

THE GHOST

II: THE SEARCH BEGINS

Geoff Davies

2019

Synopsis

Following their encounter in the old castle Bill and Sir James Edward Willingford meet up once again and commence the search together for Sir James' wife's burial place. Their adventures start with a conflict on a bus and an altercation with a vicar, intent on exorcising Sir James' spirit. At the start of his search he meets the very attractive Laura and discovers a mutual attraction. The presence of Sir James, however, threatens the budding relationship but after a number of incidents Laura comes to accept the presence of Sir James and the three of them continue the search together, during which they uncover some surprises with an interesting outcome.

The Bus

Crickleford, a village of about a thousand souls, nestles in the English countryside and is surrounded by fields, copses and woodland. Like many small English villages it has a parish church, dating back to Norman times, a pub, a small community shop and a village hall. To the east are hangers, from the top of which are magnificent views. Local villagers, had some time in the past, gathered together to cut steps into the hillside so that anyone who can face the arduous climb would be able to enjoy the stupendous vistas. From the top of the hangars the land then drops down to a fairly fast flowing chalk stream known as the River Crickle with a ford near the centre of the village and used since early times by villagers to access fields on the other side. The nearest town, Stanten, is about 15 miles away and can be reached by a half hour bus journey.

Bill Wilford lived in Crickleford in Wisteria Cottage, which was down a lane that led to the ford. It was late morning and today, a fine warm early spring day, he was on the number thirty-six double decker bus, which wasn't that full; in fact there was only a handful of people downstairs and none upstairs, as far as Bill knew. The number thirty-six was the only bus servicing the outlying villages and today he needed to go into town to buy some computer accessories and replenish his larder with items not available in the Crickleford village shop, hence his journey outside the rush hour thankfully free of crushing commuters, with their BO, jostling and briefcases or handbags which had the habit of jabbing one in the ribs or bashing one's head. He could have driven, of course, but today he just felt like taking the bus to sit and gaze out of the window and absorb the countryside views with fields full of yellow rapeseed, the hedgerows and the odd field of sheep, cows or horses.

About two minutes into the journey he felt a presence next to him. It wasn't as though the seat moved when someone sits next to you. He ignored the feeling until a voice said "Bill?" A spasm shot through his body as he turned slowly to face source of the voice. There, seated next to him was Sir James Willingford. He stared in disbelief until Sir James brought him out of his paralyzed shock, repeating the greeting. "Greetings Bill." He moved his left hand onto Bill's arm but the latter felt no sensation. "Sorry Bill. Did I surprise you?"

Bill ignored the question. “What’re you doing here?”

Whatever the reply was, Bill didn’t hear it. He was suddenly aware of an elderly couple a few rows back on the opposite side staring at him; as was a little girl leaning over the back of her seat a few rows forward. He turned to face the elderly couple, smiling somewhat guiltily. “Sorry. I dropped off and must have been dreaming.”

They both smiled back in that sympathetic way. “It’s alright” said the woman, indicating her husband with a sideways jerk of her head. “He’s always doing it.” The man, wearing one of those flat caps that elderly men often wear, nodded in agreement; a smile stretched across his face.

Bill turned back and smiled at the little girl, who proceeded to stick her tongue out and promptly disappeared behind her seat. “Sit down Jessica” he heard her mother snap. “Stop staring at that strange man.”

“Is all well with you Bill?” Sir James looked a bit concerned.

Bill got up and made his way to the front of the bus to climb the stairs to the top deck.

“You getting off mate? The stop’s a long way yet and you should ring the bell.” The driver wasn’t very happy.

“No” replied Bill. “I thought I would like to see the view from the top deck.”

“What view? You trying to be funny?”

Bill ignored the comment and climbed the stairs at the front of the bus to the top deck.

Fortunately, it was empty, so he made his way to the back and sat down. Sir James joined him instantly.

“I believe I may have upset you Bill.”

There was a long silent pause before Bill felt he could answer.

“No Sir James, you haven’t upset me. It’s just that I can’t talk to you with other people around.”

“Why, pray, is that?”

“Because other people can’t see or hear you and it appears as if I’m crazy ... talking to myself.”

Sir James nodded, his face taking on a sorrowful apologetic expression.

“Oh. I am deeply sorry and regret any embarrassment I have caused you, Bill.”

Bill felt a bit guilty; after all, a ghost wouldn’t be expected to know that. At the back of his mind though, he couldn’t help but wonder why he could see and hear ‘the ghost’ and others couldn’t. Still, the reason would no doubt become clear when he had more time to investigate the phenomena.

“That’s okay” he responded cheerfully. “Now, why have you decided to make a re-appearance? I thought you were searching for your beloved wife.”

Sir James settled back into his seat next to Bill.

“That’s just it. I am in need of your help once again.”

Bill had that sense of foreboding.

“What sort of help?”

“I am in need of your help to find my beloved.”

“But she’s dead” Bill blurted out and instantly regretted it, noticing the hurt expression on Sir James’ face. “Well, sorry; but you know what I mean.” Bill continued quickly, trying to be a bit more positive. “Where were you expecting to find her?”

Sir James looked quite depressed.

“I have searched for her far and wide, visiting the many places which we visited or stayed but have felt no trace of her. I just hope she hasn’t been damned to hell. She was such a good and loyal wife.”

“I am sure she was” Bill responded, as comfortingly as he could. “But how can I help?”

“Perhaps you could seek out information on my family to try and find out what happened to her. I am sure there must be a record somewhere of my dear wife’s demise.”

Bill didn’t feel too happy about the prospect.

“That could take ages and I am neither too sure where to start looking, nor do I have the time.”

“I will make it worth your while Bill.”

Bill stared at him. “And how do you propose to do that?”

Sir James pondered a moment then perked up.

“I know of something that may interest you.”

“And what might that be?”

“Help me first. You will not regret it.” Sir James was now becoming quite cheerful and excited.

There was another long pause while Bill thought of what he might be getting himself into, before he began to reply.

“Well”

At that moment they were interrupted by four young lads who came bounding noisily up the stairs. They all glared at Bill sitting at the back, before choosing random seats to sit in or use to leap across to another seat. Bill and Sir James just sat and watched them, Sir James remembering not to ask Bill any questions when others were around. One of the lads turned and stared at Bill.

“What’s the trouble Granddad? Got a problem?”

Bill shook his head slowly, preferring not to answer in case he got into an unwelcome argument but the boy wasn't going to let him off so easy. He turned to his friends and shouted.

"He can't speak. He must be a dummy."

They now all turned to stare at him and started laughing. One of the other lads started walking down the bus towards him.

"Hello dummy. Want your mummy?"

They all cracked up laughing again and the other three followed the first one down the gangway.

"Do you wish me to get rid of them?" Sir James asked, staring ahead at the approaching quartet.

Bill thought '*How is he going to do that?*' but just nodded anyway.

Sir James disappeared and the next minute the second lad seemed to trip and fell against the one in the lead. Both fell in the gangway, the first one yelling as his mate fell on top of him.

"Jason! Whatcher doin?"

"Nu'ing. I just ... tripped on sumut ... I fink."

They both got up. The first one brushed off his clothes.

"Wha'jer mean tripped? There's nu'in to trip over."

Jason looked a bit sheepish. "It's like someone pushed me."

"Be' tha' wa' you Darren" the first one snarled.

"Wont eever of us Joe" Darren blurted out, glancing back at the fourth boy. He then pointed at Bill.

"Bedit were 'im, casting a spell."

"Oh, funny" yelled Jason.

Joe started forward again and suddenly his feet slipped forward as though he had trodden on a banana skin. The result was that he fell back against the others and they all ended up in a pile. Gordon's head hit the floor.

"Ow, tha' 'urt, you prick!"

"Wont my fault", Joe shouted back.

"Someone push yer?" sneered Gordon.

The bus had stopped and the driver's head appeared at the top of the stairs.

"You lot don't behave yourselves and you'll be off this bus. Now; get downstairs where I can keep my eye on you."

The boys brushed off their clothes and sheepishly followed him back down.

Sir James reappeared beside Bill.

"How did you do that?" Bill asked.

"Do what?"

“Make those boys keep falling over. I mean, you are a ghost; not physical and therefore not able to .. er, cause things to move.”

Sir James mulled the question over for a moment. “I really don’t know.” He pondered a bit more. “What I do know is that I sort of ‘willed’ it and it seemed to have an effect. I must admit that I have never tried it before.” He raised his head in a superior fashion. “I must admit that I am quite impressed with myself.”

Bill started. “What? Never tried it before; but you said you were going to get rid of them and...”

“Well I did; didn’t I not?”

“But you just said you had never tried it before.”

“’Tis true.” Sir James looked puzzled.

“But how did you know it would work?”

“I didn’t.”

Bill was getting confused. “So you thought to yourself *‘I will tell Bill that I will get rid of the boys but don’t know whether I really can’*”

Sir James thought for a moment and also looked confused now.

“Yes. I think. That’s right. I suppose. Is that what you mean?”

Bill got up. “Oh, I don’t know; but it sounds as though you were taking a risk with my wellbeing.”

He started walking down the gangway hearing the faint “Oh; what’s wellbeing?” behind him. He shook his head and felt it best to get off and walk the rest of the way to avoid any further embarrassment. Fortunately the bus had reached the outskirts of the town so he knew he wouldn’t have far to walk.

Sir James disembarked with him as, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the four sullen youths now on their best behaviour.

The Pub

'I could do with a drink' Bill thought to himself as he approached The King's Head.

"Aha!" Exclaimed a voice to his right. "My sovereign Lord."

Bill glanced up at the pub's sign board and noticed what he presumed was the head of Charles I.

"It was certainly a sad day when that ruffian Cromwell defeated my Lord's army" Sir James said despondently.

Bill nodded his head. "Hm, I often wonder how things might have turned out if he had won the civil war. I also sometimes wonder how Britain might have developed had William failed in his invasion in 1066. It was certainly lucky that William had better disciplined troops."

Sir James suddenly became quite animated. "Yes, I must agree with you in some respects. My own family in fact was quite lucky; as I believe we are descended from Anglo-Saxon stock and somehow survived the Norman conquest." He paused a moment. "What about you Bill? Are you from Norman or Anglo-Saxon stock?"

Bill paused before pushing open the door to the pub. "I really don't know, but now you mention it I could be Anglo-Saxon as my surname is Wilford."

"Well I never!" Sir James exclaimed. "What a coincidence."

Bill said no more and entered the pub.

It was certainly a very old pub, probably Tudor or even older looking at the characteristic dark wood frame and white plastered walls. Bill liked it because of its old world charm, welcoming landlord and coziness. In fact it was his regular when he made trips to town. Bill and Sir James stepped through the doorway into the gloomy interior, due to the small windows mainly set quite high up the walls. The bar was directly in front and curved round to the left and right. There was no one at the bar itself but there were a few people sitting at tables talking and drinking. Bill could hear voices coming from the kitchen. All along the right hand side were booths of high backed seats with tables between; enough room for groups of four people. This offered a certain amount of privacy for patrons. Bill selected a booth at the end furthest from the bar, so that others wouldn't hear him apparently chatting to himself. As he made his way towards the bar the landlord appeared.

"Hello Bill. Long time no see."

"Hello George" Bill replied. "Yes, I've been pretty busy lately."

“What’ll you have?”

“Two pints ... sorry, I mean a pint of cider please.”

“You expecting someone or are you just thirsty?” George laughed.

“Thirsty I guess, but I wouldn’t mind the right sort of company at the moment.”

“Perhaps Jenny could keep you company, if we’re not too busy” he chuckled.

Jenny was the attractive long haired buxom blonde barmaid who always wore dresses showing her ample cleavage. She was also probably quite well paid Bill thought, as she tended to attract a regular stream of admiring male clientele to ogle her. A valuable asset to the pub one might say.

“I’ll bring it over.”

“Thanks.”

Bill sat with Sir James opposite. “I hope you don’t mind watching me, Sir James” he mumbled as quietly as possible.

George appeared with the cider. “He we are Bill. Enjoy.”

“Thanks.”

“It looks good and makes me quite envious” Sir James said, staring at the glass of golden liquid.

“Yes” Bill replied taking a good draft. He began to feel a bit self-conscious and began to pity Sir James staring at him enjoying his drink. “Well” he continued, putting the glass down, “let’s get started.” Then he thought of something else he wanted to ask the ghost. “But tell me first Sir James; how come you’re not speaking in your usual tongue, using words like ‘thee’ and ‘thou’?”

“Well thanks to you Bill, in helping me reconnect with my body” he replied “I have been able to travel about and noticed, from dialogue around me, that the words people use have changed over the years, so I thought it about time to bring myself up-to-date, so to speak.”

“But surely you didn’t need your body to do that; after all you are a ghost.”

“It’s not the same. I mean, a head floating about looking for its wife. Anyway I really appreciate what you did for me.”

“Glad to have been of help” Bill replied, cheerfully. “Now, fill me in with your family background and I will just sit and listen.” He stuck his head out of the cubicle and glanced about. “I don’t want people to think I’m loopy, talking to myself.”

“Loopy?” Sir James queried.

Bill pointed to his head. “A bit, you know, nutty.”

“You use some strange words but I believe I know what you mean.”

“Good. Carry on.”

“Well” said Sir James “to continue where I left off, before we were rudely interrupted by those unruly peasants on that carriage, I took the journey to my wife’s parent’s house. I thought it likely that she would have gone there when Cromwell’s troops commandeered and ultimately destroyed my family home as punishment for supporting the King.”

“Hang on then” Bill interrupted, but in turn was interrupted by Sir James.

“Hang? No way. They preferred to remove our heads with an axe.”

“No. I meant ‘wait a minute’. The term ‘hang on’ is a figure of speech and means, well ‘stop at the last word or phrase you uttered’.”

“Oh, I see.”

Bill wasn’t entirely sure that he understood but told him to continue anyway, which he did.

“It might be useful if we sketched out your family tree, which might give us some idea where she might have gone.” Bill added.

Sir James brightened up. “Good idea Bill, especially as when I arrived at her family home, much changed in a tasteful way I might add, I sensed not a lasting presence but that she had been there in a very distressed state.”

Bill was astonished. “How did you know that?”

“The distressed spirit” Sir James started, “leaves traces of its presence which tend to linger until the soul is at peace. The longer the distressed person remains at a place the stronger the footprint. Thus, I know that my dear wife had been here, but only for a short duration.”

Bill nodded. “Hm, interesting.” He got up. “I will go and get some paper and a pen to draw your family tree. Wait here.”

“I’ve no intention of going anywhere” Sir James retorted.

George was at the left end of the bar chatting to a couple of customers but noticed Bill’s presence. He called out to the kitchen. “Jenny, your friend Bill is here. Could you look after him please?”

Bill felt his heart thump with a trace of excitement as Jenny appeared. She was wearing a white, very low cut blouse with plenty to fill it. Bill found it difficult to take his eyes off her cleavage. She looked ravishing as usual with her blonde hair in plaits giving her that ‘Scandinavian’ look. Bill often thought about asking her out but never seemed to pluck up the courage, probably because he expected her to have a boyfriend already. She certainly wasn’t married, according to the absence of a wedding ring.

“Hello Bill” she purred. “What can I get you my darling?”

Bill cleared his throat. “I don’t suppose you have a pen and paper I could borrow.”

“Going to write me a love letter?” she smiled.

“I wish. No, just a few things come to mind that if I don’t write them down I will forget them.”

She turned round to grab an order pad and pencil from the shelf behind her.

“Here, take this and use what you like.”

Bill took the pad and pen, brushing her hand as he did so. It was smooth and delicate. “Thanks Jenny.”

“You’re welcome Bill dear.” She turned and walked back towards the kitchen.

Whilst all this was going on, Bill didn’t notice the tall man wearing a top hat and long coat, with the appearance of an undertaker, pass behind him to sit in the booth next to Bill’s. He already had a drink in his hand and sat out of sight of Bill’s field of vision. Bill returned to the booth where Sir James had his eyes closed.

“Are you asleep Sir James?” he asked quietly.

Sir James’ eyes opened slowly. “Just contemplating and wondering whether this is all worthwhile; particularly in expecting you to help me in my quest.”

Bill felt sorry for him again. “That’s what friends are for isn’t it?”

Sir James’ eyes lit up. “Friend? If you call me your friend then I truly value your friendship and will be grateful forever.” His expression saddened a little.

“Sadly, there is no way I can repay you.”

“I’m not expecting payment” replied Bill. “After all, tracing your family will provide me with the experience when it comes to tracing my own ancestors.”

Suddenly, his eyes lit up once again. “Oh, and what did you say your surname was?”

“Wilford” Bill replied, leaning forward in his seat.

“Do you think we could we be related?” Sir James asked with some excitement. “If your name is Wilford and mine, as you know, is Willingford, perhaps there could have been a name change some time in the past.”

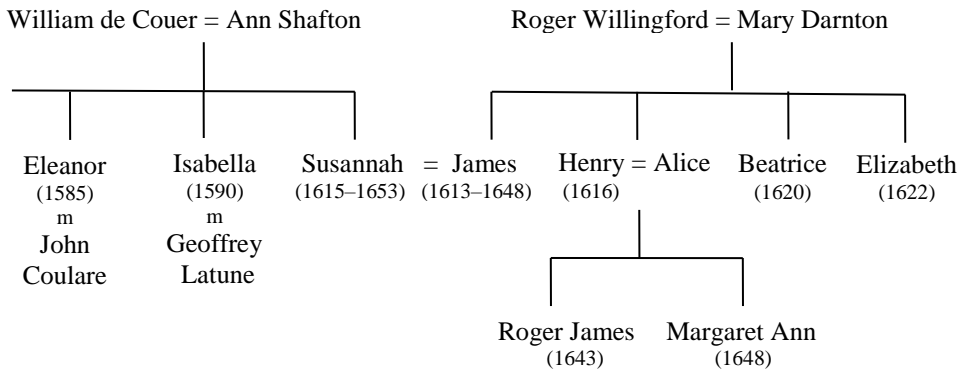
Bill shrugged. “A bit of a long shot.” He slumped back. “After all, there are Willingdons, Willingtons, Willingfords, Willinghams. It could be any one of those that are your descendants.”

Sir James’ expression changed again to one of disappointment. “It was just a thought.”

Bill picked up the pen. “Now for the family tree.”

Listening to Sir James, he drew a chart of Sir James’ and his wife’s families, that seemed relevant to their investigation.

