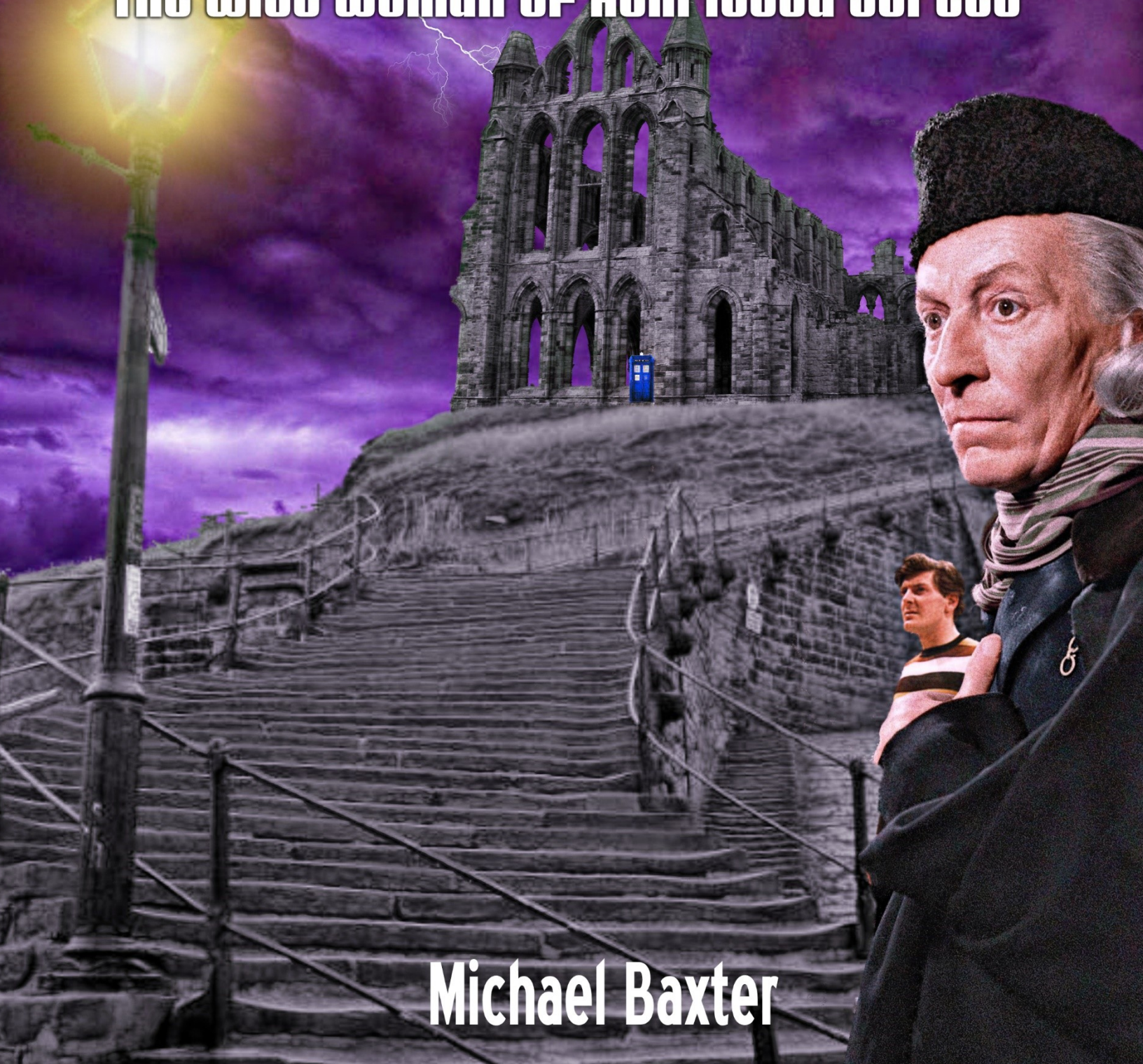


BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

The wise woman of Henrietta Street



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Steven Taylor pushed forward a lever on the six-sided control panel of the TARDIS, completing the materialisation sequence. The grinding cacophony of the time and space machine's engines died away.

The Doctor, settled in his deep armchair with worn but comfortable cushions at his back, looked up from his first edition of *In Patagonia* by Bruce Chatwin.

"Well, my boy, where are we this time then, hmm?"

