before my time, probably near the war," she began.

"Go on," the Doctor urged.

"Those boxes, like some-one's moving house," she paused remembering the labels she'd spotted on some of the crates. "Where's Mesopotamia?"

"By your time it's known as Iraq."

"So come on what do I need to know?"

"The year is 1934," the Doctor began. "The house is Hampton Lode in Essex and the boxes contain artefacts from an archaeological dig carried out by the late Edward Hawke, estranged younger brother of the owner of the house."

"And what are we doing here?" she asked.

"There are things to discover, secrets to unravel." The Doctor pulled out his pocket watch and consulted it. "And people to meet."

The funereal chime of the doorbell caused Ace to start, the Doctor smiled and moved to the door.

The two people the butler allowed egress were remarkably similar in appearance, like two figurines created as a set. Both were slim, medium height and fair haired, dressed in matching clothes that, although not his and hers, reflected Ace as she and the Doctor peered through a crack in the door, were as near as made any odds. They moved with a casualness and sense of entitlement that only centuries of breeding by the most upper of upper class families in England could instil. They stood in the hallway looking around with an air of condescension on their thin tight faces until their eyes alighted upon the packing crates; the two covert observers caught a look of recognition that passed between them.

Fry ushered them through an opposite door into a second reception room designed, no doubt, to keep visiting parties separate. With the newcomers settled to his satisfaction, Fry closed the door and headed up the stairs.

The Doctor turned to Ace, "Now while everyone's distracted I want you to find the people who know all the secrets, see what you can find out," he murmured.

"Who are they?" she asked confused.

"Who in a house like this would you expect to be the experts with dirty laundry?" he shot a meaningful look down. She smiled her understanding and slipped stealthily away.

The darkness cast a wary eye over Ace as she stalked cat-like away. Then, more apprehensively, followed the Doctor as, after a furtive glance around the empty hallway, he darted across to the door opposite.

As Ace drew towards the kitchen, she was struck by how few servants there were; she'd expected below stairs to bustle with the activity necessary to the smooth running of a great

house. Ahead, the sound of spirited humming directed Ace to the kitchens. There, surrounded by piles of semi-prepared fruit and single-handedly attending to pots steaming on the large black stove, fussed a well-built woman in cooks whites rolling pastry vigorously.

"That's a nice tune," Ace said, "What is it?"

"Oh just an old lullaby my family sing. Can I help you madam?" she asked.

"I wanted a glass of water," lied Ace.

"You should have asked Fry," the cook informed her. "Are you visiting? We don't see many visitors these days, it's not a very happy place."

Ace sensed that here was a very lonely woman who was grateful to have someone to talk to, she felt guilty that she was going to take advantage of her. The cook filled a glass with water and handed it over. "Yeah, I can tell that," Ace said accepting the drink. The way the house made her feel she suspected that could be considered understatement. "Shouldn't there be more servants?"

"Oh, there used to be quite a large staff, proper little family we had below stairs," the cook said sadly. "Most have left, now it's just the three of us myself, Fry and Florence."

"Who's Florence?"

"The maid; she had a funny turn." A strange look came over her face as she spoke. "She's having a lie down leaving me to do all this," she waved her arms around the kitchen indicating the many half completed jobs. Ace noted the affected cheeriness the cook had injected into her voice.

"Funny turn?"

Her voice fading with the colour from her face the cook said, "She... saw something. Screamed herself hoarse she did. Never heard anything like it and don't want to again."

"What did she see?" Ace had been with the Doctor long enough to recognise a promising avenue of investigation when one presented itself.

"Master Edward," she whispered. "His Lordship's late brother."

* * * * *

The two fair haired figures posed in front of the sulkily glowing hearth turned expectantly towards the Doctor, half rising as he entered the room. Failing to hide their annoyance at not seeing who they were expecting, they resumed their seats.

"Can I help you?" enquired the man scrutinising the Doctor and being evidently unimpressed with the result, "I hope Lord Hawke is not attempting to evade us by sending some lackey to fob us off?"

"And why should he wish to do that?" the Doctor frowned.

"You know full well sir, the treasure."

"Treasure?" the Doctor thought for a minute. "You mean the antiquities?"

"I mean the valuables recovered from the expedition," the man snapped back. "Items that rightly belong to my family sir, items I intend to remove from this house."

