

THE GHOSTS IN THE CLOCK WALK AGAIN

CHAPTER TWO

ABBOT BALDWIN'S GOOD DEED

The day after his adventure in Leticia's house, John took the opportunity, while his parents were busy in the kitchen, to inspect the clock for damage from falling stone and rubble. Fortunately, all was well, but it was a few days before John was able to visit the clock again; he decided to take the book with him - his Grandad had let him keep it a bit longer - and he crept downstairs and carefully opened the door of the clock. He whispered "Is there anyone there?" and listened carefully. There was no answer, no sound could be heard and John felt rather let down and wondered again whether it had all been a dream. He leant his head on the door ledge and sighed, closed his eyes - then went dizzy suddenly and found himself very tiny and lying half on and half off the ledge, with his legs dangling into space. He scrambled onto the ledge quickly and lay there for a few minutes getting his breath. Rising up to his eye level came Lady Matilda as the clock began to fill with its gentle yellow glow.

"Take you by surprise, did it?" she asked, her eyes twinkling.

"It certainly did!" gasped John. "I really felt it had all been a dream that time and then - whoosh! I'm all small and dangling into space!"

"The clock has a sense of mischief, I think. It likes to surprise us sometimes, too. I see you brought the book," said Lady Matilda, helping John up.

"Yes, although after the last time I wondered if it was good idea," said John.

"Well, I'm not sure, to be honest," said Lady Matilda. "But I have to admit I'm curious to see the house again in all its different forms. I think the Abbot will be pleased to see you with the book. He's been acting rather strangely, lost in thought and wishing that there was something he could do that he should have done long ago."

"What sort of thing?" asked John.

"You better ask him. Come on - got your breath back?"

John nodded and taking Lady Matilda's hand, he stepped off into space. This time they floated up.

"Everyone's in the Castle for a change," said Lady Matilda, "Enjoying a good meal, as usual. Jellicoe's arranged it, and of course there's far too much, but the others all seem to enjoy it and are tucking in like no-one's business."

They floated into the works, through the face and up to the picture of the castle. Once again John saw the green grass and coloured flowers waving about in the gentle breeze that seemed to blow out of the picture, as the sunlight glowed off the noble castle with the trees behind it. They walked into the picture and John felt the soft, springy grass under his feet. Then they strolled over the drawbridge and into the courtyard. The door to the great hall was open and in they went. John had forgotten

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how splendid the castle was, with its tall towers capped with red pointed roofs and the great hall with its windows full of stained glass that made the inside glow with all sorts of colours. The table in the hall was groaning with a huge meal and round it were gathered the other ghosts, eating their way through it. They all looked up as John and Lady Matilda entered.

“Welcome to the Castle!” said Jellicoe, standing up and shaking John by the hand as he always did. “Good to see you again, lad. Fancy a bit of supper?”

“Bit of supper!” said Lady Matilda. “There’s enough here to feed a small army!”

Jellicoe eyed John and winked, “Lady Matilda thinks that a light salad is a good enough dinner. She’s right, it is for a rabbit! Now, what can I get you?”

“I’d love a bit of that cheese, please,” said John. “It’s gorgeous.”

John had tried some of the cheese that Jellicoe had for his dinner before. It was a strong taste that took all the moisture out of your mouth when you bit into it. John thought it was delicious. Jellicoe cut him a piece and Lady Matilda produced a glass of ginger beer for him.

“Did you bring the book, lad?” asked the Abbot, a bit apprehensively. John nodded. “I would like to visit the abbey,” continued the Abbot. “Would you like to come with me?”

“Yes, please,” said John. “I’ve never seen an abbey except in ruins. It looks good in the book.” He took the book out of his pocket and opened it up to the picture of the abbey; the others all gathered round to see it.

“Handsome building,” said Jellicoe. “Was it built on the site of Leticia’s house?”

“Yes,” nodded Abbot Baldwin. “No-one else would build there because the ruins were haunted by a certain wailing woman in white who frightened the living daylights out of everyone.”

Leticia winked at John, “I had a good reputation, didn’t I?” she said.

“So,” the Abbot went on, “the land was given to the church on the grounds that a holy building might drive the ghost away. It didn’t do any good, though.”

“No, it didn’t.” said Leticia. “They plonked the Abbey right on the bit I haunted and there I was in these big cellars under the church - the undercroft they called it. So I started haunting the upper bits of the church where there was plenty of light and a bit of a breeze. I could wail to my hearts content up there.”