The Family Tree of Sir James Willingford in 1649



He scanned the completed chart. “So, you and Susanna didn’t have children?” “Sadly not” Sir James replied. “Susanna seemed to have trouble conceiving and was most distraught at not being able to produce an heir or even a daughter and felt she was letting me down. However, she was a very loyal and loving wife and, after all, it could have been my fault.” He hesitated a moment. “What about you Bill? Do you have a family?”

“Yes” Bill replied. “I have a sister who lives in Canada.”

“Canada?”

“Yes, the northern part of the Americas.”

Sir James pondered on this reply for a moment. “Do you see her very often?”

“Sadly not, but we do keep in regular contact.”

Bill returned to the chart. “What about Susanna’s family?”

Sir James looked a bit grim. “I understand they played their cards right and developed parliamentary sympathies when they saw that the tide was turning against the Royalists.”

“So it’s unlikely that Susanna would have stayed with them for long” Bill suggested.

“Certainly she would have been an embarrassment to them and a possible risk” Sir James added.

“Very caring in-laws” Bill muttered, sarcastically. “What about her sister Isabella?”

“Yes, entirely possible.”

“Where did her family live?

“Susanna’s parents lived in Penderton in the Welsh Marches and her sister Isabella near Pulchester.”

Bill scanned the chart again. “What about your parents? Could she have gone to them?”

“No” Sir James replied. “My father was killed in battle and the family property was confiscated.”

There was a sad pause. “I don’t know what became of my mother. Stripped of her wealth, I believe she and my two sisters might have approached my brother Henry for protection, but what became of them I don’t know.”

Bill glanced at the chart again. “I see your brother had two children. How old were they?”

Sir James lifted his eyes up and thought for a moment. “Roger was five years old and Margaret about three months and ...” he looked across to the chart “Beatrice was betrothed”.

“Hm” Bill pondered. “Do you think he survived the war and could she have stayed with him?”

“I don’t know. Certainly he was not under arrest at the time I was incarcerated, so maybe survived.”

“Did he partake in any battles?”

“No. Having a family to support I believe his support for the Royalist cause was engineered in more subtle ways. He was an accountant, so possibly had some value to the Parliamentarians. I wouldn’t have blamed him if he agreed to provide them with his services. He had to survive for his family’s sake. He could also have thought about the dilemma he would find himself in by letting our mother and his sisters live with his family.” Sir James shook his head slowly. “Henry probably had enough on his plate to take in Susanna as well.”

“Yes, I see what you mean. A difficult situation.” Bill considered a few options. “Do you think Henry’s home would be a good place to start looking? Where did he live?”

“Upper Settingly.”

“Upper Settingly? There’s nothing there now other than an old derelict chapel a stream and farm land.”

“What?” Sir James was visibly astounded. “But there was a small hamlet there with the chapel and Henry had a large house on the other side of the river which was accessed via a bridge that I believe dated back to Roman times.”

“This doesn’t sound like it’s going to be easy; but I guess we have to start somewhere.”

Bill thought for a moment. "We'll start with Upper Settingly as it isn't too far away. Pulchester is about a hundred miles and Penderton one hundred and fifty miles, so will probably involve staying locally for a few days to carry out any research."

Sir James laid a ghostly hand on Bill's arm, which of course he didn't feel. "You have my deepest thanks, Bill, for your commitment and all the help you are giving me."

"No problem" he replied. "I'm looking forward to it" he added, not sure whether he actually believed what he was saying.

Bill drained his glass and was about to get up when the tall man wearing the top hat and long coat came around to his booth. He sat down opposite Bill where Sir James had been sitting, before the latter sidled over to the left of the stranger. Bill nearly warned him that Sir James was already sitting there but stopped himself just in time. The stranger didn't remove his hat but Bill noted the long grey face with equally long hooked nose, thinking that he looked like a witch. He was about to ask the stranger why he came and sat there but the man spoke before Bill had chance.

"You are disturbed my son?"

It seemed like a statement more than a question.

"Er, no" replied Bill, putting his glass back on the table. "Why do you ask? Anyway, who are you?"

The stranger leaned forward with his elbows on the table and his hands placed together with touching thumbs and fingertips.

"I am here to help you, my son."

Bill was getting irritated that this stranger had interrupted his plans and that he kept calling him 'my son'.

"In what way?" he asked brusquely.

The stranger lowered his hands. "Er, how can I put it."

He was obviously fighting to find the right words to say, but finally looked Bill straight in the eyes and said. "I sense that you are in contact with a spirit from the past."

There was an awkward silence while Bill looked towards the seat next to the man and noticed Sir James raise his eyebrows in a questioning way. The stranger didn't miss this and, lifting his left arm off the table, turned slightly to his left. "Ah! It is here; next to me."

Bill was about to admonish the stranger with 'You mean Sir James not it' but thought better of it.

"And what gives you the impression that I am in contact with a spirit when all I am doing is just trying to enjoy a drink."

The stranger glanced down at Bill's sketch of Sir James' family tree. "Let's say that I couldn't help overhearing your conversation, even though you were speaking very quietly so as not to attract attention."

"You were listening in to what I was muttering to myself?" Bill replied somewhat annoyed. He quickly gathered his thoughts, as he did on the bus. "You've got it wrong you know. I am an amateur dramatist and am practicing my lines for a play relating to the English Civil War that our group are staging."

The stranger slumped back in his seat. "No. Not only do I not believe you but I really do 'sense' a presence here with us and only wish to help you ... both." Bill wanted to get shot of this chap but curiosity prompted him to give him the benefit of the doubt.

"Since you don't know what the problem is, how can you help?"

"I do know that there is a lost soul with us who wishes to be united with others and is but a yoke around your neck."

"Not a yoke ..." Bill began, but the stranger ignored him and continued.

"I can help you both."

Bill contemplated the reply whilst the stranger sat studying him as though he was trying to read Bill's mind. He caught that phrase '... to be united with others ...' and thought '*Maybe this guy can help*'. He decided to follow it up. The stranger became interestingly alert, aware that Bill was about to say something in agreement.

"When you say 'wishes to be united with others' ..."

"Yes" he interrupted eagerly.

"What do you mean or how do you know?"

The stranger sat up straight. "I am a man of God and through His teachings and for the service I devote to Him I have developed an insight into the spiritual word." He sat back and waited for Bill's next comment or question.

Bill pondered this some more. '*Maybe this guy can really help or at least help us find Sir James' wife*'.

At which point Sir James himself joined in. "Bill?"

Bill didn't reply but shifted his eyes across to Sir James and raised his eyebrows slightly in acknowledgement.

Sir James continued. "I do not feel comfortable with this."

Bill took up this point to try and sooth Sir James' concern. "How do you propose to achieve this union?" He asked the stranger.

The man leant forward across the table. "With God's help we shall bring them together in God's house."

"When?"

"Now, if you wish."

Bill looked across at Sir James, who shrugged his shoulders in what Bill interpreted was his agreement.

“Okay. We’ll give it a shot.”

The stranger rose to move off.

“Oh, by the way” Bill asked.

“Yes?”

“What is your name? I forgot to ask.”

“The Reverend Humphries. John Humphries.” He turned and made his way to the pub door with Bill and Sir James following. Bill dropped some coins on the bar as he passed by.

“So long Bill” George called out, wiping glasses at the far end of the bar.

“Thank you Sir” he added, to the Reverend.

John Humphries just nodded and raised an arm in acknowledgement.

Bill thought ‘*The vicar hasn’t even asked my or Sir James’ name*’.

The Church

They made their way silently along the street, past a couple of turnings and left down an alley way that lead to a small close with a few old Victorian houses facing the church cemetery, which was surrounded by a crumbling stone wall. Bill recognized the church as St Lukes, although he didn't recall ever having been inside. The vicar led them through a small gate and along a path around to the church entrance. Bill didn't pay much attention to the church itself but did notice the characteristic yew tree which looked as though it was suffering from some disease. The graveyard didn't look particularly well maintained either. The grass was quite long and creeping across the path and most of the graves were covered in weeds; but a few had been cleared, with pots of half dead flowers left by caring relatives. When they reached the church entrance the reverend took a large key from his pocket and inserted it into a large lock. Following a loud clunk he turned the large ring handle and pushed open the heavy wooden door beckoning them to enter. It was an old 15th–16th century building, which had been extended over the years as the town's population increased. The inside was rather dingy with a musty odour and chill in the air. It gave the impression of not being well attended. Many churches have vases of flowers, display areas or sections for children's activities but here there was nothing that conveyed a welcoming feeling. The vicar removed his top hat as they entered revealing long wispy grey hair.

"Do you get very large congregations?" Bill asked.

"Y ... es" came back the hesitant reply, which Bill interpreted as 'No'.

'I'm not surprised' he thought. *'This guy would give anyone the creeps'*.

"Please" the vicar said, indicating with his hand for them to walk ahead of him.

As Bill and Sir James turned and walked down the aisle they heard a faint click. Turning their heads they saw the vicar had locked the door with the large iron key and removed it from the lock. Above the door Bill noticed a large circular stained glass window with a circular central panel of plain yellow glass. It had the strange effect of drawing one towards it as if one wanted to 'escape'! His attention was brought back by Sir James' next statement.

"I feel distinctly uncomfortable, Bill" he said.

"Why are you locking the door?" Bill called out to the Reverend.

"We must not be disturbed" came the somber reply as the vicar joined them.

'Not much chance of that' Bill thought.

"Please" said the vicar, indicating for them to sit in the front pews close to the altar. "I presume the ... er spirit is with you?"

Bill looked at Sir James' concerned expression and replied hesitantly "Yes."

"Good." He turned and made his way the vestry. "I will be back in just a moment."

"I think we should go" Sir James said.

"Let's give him a chance, even though I think it's a waste of time" Bill replied.

He turned to sit down in the pew, on which he could see a layer of dust which he tried to blow off. Whilst waiting for the vicar to return he wiped any residual dust off with his hand and glanced around the church. There were a few tatty looking pew kneeling cushions which, Bill thought, needed recycling. The altar did have a couple of vases containing what were obviously artificial flowers and the lectern was in the form of what appeared to be an eagle with part of one wing missing.

After a few minutes the Reverend Humphries returned with his church apparel on and a large old worn looking book in his hand. As he approached the altar and opened it, Bill noted the frayed black cover.

'The book of spells' he thought, jokingly.

"Are we ready?"

"Yes."

"And the lost soul?"

Bill sighed to himself "Yes". *'Lost soul! This guy just doesn't understand.'*

The vicar found his place in the book and set it upon the lectern. He raised his arms each side and began to chant.

"Oh Lord who giveth life and taketh it from us.

We seek thigh help on this sad day."

Bill and Sir James glanced at each other. *"Sad?"*

"We have amongst us one whose yearning
is to be united with one long gone."

Susanna came to both Bill's and Sir James' minds.

"Your words of wisdom have been forsaken

And the Devil's hand has intervened."

Bill didn't like the sound of that and Sir James was getting fidgety.

"I beseech thee take this sorrowful spirit
And cast the Devil from its soul."

"Tell him to stop" Sir James said quickly. "I must get out of here." He got up off the bench.

"Bring forth thy servants to cleanse this spirit
And take it to the other world."

Now things were starting to happen. It seemed to start with a low moan which slowly increased in pitch. At the same time dust from the middle of the aisle was starting to circulate as though caught by a whirlwind.

"The Devil holds its children closely.
Oh Lord, bring thy wrath to cast it down."

"Tell him to stop before it is too late." Sir James' voice was tinged with panic.

"Please stop" Bill called out, but the vicar ignored him.

"The Devil fights hard and dost not yield.
I beseech thee to bring thine angels into the field to help us."

The whirlwind was getting stronger and the sound was increasing in intensity and pitch.

"I have to get out NOW." Sir James was in the air and rushing towards the door.

"Open the door" yelled Bill. He got up and approached the chanting vicar.

"Where is the key?"

The vicar ignored him.

"I now feel I have the power to banish this spirit from the Earth.
With faith in you the almighty we will extinguish the Devil's powers."

Things were now really starting to happen. The noise of the whirlwind was becoming deafening and a few tatty prayer books on the pews were being

carried up into the air. Sir James was now flying around the church looking for a way out.

“Soon, it will be too late” he shouted.

Bill grabbed the vicar and shook him. “Stop. Now. Before it is too late. This is not working.”

“You are wrong” the vicar shouted above the melee. “It will soon be released.”

“He doesn’t need ‘releasing’.” Bill yelled.

The vicar paid no attention to the pleadings.

“I feel the power is now within me.

At last ... “

He didn’t get to finish. Suddenly, the circular centre of the stained glass window glowed as though the sun had shone upon it. Sir James became aware of it and with a deafening roar headed for the yellow disc and with a shattering of glass exited the church.

The Reverend stopped suddenly looking dumbstruck. “What have I done?”

“I don’t know, you stupid old fool” Bill snapped. “Now open the bloody door.”

The vicar just stood paralyzed. Bill quickly looked around and made his way to the vestry, where he found the key. The vicar was still standing staring at the stained glass window with the hole in it while Bill unlocked the door and let himself out.

There was no sign of Sir James. Bill momentarily thought it a bit ironical when he considered the meaning of the term *no sign of the ghost*; a bit like saying ‘no sign of the invisible man’. He wandered around the churchyard and found pieces of stained glass where the window had blown out. A few passers-by had stopped just outside the surrounding wall staring at the broken window.

“Do you know what happened?” asked a tall thin man, suspiciously.

“No” replied Bill. “Maybe the window was under stress; but I don’t know why, considering how many centuries it’s been there. Maybe there was some slight ground movement under the church.”

This explanation didn’t seem to satisfy the suspicious onlooker but Bill continued his walk around the church thinking that the next church appeal will be for funds to repair the window. Eventually, he gave up and wandered back into the town wondering if he would see Sir James again or whether he had been exorcised by the stupid vicar. He felt guilty about what might have

happened to Sir James. It was his fault that Sir James had probably been exorcised and that he had not kept the promise to help him find his wife. The feeling remained with him for the rest of the day.

Laura

Over the following weeks Bill thought less and less about the ghost but it nevertheless had triggered an interest in investigating the genealogy of Sir James' family and the history of the castle; so he thought a good starting point was to visit the local library in his spare time to start some research.

The town library was a dull grey concrete building next to the council offices. He walked across the car park, strewn as usual with take-away cartons, plastic drink bottles and other assorted rubbish, no doubt thrown out of car windows by untidy youths. He stepped into the small entrance lobby, briefly scanning the notices pinned on the cork notice board. The one that drew his attention was plans for a new library: a smart looking red brick building set in an artist's impression of a park with trees, shrubs, footpaths, picnic tables and a duck pond. '*Very nice*' thought Bill, '*If it ever happens*'. As an afterthought he hoped that they didn't forget the dog poo bins. He pushed at the inner door that wouldn't move; then saw the notice on the door that said *PULL*, which he proceeded to do. He glanced around then made his way to the enquiries desk, behind which sat a very attractive brunette with long hair tied back in a ponytail. Her face and upper part of her body were indicative of a very slim woman probably in her mid to late twenties. She was wearing a long sleeved mauve blouse and as Bill approached her he noticed her sparkling brown eyes and slightly pinkish lips from a fairly neutral lipstick. '*Very nice*' he thought to himself.

"Good morning" she said with a lovely smile as he approached the desk. "Can I help you?"

She had a lilting voice but no real accent, so there was no indication as to which part of the country she was from. Bill felt a little embarrassed at his self-consciousness brought on by the feeling that he was ogling her, which he was.

"Yes" he replied. "Well I hope so anyway". He then relaxed. "I am trying to trace a local lord's family from the time of Charles the First and was wondering where to start."

"Interesting" she said. "But why a particular family?"

Bill considered the question for a moment wondering how to answer it. "I visited the old castle in Crickleford recently and thought it would be interesting to find out a bit about who owned it."

“Oh, I can tell you that” she replied, with some excitement. “It was Sir James Willingford, who was beheaded by Cromwell during the civil war”.

Bill felt deflated for a moment and sort for another reason. “Oh. Well what about his later heritage?”

“Well he didn’t have any children so the family ceased to exist”.

He thought again but then regretted what he hastily said next. “What about his brother and two sisters?”

Now she was surprised. “Gosh, how did you know he had siblings?”

Bill felt as though he had dug himself into a hole. “Oh er, something I read a while ago in some history magazine.”

“I love history but don’t remember ever coming across that article. What was the title of the magazine and have you still got it?” she replied enthusiastically.

“Um no. I’ve forgotten the title and must have thrown it away.”

“Pity” she said. “I have actually studied our local history and never found much information at all relating to the castle owners”. He had the impression that she didn’t really believe him.

Bill suddenly thought of another reason to cover his evasiveness. “It’s also part of a bet.”

“A bet” she said, suspiciously. “Hm. Okay” she continued, coming around the desk. “Follow me.”

As she walked elegantly before him he noted her neat black skirt ending just above the knee and well-proportioned shapely legs. ‘Wow’ he thought to himself.

Reaching the section on History she scanned the titles on the Stuart period locating those on the English Civil War. “Fortunately we have a number of extra titles on loan from other libraries that might help” she said, pulling a couple out slightly from the shelf. “Try these and a few of the others and see how you get on.”

‘Opportunity’ thought Bill. “Thank you Miss ...”

“Larson” she replied with what he interpreted as a very alluring smile. “Laura Larson”.

“Thank you for your help Laura” he replied, with a big smile. “I’m Bill. Bill Wilford.”

Her eyes opened wide for a moment. “How interesting.”

“What?” he replied.

“Your name; add in ‘ling’ and you could have been Willingford; the name of the family in which you are showing so much interest. Perhaps you are related.”

"I'd never thought of that" he lied, remembering that Sir James had suggested the same thing in the pub. Still, it was a means of keeping the conversation flowing. Laura was about to turn away but Bill quickly added "Do you know much about the Civil War then?"

She turned back to face him. "I should. I have a degree in History but am currently studying archaeology and also for a degree in English Language."

"Wow" he replied in surprise. "Are you working here full time as I haven't seen you before?"

"No. I'm sort of freelance so I tend to help out in various libraries, regional record offices and try to go on archaeological digs when I can. Other than that I am available when temporary help is required for other related activities; in museums for example."

"Sounds quite exciting" Bill replied rhetorically.

"It pays the bills, my further education and other needs."

He probed a bit further. "Entertainment? Relaxation?"

"I read a lot" she replied, reaching her hand behind her head to check her ponytail, "I enjoy my studies, love music and travel about as much as I can afford." She paused. "So life's good."

She then beamed such a smile that Bill couldn't help blurt out "Fancy going for a drink ... a meal ... or something?" and then added defensively "Assuming, that is, that you haven't got a boyfriend."

