

# The Haunted Dolls' House



## Part one

'Mr Chittenden, you must often get things like that in your shop,' said Mr Dillet, pointing with his stick to the doll's house in the window. Mr Dillet knew a lot about old things, and realized it was very special.

'You can't be serious,' replied Mr Chittenden. 'That should be in a museum.'

'You don't say!' laughed Mr Dillet. 'And how much is it?'

'Seventy-five pounds, sir.'

'That's a price for an American buyer. Let's say fifty.'

In the end they agreed on something in between, and half an hour later Mr Dillet took the thing away in his car.

Mr Chittenden stood at the shop door, smiling, with the money in his hand, and waved goodbye. Then he entered the back room where his wife was making tea.

'It's gone,' he said. 'Mr Dillet bought it.'

'Good!' said Mrs Chittenden. 'He needs a bit of a shock.'

'Well, I'm sure he's going to get it, and we won't have any more of it,' said Mr Chittenden, as they sat down to tea.

When Mr Dillet arrived home, Collins, the butler, came out to help him. Together they carried the doll's house up to Mr Dillet's bedroom and put it on his desk. Then Mr Dillet opened the front of it, and put everything in its place.

It was a beautiful example of an 18th century doll's house - six feet wide with a chapel on the left, and a stable on the right. The chapel had a bell and colored glass windows. When the front of the house was open, you saw four large rooms inside: bedroom, kitchen, drawing room, and dining room, each with all the right furniture in it. The stable contained horses, a coach, and stable boys, and on top was the stable clock, also with a bell.

The house stood on a platform which had steps going up to the front door, and a terrace on it. This platform also had a drawer in it, where you could keep different curtains and dolls' clothes, so you could change things when you wanted.

'It's wonderful,' sighed Mr Dillet. 'And what a low price! I could sell it in town for ten times more. It almost makes me afraid. I hope my luck doesn't change for the worse. But let's see who lives here.'

He put the dolls in a line in front of him. There was a gentleman and a lady in blue - he was in a

suit and she in a fine dress. There were two children, a boy and a girl, together with a cook, a nurse, a servant, a coach driver, and three stable boys.

'Is there anyone more? Perhaps.' The four-poster bed had its curtains closed and he put his finger between them and felt inside. He pulled it out quickly because it seemed to him something there had felt almost alive. When he opened the curtains, he discovered an old gentleman with white hair in a long white nightgown, and put him with the others. That was all of them.

It was nearly dinner time, so in five minutes Mr Dillet put all the dolls back and went down for dinner. He didn't return to his own fine four-poster bed until eleven o'clock that night.

There was no striking clock in Mr Dillet's room, nor on the stairs or stables of his house, and none in the nearby church. But it was a clock striking that woke Mr Dillet from a pleasant sleep at one in the morning.

He was so surprised he sat up in bed.

Strangely, although the room was dark, he could see the doll's house very clearly. It seemed that a full moon was shining down on it, and he could see trees around it - behind the chapel and the stable. It seemed too that he could smell the autumn smell of a cool September night. He thought he could hear horses moving in the stables. And with another shock he realized that above the roof, instead of the wall of his room, he was looking into a dark blue night sky.

He saw too that this was no four-roomed house with a movable front, but a real house with many rooms and stairs, although strangely smaller than it should be.

'You want to show me something,' he said to himself.

Two rooms in the doll's house were lit: one on the ground floor to the right of the door and one upstairs on the left. The first room was brightly lit, the second not so brightly. And he could see everything that was happening inside those rooms. The first room was the dining room. Dinner was finished, but glasses and wine were still on the table. The gentleman and lady in blue sat alone there. They were talking seriously, and from time to time it seemed they stopped to listen. Once the gentleman got up, opened the window, put his head out and put his hand to his ear. Then he went from the window and from the room and the woman was left standing alone there, holding a candle. Looking at her face, it seemed that she was fighting against a strong fear inside her, and that she was winning. She had an unpleasant face, too: wide, flat and too clever for its own good.

Now the gentleman came back into the room and she took something from his hand and hurried out. He too disappeared, but only for a moment. The front door slowly opened and he came out and stood on the terrace. Then he turned to the upstairs window which was lit, and shook his closed hand angrily up at it.