“Most of the time we thought it was the wind,” said the Abbot. “Occasionally a brother would go up there to do something or other and would come down an awful lot faster having seen something frightful but on the whole, few people went up to the top of the church so Leticia was left in peace.”

“I used to like the services,” said Leticia. “All the singing and the smell of the incense. I used to join in the singing sometimes.”

“We used to think that the wind was particularly strong occasionally,” said the Abbot. “Really howling!”

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Leticia looked offended and this time it was the Abbot's turn to wink at John.

"Right!" said Lady Matilda. "If you have all had your dinners we'll go. If you eat much more you will all burst."

"Something of an exaggeration," said Sir Percy as he finished off a chicken leg, "but if I do eat any more I really won't be able to move. And I've a feeling it will take all of us to concentrate hard to get anyone into the Abbey."

"Quite right," said Lady Matilda. "And a clear head," she said severely to Bunsen who was finishing a large glass of something.

"It's all right, it's only lemonade," said Bunsen a bit regretfully. "Leticia has decided I should stick to lemonade and tea. Quite right, of course. But still . . ."

"He kept wondering around the desert picture where we live and falling into the well," said Leticia. "I found he had a cellar under one of the buildings and was up to his old tricks of downing a bottle or two every day." Bunsen sighed and finished his lemonade.

They set off, stepping out of the picture and floating down to the ledge. The open clock door showed the hall of John's house, dimly lit by moonlight coming in through a window. They all closed their eyes and concentrated and John joined in, thinking hard about the picture of the Abbey. When they opened their eyes, they were once again looking into darkness. The hall of John's house had gone and it really seemed pitch black. Bunsen and Sir Percy snapped their fingers and produced lanterns, but they were too small to do much more than show that they were in a big black empty space. The Abbot took a deep breath, closed his eyes and stepped off into the blackness. He floated, hanging there in space, opened his eyes again and looked relieved.

"I didn't know if it would work," he said. "Looks as though we can get down this way. Coming everybody?" and down he went.

The others all took deep breaths and floated off, John holding hands tight with Sir Percy and Lady Matilda. They found themselves floating and gently descended to the floor, Sir Percy also keeping tight hold of his head. Once down they resumed their full size and the lanterns now threw a bit more light around so they were able to see that they were in a cellar again, this time with a vaulted roof and pillars, because it was quite a bit bigger than the cellar of Leticia's house.

"We're under the church," announced the Abbot. "We had better be careful going into the rest of the monastery. I look the part but I think you all should become invisible. John can stay with me and I can say he's a novice come to join us. He doesn't look too different in his dressing-gown."

This sounded good advice and the ghosts all became invisible, but John and the Abbot walked up a big set of steps at one end of the cellar that wound upwards and brought them out into the great nave of the church. It was wonderful. The vaulted roof soared up and was painted with patterns and pictures. The walls and pillars of the church were all painted too, and with the stained glass in all the windows the place was a riot of colour. However, there was no one about.

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“The place seems empty,” said the Abbot. “Strange, there should be plenty of monks around, cleaning the place, getting ready for the next service and generally bustling about. Yet there’s no-one. I wonder if they are all in the Chapter House.”

“What’s that?” asked John.

“It was where we held our meetings to discuss all the business of the monastery,” said the Abbot. “I’ll show it to you later. What do you think of the church? I’d forgotten how beautiful it was.”

“It’s amazing!” said John, “I love the paintings. But they don’t look much like church paintings - they all seem to be full of knights and dragons”

“They are; this is the Abbey of St. George,” said the Abbot, “and all the paintings are about the Life of St. George. I had a lot of them done when I was Abbot, and it looks as though a lot more were done later. In fact it looks quite a bit different to when I was Abbot.” he continued, looking around a bit puzzled.

Jellicoe and the others appeared out of thin air.

“I think you’ll find it is quite a few years since you’ve been Abbot,” said Jellicoe. “If I remember that picture in the book right, it’s of the Abbey just before it was dissolved and sold off by Henry VIII and stopped being an Abbey. A lot of it was pulled down but a few bits were saved.”

“Yes, they were made into a house and that was where I lived,” said Lady Matilda. “It was a strange old place, half house and half monastery.”