He had noticed that she wasn't wearing a wedding or engagement ring, not that he would have known what they might have looked like. She didn't reply and seemed to be searching for an excuse to decline his invitation, but his disappointment quickly evaporated when she replied "Yes, why not."

Bill was about to suggest a time, when she continued "But what about your profession and interests Bill. Do we have anything in common? Not that it should be the deciding factor on a first date."

He replied eagerly. "Systems Analyst, also freelance; and my interests also include music and reading mainly factual books but the occasional fiction. I also try to get in a bit of cycling for exercise."

"Good" she replied. "Okay, where and when shall we meet?"

He thought for a moment. "Well, there's the Kings Head here in town or The Castle, a great little pub on the edge of the Green in Cricklewood where I live."

"The Castle sounds great" she replied. "I live here in town but prefer village pubs; they always seem more welcoming and cozy."

"How will you get there? Do you want me to come and pick you up?"

“No” she replied. “I’ll drive. I have an old VW Beetle. When do you suggest?”

“Friday at 7.30?”

“Can you make it Thursday?” I have college on Friday evening.”

Now Bill was feeling excited. “Great, looking forward to it.”

“Me too” she replied convincingly.

He felt encouraged and just a little nervous. He started to watch her walk back to her desk then turned to collect a few books to browse at one of the tables in the library. The pile of books included *The English Civil War: Key Royalists and Republicans* and *Royalist Homes and Mansions: Cromwell’s Legacy*. The first book he opened was about regions, towns and villages that supported Charles or Cromwell and, after much flicking back and forth, eventually found a few lines referring to Crickleford. Another book included part references to Crickleford Castle as a royalist stronghold and how it held out for several weeks against the parliamentarians. However, as Sir James was not considered a major figure within the royalist hierarchy and the fact that he had no direct descendants, there was not much information regarding his family. Hence, there were no clues as to what happened to his wife when Cromwell’s forces destroyed his home.

As it neared closing time, Bill selected a few books to take out on loan and went back to the desk to find Laura.

“Find anything useful?” she asked, again with her lovely smile.

“Not a lot” he replied. “But maybe there’ll be something of interest in these books.”

He dumped the pile on her desk where she proceeded to scan them.

“There we are” she said. “Best of luck; and let me know how you get on.”

“Will do” he replied. “See you on Thursday?”

“Yes” she replied. “Looking forward to it.”

“Me too” he said, trying not to appear too excited as though he had never been out with a woman before; but he walked towards the library exit definitely with an excited but nervous feeling, hoping he would make a good impression on the extremely attractive Laura.

Whilst waiting for Thursday to come around he spent the evenings reading the books more thoroughly. What really grabbed his attention though was when he read a few lines in one book which confirmed that Sir James’ wife moved in with one of her sisters and even mentioned the year of her death. However,

when he read that there was circumstantial evidence that she had left a five year old son he had to read it several times.

“An heir!” he exclaimed out loud. “Sir James left an heir.” *‘If only he would or could reappear now’* Bill thought to himself. *‘He would be over the moon.’* By the time Thursday came, he had completed a thorough search of the books and photocopied all pages with references to Sir James and his family. Nearly all day Thursday he thought about Laura and what he had found out. When evening arrived he donned a clean pair of his best jeans and a checkered shirt and set off for The Castle, making sure that he would arrive in plenty of time so as not to keep her waiting.

The Castle was the quintessential English pub; set in an idyllic surrounding at the edge of the village. It was situated on one side of a triangular green at the intersection of three roads. There was a graveled area in front of the pub with a number of benches at which one or two people were drinking. This area was bordered by flower troughs containing geraniums and petunias with window boxes containing a variety of hanging fuchsias and other summer bedding plants. The front door to the pub was situated in a porch with a projecting gabled roof. The whole gave the pub a very picturesque and welcoming appearance.

Bill poked his head just inside the door to check that Laura hadn’t already arrived and decided to wait outside for her. More or less bang on time a black Volkswagen Beetle pulled in behind a few other cars parked on the road alongside the green and outstepped Laura, looking radiant with her dark hair flowing around her shoulders. She was wearing a white lacey blouse, blue jeans and red short-heeled shoes. A group of students sitting at one of the benches all turned their heads to look at her with their conversation changing to low tones, no doubt commenting on her looks. She smiled and waved when she saw Bill and exchanged a brief embrace with him as they met.

“You look absolutely lovely” he said, thinking to himself that it was very much an understatement.

“You look good too” she countered, “But I won’t say ‘lovely’.”

They both laughed and wandered over to enter the pub.

“In or out?” he asked.

“In, I think. I don’t want to get bitten by midges.”

“Too true” Bill added.

As he followed her inside he smelt her perfume and felt like taking hold of her there and then and planting a big kiss on her lips.

It was an old pub with a number of tables alongside the wall on the right, which extended back further into the room, with smaller round tables in the window bays to the left and right. The long bar was right in front of them at which sat a few what looked like locals, two of them with dogs lying at their feet. In the corner to the left a small raised podium had been constructed with a lectern and microphone. Bill hadn't noticed it before, but then he hadn't been in the pub for some time. Maybe they had the occasional vocalist with a small backing group, but then again there certainly didn't seem to be much room for of a group of musicians.

"Shall we sit over there?" Bill suggested, indicating one of the tables on the right.

"That's fine" she replied.

"What will you have?"

"Half a lager shandy please" she replied, then quickly changed her mind.

"No, make that a pint. I'm feeling pretty thirsty tonight for some reason."

"Okay" he replied, stepping towards the bar. "Why don't you grab a seat and I'll bring them over."

The young barman was chatting to one of the customers who had a dog and broke off to come and serve Bill.

"What'll you have sir?"

"Two pints of lager shandy please."

"Which lager sir? We have Fosters, Carlsberg, Heineken"

"Fosters is fine thanks" Bill interjected.

Whilst the barman was making the drinks Bill glanced around the pub, seeing quite a few young people, and noticed what appeared to be pieces of paper with verses written on them pinned to a number of cork boards hanging on the walls throughout the bar. "Gorgeous evening, isn't it" he said cheerfully, to start a conversation.

"Sure is" the barman replied. "If it stays this way, we should get quite a crowd tomorrow night."

"Tell me" Bill enquired. "What are all those pieces of paper around the pub for?"

"Well" the man replied, finishing the drinks and placing them in front of Bill.

"We host poetry readings here every Friday evening. That's what the podium is for. Sometimes we hold competitions and pin the winning entries up around the pub. That's why you'll notice that most of the clientele tomorrow night will be young students, if you decide to turn up." He leant over the bar to indicate one of the dogs. "Even Rusty the Labrador here quite enjoys the sessions."

“He even thinks he can do readings sometimes” his owner added. “But I think he’s barking up the wrong tree.”

There were many guffaws of laughter as Bill paid for the drinks and added “I might just do that one week.” He paid for the drinks and took them over to where Laura was sitting.

“Thanks” she said, taking the drink from his hand and lifting it up. “Cheers, Bill.”

“That’s okay; cheers Laura and thanks for coming.”

“Pleasure” she replied convincingly.

She took a long draught of the golden liquid and placed her elbows on the table resting her chin in her hands. “So, what was all that about?” she asked, referring to the laughter at the bar.

Bill explained about the Friday night sessions and reached up to unpin a short poem on one of the cork board above them. He began to read:

The Cemetery

A different place, a different time.

The etched stones conjure up visions of times long past.

A time of little noise, little civilisation; good yet bad.

Only the sun can remember these times, pouring out its warmth upon a changing world.

Sorrowful these sights, these monuments to a past, forgotten age.

Decaying, crumbling; slowly defeating futile attempts to prolong their ebbing life.

Death is all around us.

The death of people, long gone.

The death of buildings, convulsing; fighting for the life that is no longer theirs.

“That’s very poignant” she commented. “Maybe I’ll try writing poetry sometime.”

“Yes” agreed Bill. “You’ll probably find it quite rewarding.”

There was a slight pause as he returned the poem to the board.

“Well, systems analyst, what is it you actually do?” Laura asked.

Bill described how he designed computer applications for clients which included data storage and processing including links to third party software and how he used contract programmers to code the applications. It was also

his responsibility to thoroughly test the systems before delivery and sign off; but even then, some clients would ask for post implementation changes.

“Some clients would still rather have bespoke systems than try to adapt a generic package that doesn’t quite fit the bill” he continued.

“So, for example” Laura added, “you could design a system for a library that provides for the cataloguing of books and tracking their loan history.”

“That’s a very simple example, Laura, but yes.”

“Similarly with archeological finds, I guess” she postulated.

“Sure” he replied “but I would imagine there are already systems out there that do just that.”

“Hm, yes there are” she added.

They continued to chat about various topics with the occasional shandy top-ups, some of which she insisted on paying for. Before they knew it, it was half past ten, so decided to call it a day.

“Do you live far?” she enquired.

“No” he replied. “It’s about a half hour walk home.”

“Would you like a lift?” she asked, expectantly.

“No, it’s ...” he started to say; then changed his mind. “Oh, go on then; thanks.”

“I have a flat in town” she said, as they climbed into the Beetle. “Which way do you live?”

“Just off the main road into town, down River View Lane on the left.”

“I know it” she said, starting the car. “You can reach the path by the river can’t you?” It was a statement rather than a question.

“That’s right” he confirmed, as she pulled away.

Soon they were turning into River View Lane.

“Which one’s your house?” she asked looking left and right as she drove slowly down the gentle slope.

“Wisteria Cottage near the end of the lane on the left.”

“I know it!” she exclaimed. “Lucky you.”

“I was fortunate to inherit it from my grandparents” he added. “So can’t complain.”

“Wow. What I’d do to live here. So tranquil” she added wistfully.

As she pulled up outside she got out of the car to admire Bill’s home. Wisteria cottage, aptly named because had a wisteria climbing over the front, had whitewashed rendered walls and a slate roof. A front porch with tiled roof shielded the pale green front door from the worst of the weather. The windows were all Georgian style with two downstairs, either side of the front

door, and three upstairs; the centre one over the porch and smaller than the other two. The property was surrounded by a low hedge with a wrought iron gate, also green, opening onto a brick path leading to the front door. Laura noticed that further to the right there were double gates with a gravel drive presumably leading to a garage or car port which was out of her line of sight. "You'll have to give me a tour sometime" she suggested, then turned to climb back into the car.

Bill tentatively asked if she would like to come in for a quick coffee, but she declined apologetically saying that she had some project work to complete for the following evening. After exchanging pecks on the cheek he watched her start the car again, turn it around and about to drive off, but he stepped back into the road and waved her down. She wound down the window but before she could speak he asked hopefully "Can we meet again ... sometime?"

"Sure. I'd like that." She smiled endearingly and started winding the window back up. "Bye."

He turned to walk back up the path with a glowing feeling of excitement.

The following weeks found both Bill and Laura busy; he with his systems analysis work and she with her work and studying for her English exam which was coming up soon. They did, however, occasionally manage to snatch a bit of time together in town, when she was not off on an archaeological dig, usually for a quick drink or lunch. They found that they really enjoyed each other's company and were always interested in the other's activities. Slowly they seemed to be drifting into a relationship but without any firm commitment at this stage. The pecks on the cheek were replaced with kisses that were beginning to arouse feelings in both of them.

Finally it was time for the exam, which Laura felt confident that all went well. "How did you get on?" Bill asked her when they met up the following day for lunch in one of local cafés

"Without sounding over confident, if I don't pass I will be surprised" she replied.

"That's great, Laura" Bill said, grabbing her hands. "I'm really pleased for you."

"Thanks Bill" she replied.

"Tell you what" he suddenly interjected, "Why don't we celebrate, if it's not too premature."

"Great idea" she agreed. "What do you suggest?"

“A slap-up meal, a visit to the cinema, which happens to be showing an historical film about the English Civil War believe it or not, or anything else you fancy” Bill suggested.

“The meal sounds more appealing” Laura replied “and at The Castle if possible. The ambience there is much more appealing than any place in town.”

“When do you fancy going?”

“Tonight?” she suggested somewhat eagerly. “Why wait.”

“Okay” Bill agreed. “My treat; I’ll check it out. I think they have a small dining area at the back.”

As they left the café Bill suggested he pick her up this time.

“No” she replied, somewhat hastily. “You don’t want to have to drive into town and back twice.”

“Makes no difference to me” he replied

“No, I insist” she replied with determination. “If you are paying for the meal it’s the least I can do.”

“Okay. I’ll ring you later.”

“Super” she said. “Now I must get back to work.”

They exchanged kisses and he headed for the car park, having decided to drive into town on this occasion rather than rely on the bus.

He decided to call into the pub on his way home to select and book a table and also call into the village shop, hoping that they might still have some fresh flowers. ‘*Maybe*’ Bill thought ‘*this is the opportunity to develop a more romantic relationship between us*’. He’d tried to avoid being too pushy so as not to put her off; after all, she was a very attractive woman and must have many admirers. Calling in at the village store, he was relieved to find that there were still some bunches of flowers left so selected the last bunch of red roses, which seemed appropriate and fortunately still fresh looking. He then made his way to The Castle and managed to book a table for eight o’clock. Laura said she would come at about an hour before so that he could give her a tour of the cottage. She also suggested that they walk to the pub, as it promised to be another warm and pleasant evening.

Whilst he was waiting for her to arrive he had a passing thought of Sir James. He concluded that maybe the vicar had actually exorcised the ghost, as he hadn’t seen him for weeks. ‘*Maybe it’s for the best*’ he thought. ‘*I don’t need that now that I am seeing Laura more.*’ His thoughts were interrupted by a knock at the door. He leapt up, eager to see her again. He was nearly bowled over when he opened the door. Her long glistening auburn hair hung down

over her right shoulder which accentuated her face with its sparkling brown eyes, smooth skin with just a hint of makeup and red lipstick. She wore a vintage style floral white summer dress that, again, ended just about the knee. It had a V-necked top with a large collar, appeared to be buttoned at the back and she wore a wide black belt around the waist. Her red shoes matched her lipstick and the colour of some of the flowers on the dress.

"Hello Bill" she said, leaning forward to give him a kiss.

"Laura" he answered "You look fabulous." Then, looking over her shoulder, he noticed the black Beetle parked outside the front gate. "Why don't you park in the drive; probably better than leaving it on the road, although I'm sure it will be okay."

"Yes, I may as well" she replied, and proceeded to do as he suggested.

Bill stepped outside to open the double gates for her and close them when the car was parked. He then escorted her back into the cottage.

"Ready for the tour?" he suggested.

"Let's go" she replied eagerly.

The small entrance hall had stairs more or less directly opposite the front door with a passage alongside to the rear of the cottage. Old wooden doors, with latch closures, to the left and right gave access to two rooms. The room on the right was the lounge, furnished with a dark green leather suite, a book case containing books, CDs and DVDs, a nest of side tables and a large TV. There was also a glass fronted sideboard contained some drinking glasses and bottles of spirits. The room on the left served as Bill's office and was littered with computers, a printer/scanner, telecoms equipment, piles of folders and other pieces of office equipment. There was also a small dining table with fold-down leaves and a vase of fresh flowers.

"From my garden" Bill said, pointing them out.

"Lovely" she said. "I can smell them from here."

He then led her down the passageway through a door into the fully equipped kitchen which spanned the whole width of the cottage except for a toilet to the left. A door at the opposite end opened to the back yard with a separate garage, a garden shed and a well-maintained garden.

"It's absolutely gorgeous" Laura commented. "I can't wait to see upstairs."

"Not that exciting I'm afraid" Bill added, leading her back out of the kitchen and up the stairs.

"They've got narrow treads, due to the age of the cottage, but stop me running up and down. I nearly came a cropper once in my haste."

"Lucky for me you didn't" she replied laughing.

Bill smiled. A window at the top of the stairs opened on to the rear garden and a few steps to the right was the door to the master bedroom which stretched the full depth of the cottage.

“Wow, what a lovely bedroom!” Laura exclaimed. “So large.”

Apart from the king sized bed it had fitted wardrobes on the back wall. To the left of the stairs were two rooms: a smaller second bedroom and a good sized tiled bathroom with a shower cubicle but no bath.

“There we are” Bill said. “My home.”

“Am I envious” Laura replied rhetorically. “It’s absolutely wonderful, Bill. You must be very happy here.”

“Yes, I suppose I am; but it gets a bit lonely at times.” He sensed that she was about to say something but held off. “Right” he said, breaking the silence.

“Shall we get going?”

“Sure” she replied. “I’m starving.”

It was still a warm evening so, although she had a jacket in her car, she decided not to take it. As they walked, they picked up on topics discussed previously, she asking about his parents and family and he hers. He had an elder sister who had a family and moved to Canada. He rarely saw her but occasionally communicated via a video link. Laura was an only child and both of them had lost their parents, quite recently as it happens. Finally they reached The Castle and were shown to their table.

“The flowers!” she exclaimed. “For me?”

“Beautiful flowers for a beautiful woman” Bill said, feeling a bit self-conscious.

“Oh Bill, you’re wonderful” she said, throwing her arms around him and planting a big kiss on his lips.

The waiter stood there looking a bit embarrassed and pulled a chair back for her to sit down, with Bill sitting opposite. There was already a bottle of white wine in a cooler on the table which the waiter opened and poured out for them, after Bill had declined to taste it first.

“I’m sure it’s fine” he said; and then added to Laura “I’m not a connoisseur.”

“Nor me” she replied, and picked up her glass. “Cheers, and thanks Bill. Very romantic.”

“To us” he replied, hopefully.

Having enjoyed their romantic meal, Bill and Laura left The Castle at about half past ten and walked back to Bill’s house in the warm summer evening arm-in-arm, she leaning her head now and again on his shoulder. They had finished off their meal with liqueurs so were still a little merry when they

arrived at Wisteria Cottage. In the back of his mind Bill knew that Laura would not be driving home tonight; in fact neither of them was in a state to drive. She could always sleep in the spare room.

When they finally reached the cottage he opened the front door and let Laura in. She stood there watching him as he closed and locked the door and when he turned, to suggest she could sleep in the spare room, he found her close to him and looking into his eyes. They both read the same thoughts and flung their arms around each other, kissing passionately. His hands started wandering over her body searching for those sensitive parts through her clothing. He started to lift up her dress.

“Let’s go upstairs” she whispered in his ear.

“That’s a good idea” he replied, as they released themselves and bounded up the narrow stairs with outstretched touching hands.

They woke up to a glorious Saturday morning and made love again before enjoying a late breakfast. In confirmation of Bill’s guess that she had planned to stay the night, Laura nipped out to her car and came back in with a small travel bag which she held up.

“Change of clothing” she said.