"May I ask what right you have to claim the artefacts?" queried the Doctor.

"Right!" he exclaimed. "I'll tell you what right, money! My family financed the whole folly and now it is ended we are left with nothing but debts."

"Financed," muttered the Doctor thoughtfully. "Of course you must be..."

"Laurence, Lord Wintringham, son of the man who's life's work lies boxed up beyond that door," he gestured angrily.

"And the charming lady?" prompted the Doctor smiling at the thin unresponsive creature beside the irate Lord.

"My sister, Emma," Lord Wintringham waved vaguely at her as though she were of no account. "Sole surviving sister thanks to this accursed family."

* * * * *

If bricks and mortar can be said to have a heart then the beating heart of a house would be the kitchen. After spending time in this heart Ace could tell it was ailing and that reflected in microcosm the state of Hampton Lode. The cook, Rosalie, busied herself with a large fruit pie and chattered cheerfully.

"His Lordship's had a lot to deal with," she said. "After his father died he took on the family business, made a success of it too, for a while."

"What did they do?"

"Engineering. A right state when his father went it was, talk of closing down, many families hereabouts relied on those jobs. Then they invented some do-dah or other and the business took off again," she waved a floury hand vaguely.

"That was a while ago now though."

"He must have made a bit of dosh then?"

"Oh yes, the trouble was Master Edward," the cook's mood darkened. "Him with his gambling and women and His Lordship forever having to bail him out! It fairly ate the money up, then suddenly, Master Edward up and left. Always was a wrong 'un, had to look after him once when he rolled up here steaming drunk..." her voice trailed off thoughtfully.

"Why did he leave?"

"It was a girl of course," laughed Rosalie hollowly, "Laura Wintringham, daughter of Lord Wintringham the famous archaeologist. Beautiful she was, the sort men fall for and so they did. His Lordship set his cap first but was thrown over for his brother and they ran off together. It seemed she preferred the wild lifestyle. Well she paid the price in the end."

"Oh?" Ace raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Yes, Master Edward," she replied maliciously. "He murdered her!"

* * * * *

Despite entreaties from the poker, the fire in the grate had refused to rouse from its petulance and crackled darkly to itself. It was one of the most gloomy buildings the Doctor could ever remember visiting, light had given up on the place. From one panelled wall, a large portrait of a stern grey-haired man with bushy side whiskers gazed down with haughty disapproval. Only one type of man could possibly wear such an expression, thought the Doctor, and it would certainly explain much. He gazed at the now silent pair as they sat lost in their own thoughts staring into the reluctant blaze.

The story they'd related had been one of great tragedy. Laura Wintringham had been a happy and devoted sister, she had adored her father and for many years they were inseparable.

She had inherited his love of archaeology and together they had toured all the world's major sites and excavations. Then came the day when this wasn't enough for the old Lord, he began to yearn for his own name to be added to those of Carter and Woolley. He'd studied books and, inspired by Mallowan, he'd one day announced plans to travel to Mesopotamia and dig for some lost city or other, the present Lord Wintringham had been a little vague on details, Laura was to accompany him of course.

For many months things had gone well, the site was soon located and the dig proceeded smoothly. Then Laura had returned home for a friend's wedding where she had met the current Lord Hawke and his brother Edward, friends of the groom.

They were from new money, here the Doctor had glanced at the portrait of the stern gentleman, the older brother was sensible and steady while the younger was wild and irresponsible. Both had taken a liking to the young fresh-faced Laura and she to them. So much so that she delayed rejoining her father to spend more time with them. The elder brother courted her for many months, not the right sort Laurence Wintringham had said, but in these uncertain times he'd had enough of the right stuff. Money, the Doctor had guessed, knowing how impoverished many of the older families of England had found themselves after the last war. It was expected that she would marry him but, to the surprise of all, she suddenly took off and married the feckless Edward. This, not unexpectedly, enraged the older brother, a man who had spent an entire lifetime watching his brother live the high life, reeling from one scandal to the next. It was rumoured the family had paid out a fortune to hush up Edward's many indiscretions. Stories of wronged women and illegitimate children abounded, even a murder. They had decided to join Laura's father at the dig to give things a chance to blow over.