“Those bits were still there when I was alive,” said Sir Percy. “We could never make it all a really modern house because there was so much of the Abbey left. Passages and great thick stone walls everywhere.”

“All this went, though,” said the Abbot regretfully, looking round again at the beautiful paintings. “Pity, really. Oh well, let me show you the rest of the place,” he went on, and they followed him as he opened a door that led into a wide passage with big windows that went round all four sides of a courtyard.

“This is the cloister,” said the Abbot. “My favourite place. You could walk round here and think quietly or sit and read or copy some parchments out. We did a lot of that here,” he continued, turning to John. “There were no printed books, you see. If you wanted a copy of a book you had to write it out again and a lot of that sort of work was done in monasteries. When I first became a monk that was my job; I used to like it. I wish I’d stayed a scribe - that was what we were called. Instead I rose to become Abbot, and I wish I hadn’t.”

He sounded very sad and regretful. He led them along a passage and into a great round room with lots of tall windows and a high roof held up by a slender pillar in the middle. All around were wooden benches.

“The Chapter House,” said the Abbot, “This was our meeting place. I presided over a lot of meetings here in my time as Abbot.”

He led them out of the chapter house and along a passage to the dining room which he called the refectory. It was very long and had a big table down the middle with benches each side. The walls were whitewashed and at one end was a raised area

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where the Abbot said a monk would read to the others, while they ate, from some Latin book that would make them lead a better life.

“It was plain food, too, and you weren’t allowed to talk over dinner,” said the Abbot.

John thought that his Dad would like that because he said that the chatter of John and his brother over dinner would drive anyone mad and that as a result they took three times as long as anyone else to eat their dinners.

“Did you really eat plain food in silence listening to a book in Latin?” asked Sir Percy. “Doesn’t sound like you.”

“Ah! Well, no, I didn’t. They all did, but I ate somewhere else,” said the Abbot and sighed again. This time he led them up some steps to another long room with beds all down it.

“This is the dormitory,” he said. “The monks bedroom in other words. They were woken up at midnight for a service, went back to bed, up again at six and then after another service, breakfast. Another service at eight and then another at ten, dinner at eleven, then work. A service at five, supper and finally bed at half-past seven. Quite a day. It was cold in winter - there were no fires except in one small room. There were many good monks here, all except me. I was a wicked man.”

“However did you manage it,” gasped Sir Percy, astounded at the prospect of having to get up at six let alone go to bed at half-past seven.

“I didn’t,” said the Abbot shortly.

John wondered how the Abbot could have been a bad man. He said that with a busy day, all services and work, and being woken up so early and going to bed so early too, no-one would have had time to be bad. He told the Abbot that his mother always said that it was only when John had time on his hands that he got into mischief. If she kept him busy, she said he never had time to get into trouble.

“I’ll show you why I had the time,” sighed the Abbot.

In silence he led them downstairs and along some more passages into some much grander rooms with fine carved furniture, the walls all covered with tapestries. In a bedroom was a huge and very comfortable looking bed. There were fine silver and gold plates and cups around.

“These are my quarters as Abbot,” sighed Abbot Baldwin. “It’s called the Abbot’s Lodging. I’m afraid I didn’t lead the life of a monk at all well. I was a rich and powerful man; I ate what I wanted when I wanted - I even had my own kitchen. I slept as long as I wanted and wore rich clothes. I hunted and travelled and had parties here. I paid for the paintings but I hid a lot of money away and stopped paying for repairs to the Church. Everything became so dangerous in the bell tower that we couldn’t ring the big bell, Old Tom, anymore. But I wasn’t bothered - I was leading a good life. I was not a good Abbot at all.”

They all sat down on the comfortable chairs in the Abbott’s sitting room to listen to his story.

“What happened in the end,” asked Jellicoe quietly.

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The Abbot looked uncomfortable. “I deserved everything that happened to me,” he said. “The king had raised the taxes and the people were complaining - I was in charge of collecting the taxes around here. The monks warned me that there was trouble expected because the people were starving and couldn’t pay and I told them to hold their tongues - I wouldn’t listen and I threatened them with a flogging. I hadn’t got a clue about how the peasants round here lived and how poor they were. I heard that they were refusing to pay their taxes so I rode out to teach them a lesson with a few men at my back. We came into a village nearby and I called on the peasants to come out and pay or I would have them beaten. They came all right - and in a large group all waving pitchforks and clubs. I ordered my men to charge but they didn’t, and I looked back to see why; I saw that they were riding off as fast as they could. I turned round and did the same - the villagers were looking really angry. I rode back through the Abbey gatehouse breathing fire and brimstone and ordered the gates closed, the serving men to arm themselves and the monks to grab weapons and prepare to repel the peasants - and then realised that there was no one listening to me - they had all run away. The peasants followed me through the gate and it was my turn to run away as fast as I could.

