

Dolly



A Ghost Story

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Iyot Lock



On an autumn night and the fens stretch for miles, open and still. It is dark, until the full moon slides from behind a cloud and over the huddle of grey stone which is Iyot Lock. The hamlet straddles a cross roads between flat field and flat field, with its squat church on the east side, hard by Iyot House and the graveyard in between. On the west side, a straggle of cottages leads to Iyot Farm, whose flat fields bleed into the flat fens with no apparent boundary.

It is rare for a night here to be so still. The wind from the sea keens and whistles, though that sea is some miles away. Birds cry their eerie cries.

And then, a slight, thin movement of the air, from inland. It skims over the low dykes and watery

ditches, rattles the dry reeds and rushes, rustles the grasses along the roadside.

It strengthens to a low wind and the wind weaves through the few trees in the churchyard and taps the branches of the creeper against the windows of Iyot House.

Nobody hears, for the house is empty and surely the sleepers in the churchyard are not disturbed.

The grasses whisper, the wind moves among the gravestones. And somewhere just about here, by the low wall, another sound, not like the grass but like paper rustling. But there is no paper.

The creeper scrapes the windowpanes. The moon slips out, silvering the glass.

The wind prowls around Iyot Lock, shifting the branches, stirring the grasses, swaying faintly, and from somewhere nearby, hidden or even buried, the sound of rustling.

PART ONE

I



It was a November afternoon when I returned to Iyot Lock and saw that nothing had changed. It was as I recalled it from forty years earlier, the sky as vast, the fen as flat, the river as dark and secretly flowing as it had been in my mind and memory. There had sometimes been sunshine, the river had gleamed and glinted, the larks had soared and sung on a June day, but this was how I knew it best, this landscape of dun and steel, with the sky falling in on my head and the wind keening and the ghosts and will-o'-the-wisps haunting my childhood nights.

I drove over Hoggett's bridge, seeing the water flow sluggishly beneath, and across the flat straight road,

past the old lock keeper's cottage, abandoned now, but then the home of the lock keeper with a wen on his nose and one glass eye, who looked after his sluices and his eel traps in sullen silence. I used to steer clear of Mr Norry, of whom I was mortally, superstitiously afraid. But the blackened wood and brick cottage was empty and the roof fallen in. As I went by, a great bird with ragged wings rose out of it and flapped away, low over the water.

I could see far ahead to where the fen met the sky and the tower of Iyot Church, and then the house itself shimmered into view, hazy at first in the veils of rain, then larger, clearer, darker. The only trees for miles were the trees around the churchyard and those close to Iyot House, shading it from sight of the road, though few people, now as ever, were likely to pass by.

I parked beside the church wall and got out. The rain was a fine drizzle lying like cobwebs on my hair and the shoulders of my coat. Mine was the only car, so unless she had parked at the house, I was the first to arrive. That did not surprise me.

I pushed open the heavy greened wood of the gate and walked up the path to the church door. Crumpled chicken wire had been used to cover the

arch and keep out birds, but it had loosened and old twigs and bits of blackened straw poked through where they had still managed to nest. I lifted the iron handle, twisted it and the door creaked open. The cold inside the porch made me catch my breath. Beyond the inner door, inside the church itself, it was more intense still and smelled of damp stone and mould. It seemed to be the cold of centuries and to seep into my bones as I stood there.

I did not remember anything about the church, though I was sure I must have been there on Sundays, with my aunt – I had a folk memory of the hard polished pews against my bony little backside and legs, for I had been a thin child. It was dull and pale, with uninteresting memorial tablets and clear glass windows that let the silvery daylight in onto the grey floor. Even the Lion and Unicorn, the only touch of colour in the church, painted in red and faded gold and blue on a wooden panel, and which might have taken the attention of a small boy, was quite unfamiliar. Perhaps my memories had been of another church altogether.

I wandered about, half expecting to hear the door open and see her standing there, but no one came and my footsteps were solitary on the stone floor.

The lights did not come on when I clicked the switch and the church was dim in the sullen

November afternoon. I made my way out again, but as I stood looking out at the path and the graveyard, I had a strange and quite urgent sense that I ought to do something, that I was needed, that I was the one person who could rescue – rescue what? Who? I could not remember when I had had such an anxious feeling and as I walked out, it became stronger, almost as if someone were tugging at my sleeve and begging me to help them. But there was no one. The churchyard was empty and it felt desolate in the gathering dusk, with the brooding sky overhead, though it was only just after three o'clock.

I shook myself, to be rid of the inexplicable feeling and walked briskly to the car and drove the short distance to the house, the back and chimneys of which were hard to the road. There were the wooden gates, which I remembered well. If I opened them I could swing into the yard and park behind the scullery and outhouses, but the gate was locked and seemingly barred on the inside, so I returned to the lay-by beside the church and set out to walk back along the deserted lane to Iyot House. I glanced down the road but there was no sight of a car, even far away, no moving dot in the distance.

And then, it was as if something were tugging at my sleeve, though I felt nothing. I was being urged to return to the churchyard and I could not disobey,

whatever was asking me to go there needed something – needed me? What did it want me to do and why? Where exactly was I to go?

I turned again, feeling considerably annoyed but unable to resist, and the moment I set off I sensed that this was right, and that who or whatever wanted me there was relieved and pleased with me. We all like to please by doing the thing we are being asked, in spite of our misgivings, and so I retraced my steps briskly the hundred yards to the lych gate. That was not quite far enough. I must go through and into the churchyard. By now the dark was gathering fast and I could barely see my way, but there were still streaks of light in the sky to the west and it was not a large area. I moved slowly among the gravestones. It was almost as if I were playing the old childhood game of Hide and Seek, one in which the inner sense was saying ‘Cold’ ‘Cold’ ‘Warm’ ‘Very Warm’.

It was as I neared three gravestones that were set against the low wall at the back that the sense of urgency became very strong. I went to each one. All were ancient, moss and lichen-covered and the names and dates were no longer visible. Even as I got near to the first I felt a peculiar electric shock of heat, followed immediately by a sense of release. This was it. I was there. But where? Wherever I was meant to be? Then by whom, and why?