Edward, now cut off from his family and broke, had readily agreed. They had been there about six months when the first incident occurred. Laurence and Emma Wintringham had been there at the time.

While inspecting the dig, Lord Wintringham had apparently fallen. He was found concussed by Edward and helped back to his tent. They nursed him for days and, just as it seemed he would recover, he took an unexpected turn for the worse and died. Nothing untoward was suspected and the dig was allowed to continue. Then, shortly after coming in to her inheritance, Laura took ill. Doctors were called but nothing could be done. Her condition worsened and she, too, died. With two deaths so close together in the same family an inquest was held. Post-mortem results showed she had ingested small amounts of a poisonous substance, a verdict of murder by person or persons unknown was reached. The police investigated thoroughly, and concluded that Edward had murdered his wife and her father for the money. He was promptly arrested.

Edward, in trouble, did what he always did: contacted his family. Somewhat reluctantly, concerned that the scandal might attach itself to the family and, by default, the business, Lord Hawke journeyed abroad for the first time. What happened next no-one was really sure, but the charges were dropped and Edward freed. The Wintringhams were convinced the officials had been bought off; it was, they said, well known they were all corrupt out there.

"He could have been innocent?" Ace prompted, she had become absorbed in the cook's tale.

"No," the cook replied firmly. "Take it from me, did her in for the money, eyes lit up as soon as he saw her."

It was plausible, reflected Ace, even in her time the papers were full of similar stories, a charming man turns the head of a wealthy but naive woman, does her in and collects the lot. "What happened then?"

"Tried to make a go of it out there but it didn't take," she answered. "Reopened the dig, but people wouldn't work for him, didn't trust him. Then one night he was attacked. Mob justice. The courts wouldn't punish him so they would. It was too much for him, closed things down packed up all the treasures and sailed for home."

"So how come they made it back but he didn't?"

"Took his own life on the way back," she said darkly. "Reckon one night the guilt got too much for him and he threw himself overboard."

"Doesn't seem too likely after what you've told me about him," said Ace thoughtfully.

Rosalie shrugged, "That's when things started happening, like a curse had been put on the house."

"No such thing as curses," Ace said.

"Of course there are," she nodded emphatically. "When the Master returned from abroad he took ill, caught some foreign disease, can't cure him. He's not long left," she paused momentarily and Ace saw a look of intense loneliness cross her face. "And what will become of us then. My family have always been in service, my sister works for the Wintringhams, terrible people, treat their staff very badly.

Her daughter's just entered service, I'd hoped that my daughter would follow me, keep it in the family. I've worked in this house since I was a little girl, Mother was the cook before me, but..."

"She doesn't want to," Ace finished for her. She could understand it, she wouldn't want to be a domestic. The world was changing, in a few years rather terribly....

Rosalie shifted uncomfortably. "Still with the goings on around here lately maybe it's no bad thing."

Before she could follow this up there was a cough behind her and turning Ace saw a pretty maid, this must be Florence.

* * * * *

Leaving the Wintringhams with their grievances the Doctor slipped back into the hallway. A quick glance towards the stairway confirmed he had some time before the butler returned. He made his way to the packing crates and began inspecting them closely. Just ordinary wooden crates, he wondered if he dare risk opening one. As he reached out to touch the closest he became aware of a presence. He spun round wearing his most disarming smile... there was no one there.

"Who's there?" he asked calmly moving forward. The only reply, the creaks of an old house. His eyes narrowed as he peered into the gloomy nooks, there was no sign of a living being. Still, the Doctor could sense the presence; he knew he was not alone. "Don't be afraid, I'll help if I can."

He glanced in the mirror, no-one behind him, the hallway empty, but the feeling of not being alone persisted. It played on the back of his mind, jarring chords on the organ of his subconscious. Music so familiar to him, he no longer danced to its tune. Fear.

There was something dangerous and powerful in this house, something strange and familiar to him. The primal force raged inside him trying to overwhelm. Calmly, the Doctor walked away.

The arrival of Florence had altered the cosy atmosphere, Rosalie had become less chatty and involved herself more with domestic duties. The maid hadn't wished to talk about the previous evening and an uncomfortable silence had fallen over the kitchen. Feeling like an unwelcome intrusion Ace had made her excuses and left.

"What are you doing here?" Halfway up the stairs Ace was started out of her introspection by the cold voice of Fry.