“I got to the bell tower and began to pull on the bell rope hoping that it would attract the monks and servants of the monastery to my aid, but of course I had forgotten that I had been neglecting the Abbey and all the stone and wood needed repair. Do you know how to pull on a bell rope in a church?” the Abbot asked John. John shook his head.

Jellicoe chuckled. “I’ve an idea,” he said. “What did you do wrong? Pull too hard, look up and forget to let go?”

“Yes,” nodded the Abbot. “All the things they teach you when you pull on a bell. Don’t pull too hard, don’t look up and above all, don’t forget to let go of the rope if it flies too far upwards. If you do all three of those things do you know what can happen?” John shook his head but Jellicoe chuckled a lot more - he knew.

“You get pulled up through the holes where the bell rope comes down as the rope wraps itself around the bell which goes round and round!” said the Abbot. “So I flew up to the bell, cracked my head on it and then of course I did something equally stupid. I let go of the rope. So I came down five floors a lot quicker than I went up. And then the woodwork holding the bell gave way and everything crashed down - right on top of me. I did a Leticia; I bought the house down - or at least the inside of the bell tower. That was how I became a ghost. I’ve been wishing I could make up for all my mistakes ever since.” He sighed again and continued, “Now you all know what sort of man I am. I’ve never told anyone before because I was afraid you would never talk to me again once you knew what a bad man I had been.”

Lady Matilda said gently, “Don’t be silly, of course we’ll talk to you.”

Jellicoe got up and patted him on the shoulder. “Come on,” he said. “Show us some more of the monastery, just for John here.”

The Abbot looked up to see John and smiled.

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“Right ho,” he said. “I’m sorry. I’m going on about things that happened a long time ago.”

“I think that the Abbots who followed you lead just the same good life,” said Bunsen who had been going through one of the chests and was looking at the rich clothes inside. “These aren’t the clothes of a monk.”

“No, they’re the clothes of a rich gentleman,” said Lady Matilda, “Not too different from the stuff that was worn in my day.”

“The last Abbot wasn’t really interested in the monastery, from what I remember of that book,” said Jellicoe. “He had to run away when the Abbey was closed by the king. I think it was something he said. Anyway, the king wasn’t very happy with him and it didn’t do to upset Henry the Eighth. You could lose your head.”

“Come and see the infirmary,” said the Abbot. “We’ll have a good look around the old place before it is all pulled down.”

“The infir-what?” said John.

“The hospital,” whispered Leticia. “That’s what they called it. They had one in all the monasteries; this one was very good and looked after the sick and old of all the villages around here at one time.”

They made their way down stone passages and past big store rooms until they came to a great long hall, with slender pillars and a fine wooden roof. There were wooden partitions down each side, making little cubicles in which there were beds. There seemed to be no one about - then a monk, very old and bent with age, came out of a cubicle and bumped into the Abbot, dropping and scattering a pile of manuscripts and books which he had been carrying. The rest of the ghosts became rapidly invisible and left John and the Abbot to greet the man. The old man squinted up at the Abbot as if he couldn’t see very well.

“Greetings, brother,” he said. “You must forgive me if I do not recognise you but my eyes are not what they were.”

“Greetings to you, brother,” said the Abbot. “I am brother Baldwin. I, er, come from far away. You do not know me. This is John, he is, um, a friend of mine who I was showing round the monastery.”

“It will soon be gone,” said the man regretfully, as he picked up the papers; John and the Abbot helped him. “Everything will be gone soon and I am trying to save some of these old books, for they will be all destroyed once the men come. My name is brother Gerard.”

“They are truly beautiful,” said the Abbot as he picked up some of the manuscripts. “This was once my job, I was a scribe.” He showed John some of the parchments before he returned them to the old man. They were written in a beautiful - but to John, unreadable - script and they had the most wonderful little pictures all over them, glowing with gold and colour.

“They really are fabulous,” said John. “Surely no one will destroy these?”