It was time to look at that upper window. Through it you could see a four-poster bed, and a nurse sleeping in an armchair by the fire. In the bed an old man lay awake, and - from the way he moved his hands on the bed covers - he was worried. Beyond the bed, the door opened. The lady in

blue came in with the candle. She put it down and woke up the nurse. She had an open bottle of wine in her hand. The nurse took it and put some wine into a pan. She added sugar and spices from little pots, and then put the pan on the fire to cook.

At the same time, the old man seemed to call weakly to the lady. She went to him, felt his wrist, and bit her lip. The old man looked at her worriedly and pointed to the window. She went to the window and then, as the gentleman had done, she opened it, put her head out - with her hand to her ear - and listened. Then she pulled her head in and shook it at the old man, who seemed to sigh.

Now the spiced wine was ready. The nurse put it in a silver bowl and took it to the old man. He waved it away, but the lady and the nurse moved closer, probably asking him to drink. In the end it's clear he said 'yes', because they helped him to sit up and put the bowl to his lips. He drank most of it, then lay down. The lady smiled goodnight, and left the room. She took the candle, the bottle, the bowl, and the pan with her. The nurse went back to her chair and for a time everything was quiet.

Suddenly the old man sat up in bed and opened his mouth wide. He was probably crying out, because the nurse jumped up and ran to the bedside. The old man looked terrible. His face was dark red, almost black, his round eyes were staring, both hands pulled at his chest, and his lips were white.

For a moment the nurse left him, ran to the door, and threw it open, clearly calling for help: then she ran back and tried nervously to calm him down. But as the lady, her husband, and several servants hurried with shocked faces into the room, the old man fell back on the bed, his arms stopped moving and his pained face slowly became calm and still.

A few moments later, lights showed to the left of the house, and a lit coach drove up to the front door.

A man in black with white hair got out and ran up the front steps, carrying a black bag. He was met at the door by the man and wife. She seemed to be crying and he had a long sad face. They took their visitor into the dining room, where he put his bag of papers on the table. Then he listened with a worried face to what they told him. He seemed to say no to an invitation to have something to eat or drink, returned to his coach, and drove off the way he'd come. As the gentleman in blue watched him from the top of the steps, an unpleasant smile covered his fat white face. Then all became dark as the coach disappeared into the night.

## Part two

All was dark in Mr Dillet's bedroom, but he stayed sitting up in his bed. He guessed he would see more.

The front of the doll's house began to shine again, but the lights were now in different places. One was at the top of the house and the other in the chapel. There was a coffin in the middle of the chapel with four candles in tall silver holders around it. A black cloth lay over the coffin and, as he watched, the cloth seemed to move up at one end and fell to the floor, leaving the coffin uncovered. One of the candles fell to the floor also.

Now Mr Dillet looked at the room at the top of the house. A boy and girl lay in two small beds and there was a four-poster bed for the nurse. She wasn't there, but the father and mother were. They were dressed in black clothes, but were laughing and talking with each other and with the children. Then, unnoticed by the children, the father left the room, taking a long white nightgown from by the door as he went. He shut the door behind him. A few moments later, the door opened slowly and a large terrible white thing entered and moved towards the beds.

Then the figure suddenly stopped, lifted up its arms, and showed itself to be - the laughing father, of course! The children were terrified - the boy hid under the bed covers and the girl ran to her mother's arms. The parents tried to calm them down, took them on their knees, and showed them that the old nightgown couldn't hurt them. At last they put the children to bed, waving to them as they left the room. As they left, the nurse came in, and soon the light in the children's room at the top of the house went out.

Mr Dillet stayed watching without moving.

Then a new kind of light, not a candle, but something unpleasant and cold shone into the room at the top of the house as the door opened again. Something very frightening entered the room. The watcher couldn't describe it beyond saying it looked like a frog as big as a man with thin white hair on top. It went to the little beds and was busy over them for a while, but not for long.

The noise of weak little cries, sounding very far off but still awful, reached the listener's ear. Suddenly the house was full of lights moving, figures running, doors opening and closing. The clock in the stable sounded one, and darkness came.

Then, for the last time, the house shone brightly again. At the foot of the steps by the front door two lines of black figures waited, holding burning lights. More dark figures came down the steps, carrying two little coffins. And the lines of dark figures carrying lights, with the coffins between them, moved to the chapel on the left.