"I fancied a drink and got talking to Rosalie," she replied coolly, refusing to be intimidated. "She didn't seem to care for Edward Hawke much."

"You shouldn't pay too much attention to Rosalie," said Fry as they began to ascend the stairs. "She has her reasons for thinking badly of Master Edward, blames him for her daughter's death."

"Her daughter died?" Ace glanced back towards the kitchen, so that's why she wouldn't take over from her mother, the poor woman.

"She was late getting home one night, she found the house full of gas and her daughter in the kitchen," he explained. "Wanting to please her Mother, it seems, she had attempted to prepare their evening meal. She hadn't noticed the gas had failed to ignite. She was eight years old"

"That's terrible! But how can she blame Edward?"

Fry winced slightly at her over familiar use of the forename. "She was delayed because she was attending to Master Edward's needs. Then, when he was wrongly accused of his wife's murder...."

"You don't believe he did it?" she interrupted.

"I don't believe so, no." He shook his head, "I saw them together before they went away..."

"And?"

"He was very much in love with her I am sure."

* * * * *

Back in the hallway the first thing that struck Ace was the sound of raised, though muffled, voices. Obviously the other visitors to Hampton Lode were in heated discussion with someone.

"Why are they there?" Ace indicated the wooden crates.

"They have been sold and are awaiting collection," Fry answered. "His Lordship has no wish to keep any of them, except for the mirror."

Ace turned to view herself in the large reflective surface. "What's so special about that?"

"Nothing I am aware of," he admitted. "It was believed it would add light to the reception area."

"It hasn't has it," she glanced round the dingy hallway.

"This way, Miss" Fry gestured towards the room where the Doctor would hopefully be waiting.

Hunched before the fire, eyes cloaked in thought, the Doctor barely acknowledged Ace as she was shown in. Fry excused himself and left.

"How was the linen?" he asked breaking the silence.

"Dirty but aired."

* * * * *

The sound of the reopening door interrupted their conversation and they turned as a macabre figure was wheeled into their presence. Wrapped in a blanket and shawl there was an undeniable power that emanated from hunched, wizened figure. A fierce light burned in his eyes, perhaps the only light left in this house, the outline of a sneer made him appear many years older than his mid forties. This man was undoubtedly a force to be reckoned with.

"I hear you wish to discuss my late brother?" he snapped. Before the Doctor could answer he continued, "I have no wish to discuss him sir, he's been dead a year and the world is well rid of him. I've spent too much of my time clearing up his sordid affairs, now there is little left to me I refuse to do it any longer."

"That's not..." the Doctor began.

"My brother was an irresponsible dilettante, he drifted through life shirking responsibility with scant concern for others," Hawke snarled. "Even on the ship home he took up with some floozy; his wife barely cold in the ground."

"It was more your brother's artefacts I wished to discuss," the Doctor explained. "But there are now more pressing concerns."

"Ha! Somebody told you about the ghost," cackled Hawke.

"Ghost?"

"All old houses have a ghost, all nonsense of course," he replied. "Ours, though, seems to be tormenting some of our more impressionable staff." He broke off suddenly becoming more serious. "Never heard anything like that girl's scream."

"Lord Hawke, it is vital you listen to me," the Doctor stated firmly. "There are things I need you to do."

It had taken some time to persuade Hawke to acquiesce and Ace suspected that it was the theatre of the Doctor's request that had appealed. After he had left to see to the arrangements she'd filled the Doctor in on all she had discovered and he'd fallen into silent contemplation.

"This is a terrible place, Professor," she said when the silence had become unbearable. He joined her, peering through the crack in the door. "It is like something out of a ghost story".

"It's not a ghost story," he explained. "It's a whodunit, and I see the suspects are gathering."

The suspects sat in the hallway in an uneasy horseshoe facing the large mirror. Lord Hawke in his wheelchair, Fry the butler, Rosalie the cook with Florence the maid. Next to them were Lord Wintringham and his sister whose pinched features radiated disdain on all present. The darkness, resenting the intrusion, lingered rancorously. As if oblivious to the tense, laden atmosphere the Doctor entered taking his position at the front of the group Ace, very much aware, followed but chose to stand at the back.

