

Coming Home

Frank Heron had noticed that tumble down cottage for several years. He often slowed down to look at it as he passed in his car. It was located just outside a small village in Oxfordshire. Even though it was still standing it was obviously uninhabitable. It stood in a large plot of land and had a brook flowing along the bottom of the garden. But what made a difference today was that it had a 'For Sale' sign erected. Frank stopped and noted the Estate Agent's details.

It took three months to complete the sale and by April Frank had possession of the cottage. He was excited and so was his partner Sally. She fell in love with it the first time she saw it and always pestered Frank to try and find out who owned it to make them an offer. Sally was expecting their first child and dreamed of bringing up hers in such an idyllic spot.

Frank stood by the gate of the cottage whilst the building contractor busied himself around the property. "That place aint fit for nothing now then," came a voice that startled Frank away from his thoughts. He lifted his arms from the gate and looked towards the voice.

"Well, I hope to make it habitable again soon," said Frank, trying to work out who the old man was. "I'm Frank Heron, pleased to meet you," and held out his hand. The old man made no attempt to take up Frank's offer of a handshake. "This cottage." Frank turned to look at it. "I've just purchased it and now intend to renovate it and move in." The old man swayed a little and held out his hand to steady himself on the gate. After looking towards the

cottage he turned to Frank and a mischievous grin spread across his face. "You reckon your gunna live in it lad; happy ever after and all that stuff, eh?"

Frank was a little indignant. "Yea, why not? I can afford it. With a small extension it'll make a lovely place to live." The old man growled and shuffled away and as he pushed past Frank he stopped and looked him straight in the eye. For a moment it made Frank uneasy. There was something about the old man's steely eyes. Then slowly shaking his head, the old man moved off muttering to himself. "Weird old codger," Frank whispered.

For the next four months the renovation work took place. Frank visited the cottage almost daily to check on the progress. At one stage it was reduced to a mere shell, no windows, no doors and not even a roof. The extension was added, strictly according to the planning consent, built of matching stone. All the windows and doors were 18th century period replica and the whole building was capped off with a new thatched roof. It rapidly became the stuff of picture postcards and Frank couldn't wait to move in.

That day came in September. But unhappily for Frank it was without Sally. Just the previous evening things had started to happen with the birth of the baby and Sally had been kept in hospital for observation. "There," said Frank triumphantly as he stood back to admire it. "It's done. The cottage has been officially named." He grinned and thought how good it looked. On the corner of the wall was the plate bearing the name, 'Tuckmill Cottage'.

Drifting off to sleep was difficult for Frank that night as he had so much on his mind. On the one hand it was so exciting to move into his new house

but on the other he was worried about Sally and the baby. But the doctor had reassured him; her pregnancy was progressing normally, and he expected her to give birth in the next few days. As Frank dozed on the point of drifting off there was a loud thud like a heavy door slamming. Frank opened his eyes with a start. He listened, thinking he must have dreamt it. Then it went cold, almost as though someone had opened a door and let in an icy blast. His senses were telling him that there was something in the room with him. He sat up, his heart pounding. "Who is it," he stammered. Then came a strange sound of a woman sobbing in the distance. Frank turned on the light and got out of bed. He peered gingerly out of the bedroom door to the stairs. The noise stopped. A very large brandy eventually helped him to sleep.

In the morning Frank reassured himself that it was just the cottage drying out. The builder had warned him about that. He reasoned that it was probably just a mixture of drying out and being in the country. In time he would get accustomed to the feel of the place. But his optimism was short lived and for the next three nights the same events happened again. It followed a similar pattern, the strong presence of someone or something in the room, and an icy coldness filling the whole place. Then the sobbing noise. On the last occasion Frank got up and switched on all the lights in the house. As he walked around from room to room the sobbing was still there but impossible to pinpoint.

The next day Frank decided he would have to talk to somebody. He wasn't the sort of man to believe in ghosts, but there was no denying what he had experienced. He made enquiries at the local shop and post office as to who

might be the local historian. With Geraldine Harper's name written on a piece of paper he headed for her house.