The hours of night passed very slowly, thought Mr Dillet. He slowly moved from sitting to lying in his bed, but he didn't close an eye. Early next morning he sent for the doctor.

The doctor found him uneasy and nervous, and said that sea air was the answer. So Mr Dillet was driven slowly to a quiet place on the east coast.

One of the first people he met as he walked along by the sea was Mr Chittenden, who had also been told to take his wife away for a change of air.

'I'm a little upset with you,' said Mr Dillet.

'I'm not surprised, sir. My wife and I went through a lot ourselves. But what could I do? I couldn't throw the thing away - it was a really nice piece. And I couldn't really tell a buyer, "I'm selling you a haunted doll's house which will always come to life at one o'clock in the morning." I didn't want people to think me and my wife were crazy.'

'Will you buy it back from me?'

'No thanks! I'll tell you what, though. I'll pay you back what you gave for it, except the ten pounds I paid, of course. And you can do what you want with it.'

Later in the day the two men had another whispered conversation in the smokers' room at their hotel.

'Tell me, how much do you know about that thing, and where it came from?'

'Honestly, Mr Dillet, I don't know the house. Of course it came out of an old country house, that's clear. I've got a feeling it was from somewhere not far from this place. The man I bought it from isn't one who usually sells to me, and I haven't seen him since then. But this was his part of the country. And that's all I can say about it.'

'But, Mr Dillet, I've got a question. The old man who drives up to the door - you've seen him, haven't you? Ah yes, I thought so. Do you think he was the doctor or the lawyer? My wife says the doctor, but I say the lawyer because of all the papers in his bag, and the one he took out last but didn't open.'

'I agree,' said Mr Dillet. 'I think that was the old man's will, ready for him to write his name at the bottom.'

'I thought the same,' replied Mr Chittenden. 'Probably a will that didn't leave any of the old man's money to the younger ones. But it's taught me something. I won't buy any doll's houses again, or spend time and money at the cinema. And about the idea of poisoning grandad, well, I couldn't do it. I prefer to live happily with my relatives - always have done, always will do.'

The next day Mr Dillet went to the town museum. He wanted to try and find the house at the heart of the mystery. He looked at lots of old pictures of houses on the walls, but couldn't see his house among them. He looked through lots of old church records but again he had no luck. Then, in an almost empty room, he saw an old model of a church which made his heart grow suddenly cold. It looked like more work by the same man who had made his doll's house. He read the small notice in

front of it carefully.

This model of Saint Stephen's Church, Coxham, was given to the museum by Mr J Merewether of Ilbridge House in 1877.

It is the work of his ancestor, James Merewether, 1786.

He went back to look at a map of the country nearby that he'd noticed earlier on the wall. There he saw that Ilbridge house was in the village of Coxham. Then he went back to the old church records and soon found the funeral of Roger Milford, aged 76, on the 11th of September 1757, and of Roger and Elizabeth Merewether, aged 9 and 7, on the 19th of the same month. Although he wasn't sure this was the family, it seemed worth visiting Coxham, and so he drove there that afternoon.

In the north of the church there was a Milford chapel. In it there was a stone to the memory of Roger Milford:

'Father, and successful lawyer'. 'This stone was put here by his loving daughter Elizabeth, who died soon after losing her caring father and her dear children,' it said.

The last words had obviously been added later.

In the chapel too, a later stone spoke of,

'James Merewether, husband of Elizabeth, who - when a young man - was a promising architect, but who stopped this work on the death of his wife and children, and who ended his days in a comfortable retirement home.'

The children had smaller, less grandly-worded stones. They'd both died on the night of the 12th of September.

Mr Dillet felt sure that in Ilbridge House he'd found the place where it had all happened. In some old picture some day perhaps he'll find he's right. But the Ilbridge House of today is not the house he was looking for. It's a newer red-stone house which was built in the 1840s.

Not far from the new house, in a lower part of the garden, near some old trees, is a terraced platform covered with grass. That, someone told Mr Dillet, was the place where the old house had once stood.

As he drove out of the village, the church clock sounded four, and Mr Dillet put his hands over his ears. It was not the first time that he'd heard that bell.

These days, waiting for an American buyer, the doll's house rests, carefully covered, in the upstairs room over Mr Dillet's stables. It was taken there by his butler on the day that he left for the seaside.

- THE END -

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