Steven did his best to suppress a certain irritation. When the Doctor operated the Ship, he was rarely able to correctly identify their landing point and any criticism at all of his inability in this respect was always resented to some degree. Despite that, the old man never failed to imply, when Steven was at the controls, as the Doctor had quite often allowed him to be lately, that the young man ought to be able to say in what location the craft had materialised and in which period of time.

"I'm just about to establish that, Doctor."

Steven's tone was determinedly confident. He would not be ruffled by the exasperating old barnacle.

The Doctor flicked over another page of his book. "Good, good. Let me know when you have."

Steven muttered under his breath as he studied the instruments. He made up his mind quickly.

"Earth," he announced, refusing to add "or somewhere very like it".

The book was snapped shut. "When?"

"Somewhere between the 1930's and the 1960's," Steven replied, again without any unbecoming hesitation, hoping fervently that the temperamental 'yearometer' would prove to be passably accurate for once.

The Doctor rose from his chair and flicked a switch on the control panel. One of the indented circles that patterned the pale green walls flickered into life as a scanner-screen. The two men saw the stretch of beach, with a grey sea beyond it, that lay outside the TARDIS.

"The seaside," the Doctor said delightedly. "I can smell the salty breeze already."

"There doesn't seem to be anyone about," Steven commented, "but the readings do indicate that it's a bit nippy out there."

“Nippy! What kind of a word is that, eh?” scolded the Doctor. He glanced at the screen again. “I expect we’ve arrived outside the holiday season.” He took his long black cloak from its peg. “I intend to wear this and be prepared,” he announced. “Like the boy scouts,” he added with a chuckle. “You’ll need a warm coat, my boy. There’s rather an impressive one in the clothes chest. It was a present from Gilbert and Sullivan to thank me for some trifling suggestions I made for the plot of *The Gondoliers*. It was too large for me as it turned out but it should fit you at a pinch. Chesterton wore it once, I remember.”

Steven moved towards the Elizabethan chest. The Doctor took his black astrakhan hat from the stand and selected a walking stick, the one with the carved dog’s head handle. He turned a black switch and the great doors swung open, distracting Steven from finding the coat.

When they stood on the sand the Doctor spotted a church, perched on the headland near some eerie-looking ruins that were silhouetted against a winter sky. At the foot of the cliff a row of old cottages were visible. His insatiable interest was immediately aroused.

Steven also noticed the buildings but felt more drawn towards the lonely stretch of seashore, strewn with shells and pebbles, that extended in the opposite direction. It was soon established between the two travellers that they would split up and meet back at the TARDIS later.

The Doctor shivered suddenly. “It’s very cold indeed. Go and put on that coat, dear boy, then get yourself some coffee and a sandwich or two to take with you. The food machine is fully operational again. I made some changes, as you’ll see. There’s a flask in one of the small cupboards.” He thought for a moment. “I don’t think I’ll bother taking anything myself. Don’t forget to lock up the Ship.”

Steven, upon whom the Doctor had some time ago bestowed a key of his own, assured the old man that he would remember and then went back into the battered old police box to fetch the coat and provisions.

The Doctor walked briskly away, his cloak flapping about him in the chilly wind that skirmished along the beach.

Steven had not been traversing the shoreline for long before his normally well-combed hair was in disarray and wet with spindrift. He came across the deteriorating remains of a boat and his associated thoughts sent his gaze drifting across the slate-coloured sea to reach a gaunt crag a little way out that would be lashed mercilessly by the waves in stormy weather. As he leaned against a substantial rock by the cliff, munched a beef sandwich and looked forward to his hot drink he fell into an introspective mood. A procession of memories crossed his mind: His parents - a self-involved politician and a glacial society hostess; his grandmother, giving him the soft toy panda he named Hi-Fi for his birthday and providing the only real affection he received; his mother, perpetually inebriated after losing her husband to a conniving blonde secretary; his own inability to comfort the distant woman he had never known all his life; Roylus Prime, his doubtful refuge from home, and its repressive establishment; the Krayt battlecruisers, remorseless death machines dwarfing his own ship amidst the carnage of space war; the lonely years on Mechanus after his crash and before the Doctor came; Christopher Marlowe, the poetic and sensual, a man of the past arousing him to an alarming and undeniable degree; his low ebb after the apocalyptic events on Kembel and the Doctor, the crotchety, irascible Doctor, stroking his hair to comfort him as he sat on the edge of his bed teetering on the brink of tears...