"I expect you're wondering why I've gathered you all here," he began mischievously all eyes on him. Ace groaned and he shot her a steely look. "There's a mystery in this house and if I've learnt one thing from my friend Agatha it's that you should gather all the suspects together for the denouement."

"Suspects!" spluttered Hawke angrily. "What do you mean suspects?"

"One of you here is a murderer," stated the Doctor calmly.

"This is outrageous," Lord Wintringham protested leaping to his feet.

"Sit down!" The Doctor met the young Lord's angry stare with a look that brooked no dissent. Unable to meet the challenge Wintringham sat. "People have died and if I don't act more could follow."

"We know who killed my Father and my sister," spat Emma Wintringham. Hawke shot her a narrow eyed stare.

"They were indeed murdered," the Doctor paused dramatically, "But so was Edward Hawke."

"What!" gasped Hawke.

"On the way back from Mesopotamia Edward Hawke was forced overboard," the Doctor looked around at the sea of shocked expressions. "And one of you here is responsible."

He allowed time for his pronouncement to sink in.

"To prove murder you need means, motive, and opportunity. There are plenty of motives here, greed, revenge, love, hate, envy. The usual human frailties," he said bitterly.

"I had no reason to kill him," piped up Rosalie, instantly regretting her outburst as all eyes turned on her.

"The death of a child, alone because her mother was nursing an intoxicated man instead of home making tea." The Doctor turned sad eyes on her. "Revenge for a tragic accident. Seeing his reckless lifestyle ruining the family and what that might mean for you. Seeing the staff, that you had taken refuge in after that tragedy diminish as the money ran out. Fearing you might lose the one thing you had left, your position, because of him. Oh yes, you had motive."

"Yes it's true I blamed him," she wept bitterly. "But I couldn't..."

"Maybe not," he continued. "When Edward was killed you were here, as always, diligently running the household... as Fry was absent."

"May I ask what you are implying sir?" asked the startled retainer.

"That you were many miles from here, returning from abroad..."

"I had gone to Southampton to meet Master Edward's ship," he supplied. "Besides, why would I want to murder him?"

"Firstly it would have been simplicity itself to meet the ship, it docked in southern France to take on supplies. All you needed to do was cross the channel, take the train, then join the ship as a passenger. You murder your employer's brother then, once the ship reaches Southampton, mingle with the crowd pretending to wait for someone to disembark." The butler protested but the Doctor forged on. "Secondly, your motive... you were in love with Edward."

"What? No!" the butler paled.

"Yes! You grew up together, he with all the advantages of his position you with the disadvantages of yours. You followed your Father into service here so you could be near him; never once did he show you any affection." The Doctor turned to the mirror surveying the effect his words were having.

"Why would you say this?"

"Because you are the only one in this house who speaks well of Edward Hawke, who believes totally in his innocence."

"But if that's true, Professor, why kill him?" Ace was confused.

"Because of a promise," Hawke explained sadly. "After they eloped Edward wrote, explained how he couldn't live without Laura, apologised for what they had done. He informed me that Fry had promised him he would look after me."

"A difficult task before you got sick, a positive burden afterwards," the Doctor elucidated.

"And a situation I may have taken advantage of from time to time," said Hawke regretfully.

"An honourable man, Fry, couldn't just break his word, he went to meet Edward, to beg for release. He refused and, frustrated, they fought and Edward was killed."

"It's true I'm stuck here, seeing to that wreck of a man because of a promise I made to the man I..." Fry broke off angry and confused. "But I didn't kill him."

"The 'butler did it' is a bit of a cliché," sneered the Doctor.

"Which just leaves four," said Ace dramatically.

"What reason could my brother and I possibly have for murder?" protested Emma Wintringham waspishly.

"Greed," said the Doctor simply. "And we could lay all three deaths at your particular door. Your Father's expensive obsession with archaeology threatens to lose you your inheritance. You go to see him but he refuses to listen, so one night, while he is out walking with Edward, You, Laurence Wintringham, wait till they part company then attack. But before you can finish the job, Edward returns and helps the stricken man who can't or won't say what's happened. When it becomes clear he will survive you panic, what if he really remembers what happened? Worse, what if he remembers nothing and carries on wasting money on his precious dig? You have to act. That night you slip into his tent and finish him off."

"You don't know what you're saying," hissed Lord Wintringham menacingly.