“How did I know that” Bill stated, both of them laughing. He took her free hand. “Laura, I think I’m falling in love with you.”

“The feeling’s mutual Bill” she replied. “But now I must shower and change.”

They enjoyed the rest of the weekend together walking by the river and to the hangers with a drive to local villages, which she was particularly interested in seeing, in his car - a Jaguar XJ-S with cream upholstery.

When he drove it out of the garage, she exclaimed “I don’t believe it! Not only a wonderful cottage but a fantastic car to go with it.”

Bill was sitting in the car with a big grin on his face.

“No, don’t tell me” she continued.

He just nodded.

“You inherited this as well?” He continued to nod. “From your grandparents?”

He still nodded. “My grandfather was passionate about Jags and was lucky with investments to be able to afford them.”

“Quite astute then” she added.

“Yes” he replied “and lucky for me.”

“You’ll have to carry on the tradition” she suggested.

“I wish.”

From this moment they usually spent most weekends together, mainly in his cottage, which she loved so much, but occasionally at her flat in Stanton.

‘Life is good’ Bill thought to himself when alone. *“I wonder where it will end up.”*

Sir James Returns

Throughout the period from the first meeting and subsequent maturing relationship with Laura, the ghost of Sir James Edward Willingford slowly faded from Bill's mind. Then one day whilst they were taking a stroll alongside the river, Laura asked "Are you still interested in researching the Willingfords, only you haven't mentioned it at all during the time we have been together?"

His mind went back to the dramatic event at St Lukes and whether he would actually ever see the ghost again. Maybe the promise he made to Sir James was no longer relevant. He was no longer under any obligation.

"I don't know really. I guess I've been too busy with you." He squeezed her hand.

"Why the change of heart; just because we are together? I thought you were quite keen." She glanced at the shrubs on the right as a robin sang loudly just a few feet away. "Anyway, I would like to help you." She stopped for a moment. "I could write a short article on the family for publication in one the history magazines ... if you are agreeable that is."

"Yes" he agreed. "That would be nice and certainly help your career and maybe even bring some kudos."

"It's not just about me" she replied. "This was your idea or project and actually sounds very interesting. It could be a joint effort."

"Okay" he said. "When we get back to the cottage I'll show you what I have found out and we can take it from there."

"Super." She suddenly had a thought and, looking around, said "Aren't we near the village church?"

"Yes" Bill replied. "Church Lane is just a short distance ahead and also runs down to the river. The church is half way up. Why?"

"We can take a quick look around the cemetery to see if we can find any graves of the Willingfords, or derivations with 'willing' in the name."

They carried on with their stroll and finally reached Church Lane, which they proceeded to walk up the lane until they came across a dry stone wall on the left just after a footpath sign. They could just about see the church amongst the trees but the graveyard was immediately on the other side of the wall. They walked on alongside the wall following it until they reached an old wooden gate, which looked as though it could have been the original. A

curved path from the gate led up to the church which they could now see clearly, apart from the old yew tree blocking the view of the church porch. They entered through the gate and looked about.

“Shall we start on the left?” Laura asked.

“Why not” Bill replied.

They let go their hands and made their way towards the gravestones. Many had sunk into the ground over the years with inscriptions worn away by weathering. Others had barely legible writing that might reveal more by trying to generate an image using paper and rubbing with a pencil.

“I don’t hold out much hope” Laura called out from one of the older gravestones.

“No, I agree” Bill replied loudly as he crouched down to examine a stone where the writing was faint but part decipherable. He stroked his finger over the writing and thought he could just about make out part of a word with *willing* in it.

“Hey, come and see this Laura” he called.

“Bill?”

Bill thought at first that it was Laura calling but the voice didn’t sound right, being deep and sounding more masculine. It certainly didn’t sound like Laura’s.

“I didn’t know you were standing there” he responded, turning his head to talk to whom he thought was Laura. He shot up to a standing position.

“Sir James!” he exclaimed without thinking. He was suddenly aware of Laura standing up by one of the stones calling out.

“Bill? Bill? Who are you talking to?” She came over with a questioning look on her face.

“Er, no one Laura; just muttering to myself,” he replied with embarrassment. She bent down to look at the headstone in front of which he was standing.

“I thought I heard you say ‘James’ but I can’t make that name out on this stone.” She traced her fingers over the worn writing as Bill had just done.

“But I can just about make out the ‘willing’.”

“I guess I must have been thinking about James Willingford” he hurriedly responded.

Laura laughed. “Wishful thinking methinks.” She joined Bill standing next to him and slipping her hand into his as they stood there looking around. Bill sensed the presence of Sir James close by and tried to ignore him as he came into view with a questioning look on his face and indicating Laura by cocking his head in her direction.

"It might be worth having a chat with the vicar at St.Lukes, being the main church in the area. It is more likely to hold any birth/marriage/death records than the local parish church" Laura suggested.

Bill responded rather hastily, remembering the altercation he had had with the moronic vicar. "No. No, I don't think he will be of much help."

"Oh" Laura replied questioningly. "Why not?"

Once again, Bill found himself trying to extricate himself from another predicament.

"I've, er, never found him very approachable or helpful in the past."

"Have you already spoken to him about the Willingford family then?"

"Well, yes" Bill replied hesitantly "and let's say, he was rather dismissive." He wasn't actually lying he thought to himself, just bending the truth. "Anyway, I found him a bit strange."

Laura thought for a moment. "Yes, I think I agree with your opinion of him. I've never actually spoken with him but when I've seen him he always seems to convey the impression of being undertaker rather than a vicar; a rather morbid appearance if you ask me."

Bill was glad she didn't pursue that line any further.

They spent a little longer wandering around the graveyard but soon realized that the inscriptions on all the older headstones had been worn away too much from weathering to be decipherable. Before deciding to call it a day there was another incident involving Sir James when, after examining another headstone, Bill got up and turned around and was taken by surprise when he found the ghost standing right behind him again

"Oops!" Bill exclaimed, without thinking.

"What's that?" Laura called out once more as she looked over to see what Bill was doing.

"Oh" Bill quickly replied, "I had the sensation that someone was standing behind me."

Laura laughed a bit nervously. "Next thing, you'll be telling me you've seen a ghost ... that of Sir James Willingford."

Bill tried to make light of it with a tongue-in cheek comment. "Many a true word's spoken in jest."

Laura didn't laugh this time but tried to inject a bit of humor into her reply.

"Oh come on Bill. A logical person like you can't believe in ghosts just because we happen to be in a graveyard."

She glanced around. "Well, it seems pointless wandering around here any longer."

Bill was about to voice his agreement but she continued.

“Tell you what; why don’t we go and have a bite at The Castle.”

“Good idea” he agreed. “I just need to call in at the cottage to pick up my wallet.”

As they walked back to the cottage, hand-in-hand, Bill sensed Sir James following behind and was beginning to feel annoyed as though the ghost was intruding on their privacy – which he was!

Having become fairly regular customers of The Castle, Bill and Laura were developing a good rapport with some of the locals from the village whom Bill had only previously encountered just to exchange polite greetings on his way to the local shop or the bus stop. Whilst eating their lunch they overheard someone mentioning a dear old lady in her nineties who lived at the foot of the hangers in Rose Cottage.

“Her nineties!” Laura exclaimed in surprise. “I would never have guessed it. She is so agile. We’ve often seen her pottering around in her garden on our way to the hangers.”

The speaker, an old gent in tweed jacket and brown corduroys nodded in agreement.

“There are such lovely panoramic views from the top.” Laura added.

“That there are” the old gent agreed. “But I haven’t seen Mrs Dobson for some time.”

“I hope she’s alright ‘cos Mabel, the shopkeeper, usually calls on her regularly” added an elderly woman sitting at one of the tables with a friend.

“Maybe we should all look in on her a bit more often” the friend added.

“She is a very private person” added someone else. “Has been since her husband George died about ten years ago.”

The conversation continued with other topics while Bill and Laura finished their meals.

Maybe this was a premonition because about a week later when Laura was spending the weekend with Bill once again, it becoming a fairly regular occurrence, Bill woke up in the early hours of the Saturday morning sensing a presence in the room. He lay there listening to Laura breathing deeply, so guessed she was fast asleep. He then lifted his head over the bed sheets straining to pierce the darkness of the room. There, standing at the bottom of the bed was Sir James, looking very concerned.

“What are you doing here?” whispered Bill. “This is an invasion of our privacy.”

“I’m sorry” Sir James replied. “But it’s a matter of some urgency.”

“What is? What can be urgent at ...” he lifted himself up slowly, so as not to awaken Laura, and glanced at the bedside clock “... one o’clock in the morning?”

“I feel a disturbance” Sir James replied.

“What do you mean *a disturbance*?” Bill glanced over at Laura who still seemed to be sleeping soundly.

“I sense that someone is about to enter the spirit world but is teetering on the brink and requires help.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” Bill was getting annoyed and fearful that Laura might wake up any moment.

“You need to come with me Bill.”

“What? I am not going anywhere at this time of the night.” He was now supporting himself on his elbows whilst Laura was still breathing deeply.

Sir James now sounded really concerned. “You will regret it, Bill, and never forgive yourself.”

Bill was in a dilemma. He couldn’t really get up and try to sneak out without waking Laura. What should he do?

“Who are you talking to Bill?” Laura’s voice stunned him for the moment. He couldn’t find the right words with which to reply.

“I must have been dreaming” he replied.

Laura turned onto her back. “You weren’t dreaming. You were definitely talking to someone.” she countered. Then she sat up looking at him. “I’ve been a bit worried about you of late. I have often heard you talking to yourself as though someone was with you. Maybe your work or our relationship is putting too much strain on you.”

“No, no” he replied, with a hint of panic in his voice. “I love you Laura and treasure our times together.”

“For the sex.”

“No” he replied sternly. “Not just for sex. You must know that it is much deeper than that.”

Laura took his hand. “Maybe you should see a doctor.”

“Look ...”

“Hurry” interrupted Sir James. “Before it’s too late.”

Bill let Laura’s hand go and started to climb out of bed. “I have to go ... somewhere.”

Laura looked astounded. “What! At this time at night. What’s up with you?” She was also getting annoyed now.

Bill started pulling on a pair of jeans. Laura got out of bed and grabbed her clothes,

“I’m coming too.”

“But ...”

“I want to know what you’re up to. Your behavior is worrying me and if you are keeping secrets from me then our relationship is finished.”

He stopped what he was doing. “Oh Laura, no.” He was lost for words. “I’ll explain later.”

“No. Now” she insisted.

Sir James was now leaving the room with Bill following, pulling a sweater over his head, while Laura was stepping into a pair of shoes.

“I ... I ... am in contact with ... the spirit of James Willingford.”

Laura stopped half way down the stairs. “You’ve got to be joking.”

“More than that” he continued, looking back at her rather flustered, “I can see him.”

“What! You can actually see a ghost. I find that extremely difficult to believe, Bill.” She was getting angry now. “So where are we supposed to be going?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know. You are dragging us out in the early hours of the morning but you don’t know where we are going.” She was nearly shouting now.

“I’ll ask” he hastily replied, and called out to the ghost. “Er, Sir James; where are we going?”

Sir James turned his head to answer “To the cemetery.”

“To the cemetery” Bill repeated to Laura.

“Great!” she exclaimed. “We are going to the cemetery in the dead of night. That makes me feel really good.”

Bill grabbed the flashlight from the kitchen as they left the cottage and followed the ghost in the direction of Church Lane, which was about fifteen minutes away.

“Wait for me” Laura shouted. “Or I’m going back, and in the morning may well leave your haunted cottage and your ghost to you.”

Bill was now feeling thoroughly deflated. What had induced him to go to the cemetery in the middle of the night on the say so of a ghost? Was he going mad? Was Laura right about his state of mind?

They reached the church’s cemetery and entered through the little gate in the surrounding wall. They followed Sir James until he stopped in front of a gravestone.

“The spirit of this deceased person may soon be joined by another” he said, solemnly.

Bill bent down to read the inscription.

*Here lies Frederick Alan Dobson
Loving husband of Doris
Who departed from this world
At the age of 81
He will be sorely missed by all*

“Well?” Laura snapped. “What’s the amazing thing you’ve discovered? Somebody is actually dead. There’s a surprise!”

Bill was oblivious to the sarcastic comments being too amazed at what he was reading.

“I don’t believe it!” he exclaimed.

“Believe what?” Laura snapped again. “That he’s dead.”

“No” said Bill, incredulously. “The .. er .. Ghost told me that somebody will be joining this poor soul soon.”

“And how would he know that?”

Bill turned to face her. “This is the grave of Mrs Dobson’s husband.” He now looked very worried. “She must be dying. We can save her.” He got back to his feet. “Come on.” Ignoring her protestations he started running for the gate to return to the cottage with Laura close behind. On reaching the cottage he suddenly had a thought. “Let’s take your car; it will quicker than getting mine out. You drive.”

Laura had now given up arguing and was taken up with Bill’s sense of urgency, now half believing him. She now just did what she was asked and grabbed her car key from the cottage wondering how this excursion might play out. They were soon on their way driving along the dark country lanes as fast as they dared.

“I suppose we are going to wake up poor Mrs Dobson.” She postulated.

“Yes” Bill replied, feeling fidgety and anxious, worried that poor Doris Dobson might already be dead.

As they pulled up outside Rose Cottage, Bill leapt out and ran up the garden path to her front door. Sir James suddenly appeared beside him.

“Her spirit still resides in her body” he said. “Just. You must hurry.”

Bill suddenly found himself at a loss about what to do. He knocked on the front door with increasing force but no lights came on in the house. He even went around to the back door where the result was the same. Returning to the front, to tell Laura that he might have to break in, he was met by her coming towards him with presumably her next door neighbour.

As she approached Bill she was holding her arm up with something in her hand. "I thought a close neighbour was more than likely to have a key, as they often do in small communities like this." The neighbour didn't look particularly happy at being woken up but was obviously concerned about Mrs Dobson. Laura opened the front door and the three of them entered the cottage, turned the lights on and ascended the stairs calling out 'Doris' as they went. There was no reply but they soon found her lying still on her bed breathing shallowly. They made an attempt to waken her but to no avail. Laura felt her pulse.

"It's very weak" she said, now sounding very concerned.

"Quick, someone phone the doctor; for an ambulance, or both" Bill said.

The neighbour ran back to her house to phone for help. She told Bill and Laura that the doctor wasn't too happy about being woken up but when he heard what the neighbour told him he asked her to phone for an ambulance and that he would be there as soon as possible. Soon, Doris Dobson was on her way to hospital.

As dawn approached over the horizon, Bill and Laura sat staring ahead drinking coffee.

"I believe I owe you an apology, Bill" Laura said quietly. "I still can't believe what has just taken place. Was it a premonition, sixth sense or some sort of prescient power that you possess? Do I believe you can really converse with and see a ghost?" She paused. "Bill, I'm confused with all this paranormal stuff."

Bill moved closer and put his arm around her.

"You know Laura, my greatest fear over what has just taken place was ..."

"Yes?"

"... losing you."

She leant her head on his shoulder and took his hands. "Oh Bill, I am sorry; but ..."

"No" he interrupted. "I do understand. If I had been in your shoes I would have reacted in the same way."

"It's just incredible" she said. "How are we going to explain our actions last night?"

"I don't know" he admitted. "I guess we just say that something didn't seem quite right and that we were concerned for Mrs Dobson's well-being; so we decided to check up on her."

"At two o'clock in the morning?"

Bill just shrugged his shoulders. "Shall we go back to bed?"

“Yes, lets” she responded eagerly; and off they dashed upstairs once again, giggling.

The Crypt

It was now about three months since Bill and Laura had got together and the opportunity arose for her to participate in another archaeological dig for about two weeks. Bill told Laura that he would really miss her but wished her lots of luck in one of her main interests. Whilst she was away he continued researching when time from his professional work allowed. Fortunately he was usually less busy during the summer months due to clients being on holiday. He made some progress on his own but didn't realize how much he missed Laura; still, they made up for the lost days when she returned. She was very enthusiastic telling him about the dig and their findings virtually non-stop until he managed to bring her back to their joint research project. So, as autumn approached they began to piece together what he had so far uncovered.

With Sir James persistently hovering about and Laura getting used to Bill's mutterings when the ghost appeared they both thought it time to start spending more time trying to find out what happened to his wife. Bill had shown Laura the family tree that he had constructed with Sir James' assistance; so they decided to research three families: the Willingfords, de Couers and the Latunes. Using on-line searching of genealogy databases coupled with visits to the local county records office, where they benefited from Laura's skills from her working experiences, they managed to piece together James' and Susanna's families. They did manage to confirm the dates of Sir James and Susanna's deaths and also ascertained that according to the records the couple had no children, even though Bill had discovered the reference to a five year old son.

Having enjoyed a Chinese take-away on a Saturday evening, at Wisteria Cottage again, they sat down with a glass of wine each and compiled a list of their findings to date.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Last Known Location</u>	<u>Birth & Death Dates</u>
Roger Willingford	-	Killed during the civil war
James Willingford	Crickleford	1613 -1648
Susanna Willingford	?	1615 -1653
James's son	?	1648 -
Henry Willingford	Upper Settingly	1616 -

William de Couer
Isabella Latune
Eleanor Coulare

Penderton
Lower Paperton
?

Not known
1600 -
15xx -

On reviewing the data, Laura commented “It’s incredible what you have found out about Susanna and her son, Bill. How confident are you of the sources?”

“At this point” replied Bill, “we can only trust what has been published before the data can be verified.”

“Yes” she agreed, scanning the list once again. “Okay” she said “Maybe we start the search of these key family members in the areas of their last known locations. It will no doubt confirm what James Willingford has already told you but it may throw up some other links.”

“That sounds good” Bill replied “but won’t it mean travelling to county record offices, unless we can find the information on-line?”

“Unfortunately” Laura added “many parish records have not yet been transcribed but we’ll have a go anyway. We will need to book hotel rooms or B&Bs in the areas concerned.”

Sir James suddenly appeared beside Bill. “Have you tried looking in the crypt, Bill?”

Bill turned to face Sir James. “What? What crypt?”

“What did you say, Bill?” Laura asked, looking at him. “Did you say crypt?”

Bill transferred his glance to Laura and replied spontaneously “No I didn’t ... well, actually, yes I did. It was ...”

“James Willingford?”

“Yes” Bill replied, a little embarrassed.

“Don’t worry” said Laura, in a comforting tone “I’m getting used to him being around now.”

She paused briefly then added, tongue-in-cheek “As long as he keeps out of the bedroom. We don’t need an audience there!”

Bill turned back to Sir James. “You were saying? A crypt? Where?”