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“Oh, they will. No one values such illuminations now,” said the old man. “You too were a scribe, brother? That is - or was - my job. Now I have nothing to do and nowhere to go. Who will want a nearly blind old man who could once illuminate a manuscript?”

“What do you mean by illumination?” asked John. “Doesn’t that mean lighting things up?”

“Not in this time and place,” said the Abbot. “It means painting these little pictures on manuscripts and in our books. You are trying to save them?” he asked the old monk.

“I am,” sighed brother Gerard. “But I do not know where I can put them out of the grasping hands of those who will soon arrive to smash this place to pieces.”

“Why are they coming here to do that?” asked John.

“It is our King’s wish, Henry, the eighth of that name,” replied brother Gerard, “He has ordered the destruction of all the monasteries. But it is not just this building that will go and all we monks who must wonder in the world to beg. What will happen to all the villagers who live on our lands here? They will all be turned off and sheep will be put to graze on land that once was farmed. The lands are up for sale and the rich will buy them and as they have in so many other places, they will farm sheep for it brings them more money. What will become of us all? The villagers, old and young, will join us as beggars.”

The Abbot’s face grew thoughtful.

“I may be able to help them,” he said. “And I may be able to help you too. Follow me.”

He led John and the brother Gerard to the Abbot’s lodging where he rummaged in an old chest.

“I know that there is something here,” he muttered. “One of my successors had them...”

With a cry of triumph he pulled out a pair of round spectacles with silver frames; they looked a little clumsy to John, but Abbot Baldwin put them on the old man’s nose and they fitted quite well.

“Now!” he said. “Can you see better? If you can’t I may be able to alter the lenses.”

“It is wonderful,” gasped the old man. “There was once an Abbot here some years ago who had such a device, but I didn’t know it was still here. How did you know where it was,” he asked.

“It’s a long story,” said the Abbot. “But I know this monastery well.”

Brother Gerard studied Abbot Baldwin closely through his new glasses. “I feel I should know you,” he said. “A long time ago I think I saw you.”

Abbot Baldwin looked steadily at the old man. “You may have done,” he said quietly. “I have been here a long time.”

“What’s this?” asked John, who had found something on the floor that had fallen out of the chest when the Abbot was rummaging through it.

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Brother Gerard picked it up and squinted through his new glasses at the object. It was a small, flat figure of a knight fighting a dragon.

“It is one of the tokens we sold to pilgrims who came to the Abbey,” said brother Gerard. “You would wear it on your cap or sew on to your coat to show that you had been on a pilgrimage here. Take it - it is the last. No one else will come here to buy one.”

“Thank you,” said John.

“Do you know where I can put these manuscripts for safety, brother?” asked the old monk.

“I know where,” said the Abbot, quietly. “First, let me find a good leather bag.”

He rummaged further in the chest and found what looked like a leather satchel. He put the manuscripts and books carefully inside it.

“Now,” he continued. “We will go to the undercroft in the church - and I may be able to help you in another way too, along with all the villagers who farm the monastic land hereabouts.”

They left the Abbot’s Lodging and walked down a passage, straight into a party of men who had just entered the Abbey. They were led by a tall man all in black, wearing a big hat wrapped round his head which hid part of his face, but his glittering eyes could be seen well enough, and the scowl on his face. He had a great black beard.

“Grab them,” roared the figure in black. His followers, a rough looking crew who carried crowbars, hammers and sacks, hastened to obey their leader. John, the Abbot and the old man were roughly seized.

“Too late,” quavered brother Gerard.

The figure in black roared at him to shut his mouth or it would be shut for him. The old man cowered and John could see the Abbot fuming.

“What’s in the bag,” rasped the man in black and he tore it from the old man’s grasp and opened it. “Rubbish!” he grunted. “Nothing valuable. Burn this trash later.” Here, you carry it,” he said, thrusting it back in the old man’s hands. “First we must find all the jewels and gold and start smashing this place to pieces. We’ll start in the church. Bring these three - there’s something I want them to see.”

Just at that moment the Abbot kicked the man holding him on the shin really hard and darted back into the Abbot’s Lodging. The leader ordered his men to follow and haul the Abbot back. Two of them ran after him but emerged in a few minutes empty handed.

“He’s gone,” said one. “Must have dived out of a window or something.”

“Never mind, we’ll find him later. He can’t get far,” said the leader. “Now, to the church!”