"Don't I?" countered the Doctor. "After the inquest you realise you've got away with murder and then you start to think: You could do it again. After all why should Laura get anything, she'll only waste it on her worthless husband. Better still you could get her out of the way and pin the blame on him. No-one would believe he hadn't killed her for her money; there were already rumours he'd killed before."

"You're mad!" laughed Emma Wintringham. "You can't possibly believe all that? It's like the plot of a bad novel."

The Doctor turned to Lord Hawke. "And then we have you."

"Me!" exclaimed Hawke incredulously. "How could I have killed my brother?"

"This house, is a monument to one man's ambition," the Doctor explained as though he had never spoken. "To leave behind humble beginnings and join the elite. Industry provided the money, money bought connections and eventual elevation to the Lords. He was only missing one thing, an heir. Like the perfect Lord of the manor he wished to be, he fathered two sons."

"A spare and an heir," Lord Wintringham mocked.

"The elder fashioned to take over the business while the younger, ignored, ran wild."

"It's true, you were always jealous of your brother, his carefree lifestyle. Then he stole the woman you loved and fled abroad."

"Then when Edward got into trouble, you saw a chance to temporarily escape your responsibilities," continued the Doctor. "And have the satisfaction of seeing him hang."

"It's not true!" growled Hawke. "Doctor, when I agreed to this..."

"But things didn't go to plan, the case collapsed so you came home," the Doctor pressed on. "Shortly after arriving home you became ill, doctors were consulted, tests done, and they informed you, that while abroad, you had contracted polio."

"So that's why you've shut yourself away!" cried Wintringham.

"It seemed so unfair to be punished for having a little adventure." A look of shame crossed Hawke's face at the Doctor's words. "When Edward wrote to tell you he was returning, you made your plan. Heading to London on the pretext of visiting your clinic, you instead sailed to meet your brother's ship. You told him you wished to make up before it was too late. You drank together and talked; then one night you slipped something into his drink, something that left him weak, vulnerable. Feeling ill you suggest he takes a stroll around the deck then, as he leans over the rail, you rise from your chair and push him overboard."

"Then return home as if nothing has happened to await news of his death," laughed Hawke. "Contact the clinic they'll confirm I was there."

"Money can buy many things," the Doctor said matter-of-factly, "even an alibi."

"This is all well and good Professor but none of it explains Florence's ghost," Ace interrupted.

"Please," shuddered Florence, "I don't ever want to think of it."

"There never was a ghost." The Doctor turned to face the young maid.

"But I saw it... him," Florence protested feebly, "at the bottom of the stairs... Master Edward."

"The manifestation of a guilty conscience," said the Doctor coldly. "Guilty... of murder!"

"No!" said Florence when the shocked commotion had died down. "I never even knew Master Edward."

"Not until you boarded his ship," agreed the Doctor. "Where you deliberately courted his interest."

"You're just accusing people, making up ridiculous stories. What reason have you cooked up for her?" accused Lord Wintringham derisively.

"She was the avenging angel sent to strike against two families, the Hawkes and the Wintringhams."

"Sent by who?" asked Ace.

"By you," he replied, pointing an accusing finger, "Rosalie!"

"What?" she spluttered nervously.

"You and the sister who is the Wintringham's cook, one of the badly treated staff. You told Ace her daughter had just entered service, naturally she thought that meant at the Wintringham's, no! She works here!" he shouted. The tension in the room was palpable now, Ace could feel it.

"Nonsense," put in Rosalie.

"Pooling what money you could you sent her abroad. How could you forget the death of your daughter, of your cousin, you couldn't."

"Give it up Aunty Rosa," Florence interrupted. "It's true she's my Aunt, that she got me the a job here, but the rest of it's all lies."

"Of course it is," smiled the Doctor suddenly.

"What?" Florence was confused.

"Lies, all of it. Well most of it," he explained. "There is a murderer in this room but I needed your help."

"Our help!" Lord Wintringham exploded to his feet.

"Yes, I needed some heightened emotions to weaken the interface enough for me to do this!" He grabbed the vacated chair and hurled it into the mirror. With a cry of wild torment the mirror exploded, a blinding light briefly engulfed the room.