“In the church of course.”

“Yes, but where in the church?” Bill asked with some excitement.

“I’ll show you. Follow me.” Sir James replied, starting to walk off.

“Not now” Bill said. “It’s too late for us anyway. We’ll look tomorrow after the Sunday service has finished.”

Having now identified where to start looking and assigning tasks to each of them, with the tentative plans when to visit record offices, they decided to call it a day.

“A nightcap before we retire?” suggested Bill.

“Let’s just miss the nightcap” Laura said, planting a long kiss on his lips.

“Couldn’t agree more” Bill replied, grabbing Laura’s hand to lead her upstairs. Sir James promptly disappeared.

Sometime around mid-morning the following day, which was a bit dreary but at least dry, they made their way to the village church accompanied by Sir James. Bill had never really ventured near the church itself since he moved into the village, so as they walked up the path towards it he became aware of how old it looked. It was probably Norman, like all village churches seem to be and, from a cursory glance, appeared to be rectangular in shape. It had a small wooden tower at the left end open near the top so that he could just about make out the bell inside. The porch entrance was slightly to the right of the tower, so he presumed the altar would be at the opposite end to the tower. Laura suddenly noticed a figure in the cemetery.

“Who is that over there?”

Bill followed her gaze and saw a diminutive old lady putting some flowers on a grave. She was quite short and had grey hair tied back in a bun with a red beret on top. She was wearing a grey skirt and white blouse with a pink cardigan.

“Isn’t that Mrs Dobson” she added rhetorically.

“Yes, I believe it is” Bill replied. “Let’s go over and see how she is.”

They wandered over to speak with Mrs Dobson, standing in front of her husband’s grave.

“Hello Mrs Dobson” Bill said.

The old lady started and looked up. “Oh, you made me jump. I was so lost in my thoughts and thought I was alone.”

“Sorry we startled you” apologized Laura.

Mrs Dobson looked at each of them in turn with a questioning look. “From the descriptions, you must be the young couple who saved my life.”

Bill and Laura felt a little embarrassed.

“Well, yes” Bill confirmed. “It seems we were just in time. Are you okay now?”

Mrs Dobson nodded. “Yes thank you. It was my heart you know but they now have it under control. I have to take some tablets and they told me to slow down and take life easy from now on. I am allowed to potter around a bit in the garden; I love my garden you know; but must get help to keep it tidy.”

“Yes, you do have a lovely garden” said Laura. “We often admire it when we pass your cottage on the way to the Hangers.”

Mrs Dobson nodded. "Come to think of it I believe I have seen you both walking past on occasions. There are such lovely views from the top aren't there?"

"Certainly are" said Bill. "Don't forget, if you need help any time I may be able to help if I'm around. I live at Wisteria Cottage and work mainly from home."

"Oh, that's very kind of you" she replied. "It seems that just about everyone in the village is offering to help me; such a caring community."

"We try to be, Mrs Dobson" he said.

"Please call me Doris" she said. Then her face took on a slightly questioning look. "I am very grateful to you both of course but how did you know I was so ill?"

Bill and Laura looked at each other.

Bill quickly said "Er, we just popped around to check that you were okay because some of the village people said they hadn't seen you for some time and heard that you were a bit poorly."

"At one o'clock in the morning?" Doris queried. "Funny time to check up on someone if you ask me."

The two looked at each other again not sure how to respond. Laura came to the rescue.

"We couldn't sleep. We couldn't stop thinking about what the people in The Castle were saying and were so worried that we just had to come round and check that you were okay."

"I even knocked on the door" Bill added "but there was no reply so..."

"I went to your neighbour to see if she had a key" Laura interrupted.

Doris Dobson smiled. "Mrs Jones told me that she wasn't very happy about being woken up at that time but glad you did wake her, as it happened."

"We're just relieved that you're okay, Doris" Bill said.

The old lady turned back to look at her husband's grave. "I do miss my Fred."

After a slight pause she said "And do you know; something really strange."

"What was that?" Bill asked.

"I had this sensation whilst lying there in my room that Fred was calling me to join him." Doris' eyes became watery.

"How strange" Laura said.

"Yes, but what is really strange" Doris continued "is that I heard another voice telling me that it's not time yet; for me to hold on to life; help is on its way."

Bill and Laura stared at each other with mouths open.

"And briefly" Doris added further.

Bill and Laura sensed what she was going to say.

“I had this fleeting vision of a man with long hair wearing strange clothes; like ...” she was fighting for the right words.

“Some .. one .. from .. the .. Tudor .. or .. Stuart .. period” Bill suggested slowly

“Yes, exactly” Doris said, smiling. “So comforting. How did you know?”

Bill knew he had spoken too quickly. “Guess? Premonition? Prescience?”

Doris chuckled. “Maybe he gave you the message that I was dying.”

Bill and Laura were dumbfounded.

“Maybe” Bill laughed, and decided to change the subject quickly. Glancing at Laura, he noticed her shaking her head side to side with that incredulous look on her face.

“Oh, Mrs Dobson; Doris?” Bill finally said. “Do you know what time the service finishes?”

“There won’t be one today” she replied. “The Reverend Daniels is not available today so it has been cancelled. He’s not very well. Why do you ask?”

“We wouldn’t mind taking a look around the church but I guess it will be locked then” Bill said.

Doris Dobson smiled. “Oh no, it is open and won’t be locked until mid-afternoon probably.”

“That’s great” Bill replied. “Who is the key holder?”

“I am” she replied. “But tell you what; why don’t I give you the key and when you have finished you can drop it in to me. It will save me having to come back and lock up later.”

“That’s a good idea, Doris” Laura said. “Why don’t we do just that.”

Doris took the key out of her pocket and handed it to Bill.

“Now I think I’ll head home. I must admit that I am feeling a bit tired still so I will go and put my feet up with a nice cup of tea.”

“Yes. You deserve it. We will take care of things” Laura said comfortingly.

“We’ll see you later” Bill said, as he and Laura returned to the path towards the church.

There was a small porch at the entrance to the church which contained seating benches either side. The wooden seats were quite smooth with a polished appearance and must have replaced older or original in recent years. The worn wooden door of the church, however, looked as though it was either the original or had been replaced a few hundred years ago. Bill grabbed hold of a large metal ring on the right hand side, turned it and pushed at the heavy door. The inside of the church was, as expected, rectangular and surprisingly bright

with several large stained glass windows along the side walls. There was one large circular stained glass window at the far right end over the altar and at the opposite end to the left there was a small area below the bell tower in which hung a bell rope. In front of this area stood a circular stone font set on an ornate pedestal and immediately to the left was a small door in the wall which Bill surmised must open onto steps up to the bell tower. At either side of the central aisle were about ten rows of pews with the floor of the aisles between them and the walls containing tombstones inscribed with the names of the families buried beneath. Immediately in front of the font before the last row of pews was a particularly large tombstone with a grit-filled partially covered indentation one end that looked as though it had been fitted with a metal ring with which to lift the slab.

As Bill stood studying it, Sir James said "That is the entrance to the crypt."

"Laura" Bill called out.

She was busy reading some of the wall plaques which had been mounted to commemorate notable members of the village.

"Yes?" she replied, turning her head to look over to where Bill was standing.

"I've found, well, Sir James has shown me, where the entrance to the crypt is."

Laura came wandering over. "What, there?" she said, pointing at the slab.

"One would never have known there was a crypt below that."

Bill bent down to scrape some of the grit from the indentation. "We need something to loop around this ring hole in order to pull it up. I'll have to nip back to the cottage and look for some rope; then let's hope we can both lift it, otherwise we'll have to get some help, which will raise more awkward questions."

"Okay" she replied. "I'll wait here and mosey about a bit more. By the way" she added excitedly.

"Yes?" Bill replied.

"On the walls either side of the altar there are traces of medieval paintings. They are very faint and difficult to make out what they are portraying. A pity, but maybe they can be restored or analyzed in some way using specialist equipment before they disappear completely."

"Restoration would be very expensive and detract from the original" Bill countered, "but it would be quite exciting if they could be reproduced in some way." He moved over towards the door. "Anyway, I'm just off now darling."

"Okay love. See you later." Laura replied, blowing him a kiss.

Walking up the lane on his way back to the church Bill noticed a few young lads with bikes at the top of the lane where it joined the main road mucking

about and laughing, but he didn't pay any more attention to them. One of the lads in turn noticed Bill.

"'ey Joe" said one of them.

"Wha'?"

"Int tha' the tosser we saw on the bus the other day 'oo nearly go' us thrown off?"

Joey looked down the road to see Bill turning towards the church gate. "Yeah, I fink yor righ' Jason."

"Wots 'e doin with that rope?" asked Darren.

"Dunno" Joe replied "but let's go find out."

The three of them watched as Bill passed through the gate, walked up the path and enter the church; then they cycled down the lane and propped their bikes against the wall. They climbed over the wall, crept across the churchyard and ducked behind the yew tree.

"Give 'im a few minutes" said Joe "then you, Darren, go and try and peak through the door to see wo' 'e's doin." He gave his friend a nudge.

"Okay" replied Darren, and crept slowly towards the porch.

Inside, Bill looked around but there was no sign of Laura. "Laura?" he called out.

"I'm in here" he heard her reply.

"Where?" He looked around and then noticed that the door to the bell tower was slightly ajar, at which point Laura emerged.

"Just investigating" she said. "I climbed part way up and it looks fairly safe, although the steps are rather small." She brushed some dust off her jeans.

"Did you manage to get a rope?"

Bill lifted his hands. "Yes" he replied. "I also brought a flashlight and a trowel to loosen the grit, or dust, embedded around the slab."

"Well done" she said, taking the flash and placing it on the ground. "We'll make an archaeologist of you yet."

"Not me" he replied. "All that crawling around in the dirt and mud."

Laura laughed. "Believe you me, it can be quite infectious and very rewarding, once you start finding items centuries old."

"I believe you" Bill replied, tongue in cheek.

He dropped the rope on the ground and kneeled down to start scraping around the slab. Much of the grit was quite difficult to scrape out due to its compaction over the years but finally, with a few blisters, he did manage to clear a groove around the slab.

At this point Bill and Laura had their backs to the door so were unaware of Darren peeking briefly around the door before ducking back out of the porch

to await further developments. He signaled to Joe and Jason, who were still hiding behind the yew tree, with a thumbs up followed by a raised hand to indicate 'hold on'.

"Right" Bill said, looping the rope through the eye of the promontory in the indentation. "Let's see if with can lift this and pull it away."

They took an end of the rope each and stood either side of the slab.

"Ready?" Bill asked, looking at Laura.

"Yep" she replied.

"One ... two ... three ... pull."

They both pulled up hard but it didn't move.

"Hmm,

"Not doing too well, are we" Bill said rhetorically.

"Let's have another go" Laura said.

They both tugged at the rope again. Bill felt from the strain on it that Laura was also pulling hard.

"You seem to have some strength in your arms" he said.

"Comes from all that archeological digging" she replied.

Bill strained hard "Once more."

They again pulled as hard as they could, felt a slight movement and heard a faint scrape.

"It's coming" Laura said excitedly.

With lot more effort the slab started to lift until they managed to raise it enough to pull it forward to rest the lower edge on the surrounding floor.

"Wow! We've done it" Laura said.

Both of them were perspiring.

"Let's try and drag it away" Bill now suggested.

They managed to drag the slab across the floor revealing a set of stone steps leading down into the crypt. Bill picked up the flashlight and they walked around to the top of the steps. Sir James was standing behind them.

"It contains my family's tombs" he stated.

"It contains Sir James' family tombs" Bill repeated for Laura's benefit.

"This is exciting" Laura said.

"Let's go then" Bill responded.

"I'll just go and close the church door" Laura suggested. "We don't want people walking in whilst we are in the crypt."

Darren just had time to pull back from the other side of the door from where he had been watching them for the past few minutes. Once Laura had closed the door he turned and beckoned for his friends to join him.

Bill turned the flashlight on as they slowly descended the steps and immediately sensed the damp cold musky air from years of being undisturbed. As he reached the bottom Bill shone the beam around to reveal a long narrow room with a vaulted ceiling. There were two rows of tombs on either side of a central passageway.

“Well, look at this” he said in astonishment. “All these tombs.”

Laura took the flashlight and directed it onto the side of the tomb closest to their left.

“This one says: *Sir Roger Arthur Willingford 1590 – 1644*. This must be his father’s tomb.”

They then moved over to the one on the right where Laura shined the light again.

“*Henry Pierre Willingford 1586 – 1642*” she read out loud,

Outside the church Joe, Jason and Darren crept towards the door and turned the handle as carefully as possible. There was a slight squeak which stopped them immediately. They waited a couple of minutes and pushed the door open gently but only just enough for them to squeeze through. In the crypt Bill suddenly stood up. “Did you hear something, Laura?”

“No, I don’t think so” she replied continuing to study the inscription. “This could be his brother; James’ uncle. Did he mention an uncle, Bill?”

Bill was still listening intently but heard no further sounds.

“Must have been the wind” he said, not hearing what Laura was saying. “Maybe the door wasn’t closed completely.”

Laura didn’t take in what he said, being too intent studying the details on the tomb. Bill turned his attention back to Laura, who stood up and shined the beam down the length of the crypt.

“It must stretch nearly the entire length of the church” she said. They both started to walk down the aisle, counting the tombs.

The three young lads crept into the church and saw the open crypt with the slab pulled back far enough to expose the descending steps.

“They’re down there” Darren whispered, pointing at the opening.

“I’ve got an idea” whispered Joe. “Come and help me.”

He crept over to the end of the slab and grabbed one end of the rope. Jason immediately understood his plan and quickly moved to grab the other end. Bill stopped again.

“Shush, Laura. I think there’s someone in the church. I could swear that I can hear whispering and someone moving about up there.”

He turned and started to head back to the steps, which were illuminated by the light filtering down from above. His suspicions were answered by the slab being dragged quickly back over the entrance leaving them with just the beam from the flashlight.

“Hey, what’s going on?” he shouted.

“Bill?” Laura came running towards him. “What’s happening?”

“We’ve been shut in” he replied, and then shouted “Let us out now.”

“Who would have done that and what are we going to do?” she responded nervously.

Joe and Jason were laughing.

“That’ll teach ‘im” said Joe. “Now let’s get outa rear.”

“Wait” Darren exclaimed. “We can’t just leave ‘em there. They might suffocate and ... die.”

Joe looked around and saw a small table next to a padlocked donation box anchored to the floor. On the table were a number of leaflets, a pot of pencils and a neat pile of gift aid envelopes. He grabbed a pencil and an envelope and wrote *Two people in the crypt below* in thick letters and placed it on top of the slab. He then stepped over to the bell rope and pulled it several times.

“The bell should bring a few people to see what’s going on” he said. “Now let’s ge’ outa ‘ere.”

Darren was worried. “What if no-one comes?”

“They will” said Joe, somewhat unconvincingly.

The three of them left the church laughing, leaving the door wide open.

Bill and Laura climbed the steps as far as they could and between them tried to push the slab up. It moved slightly but they did not have the strength or maneuverability to get into a suitable position to be able to push it up and slide it back. They did, however, faintly hear the church bell toll a few times and laughter as the lads exited the church.

Laura was looking worried. “What are we going to do Bill?”

Bill was also worried but trying not to show it. “They rang the bell, so someone will come.”

“If they come” added Laura.

Then Bill remembered the key. “If we don’t drop the key in to Mrs Dobson she will probably come looking for it.” He was not convinced.

In fact, Mrs Dobson smiled when she heard the bell and presumed that Bill and Laura were enjoying themselves. She wasn’t too bothered about getting the key back that day; it can wait until tomorrow. She fell asleep.

Others in the village also heard the bell ringing and presumed the bell ringer was practicing. He was, in fact, in The Castle finishing off a pint.

“Someone taking your job, Arnold?” queried the barman.

“Looks like it” Arnold replied. “Another pint please, George.”

George duly pulled the pint, laughing.

Bill and Laura sat near the top step, worried. They both shouted for help once or twice but knew that it was probably futile. Then Bill turned off the flashlight and put his arm around Laura wondering how much oxygen was in the crypt. The air was already unpleasant to breathe after the hundreds of years the crypt had been sealed and he was now wondering whether they would suffocate. In the silence his thoughts went back to the group of lads, three of them if he remembered correctly, on their bikes at the top of Church Lane.

“I know who did this” he stated.

“Who?” Laura asked, surprised.

He told Laura about the incident on the bus. “Wait until we get out of here.”

“If we get out” Laura said, nestling into his arms.

All was deathly quiet.

They tried a few more times to move the slab then gave up, thinking about the extra oxygen they were using from their exertions. After what seemed hours with them feeling the chill of the crypt they began to doze off.

“Bill?”

Bill opened his eyes. Did he hear someone calling his name? He was sure it wasn't Laura.

“Bill?” The voice again. “Where are you?”

It was Sir James. He released Laura.

“What?” she said, awakened from her dozing.

“It's Sir James” said Bill. “He's calling me.” He then called out in response

“We're in here Sir James.”

“Where?” was the reply.

“In your crypt. We are trapped and can't get out.”

“How did that happen?” Sir James asked.

“It's a long story” Bill replied. Can you help?”

The ghost was suddenly in front of them, not visible in the darkness of course, although Bill thought he detected a faint glow outlining him. It was probably the darkness playing tricks.

“I'm not sure” Sir James replied. “But I will see what I can do with the telekinetic powers I believe I have.”

“Telekinetic” Bill repeated. “How did you come across that word?”
“You wouldn’t believe it” the ghost replied. “But for now ...” and he was gone.

The silence was broken when Bill and Laura heard the church bell tolling very faintly through the slab.

“Who’s doing that?” Laura asked.

“Sir James” Bill replied.

“Ghost can’t do physical things” she said.

Bill didn’t reply and turned the flashlight on to their faces to show his deadpan expression.

“No. Don’t tell me.” Laura continued. “He can talk, show himself AND execute physical things?”

“Luckily, yes” Bill replied. “He’s a ghost in a million.”

“You’re telling me” she replied. “Let’s hope it brings someone running.”

All they could now do was to sit back and wait.

“How are we going to explain this” Laura questioned “if we get out alive?” she added, trying to add a bit of humour.

“I can’t bear to think about it” Bill said; turned the light off and cuddled her once again.

Doris Dobson woke up to the ringing church bell. ‘*They still at it?*’ she thought. ‘*I’ll have to have a word with them about that.*’ She didn’t really feel like going down to the church again so thought she would leave it a bit longer and then, perhaps, wander down there later.