He led the way to the Abbey Church and John’s eyes opened wide as they entered for in the middle of the church was the clock! Round it were gathered another three men who had found it and had carried it up to the church from the cellar. It was

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undamaged and they evidently thought it valuable and had taken care of it. One of them was even polishing the wood.

“Lovely bit of work,” said one of them. “Fetch a fair bit, this, whatever it is.”

“Idiot!” snarled the leader. “That’s what I’ve come here for. Smash it! Break it into tiny pieces! Go on! Destroy it!”

“No.” yelled John and he wriggled but couldn’t escape the grip of the man who held him. But even as the men reluctantly raised their hammers, a strange singing filled the church, echoing off the walls as if the singer was managing to sing in harmony with himself. It was very beautiful and sounded very old and whoever was singing had a very good deep voice. The bells started to toll, too. The men with the hammers stopped and lowered their arms, puzzled looks on their faces.

“Who is doing that?” one asked. “There’s supposed to be no-one else about.”

“Ah,” gasped brother Gerard, smiling with joy. “I never thought to hear such music here again.”

“Shut up!” roared the leader. “Never mind the noise! Smash that clock!”

The men with the hammers raised them again and the singing grew louder. Then a terrible sight met the eyes of the men around the clock. The Abbot slowly rose through the floor, loaded with chains, a lurid red light shining up into his face as he sang ever louder. One of the men dropped his hammer on his toe and let out a yell of pain and with his companions backed off in terror, along with the two men holding John and the old man. Brother Gerard stared pop-eyed in shock and John pulled at his arm.

“It’s all right,” he hissed. “He’s friendly.” It didn’t sound a terribly sensible thing to say, but he couldn’t think of anything else.

“Stay where you are,” roared the man in black. “It doesn’t frighten me! There’s no harm can come to you! Stay where you are.”

His followers did not seem convinced and quaked with fear, wondering which they were more afraid of, the Abbot, now grown to a great size, advancing on them and still singing, or their leader, waving a large hammer at his men. Then from a gravestone to one side of them rose another figure in purple with a stark white face and no eyes, screaming like a banshee vaguely in harmony with the Abbot, while from a tomb on the other side rose the ghastly figure of a cobwebby knight in full rusty armour who advanced, squeaking and clanking, on the men and then slowly removed his helmet and his head along with it. Still the fear of their leader kept the men rooted to the spot despite the fact that were shaking so badly that they had dropped all their tools and one of them had lost his trousers which had fallen around his ankles. Then a terrible sound like the howling of a tornado joined in with all the other noise and a figure in white with mouth open and eyes of flame floated down from the top of the church. That was it. The men turned and fled, all becoming stuck in the doorway and scrambling over themselves in their eagerness to get out. All except the leader who grabbed John and drew a sharp, long dagger from his jacket.

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“Stop, all of you!” he roared. “I know who you are! Stop or I skewer the boy! I smash the clock or the boy dies!”

John’s knees went weak and he closed his eyes. The noises all stopped - and then the man’s grip suddenly relaxed. John opened his eyes and stared in surprise at the sight that met him. There was a shaking brother Gerard holding a big brass candlestick and looking down at the man in black, now laid out on the floor. Brother Gerard had bashed him over the head!

The Abbot dropped his chains with a crash and resumed his normal size.

“Well done,” he said to the shaking old man. “Now, sit down and let us try to explain to you what we are,” he continued, gently taking the monk by the arm and guiding him to a bench. The rest of the ghosts appeared, all now their normal size and with eyes and the rest of their faces where they should be. Jellicoe and Bunsen joined them - they had been pulling on the bell ropes.

“I know,” said brother Gerard, weakly, to Abbot Baldwin. “I saw you many years ago when I was a novice and went to the cellars for something. You are the ghost of the wicked Abbot, who haunts this place.”

The Abbot nodded, “Yes,” he said. “I am the wicked Abbot Baldwin and now I have come to do some good for a change. These are my friends. We mean you no harm. I’ve got a secret to share with you. Will you come with me to the cellars?”

Brother Gerard nodded and with John and Jellicoe helping him, he stood up and made his way to the cellars and down the steps. The Abbot sent Leticia and Lady Matilda up the top of the church to keep a look-out from the towers to make sure the men did not come back. Bunsen he stationed over the man in black with orders to repeat the bash over the head with a candlestick if the man should stir. He picked up a hammer from the floor and gave it to Sir Percy and then he himself picked up the bag of books and manuscripts.