As though someone had turned the world off; no light, no sound, total absence. Gradually a faint glow began to fade into existence. Slowly at first, like the after image from staring at a bright light, it gained luminescence, accompanied by a whistling that intensified from mere background noise into a harsh shriek of pain. The light grew into an incandescent ball that hurt to look at yet at the same time had little impact on the surrounding room, nothing could be seen but pale, scared faces. Pale and scared, except for the Doctor, his impassive tight lipped expression left his thoughts unreadable.

Louder and brighter grew the ball until it was impossible to look on. Screwing her eyes shut Ace fell to her knees, turning away from the source of the assault. It was futile, the light bore into her brain. Just when she felt she might pass out the radiant ball seemed to gather itself and exploded savagely into the air, dissipating as it hit the ceiling.

But for the whistling still ringing in everyone's ears, silence returned. Ace opened her eyes and gazed around in confusion. Sunlight swept through the hallway, illuminating the once dark recesses and reflecting off a confetti of broken mirror glass.

"Is that it?" whispered Ace as the Doctor appeared at her side.

"I sincerely hope so," he replied firmly.

"The mirror was just the form chosen for the device, it could have been anything," the Doctor explained later when everything had calmed down. "One of the great unanswered questions about death is what happens to us afterwards, is all that we are lost. It's not just the knowledge, the memories, but the potential, the unique way of seeing and organising the accumulated data. This device would be placed in the room of a person who was about to die and at the moment of death the essence of them would be copied. Experiences, beliefs, feelings. We have something like it back home but much more sophisticated, and safe."

"So what went wrong?" asked Hawke.

"Can't you guess?" snapped Ace. "You say you're dying, how do you feel?"

"Scared." he answered honestly.

"Exactly," said the Doctor. "How many people lay with this machine in their room, each of them harbouring a fear of their imminent death? All that fear was stored into the device. Slowly, over time, it built; the more it absorbed, the more people could actually sense it on a subconscious level."

"So that's why this house had an atmosphere," Ace explained.

"But what about the ghost?" asked Hawke. "What terrified Florence?"

"A projection, something to help stir up the fear it needed," he explained.

"The more scared people were the more fear it could absorb. It had become part of a feedback circuit, creating and feeding endlessly until it reached saturation point. Although not technically alive it is the repository of several consciences, each acting as though they are."

"All that fear rattling around in there," said Ace horrified. "It drove them all mad."

"And my brother?"

"Influenced by the mirror and grieving, I believe he took his own life," replied the Doctor softly.

Hawke nodded reflectively.

"My Nan told me the reason it was bad luck to break a mirror was because it let the devil out," Ace said. "It's just a stupid superstition though isn't it?"

"Perhaps," smiling, the Doctor reached out and touched her nose affectionately. "Now the mirror's been destroyed, the stored consciousnesses have dissipated."

"All those people's memories, lost," she whispered sadly, "But how did you know the mirror was the device?"

"The Mesopotamians didn't have mirrors!" he smiled.

"Did you have to be so cruel to them?"

"Believe me, if it hadn't been necessary I wouldn't have done it."

"So how much of what you said was true?" asked Hawke, returning to more earthly concerns.

"Some, how much you believe is up to you. This was a house full of secrets, of darkness. None of you were killers, but you were all tied here, by duty, finance or because you had nowhere else to go."

"You're right," Hawke agreed sadly. "I've felt bitter my whole life and people around me have suffered."

"I think your brother really loved his wife," Ace offered. "And was committed to sorting his life out."

"I believed so too, that's why I went to him when he was in gaol," Hawke sighed. "Things are going to change, I'm going to see to that. I don't know how long I have left but I'm going to use the time better."

"I'm very pleased to hear it," said the Doctor approvingly.

"I have one or two things to sort out here, there are people who have been wronged because of me and my family."

"Then what?" asked Ace.

"A holiday," he smiled. "Still time for an adventure or two. Just not a cruise."

"Very wise," The Doctor laughed taking Ace's arm. "Come on, time we were going."



Arriving at a country house in England in the 1930's
the Doctor and Ace discover it is an unhappy place
burdened by darkness and terrible secrets.
It is possible there is a murderer amongst the occupants
and maybe something far worse.
They must unlock the secrets of the house and piece together
the truth if they are to have a chance at freeing
everybody from it's terrible grip.



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