The Reverend Jones was also woken up by the ringing but still didn’t feel well enough to go to the church to see who was ringing the bell at this time of the afternoon. He was still feeling quite achy from the viral infection he had picked up, probably from one of his parishioners who had declined the ‘flu jab.

The bell ringer was fast asleep, inebriated following his lunchtime sojourn in The Castle. Most of the other villagers were also busy with their Sunday activities – gardening, walking, watching television, etc. to be bothered to go and find out why it was ringing for so long.

Time passed, until some residents, who lived nearest to the church, began to get irritated by the continuous bell ringing..

“What is that bell ringer up to?” said Vera Higgins to her husband. “It’s getting on my nerves now. After all, it supposed to be a quiet Sunday afternoon.”

“It’s quiet every day around here” her husband replied, turning over his compost heap.”

“I’m going to give him a piece of my mind” she continued, going back towards the house. “There’s only so much bell ringing one can put up with.”

“I’ll join you” Dennis replied, pulling off his garden gloves.

Bill and Laura sat quietly most of the time with short spells of conversation about the project and their relationship. Sitting on the step was not particularly comfortable, being hard and cold. They thought they could still hear the faint ringing of the bell but were now feeling despondent and worried that someone might come to sort the bell out but not realize they were in the crypt. Would their voices be heard if they shouted? They dozed off.

Vera and Dennis walked up the church path and noticed the door was open.

“What are you up to, Arnold?” Dennis shouted. “Trying to wake the devil?”

“Probably can’t hear you” Vera added.

As they entered the porch, the ringing stopped.

“He did hear me” Dennis replied, entering the building. He looked around.

“Arnold?” There was no reply. “Arnold, where are you?” Still no reply.

“Where’s he gone?”

Vera walked towards the aisle and noticing the envelope on the floor by her foot, picked it up, crumpled it and put it in her pocket. She also noticed the rope lying across the slab wondering what it was doing there.

“There’s no one here” called out Dennis, interrupting her thoughts. He had a quizzical look on his face. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“Perhaps he’s up in the bell tower” suggested Vera.

Dennis stepped over to the door to the bell tower, opened it and stepped inside.

“You up there, Arnold?” As there was still no reply he climbed the steps, calling out Arnold’s name until he finally reached the top. There was no one in the tower. He came back down. “Found him?” he said to Vera.

“No. I took a look in the vestibule and there’s no sign of him.” She replied.

“Perhaps he was hiding and nipped out whilst we were looking for him” suggested Dennis.

“Why on earth would he do that!” Vera exclaimed.

Just then, three other villagers entered the church.

“Oh, it was you was it?” Paul said. Paul was the village postman but also helped out at the shop when not doing his round. He was a tall man, with a bald head a moustache and small goatee beard. He was wearing blue jeans and a vertically striped, short sleeve shirt.

“No, it wasn’t us” replied Vera quickly. “Did you just see Arnold leaving the church?”

“No” replied Paul. “Anyway, he’s asleep in his garden. Too much to drink at lunchtime.”

“I don’t get it” said Dennis. “The ringing stopped as soon as we entered the church. Spooky if you ask me.”

“Perhaps the church is haunted after all” George suggested, standing behind the other two new arrivals.

Just then, a cold draft blew through the church slamming the heavy door shut.

“Did you feel that?” Vera stammered, shivering. The others all nodded.

“Something weird going on” said Paul, walking up to the small table and noticed the disarrayed envelopes and pencil alongside them. “Someone has been here” he said. “Doris always makes sure that the pencils are all in the pot and the envelopes are in a neat pile.”

“Could well have been” added Vera. “There was an envelope left on the tomb stone, the one with the rope on it.”

They all looked over at the tombstone. Harold, the third member of the trio and who worked in town, stepped over to the slab and bent down. Noticing the trowel just behind the rear pew he looked back at the slab.

“Someone’s been clearing out the dirt around the edge of the tombstone and ...” He moved over to the where the rope was attached. “... and has moved the slab. Give me a hand will you.”

The four men grabbed the rope between them, lifted and dragged the slab back.

Bill and Laura were awakened by the scraping sound.

“Help” they both called out.

The four men momentarily stopped pulling, looked at the surprised look on each of their faces and returned quickly to drag the slab away and reveal Bill and Laura sitting on the step. Everyone spoke at the same time.

“Oh, thank God you’ve come.”

“What are you two doing here?”

“How did you get in there?”

“What is this? A crypt?”

“Well, I never knew that was there.”

“What’s down there?”

Laura was quick to sense the confusion and she knew that Bill would be fighting for the right words to say in reply.

“Please” she gasped. “Can we please first get out and then I’ll explain.”

There was a stunned silence as Bill and Laura climbed out of the crypt.

“What ...” Vera started to say, but Laura raised her hand to signify *wait*.

“Please” she continued, and indicated the rear pew. “If you will all please sit in the pew I will explain.”

They all did as she instructed and, once they were all settled, she started.

She explained that she was an historian undertaking research, with Bill’s help, on Crickleford, along with some other villages in the area. During their research they had come across some chronicles that suggested a crypt existed in the church for the burial tombs of the local lord’s family.

“How come none of us knew it was here” Paul interrupted.

Laura shook her head. “There are plenty of hidden church secrets, many of which are not widely known nor documented.”

Bill knew she was making all this up as she continued to explain how she met Bill, who was also interested in the village’s history, particularly as his ancestors had lived here. The group all glanced at Bill, who nodded in agreement. When they started to check out the church more thoroughly Laura told them that they noticed the slab with the orifice and therefore deduced that the slab must be moveable tombstone and were most excited when they found the crypt; but even more overjoyed when they discovered the tombs.

“There are tombs down there?” asked Dennis.

“Yes” Laura replied, “and we need to document them all before anyone comes to the church. We don’t want them disturbed.”

The group all glanced at each other and nodded their heads in agreement. As a final comment Laura told them that once they had completed their research they would publish an extract in the village newsletter and prepare a pamphlet or booklet to sell in order to raise funds for the church and other restoration projects in the village. That pleased the listeners.

“What if no one had come?” asked Vera.

“We would have suffocated” replied Bill.

“Who sealed you in there?” Paul asked, with concern on his face.

Bill explained that he had a suspicion that it was some local lads and gave a description. The villagers all nodded in acknowledgement that they knew who the suspects were – trouble makers. Then came the obvious question that was on all of their minds.

“Who was ringing the bell?” Vera asked, looking around at everyone.

There was stunned silence.

Paul started to say “We think ...”

“It was NOT us” Dennis said, in a raised voice.

Laura knew what to say. “A ghost? Perhaps the church is haunted.”

Surprisingly, it shut them up.

“We’ll never know” said George. “We’ll never know.”

As they started to get off the pew to leave, Bill suddenly noticed Sir James standing in the pulpit leaning on the lectern, smiling and giving a thumbs-up sign. He nodded in response and had to stop himself laughing.

It was late afternoon when Bill finally locked the church door. They called in to tell Doris Dobson about the crypt and that they would hold on to the key until they had documented their findings and replaced the slab. She couldn’t believe it and was eager to tell the Reverend Jones at the first opportunity. They finally staggered back to Wisteria Cottage for a welcome meal, which Laura cooked, accompanied by a bottle of wine. After relaxing a while on the sofa discussing their future plans, Laura suggested that they should continue their *research* in bed, which is what they did before falling asleep cuddled up together.

Revelation

With the coming of autumn Bill and Laura found themselves busy with little time for further research. Bill had just finalized one contract and was about to start another and Laura was busy writing up archaeological notes and in demand for temporary work. They did, however, find the time to pay a quick visit to Upper Settingly to find out where Henry's family had lived. Library references pointed to a grand old building approached by an avenue of trees. It had been purchased several years prior, when in a state of disrepair, by an ex Fund Manager from the city who had obviously ploughed a lot of money into its restoration. They parked in front of a pair of tall ornate gates but decided there was no point in disturbing the occupants.

"My brother lived there?" Sir James, who accompanied them, was certainly impressed.

"Yes" replied Bill "And he owned most of the land you see around you."

"He did well."

"He certainly did,"

"Is that James Willingford again?" Asked Laura.

"Yes" replied Bill. "He's happy that his brother did so well."

With not much else useful to do in Upper Settingly they then drove on to the county records office which was located in Stanten Town Hall, an austere looking building on the outskirts of the local park. Apparently, the original stylish building had burnt down and replaced by the current monstrosity designed by a local architect who, amazingly, made a lot of money out of the project. At the time there were reports of various officials 'lining their pockets' out of the project.

As they walked in through the door of the records office a middle aged woman walked past in front of them. She glanced at them and then stopped.

"Laura, it's you. How are you? Have you come to help out? We could do with another pair of hands; Rachel is off sick again." She shook her head.

"That girl always seems to be off." She glanced at Bill. "And who is this young man? Come to help too?"

Laura just about managed to get her replies in.

"I'm fine thanks Muriel and, no, I'm afraid I'm not here to help; too busy doing other things."

Laura noticed Muriel looking at Bill.

“This is Bill, my boy-friend, man-friend, companion, whatever the terminology is these days.”

Bill shook Muriel’s hand. “Hello Muriel. I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Muriel smiled. “Hello Bill”, then turned to Laura “How long?”

“Oh, five to six months now” Laura replied.

Bill nodded in agreement.

“A lot longer than the last one.” She glanced at Bill. “Oops, sorry.” She looked a bit embarrassed.

“It’s okay” Laura replied, putting Muriel at ease. “Bill knows all about the others.”

“So what brings you here then?” Muriel asked, as someone was trying to squeeze past her to get out.

“Excuse me please” said a voice.

“Oh sorry, I’m blocking the doorway” Muriel said, moving out of the way so that the person could get out and Bill and Laura could enter.

“We are researching a family; the one who owned the castle in Crickleford” Laura told her.

“They were the Willingfords weren’t they?” Muriel queried.

“Yes, that is correct” Bill heard Sir James say.

“Yes, that’s right” Bill repeated. “We’re working on the village history.”

“Very interesting” Muriel said; but Bill could sense that she wasn’t really interested.

“*How boring. Who would want to investigate that family?*” would be more appropriate words, Bill thought.

“Still, must get on. I don’t want to keep you from your research” Muriel said, moving off. “Nice to see you again, Laura, and nice to have met you, Bill.”

“Likewise” replied Bill, and, turned to Laura as Muriel headed down the office “Nice lady.”

“A bit nosey” Laura whispered. “But very helpful.”

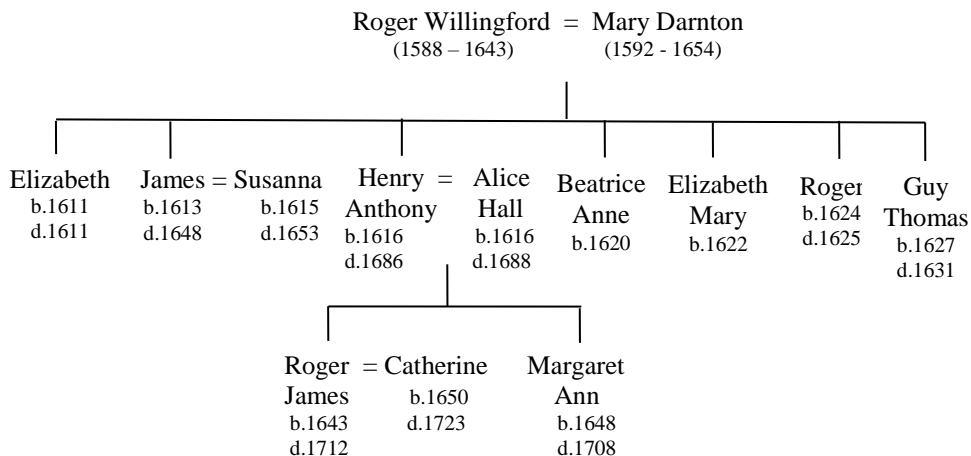
Laura guided them over to a spare desk. “Let’s work here. I’ll go and grab indexes and microfiche to scan. Fortunately most of the parish records in this parish have been transcribed and copied. You might be able to glean some information from the on-line search sites available to us.”

Bill nodded and wandered over to one of the computer workstations available to researchers, to make a start.

It took several visits and poring over photocopies of documents to construct the family of Roger Willingford and they discovered that the couple were married in 1611 and had seven children in total, three of whom died when

very young. James' marriage was in 1638, so he and Susanna only enjoyed ten years of marriage. Henry wedded Alice in 1641. Henry's son Roger married Catherine in 1670.

The Family Tree of Sir Roger Willingford



At this stage, they decided not to trace the families of James' sisters and limited the period of the male lineage to the beginning of the 18th century. After all, their prime objective was to discover what happened to Susanna Willingford (de Couer). So, with the likely probability that Susanna had moved in with her sister Isabella they now they needed to travel to the area of Lower Paperton and spend a few days in the county town of Pulchester, which was about twenty miles from where Isabella's family lived.

Lower Paperton itself was an old market town which had its own share of history. The main High Street included a butcher's shop, a greengrocer, an electrical shop and a local craft shop. Sadly most of the other small businesses had closed down due to a couple of supermarkets moving in which meant that the only other traders remaining were charity shops, estate agents, hairdressers and take-away food shops. Still, it was an interesting town with an old church, a 17th century inn, where they managed to book a room for a few days, a town

bridge over the River Pap and a local wildlife reserve. There was a small library which also held a number of tourist information leaflets and pamphlets. Bill and Laura managed to find a leaflet about the Latune family who owned substantial land and property and lived in an old manor house which was now owned by a charitable foundation, having passed through various hands over the years. It was now used as a hotel but open to the public on Wednesdays. Fortunately, Bill and Laura had planned to be in the area on the Wednesday but thought they might have to remain an extra day to allow for a tour of the house. They therefore changed their plans and decided to visit it on the following day, which was Wednesday, so spent the rest of their day of arrival exploring the local town and its environs.

Like many old manors, a long graveled drive led from two ornate wrought iron gates to an open graveled area in front of the house. The portico entrance had wide marble steps leading to two sizeable part-glazed oak doors, which did not look particularly original. The grand entrance hall led through to a large reception room, which could have been a ball room originally. This in turn led on through two heavy glazed doors to a glass covered corridor that took guests through to a recently built block of hotel rooms. A pair of curved ornate staircases on either side of the hall led to the first floor. Just inside the entrance on the right was a 'welcome' desk where visitors could pay the entrance fee and pick up a booklet describing each of the rooms. A smart looking elderly gentleman in a dark suit welcomed Bill and Laura to the 'Latune Family Home', collected the entrance fee and gave them a copy of the guide, adding that the return of which would be appreciated. At this point Sir James had joined them eager for the tour. Bill acknowledged his presence.

The three of them started their tour with the room on the left which was the original dining room and contained a long oak table and heavy padded carved oak chairs. Three large windows opened onto the front of the house and a large fireplace was situated centrally in the wall opposite. Paintings of family members hung on all available spaces on the paneled walls. The booklet included a description of each painting and identified who the subjects were. As they wandered down the room admiring the portraits, Bill heard Sir James call out.

"Bill!" he exclaimed, excitedly.

Bill looked about. Fortunately, there was no one else, apart from Laura, in the room.

"Yes?" he replied.

"Susanna!" Sir James exclaimed.

“What? Where?” Bill wandered over to join Sir James staring at one of the paintings.

Laura stepped over to join them staring up at a painting of two young women in white dresses sitting together on a Chez Lounge. The woman on the left had her hair ted up in a bun and appeared to be the taller whilst the one on the right was noticeably prettier with free flowing hair but had a very sad countenance. Bill glanced at Sir James and could have sworn there were tears in his eyes. “*I wonder if ghosts can cry*” he thought to himself. He pointed to the woman on the right.

“Is that Susanna on the right, Sir James?”

“Yes, it is; my wife” he replied sadly.

Laura, of course, heard what Bill had said.

“She is so beautiful” she said “but so pale.”

“Yes, she was very beautiful” replied Sir James.

Bill’s head jerked to look at Sir James.

“You heard what she said?” he asked, astounded.

Sir James returned his glance. “Yes, I did.”

Bill turned back to Laura. “Sir James heard what you said” he said excitedly.

She turned to look towards Bill’s side where she thought maybe Sir James was standing.

“That’s great, but I can’t hear him let alone see him.”

“May be it will happen soon” Bill suggested. “If we become more intimate” he added.

“I think we’re very much that already” Laura replied, grinning.

Bill turned back to Sir James.

“I presume that is her sister Isabella whom she is with.”

“Yes” he replied. “I only saw her a few times but, yes, it is her.”

In a more somber tone, he said “Susanna must have moved in with her when I was ... executed.”

The three of them stood there in silence contemplating what might have been.

Laura consulted the guide book to confirm what they already knew.

“I wonder how long she lived after my execution” Sir James eventually said.

“Five years” Bill replied, without thinking; and then thought about the child they had had.

Sir James looked at Bill. “How do you know that?”

“I found it in some books I was reading, but Laura and I intend to conduct a search of some old records to confirm it.”

“My poor wife” Sir James said sadly. “I wonder what the reason for her death was. I hope it wasn’t my fault.”

They continued their stroll around the room when they came across another painting of Susanna. This time it was of her sitting alone but holding a baby in her lap.

“Ah” said Sir James “that must be Isabella’s baby. Isabella loved children; had quite a few I understand.”

Bill thought he could see a likeness to Sir James but kept quiet. He didn’t want to raise Sir James’ hopes at this stage.

They heard someone enter the room and sit themselves on the guide’s chair just inside the door. Looking round, they saw it was a short, plump, middle-aged lady dressed in a black skirt and jacket with a white blouse. When she saw them look round at her she got up and came over.

“You seem to be particularly interested in a couple of the paintings” she said.

“Any particular reason?”

Bill was a bit hesitant to tell her that they were undertaking a research project on the family in case they wouldn’t be able to get rid of her, but he did anyway and was glad as it turned out.

“Oh” she immediately said. “We have some very old chronicles in the archive library that may be of interest to you.”

She pointed to the information booklet Bill had been given on entry.

“The booklet doesn’t tell you too much but if you would like some further information I am sure the librarian will allow you to view some of the old documents and books.”

“That would very helpful and most kind of you” Laura replied.

“Follow me” the woman said.

She led them out of the dining room back to the entrance hall and to a door hidden by the left staircase. It opened onto a descending set of stone steps.

“To the archive” the woman stated, as they descended.

At the bottom was a narrow corridor with framed sketches and more paintings on the walls and with doorways at intervals. They stopped in front of a door with a numeric keypad and labeled *Historical Archives*. The woman entered a security code and opened the door beckoning for them to follow her in. Seated at a desk several paces on the left was another elderly woman also dressed in the black uniform and busy tapping something into a computer on the desk. She stopped and looked up as they entered.