They had formed a bond, he and the peripatetic old man, though it was not always an easy one. Together they wandered along the byways of space and through the infinite corridors of time, helping here or solving a problem there, like... like ...

It made Steven smile when he came up with the answer.

Like an intergalactic Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson.

The old horse stood patiently outside the Prince Regent public house as the barrels were unloaded from the wooden dray that the animal had pulled up the steep, narrow thoroughfare called Henrietta Street, as it had done for so many years. Minutes later, having drawn the empty dray some yards of the familiar return journey, the horse had reached the end of a life of toil and lay dead on the cobbles, flanked by the broken shafts of the dray.

The Doctor, having ascertained earlier that he was in Whitby, on the north-east coast of England, was distracted by the fall of the unfortunate horse behind him, as was a tall, formally dressed man on the opposite side of the road.

“Good heavens,” exclaimed the latter. “It’s poor old Nimrod.”

Intelligent grey eyes met the Doctor’s.

“I remember seeing him when he was still wet behind the ears, about two years before...”

He broke off and his face paled.

“Oh, Good Lord,” he gasped out. “What does it mean?”

He swayed suddenly and supported himself by leaning against an old cottage.

The Doctor was quickly beside him. “My dear sir, are you ill?”

The man made a visible effort to pull himself together. “I shall be all right. Thank you.” He smiled weakly. “Perhaps a little refreshment might be beneficial. Join me, won’t you? There’s a pleasant little establishment near the bottom of Church Street.”

“Most kind of you,” murmured the Doctor.

“My name is Mace. Gadney Mace.”

They reached the lower end of Henrietta Street and paused by the hundred and ninety-nine steps that led up to the church and the ruined abbey on the cliff.

“The churchyard, I seem to recall, is the one frequented by Dracula, at least in the pages of Bram Stoker,” the Doctor remarked conversationally.

“Yes indeed. About a hundred and fifty years ago part of it fell away and destroyed a number of cottages at the top of the hill. They were built very close to the cliff, you see. A number of old coffins were found in the debris and others could be seen sticking out of the cliff.”

“Was the church damaged?” the Doctor enquired.

“No, fortunately.”

“What about the ruins of the abbey?”

“Oh, they’re further back.”

“The abbey was closed by Henry VIII, I suppose?”

A nod. “The greedy fellow wanted its treasures. There wasn’t much subtlety about that situation.”

The Doctor shook his head sadly. “Most reprehensible.” He paused for a moment. “There was a priory on the site originally, I believe? Where the Synod of Whitby took place and the Abbess Hilda encouraged that young protégé of hers?”

“Caedmon. There’s a memorial to him in the churchyard.”

As they began to descend Church Street a most disagreeable smell assailed their nostrils.

"The sanitary arrangements aren't always adequate, I'm afraid," said Gadney Mace. "Though we have three-inch pipes, there are people with four-inch arseholes."

The Doctor was taken aback. "Er - quite," he responded.

Further down the road the Doctor paused to admire a view of beach, harbour and the quayside beyond that was visible through a gap between two buildings.

Mace followed his gaze. "The outlook from here, seen by way of the ghaut, has always been very popular indeed with artists. Photographers, too." A pause. "Like Frank Meadow Sutcliffe," he added, informatively.

"Indeed," responded the Doctor.

The White Horse and Griffin inn, which bore an old sign drawing attention to 'GOOD STABLING', proved to be the pleasantly convivial establishment that Mace had promised. There was a bar of highly polished oak and behind it a well-rounded barmaid, cheerful and blowsy, who seemed to be on familiar terms with all and sundry and whose name, the Doctor learnt, was Dolly Bacon. Mace purchased two pots of ale and ordered hot pies with mash and gravy as if it were a matter of course. He directed the Doctor to a cosy little corner table not far from the blackleaded cast-iron chimney piece in which a substantial fire blazed merrily. The fireplace was pleasingly set off by a brass toasting fork and two copper kettles, all highly polished, and was overhung by an old painting that depicted several portly men in eighteenth century costume sitting around a table in a courtyard having a tithe meeting. At the back of the room, by the largest of the steamed-up windows, a pasty-faced pianist with wet-looking lips, who was addressed by one semi-inebriated patron as Lew, banged out a sprightly piece that was totally at odds with his lugubrious expression.