In the cellar the Abbot snapped his fingers and a lantern appeared in his hand. He took them all over to a wall of the cellar, all grimy grey stone. He was looking for something and studied the wall carefully.

“Ah!” he said at last. “There it is. Percy, hit the stone there,” and he pointed to a certain place. Sir Percy did as he was told and hit the wall smartly. A big slab of stone fell away and revealed a deep black hole. The Abbot reached inside and brought out a sizeable casket of some dull grey metal, which was evidently very heavy. He grunted as he carried it out and settled it on the floor.

“It’s made of lead,” he said, gasping. He sent Sir Percy up to the church for the long dagger of the man in black and used it to prise the casket open. They all gasped because inside were jewels, gold coins and pearls.

“All the loot from when I was Abbot,” said Abbot Baldwin. “It really belongs to the Abbey and I stole it. There won’t be an Abbey any more so I think that the money should go to the villagers round here. Do you agree?”

The old monk nodded, dazzled by the wealth in the box.

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“Right then. Now, here’s what I want you to do,” continued the Abbot. “We will find you some rich clothes from the lodging, and make you look like a wealthy merchant. Go to the town and say you have come from Italy or the Indies and have made your fortune. Use this wealth to bid for the Abbey lands and buy them all up. Then when you have got all the land, give it to the villagers - not all straight away, a bit at a time, over a year or two, and swear them to secrecy. If you are giving the land away I don’t think they will tell on you. Will you do this for me?”

“Yes, indeed, brother,” said the old man. “I was the almoner here after my eyes grew too bad to write, and the people round here trust me.”

Seeing John’s puzzled look, Abbot Baldwin explained that the almoner was the monk who gave out food and clothing to the poor.

“I will carry out your wishes to the letter,” said brother Gerard, “You may trust me, brother, but what of these books? They must not be found for they will be destroyed.”

“Put them in this casket, still in that leather bag,” said the Abbot. “If we do the casket up well, it should keep them in good condition. Especially if we can find some silk to wrap them in first. Perhaps you can rescue them later.”

They returned to the church. Bunsen was sent off to find some good clothes for brother Gerard in the Abbott’s Lodging. Sir Percy was sent off with instructions to bring back a bucket of water, some cement and a trowel from a store room. He grumbled, “Why am I doing all the heavy labouring?” but Jellicoe shushed him and went with him.

Bunsen soon returned and they dressed brother Gerard so that he looked exactly like a rich man who had just returned from abroad having made his fortune. Jellicoe, Bunsen and Sir Percy dragged the man in black, still out for the count, to a store room and locked him in. Then a piece of fine silk was wrapped around the satchel of books and manuscripts which was placed in the casket. This was sealed and put in the wall and under Jellicoe’s supervision, Sir Percy cemented the stone back over the hole. Then plenty of grime from the floor was brushed over the new cement so it could not be seen. Sir Percy was in a bit of a mess when they had finished.

“I’m not cut out for this sort of thing,” he said, brushing cement dust from his clothes.

“Do you good, a bit of honest work,” said Abbot Baldwin.

“You too, brother Abbot,” said the old man quietly. “You have done some honest work today. The people here will owe you a great deal.”

He and the Abbot shook hands and then returned to the church, taking a last look around.

“It will soon be gone,” said the Abbot sighing. “No more will there be the sound of plainsong in this fine old church.” He turned to John, “That’s what that singing was called,” he explained. “It’s been sung in churches for centuries. Probably not to your modern taste, but I always liked it.”

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“I thought it was good,” said John. “I’d never heard it before. Could you sing a bit of it again?”

“We can sing once more so the old church will hear for the last time the ancient music it has heard for so many years,” said brother Gerard, and he and Abbot Baldwin once again sang a slow simple song like the Abbot had sung before. A clear, high voice joined in from above them as Leticia sang. The sound seemed to fill the church and John felt as if he was being lifted up with the music, as the paintings on the walls and the coloured light through the windows seemed to swirl and merge - and then he was awake in his bed, the sunlight coming through his coloured curtains making patterns on the walls. As he put on his dressing gown to go down to breakfast he put his hand in his pocket - and found the little token of the knight and dragon that he had discovered in the Abbott’s Lodging.