“Ah, June” the first woman said. “These two people are undertaking a research project on the Latune family and I thought it might help them if they could view some of the archives, if that’s alright.”

June looked Bill and Laura up and down and gave the impression that she didn’t seem to think much of the idea, as though the archives were her

personal property. She pulled open a drawer in her desk and pulled out some white linen gloves, throwing them on the desk in front of her.

“Make sure they take the items to be examined to the felt table and handle them with the UTMOST CARE. They are VERY VALUABLE.”

“Thank you so much” said Laura, then added “We understand your concern. I am a librarian and also work in record offices. Oh, and I am also an archaeologist.”

June’s whole demeanor suddenly changed. She smiled and said “How very interesting my dear. Of course, not everyone appreciates how fragile some of these documents can be.”

“You’re right there” Laura added.

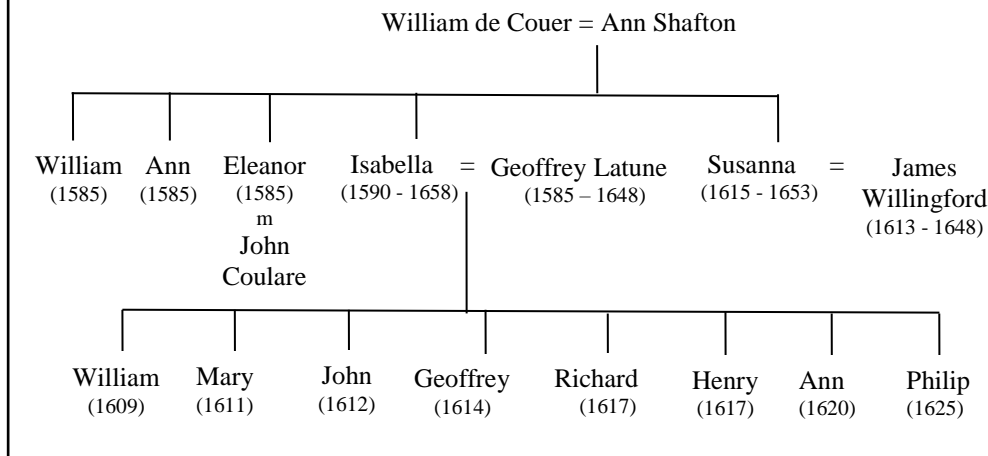
In fact, June proved very helpful by searching for documents that might be of interest to them. The guide, whose name was Pamela, said she would check if it was okay if they wished to come back on any other day, should they be unable to complete their searches that day. Bill and Laura thanked her and commenced their search through the chronicles, which she gladly brought out to them.

“Good job we came here” said Bill. “There’s a wealth of information in these documents.”

He was about to make a comment to Sir James as they made notes on their findings, but noticed that he had disappeared again.

Finally they had the relevant parts of the de Couer and Latune family trees completed and noted immediately that there was no mention of the baby that Susanna was holding on her lap.

The de Couer Family Tree



They surmised that the baby was unlikely to have been Isabella's, otherwise she would have been about fifty eight when it was born.

"It must have been Susanna's" Bill stated. "There's just no mention of the child at all."

After a bit more digging, Laura found a reference to the child in the painting.

"It says here" she read, "*Younger sister Susanna with Edward Roger.*"

"That must confirm it" Bill said, "considering that 'Edward' was Sir James' second name and 'Roger' was his Dad's name."

The evidence seemed compelling but they now needed to visit the records office in Pulchester where they would hope to confirm their theory and find out what happened to Edward Roger. As it was now getting late they agreed to start the following day, so left the office to enjoy a good meal that evening in a local Italian restaurant and settled on the usual dessert back at the hotel – in bed!

They were up early the following morning and took the journey to Pulchester to visit the records office and continue their searches. That would leave them the Friday to find Susanna's grave and return to Crickleford, which fitted in with their original timetable. The Records Office in the old Roman town, was in a fairly modern building and not one of the locations where Laura had worked, but the office manager, Michael, said he knew Muriel whom he had met during courses and conferences. Michael proved very helpful and showed Laura where she could access the 17th – 19th century records.

As half expected, they found no trace of Edward Roger Willingford.

“He can’t have just been wiped off the map” Laura said. “There has to be a record of him somewhere.”

Having finally exhausted a search under ‘Willingford’ she suggested they conduct searches based on variants of ‘Willing’.

“Maybe the spelling of the name changed or perhaps they changed their name completely” Laura suggested.

“Why would she change her name?” Bill wondered out loud.

“Maybe in fear of being persecuted” as Laura’s reply.

There were plenty of false leads using names such as ‘Wallingford’ and ‘Wilton’ until Laura suggested that they try Bill’s surname.

“Yes, like I’m probably related”, he laughed.

A couple of hours later, as it was nearing the end of office hours, Laura shouted “I’ve found him.”

A couple of other researchers looked up, somewhat annoyed, so Bill wandered over to where Laura was scanning a fiche.

“Look” she said, quietly this time.

There it was; an entry which merely stated:

Edward Roger Wilford born about 1649.

Mother: Susanna. Born about 1615; died 1653.

Father: James Edward. Born 1613; died 1648.

“It’s as though she was trying to distant herself from her former life” Laura suggested.

“But why? Surely neither she nor her son was a threat to the Commonwealth.”

“And why didn’t they revert Edward’s name back to his father’s once Charles II became King” Bill added.

“I guess we will never know” Laura replied, printing off a copy of the fiche.

Bill sighed. “So, our task is nearly over. All we have to do now is to locate where Susanna was buried and I will have fulfilled my promise to Sir James.”

He started to gather up the books and documents they had been working with. “I guess we now need to visit the local church where we hope she will have been buried.”

He was about to head towards the door when Laura stopped him.

“Bill” Laura said, slowly.

“Yes.”

“Whilst we’re here, don’t you want to find out more about Edward’s descendants, if he has any?” She was looking him in the eyes. “After all, you could be related.”

Bill wasn’t convinced. “Unlikely” he replied. “There must be dozens of Wilfords around and it would probably take ages. Maybe we can follow that up once we have found Susanna’s resting place.”

Laura was keener to complete this latest task immediately, rather than wait.

“Look, while this is still fresh in our minds I will start tracing Edward’s descendants and you can work back to the 1841 census. It shouldn’t be too great a task to fill in the hundred year odd gap to confirm whether a link exists or not; and remember, families often like to name offspring after their parents or close relatives so you may find the names like Edward, James, Roger and Susanna passed down the generations.” She was very insistent and was obviously going to get her own way, so Bill acquiesced and they resumed their searching to trace Edward’s descendants and attempt to confirm whether or not Bill was related to Sir James. He parked himself at a computer terminal to start searching the censuses whilst she popped off to dig out more fiches. They had a couple of coffee breaks and Bill nipped out for some sandwiches for a lunch break, during which they reviewed their progress. At office closing time they had amassed a copious quantity of documents to spend the evening analyzing and, hopefully, building the Wilford family tree. So that they could spend as much time as possible on the charts, they picked up a pizza and salad from the Italian restaurant and a bottle of Rose wine from an off-license. The inn keeper proved very accommodating and was happy to let them take the food into their room.

“Well Bill” began Laura as they finished the pizza and salad “how did you get on with the censuses?”

Bill pulled out a number of sheets from the file and talked her through them methodically.

“Like you suggested, I kept in mind the likelihood that the forename would be often be carried down the generations and I also checked BMD records for confirmation and arrived at the following,” Bill picked up each sheet in turn.

“I know that my grandfather, Thomas, was born in 1923 and had two children: my Dad and my Aunt Elizabeth. From the census reports from 1891, 1901 and 1911 I then identified his Dad as Edward, who was born in 1888. The 1861, 1871 and 1881 censuses suggest that Edward’s dad was John, born in 1852 and I am confident that his Dad was David, born in 1824. Most of them had quite large families which I have summarized on a separate sheet here.” He pulled out the summary sheet to show Laura. “Also, the 1901 census shows the family living in Crickleford in Wisteria Cottage but prior to that they had an address in Stanten. At some point I guess they must have moved from the Lower Paperton area.”

Laura seemed elated. “That’s fantastic news Bill. With what I have unearthed I think we’ll have some good news for you.” She pulled out the summary of her own findings to show Bill.

“Your David was a son of James born in 1790. His dad was Thomas, born in 1749. Thomas’ dad, and Edward’s son, was born in 1707. All the BMD data supports these links, so I’m confident that you are in fact related to James Edward Willingford, allowing for the name change to Wilford of course.”

“If that’s true” Bill said “The DNA link might explain why I, as a direct descendant can hear and see him..”

Bill still couldn't believe it and was now keen to see a list of all his ancestors, so they compiled a list of names with the intention of constructing the diagrammatic version when they had more time. For simplicity, they just listed the direct forbears.

Edward Roger – b.1648; married (1) 1668 [Caroline Lovell];
(2) 1700 [Mary Davies] ; d.1728

Edward William – b.1707

Thomas Henry – b.1749

James Roger – b.1790

David – b.1824

John Louis – b.1852

Edward Stephen - b.1888

Thomas Phillip – b.1823

John Edward – b.1963

William (Bill) – b.1993

They both fell back mentally tired from a night piecing together Bill's ancestry.

"A job well done" Laura said.

"Was it worth it?" Bill asked. "Yes, it was and I can only thank you Laura for being so persistent and supportive; but what do you get out of it?"

"To know that I am dating a member of the aristocracy."

"Who owns a small cottage and a ruined castle."

"That's enough for me" she replied, cuddling up to him.

Ever since they had left the manor house there had been no sign of Sir James. Bill assumed that he would have found it boring whilst he and Laura were burying themselves in records and paperwork. He assumed that Sir James was probably busying himself exploring his (unknown) son's birthplace. Now all that remained was to find Susanna's grave.

The Poacher

They started the Friday morning with a Full English Breakfast at the inn, checked out just after ten o'clock and immediately made their way to the local church. Unfortunately it was drizzling with rain when they reached the village so were grateful to find the building open. Although it was originally another Norman building it was of a slightly different design to the one in Crickleford. There was no bell tower and the entrance was directly opposite the altar, so that when one entered one is immediately faced with the altar, behind which was a large and elaborate stained glass window. The font was also at the front of the church just before and to the right of the altar. Inside, they noticed the usual assortment of leaflets and the customary donation box for the upkeep of the building. Bill and Laura first wandered about inside but found nothing relevant to their search so decided to explore the graveyard. Fortunately, the rain had ceased as they made their way to the rear of the building where they came across an impressive mausoleum set upon a black marble plinth and surrounded by wrought iron railings with a padlocked gate. There was no door to the building but they could just about make out the tombs inside. On the horizontal portico was the inscription 'The Latune Family'. Glancing around, they climbed over the railings, which was only about three feet high, and stepped through the entrance. At the end of the mausoleum was a cream coloured marble plaque which listed the family members interred in the building. Unsurprisingly, Susanna's name was not among them.

"Perhaps we'd better search the cemetery for any sign of Susanna's grave" suggested Bill.

"Yes, but to save time" added Laura "you cover the area to the right and I'll take the left."

After about half an hour they met up with heads shaking.

"No sign" said Bill. "What do we do now?"

"We could ask the local vicar" suggested Laura. "He or she may be able to throw some light on it, unless of course Susanna's gravestone is too badly weathered, in which case we would have no hope of finding where she is buried."

They found the vicar's contact details in the church and Laura called the number.

"Good morning" came the reply from a cheerful female voice. "Reverend Peters speaking".

"Good morning reverend" replied Laura, "I'm hoping you can help us. My colleague and I are currently visiting your local church ..."

"Which one?" the woman interrupted. "I actually look after two parishes in this diocese: Lower and Middle Paperton."

"Lower," Laura said, and continued "and we are trying to locate the burial site of a notable person from the Stuart period whom we are researching."

“Hmm” came the reply, “if you haven’t found it already, that could be difficult considering the state of some of the gravestones; but I do believe” she added “that we may possess a list in the church burial records. Have you got a name?”

“Susanna Willingford or Wilford” Laura replied. “We do know that she was living with the Latune family when she died in 1653.”

“Ah!” came the surprised voice on the phone. “The Latunes; they were big landowners in Lower Paperton”.

“Yes” replied Laura. “Our research suggests that Susanna had a son who was five years old when she died.”

“Why don’t you pop over and we can discuss this over a cup of coffee. You have my address?”

“Yes, from the church” Laura replied. “We’ll come over right away if that’s okay.”

“Sure” was the reply.

Bill and Laura left the church and made their way to the Reverend Peters.

The vicarage was only about ten minutes away and set in large grounds with a sweeping well-manicured lawn leading up to the house. The old oak door was opened by a middle-aged, slightly plump woman of medium height with short auburn hair.

“Oh, that was quick” she said. “I’ve only just put the kettle on; come on in.”

She led them into a dark hall and through a door on the right into a lounge.

“Please take a seat” she said, indicating a faded flowery sofa under the window with its leaded glass. “I’ll go and make the coffee. Oh, and by the way ...” she placed a book she was holding onto a small circular coffee table in front of the sofa “I managed to dig out this this old book on church births, marriages and deaths. Some chronicler did a very thorough job.”

Bill glanced around the room whilst Laura started leafing carefully through the book. It had a worn black leather cover with yellowed pages and certainly seemed very fragile. Bill noticed two armchairs, also in the faded flowery material, arranged facing an ornate fireplace in the wall on the right above which hung a large wooden cross with a crucified Jesus. The rest of the furniture was dark oak and there was a large TV screen in the corner to their right.

The vicar returned to the room carrying a tray with three cups of coffee and with milk and sugar in delicate china containers. There were also three plates with napkins and a fourth one heaped with an assortment of biscuits.

“Please help yourselves to milk and sugar” the vicar said, then offered them a plate each. “Would you like a biscuit?”

“Yes please” said bill, somewhat eagerly. He liked his biscuits.

“Not for me thanks” said Laura. “I’m trying to be good.”

The vicar looked at her. “With a figure like that I’d say you could be naughty once in a while.”

Laura smiled. “Just one then.”

They both selected a plain chocolate digestive from the plate that was proffered.

“They are my favourite too” the vicar said, taking two. “I love my biscuits. Do help yourselves.”

After they had all eaten their biscuits she asked.

“So what’s this about ... Susanna, isn’t it ... that interests you?”

Bill then explained what they were researching about the Willingfords and the village of Crickleford whilst Laura returned to leaf through the old book. She had returned the book to the coffee table just before Bill had finished.

“That’s very interesting I must say” the vicar responded and, glancing over at Laura, said “Did you find anything of interest?”

“Laura, and this is Bill” Laura said. “Sorry, we should have given you our names when we arrived.”

“That’s okay, Laura and Bill. My name is Judith.”

Laura glanced back at the book. “Unfortunately no, I couldn’t find any reference to Susanna.”

Judith Peters got up from her chair and went over to an old oak sideboard. She pulled open a drawer and came back with a thin book in her hand which she started opening. “You might try ringing the mansion where the Latunes lived. It’s privately owned now and ...”

“Yes, we’ve already been there” Bill interrupted “and the staff were all very helpful.”

“Oh” Judith said, closing the book; but re-opened it immediately.

“Tell you what; I’ll ring Arthur our local historian. He might be able to throw some light on the matter. If anyone knows about that family, it’s him.”

She stepped over to pick up the telephone and, finding his number in the book, dialed. Someone picked up the phone very promptly.

“Arthur?” Judith barked.

A muffled ‘yes’.

“Judith Peters here.”

More muffled sounds.

“I’m fine thank you, Arthur; and you?”

Pause.

“Look , you may be able to help me Arthur. I have a young couple here enquiring about the Latune family ...Yes, that’s right ... I don’t know why ... They tell me it’s part of a research project and something to do with a woman named Susanna...”

The conversation went on for quite a while with Bill and Laura looking at each other and glancing at their watches. Eventually, Judith turned to them with another invitation to coffee from Arthur, but they declined stating that their time was limited. Judith returned to the phone.

“Very kind of you Arthur but they need to complete their investigations and return home today; but many thanks for what you have told me. I’ll pass the information on.”

She put the phone down.

“More coffee and biscuits?”

“No thanks” they both replied.

“We really must be on our way” Bill added.

“No problem” said Judith. “Anyway” she continued, “it seems that Susanna was not buried in the churchyard. Apparently, the story goes that she spent all of her time looking after her young son and used to take him to their favourite spot in the woodland down by the lake. When she died, so young, the family decided to erect a shrine in her favourite spot, where it is believed they buried her.”

“Well, that’s encouraging news” Bill said. “Is the lake far from the house?”

“Yes, it is some distance away but you should be able to access it from the road that runs around the estate. It’s only a short walk through the wood and I am sure the owners won’t mind; they probably won’t even see you, as the woodland is quite dense and borders the road. It will save you time anyway without the hassle of getting permission from the site manager particularly as it’s not a public day.”

“I’m sure we will be okay” said Bill. “We have already spoken with some of the staff and they were most helpful.”

The couple got up from the sofa and headed towards the door.

“We can’t thank you enough for all your help, Judith” said Laura, as they passed through the front door.

“No problem at all” she replied. “Just glad to be of assistance.”

She watched them climb into Bill’s Jaguar which he drove off excitedly back the Latune estate.

It was quite a long drive along the narrow winding road hugged by trees on both sides. Equipped with their satellite navigation system they located their position relative to the lake. As they hadn’t seen any other traffic on the road Bill slowed to a crawl with Laura scanning for a break in the roadside scrub.

“We are just about at the nearest point” said Bill, looking at the satnav.

Suddenly Laura called out “Stop. I think there’s a gap back there – a few yards.”

Bill managed to reverse the car onto the side of the road where it was just about wide enough to accommodate the vehicle without causing an obstruction. Grabbing their mobile phones they crossed the road and found some of the brushwood flattened.

“Looks like we’re not the only ones who’ve been here” said Bill.

“I wonder who else might want to access the estate without being seen” Laura queried.

“Up to no good no doubt” suggested Bill.

It was a bit hard going, jumping over a drainage ditch, clambering over fallen trees and tree roots but eventually their path through the woodland became easier; in some ways too easy.

Eventually Bill said “Laura, by the state of the route we are taking I would say that other people have definitely been using this path.”

“Yes” Laura agreed “so I wonder whether it’s inquisitive people like us, rambles or someone up to no good.”

Just at that moment, Bill thought he heard a twig snap somewhere. He stopped, listening.

“Did you hear that, Laura?”