"I remember this place from when I was a young shaver," said Gadney Mace. "That picture over the fireplace was there then. A rogue called Thomas Pickthank was the landlord, at least until he got six months in the jug with hard labour for stealing fleeces. A dreadful woman called Mildred Crust took over then and ran it for donkey's years. She was tough; more like a man really. She was accused of watering down the ale at one point but successfully brazened it out and then gleefully barred the complainant from her premises for life."

The food was brought over by the busty Dolly just as Mace was telling the Doctor that Charles Dickens had once dined there with a young man whose colourful life story would be developed into Great Expectations. Mace attempted to cut into his pie, then called the barmaid back to the table.

"Bring me another knife," he ordered. "I could ride bare-arsed to Glasgow on this one."

Dolly laughed. "Sorry, Mr Mace."

"She seems to be a very... affable sort of woman," the Doctor remarked tactfully, after she had brought the replacement knife and departed again.

"Oh, she's a good enough sort," agreed Gadney. "Rough as a docker's tea break, of course. Warm and willing, though, for those who are interested. She's had three husbands."

He paused, then added dryly:

"Of her own, that is."

Steven went back to the TARDIS and found that the Doctor had not yet returned. He decided to continue his walk in the direction the old man had taken, crossed the river and climbed Church

Street to the foot of the hundred and ninety-nine steps. Having failed to come across the elusive time traveller, he gave up his search for the moment and began the ascent to the top of the cliff, telling himself that he might at least have a look at the view.

The steps had landings at intervals, each occupied by a bench, the first of which bore a small metal plaque with the inscription: In memory of Ephraim Cuttle, who spent many happy times in Whitby.

Lucky fellow, thought Steven. Had he been a regular holidaymaker? Or perhaps a resident seafarer?

“He was a crony of mine, old Ephraim,” a white-haired, grizzled old relic with deeply lined, leathery skin chimed in, exactly on cue. “The things he could tell you. An entertainment in himself, he was.” A sigh. “He’s been mouldering in his grave for a fair few year now, the cantankerous old buzzard. It comes to us all, though. Can’t be too long now before I’m shovelled under myself. Clayton Ferguson’s the name, by the way.”

Steven pronounced his own appellation, smiling uncertainly at Ferguson, who was standing by the guard rail and had presumably been staring across rooftops and river towards the stone pier.

“These little lay-bys used to be coffin stops in the olden days, you know, where pall-bearers could have a rest on their way up to the boneyard.”

“Really?” Steven responded, abruptly changing his mind about making use of the bench for a few minutes. It was, in any case, too cold to be sitting about. He bid old Ferguson a polite goodbye and resumed his climb.

Soon he was standing beside the weathered gravestones of the old churchyard, which was certainly on the spooky side. He was tired enough to rest for a few minutes on the damp grass, protected as he was by his thick overcoat. He found the ancient church and particularly the stark ruins beyond it, silhouetted against the winter sky, quite evocative and worth his efforts. In the other direction, looking down the cliffside, he could see first the backs of the cottages immediately below, then the river, flowing through the town that had arisen along its banks and, on the far side where there had been the scope for expansion, spread. He could see boats tied up along the quayside there.

Returning to the steps, he descended and continued to look for the Doctor, but in vain. Perhaps they had missed each other and the old man was even now on his way back to the TARDIS, or already there, gleefully waiting to level an accusation of lateness.

The White Horse and Griffin tavern would have drawn him in at this point if he had possessed any suitable money. He was about to pass by with reluctance when it occurred to him that the Doctor might have felt in need of a drink and could also have carried a coin or two of the right type in that capacious frock coat of his.

The notion was at least worth checking out...

The Doctor leaned towards Mace. “Tell me, why did the death of that old horse shock you so much, hmm?”

“Ah, well, I was coming to that...”

“Well, Doctor, you’re dining like a king, I see.”

The Doctor was nettled by Steven’s ill-timed appearance, but hastily concealed the fact and introduced the young man to Mace, who immediately offered the newcomer a drink and a pie.

“Oh, I don’t want to impose,” Steven felt obliged to say.

Gadney Mace brushed this aside, called Dolly, placed the order and then gestured for Steven to sit.

“Now, about that horse...” the Doctor re-prompted.