She stopped as well, listening carefully. “No.”

“Must be my imagination thinking about other people wandering about in the woods” Bill said.

“Could be anything” Laura said.

They carried on and eventually arrived close to the edge of a large lake. Looking across it Laura made out a clearing not quite opposite from where they were standing but slightly to the left.

“Over there” she said pointing.

Bill followed the direction of her arm.

“Difficult to see clearly but it looks as though the clearing slopes up to a white building.”

“That must be the shrine” she said, excitedly. “Come on.”

They hurried as fast as they could but it wasn’t easy trying to follow the lake shore with all the bracken, fallen branches and ditches draining water into the lake.

Finally the tree cover broke and they were standing on and looking over a mown grassy expanse leading from the lake shore to the white building that Bill had seen. As they drew closer to it they could see it was in the ancient Greek style with a simple portico consisting of a triangular pediment supported on two Doric columns. The building appeared well maintained, although as they got closer there some evidence of repair work which actually blended in well with the rest of the structure. Wide marble steps led up to the shrine with a marble seat either side of the opening. Stepping inside they saw the large circular window with an embedded cross at the back of the building which provided plenty of light to help illuminate the interior. The tomb was set in the centre of a circular room which had a continuous marble seat around the inside wall.

“Most impressive” said Bill, marveling at the grandeur of the place.

“It certainly is” agreed Laura. “They must have thought a lot of her.”

The tomb itself, of a smooth white stone and closed with a stone slab, was magnificent with a gold inscription etched into each side. It read:

*Here lies Susanna Willingford née de Couer
(sometimes known as Susanna Wilford)
Who ascended into heaven on 17th March 1653 aged 38
The loving wife of Sir James Edward Willingford*

“At last” said Bill “we’ve found her.”

He then pulled out his phone to take pictures of the tomb, building, lake and the immediate surrounds before sitting on the seat to the left of the entrance. Laura joined him and glanced at her watch.

“Gosh, look at the time.” She said. “It’s getting on for two o’clock.”

“What!” Bill exclaimed, glancing at his own watch. “I didn’t realize we have been that long.”

He took hold of Laura’s hand.

“I wonder where Sir James is. I thought he would be continually tracking us.”

"We haven't seen him since the tour around the mansion" Laura added.

"No." Bill said. "I hope he appears soon; we can't stay here all night."

"No you can't" said a gruff voice with a West Country accent.

Bill's and Laura's heads flicked to the right to see a man pointing a shot gun at them. They looked warily at the two barrels of the gun.

"Who are you?" Bill challenged.

"Gamekeeper" the man replied.

Bill thought he looked more like a poacher with his grey flat cap, a hip length dark green jacket with bulging pockets which looked more like camouflage gear. He was wearing brown corduroy trousers tied around the ankles with string and large boots. He was wearing dark glasses, even though it wasn't that bright, and had several days' growth on his face. There was a large sack tied at the neck with string containing something bulky on the ground beside him.

"What you doing 'ere?" he growled.

"Research" Laura replied. "So do you mind putting that gun down."

The man eyed Laura up and down leeringly. Instead, he cocked the gun.

"Get up," he said, pointing the gun at Bill "and don't try anything."

"What's your problem?" Bill asked.

"I'm taking you in for trespassing and ..." he paused, thinking what else to say "... obscene activities."

"What" Bill shouted. "You're joking."

His response was to jab the gun to the right. "Enough talking; get going."

"And if we don't" replied Bill.

He pointed the gun at Laura. "I'll put a bullet in your girlfriend."

"Oh don't be ridiculous; you wouldn't get away with it anyway" Laura countered.

"Don't you worry about me" he growled. "I've dispatched many a trespasser and poacher."

"Poaching now, as well as trespassing and obscene behaviour. This gets more stupid every minute" Bill continued.

"Just walk, before my finger loses patience" he yelled back.

Laura grabbed Bill's hand. "Oh come on Bill; let's do as he says and we can sort this out with the estate manager."

"Lady talks sense" the man replied.

They started walking back into the woods in the direction he told them. They guessed that it was in the general direction of the house, thinking back to the satnav map of the estate.

Shortly, they came across an overgrown path running from left to right.

"Right here" he said, waving the gun.

Bill sensed that the direction was opposite to that of the house. '*Maybe the path winds a bit*' he tried to convince himself. They continued for a short distance and came across a sign stuck in the ground with the words *Ice House* scrawled on it. Just behind

the sign was a grass covered mound with moss covered stones steps leading down to the entrance that had a metal gate with vertical bars.

"Down there" he ordered.

"What for?" asked Bill, beginning to feel uneasy.

"Just want to make sure you're secure" he growled.

"Why don't we just go direct to the house?" Bill said.

At which point he fired one of the cartridges into the mound.

"Just do as I say or the next one will be for you" he shouted.

"Come on Bill" Laura said starting to lead him down the steps.

"No" the man said. "Just you; the woman comes with me."

Bill now knew what his intentions were as he stepped around in front of Laura, noticing the fear on her face.

"Oh no" Bill said. "You're not going to get away with that!"

"Aren't I now" he man replied with an evil grin on his face.

Suddenly a wind whipped up that made the three of them look around. It gradually increased in intensity causing the tree tops to wave about vigorously. Now the three of them were looking up wondering what was happening. The wind seemed to be reaching gale force and the creaking of tree branches was getting louder and threatening. All of a sudden there was a loud squawking as a flock of birds ascended into the air which surprised the man with the gun, which he proceeded to lower. This was followed by a loud crack as a heavy branch came crashing down hitting him on the head. As he fell to the ground unconscious the wind quickly died down leaving Bill and Laura dumbfounded.

"What on earth was that?" Laura finally said.

Bill thought for a moment. "I think I know" he replied.

He climbed back up the ice house steps and stepped over to the prostrate body of the man.

"I wonder if he is okay."

He knelt down to feel the man's pulse. Laura removed his flat cap to examine his head. The skin had split and there was blood oozing out of the wound but at least his skull didn't appear to be bashed in.

"His pulse is okay" Bill said. "I think it's just concussion but he really needs to be seen."

"What shall we do with him then?" Laura asked. "He may even regain consciousness."

Bill looked back at the ice house.

"He was obviously going to lock me in there but how did he intend to secure the gate?"

They started rummaging through his jacket pockets and found cartridges for the gun, a coil of wire, assorted tools and a padlock.

"Why would he be carrying a padlock?" Bill said, not expecting a reply.

"Perhaps he hides things in the ice house" replied Laura. "It doesn't look as though anyone comes to see it from the state of the overgrown path."

“Let’s put him in there, then we can contact the police or estate manager” Bill said, moving forward to grab the man under the shoulders. Laura grabbed his feet. He was a big man and it took effort from both of them to carry him just inside the ice house. As Bill padlocked the door he noticed another old rusty padlock lying just inside that had been cut off.

A voice suddenly remarked “You should execute him, Bill”, which made them both jump. They quickly turned and Bill saw Sir James standing at the top of the steps with his arms folded. “Did you like my little surprise?” he said, with a big grin on his face. “Took your time didn’t you?” Bill admonished. “Another few minutes and we might have been shot.”

“It was the shot that was fired a short while ago that alerted me” Sir James replied. “Oh” Bill said “and where have you been since our tour of the Latune’s house and when did you turn up here?”

“Well,” he replied “I didn’t see much point in tagging along with you two whilst you were reading all those books and having tea with the vicar.”

“You knew we were there?” Bill said.

“Well, I just popped in at the end and heard that you were intending to return to the Latune’s house so, guessing that you had made a discovery, decided to follow.”

He stepped over to join them standing over the prone poacher. “I hung around Susanna’s tomb for a while then wondered where you had got to. Then I sensed the gunshot.”

“Well, we are very grateful for your help, Sir James, for saving us from that man and wonder how you managed to conjure up that wind; but now let’s see if we can help you.” Bill said.

They checked that the ‘gamekeeper’ was breathing regularly and that the padlock was secure. They left the gun and sack on the ground where the man had dropped them and headed back to the shrine.

The lid of the tomb appeared to have been just placed on top so they hoped that they would be able to move it with a bit of muscle power.

“Here we go again” Bill said, as he and Laura stood at one corner and started to push at the slab.

“Don’t just stand there Sir James” he said, grunting with the effort. “Can’t you do anything to help”.

“I don’t think I can in this instance I’m afraid” he replied despondently.

The slab started moving with a grinding sound but it took quite a while before a small opening appeared in one corner at the top of the tomb.

“Just a fraction more” pleaded Sir James, now becoming very emotional.

When the opening was about two centimetres square he called out. “Stop. That should be enough.”

Sir James approached the tomb. “Would you both mind moving away.”

Bill and Laura went and sat down on the circular seat around the tomb whilst Sir James moved close to the small opening.

At first nothing happened; then a soft breeze blew around them and a mist emanated from the gap in the top of the tomb. Slowly the mist took on the form of a woman with the same ethereal form as her husband. When Susanna was complete she slowly drifted down to stand next to Sir James where they took hold of each other's hand. They turned to face Bill and Laura. Susanna was dressed in a simple white gown, similar to one she wearing in the paintings, with her long dark hair flowing over her right shoulder. Although she was just a spirit, her eyes seemed to convey warmth and love. Bill and Laura were both stunned by her beauty.

"*She is so stunning*" Bill thought to himself.

"She is so beautiful" Laura interjected.

Bill's head snapped round to look at Laura with another astounded expression.

"You can see her?"

"Yes, and I can now see Sir James as well" Laura replied.

Bill was overjoyed. "That's incredible" he said. "But why now? What's changed?"

Susanna responded in a soft, gentle voice. "It comes down to belief, love and, I believe, a special bond that exists between you."

Bill and Laura glanced at each other with quizzical but knowing looks on their faces.

"I agree" interjected Sir James. "Ever since I have been in the presence of Bill and Laura I have seen them growing closer together. Their joint effort and belief in me has finally been rewarded by the reuniting of the two of us."

They turned to look at each other and visibly squeezed their hands. Bill squeezed Laura's hand affectionately in response.

"You have done a great job, Bill and Laura" Sir James said "and we will forever be in your debt. I only wish there was a way we could repay you."

"It was our pleasure and gave us a very interesting project to write about" Laura said.

Following a momentary pause, Sir James took his wife's arm under his own and placed his other hand over it.

"Sadly" he said "it is time now for us to leave you so that we can rest in peace. I thank you Bill Wilford and Laura Larson from the bottom of my heart."

As soon as he mentioned 'Wilford' Susanna looked at him with a questioning look, of which he was unaware. He went on.

"You remember, Bill, that I suggested that the reason you and I were able to see and hear each other was because we could be related."

He laughed. "I only wish that it were so. It would be an honour."

Now they were starting to fade, as Sir James had done on his and Bill's previous encounter.

"Oh" Bill said. "One more thing before you go, Sir James and Susanna."

"Yes?" They both replied.

"You might like to know that I have traced one of my ancestors from your period."

"And who might that be?" Sir James asked. "I might even know him or her."

"His name was *Edward Roger*."

Susanna's eyes opened wide and her mouth dropped open, accentuating her beauty. They both disappeared.

"You didn't tell ..." Laura began.

"No" interrupted Bill. "I thought it would be better coming from her. They have much to talk about."

"Yes they do" Laura agreed "and so have we." She gave him a hug.

They sat there quietly for a few minutes with Laura resting her head on Bill's shoulder.

"I love you Laura" he said. "So very much."

"And I love you too" she replied. "Maybe we do have a special bond."

Bill felt a warm feeling coursing through his body with a sudden desire for her.

"We'd better sort out his poacher and make our way home before it gets too dark."

"Yes" she agreed, as they got up off the seat and made their way back to the ice house.

With a sense of relief they noticed that he had moved and now appeared to be asleep. They were happy that he wouldn't be able to reach the shotgun and obviously didn't want to handle it, but did take a quick look in the sack and found a couple of dead rabbits.

"Time to call the estate manager or police" Bill said, pulling out his phone.

"Estate manager might be best" Laura said. "Fewer questions."

"True" Bill agreed, and looked up the estate's telephone number.

When he got through, Laura just sat listening to Bill's half of the dialogue.

"Good morning, could I speak with the estate manager please?"

...

"Ah, good morning Ms Wilson. This is Bill Wilford speaking. First of all, do you have a gamekeeper?"

...

"In that case I, or myself and my colleague I should say, have just apprehended a poacher on your property."

...

"Yes ... Well he has a shotgun and we found a couple of rabbits in a bag that he was carrying."

...

"Oh, that's interesting. Anyway, I wish to reassure you that this definitely not a hoax but at the moment I do not have the time to explain the full story right now but I promise to contact and update you in due course. You have my number should you need to contact me regarding the poacher."

...

"No problem. Okay, in summary, this poacher fellow held us up at gunpoint with the intention of sexually assaulting my partner. Fortunately for us a heavy branch broke away from a tree and landed on him knocking him out. We checked him out before we locked him in your ice house, but don't ask me how." Bill glanced at the sleeping man. "We think he's okay but he's asleep right now."

“He’s waking up” Laura whispered.

“Oh, my partner tells me he is waking up.”

Bill continued to relate the man’s situation, along with his ownership of the shotgun and spare cartridges he was carrying in his pocket, which he might try and hide, and recommended that it would be advisable to call the police before letting him out. He also recommended that he receive medical attention to his head. He then thanked the manager for her attention and was about to say goodbye.

“Oh, one more thing; you will find the key to the padlock on top of the bag by the shotgun.”

He disconnected.

“Let’s go Laura.”

“What was it that she said, that you found interesting?” she asked.

“Oh, well, when I mentioned ‘poacher’ she said ‘that figures’ because they have a deer park here and they have noticed that some deer have gone missing.”

“Lucky we caught him then.”

A murmur arose from the ice house.

“Oi, Let me outa here you bastards” the poacher shouted.

“Help is on its way” Bill replied sarcastically. “Have a nice day.”

They started retracing their steps back to the car.

“Come back” the man yelled. “I’ll get even with you.”

Back in the car they gave each other a big kiss and cuddle.

“I’m starving” Laura said.

“So am I and I really fancy a big dessert” he replied, grinning at her. She looked back at him with a sultry expression.

“Me too.”

They stopped off at a pleasant pub for a meal on the way home and finally arrived at Wisteria cottage at about ten o’clock. It didn’t take them long to rush upstairs, undress each other and enjoy the dessert, with all its trimmings, over rather a long period.

“Must be one of the best desserts we’ve had” Laura said afterwards.

“I didn’t realize how many ways one could ‘bond’” Bill replied. “It seems that Susanna was right after all about this ‘bond’ between us.”

They cuddled up giggling and quickly fell asleep.

Denouement

With all the material Bill and Laura had accumulated for their research into the Willingfords, Wilfords, Latunes and de Couers they commenced their 'History of Crickleford and the Willingfords'. They still had a fair amount of work to gather information on the ancestry of the Willingfords and, once the outline of the proposed publication was complete, they were overjoyed when a publisher agreed to take it on. With her English degree and contacts through the libraries and archaeological group Laura was able to land contracts as a professional writer with the travel industry and marketing companies, among others. Bill's work also continued to flow in at a steady rate. They did make a return visit to the Latune's old family home and expressed their thanks and appreciation for all the help and support they had received from the staff. They also said that a suitably glowing reference to the management would be included in the finished work, which placated them. They also learnt that the poacher had recovered from his head bashing and was now serving a short prison sentence.

So that they could work together more easily on the publication Laura had suggested that it might be a good idea if she moved in with Bill, on a strictly temporary basis of course. Bill was overjoyed and had agreed without hesitation. In fact it turned out to be permanent when Laura gave up the flat when her contract came up for renewal. Now at last they were together and enjoyed desserts after most dinners.

Finally their book was published and Bill became a celebrity in the village of Crickleford with his links to the Willingford family. The castle management updated their history of the castle and Bill set up a regular donation to help with the ongoing repairs and restoration. The village held a fete where Bill and Laura were guests of honour. Mrs Dobson was overjoyed saying that it couldn't have happened to a more well-deserving couple and when she sadly passed away six months later she left her estate to the village with a substantial legacy going to the castle.

One night, sometime later as Bill and Laura lay in bed after another tasty dessert, Bill, looking up at the ceiling, said "Laura."

"Yes darling."

"You remember what Susanna said about the bond between us."

"Y-e-s" she replied slowly, anticipating what was coming next. "I am unlikely to forget it."

"Shall we cement that bond?" he suggested, not without a little nervousness.

"That's a very interesting proposition" she replied. "I shall have to consider it very carefully."

"Do I take it that's not a 'no'?" he asked.

"Well" she replied "It's not a 'no' nor a 'yes'. I shall certainly give it a lot of consideration."

Bill felt, in fact hoped, that she was just teasing him.

Laura turned on her side to face Bill.

"I really love you William Willingford"

Bill also now turned to face her.

"And I am besotted with you Laura Larson."

"Sir James ... " Laura said.

"Yes?" Bill replied.

"How do you think he took the news that you are his descendent?"

Bill thought for a moment.

"Sometimes I have regrets that he wasn't made aware of it until after they had left us and finally departed from this world."

"As we now know, it would certainly seem to explain how you could see and hear both him and his wife" Laura suggested.

"And maybe the fact that you also developed the same senses could be interpreted as meaning that we are destined to be united" Bill said, hopefully.

"I can see that you're not going to give up on that one until I give you the answer you want, are you Bill?" She was looking lovingly into his eyes now.

"Nope" he said, curling his arm over her warm naked body.

"It's been an exciting time with you Bill" she said "and I have this feeling that it isn't going to stop."

"Well at least the excitement is over for Sir James, now that he is at peace with Susanna" he said.

A questioning look came over her face.

"Unless ..." she started.

"Unless what?" Bill replied with a niggling worry.

"Unless they aren't yet at peace" she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe they won't really be at peace until they find out where their son is buried"

Laura replied slowly, imagining what was going through Bill's mind now.

"Why do you say that?"

"So that father and son can be united in the other world of course" she said, grinning.

Bill flopped back, looking up at the ceiling once more.

"And then this starts all over again" he said, and then rolled over on top of her. "But at the moment I've got more important things on my mind."

"Haven't you just, Bill Willingford!"

The landlord of The Castle was collecting the empty glasses just after closing time when he noticed a yellow sticky paper that had only recently been pinned to one of the cork boards. 'Another poem I guess' as he stepped over to read it. It was short and to the point and read:

*I've just met a lovely young woman
Laura is her name
I'd like to spend my life with her
I hope she feels the same.*

He smiled to himself with a picture of the author and Laura Larson in his mind.
“Young love.”

=====”=====