“Horse?” Steven inquired. “Where would we keep a horse?”

“I’m not thinking of buying one,” snapped the Doctor, with some asperity.

Mace regarded this exchange with some amusement before inserting an account of Nimrod’s demise and his own meeting with the Doctor. It occurred to him fleetingly that the white-haired old stranger had never introduced himself.

After taking a moment to wash down a mouthful of steak, kidney and pastry with a satisfying draught of ale, he proceeded to regale his two listeners with:

“I was born in Whitby and have lived here all my life. My family has, perhaps, more than its share of somewhat eccentric characters. My cousin Lucilla, for instance. Her surname is Teatime, would you believe? She’s delightful company, I hasten to add...”

The Doctor, perceiving the threat of digression, interposed.

“Was... er... Nimrod once her horse then?”

“Oh no. Oh dear me no...”

The Doctor and Steven regarded him encouragingly. Mace responded by cutting straight to the point:

“A less agreeable relation of mine was Joan Shays, an aunt on my mother’s side, who was considered locally to be a ‘wise woman’ of sorts. A singularly unpleasant old crone, her eyes missed nothing and never shone brighter than when she had discovered a hidden secret about someone or heard news of some misfortune.”

“Perhaps she was generous to the poor,” Steven suggested, tongue-in-cheek.

The Doctor frowned at this levity but Mace seemed to appreciate it.

“She did take them presents of warm blankets,” he revealed, smiling mischievously.

“Oh... right,” Steven said uncertainly, trying to look serious now.

“A day or two later she told them, and anyone else she met, that she was still awaiting payment.”

Steven laughed. “What a sweet old lady.”

After a pause, during which Steven’s food and drink was brought, Mace went on: “Every New Year’s Eve Aunt Joan would be seen going up the steps to the church. At midnight, she always maintained, the souls of those destined to die in the following year appeared to her. She never mentioned names afterwards, but would drop sly hints.

“One New Year’s Day she was walking up Henrietta Street when someone called to her and asked if she had been to the church as usual. Old Joan, as she was usually called, shouted back angrily that people should mind their own business and that the whole thing was a load of claptrap anyway. She looked rather wild-eyed, apparently, and her thin, greying red hair was very untidy.

“Nimrod was attached to the brewer’s dray outside the Prince Regent, just as he was today, when he took fright at a sudden noise and bolted. His hooves, by some miracle, missed Aunt Joan. Unfortunately the wheels of the dray didn’t and she was crushed.

“She survived for a few minutes and spoke only once during that time, managing to croak ‘I saw...I saw...’ just before she died. Her tombstone, a small, isolated one, is in a far corner of the churchyard.”

The Doctor stared perceptively at Mace. “What she had seen was the reason for her abrupt dismissal of her visions as nonsense. Is that it, hmm?”

“I’ve always thought so, yes.”

“She herself had been among the manifestations on New Year’s Eve and she didn’t want to believe in them anymore.” The Doctor gazed sombrely at his half-empty glass. “It seemingly never occurred to her that one day her name would be on the Grim Reaper’s list, eh?”

“For the next day, too. Now, on the twentieth anniversary of the accident...”

The Doctor, who had been unaware of the present date, looked up abruptly. Steven, too, was suddenly uneasy and took a long drink from his tankard.

“...and on the exact spot, old Nimrod drops dead,” their companion ended, oblivious as yet of their disquiet.

All three of them, plus a number of other customers, almost leapt from their seats at that point when the door of the inn opened and slammed back forcefully against the wall.

But nobody came in.

Nobody they could see, at any rate.

In the picturesque seaside resort of Whitby, beneath the stark, cliff-top ruins of a ransacked priory associated with Dracula, a twisted and malicious hag is accidentally crushed beneath the wheels of a runaway brewer's dray.

Many years later, her eccentric and acerbic relative, Gadney Mace, witnesses the sudden death of an exhausted old carthorse on steep, cobbled Henrietta Street and is overcome with a terrible foreboding. In an old inn known as the White Horse and Griffin, the first Doctor learns the disturbing story of Old Joan and the visions she climbed a hundred and ninety-nine steps once a year to behold. Why did she reject her last sightings so vehemently?

Could a death on a fateful anniversary have closed a chapter and liberated an evil-minded spirit from an isolated grave

This story features the First Doctor as played by William Hartnell

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