"So you're the one who bought Tuckmill Cottage," said Geraldine. "I've watched the renovations with interest. I never thought it would ever be occupied again."

"It's that very thing I want to talk to you about," Frank said enthusiastically. "Do you know when it was last occupied?"

Geraldine sat down and smiled. "I think I know where this conversation is headed. Ok, there is a bit of a story attached to it. You must already know about the ancient history of the site, it being a water mill. But the more recent history came about in the 1930's. There was a couple living in the cottage and they had a daughter who disappeared in very mysterious circumstances. Apparently, the mother never got over it and died soon after, a broken woman. The husband left the cottage and moved in with some of his family in the village. Through the 1940's and 50's several families occupied it but all of them left in a hurry complaining of ghosts and weird goings on. It remained empty until you came along. So, is it haunted?"

Frank sighed. "I hate to go along with it, but yes, I think it is. For the last few nights I've had weird sensations of something in the house, a very cold atmosphere even though the heating is on, and the sound of a woman crying, it's awful. Can you remember what year the child disappearance happened Geraldine?"

“I’ve only read the story once, but I think it was 1937. It would be a good year to try first if you are thinking of heading for the archives.”

Frank grinned at her. “You’re well ahead of me. Thanks Geraldine.”

In the local archives Frank immediately began to search the microfilms containing copies of the only newspaper in print at the time. For the year 1937 he noticed that it was published twice weekly. It was going to be a long search. He just hoped that Geraldine Harper’s recollections were accurate about the year. As the end of the second hour approached and the newspaper’s date changed into October, Frank spotted the headline, ‘Village girl missing.’ He began to read. Apparently, the parents of the girl were Thomas and Elizabeth Carter. The mother had left her alone in the garden of Tuckmill Cottage and she just vanished. The girl called Emma was never seen again and it was never established what had happened to her. Speculation was rife as to her being abducted.

As Frank drove back to Tuckmill he thought about the dilemma he was in. He sat down under the large Elm Tree that overlooked the cottage and wondered what he was going to do. Sally was about to give birth to their child any time now. He couldn’t possibly bring them back to this place if it was full of demons. Just then Frank looked up and saw a familiar figure heading towards him. As he drew closer Frank could see it was the same old man that he had spoken to previously. The old man stopped and looked towards the cottage. “You knew the place had some sort of tormented spirit about it didn’t you,” asked Frank rather brusquely. The old man didn’t answer. “Why didn’t you tell me straight,” he snapped. The old man turned his head and looked at

him but said nothing. However, the look said it all and Frank knew what he meant. Even if he had told him he wouldn't have believed him.

As the old man started to move off he turned and said, "You bring her home lad and she'll be content." Frank was puzzled.

Events at the hospital took over. Frank was there with Sally to watch his beautiful daughter come into the world. He felt elated but at the same time anxious as to what he should do about the cottage. They chatted excitedly, mainly about what they were going to call their daughter. Frank only had male names in mind as he was convinced they were going to have a son. They decided that there was no hurry, the next few days was soon enough.

As the car pulled up by the garden wall of Tuckmill Cottage, Frank jumped out and opened the door for Sally. Sally stepped out and turned herself so that her baby could see the cottage. Frank unlocked the door and stepped in. Immediately he could feel that something was different; gone was the cold atmosphere. The whole feel of the place had changed. He turned to Sally and the baby and suddenly it struck him ... the old man's words, of course! Frank moved towards Sally and took his daughter in his arms. He stood silent for a few moments and then, his voice shaking said, "I want you to meet Emma, she's come home."

Sally took his arm and with a puzzled expression said, "This is all a bit weird Frank. Where did that name come from? You never mentioned Emma when we were talking in the hospital. But it's a lovely name. Yes, Emma."

The atmosphere at Tuckmill Cottage became tranquil. Frank became so engrossed in bringing up his daughter that over the next few weeks he began to doubt that the ghostly events ever happened at all. That is until one night at the local pub. Whilst looking at a framed photograph on the wall Frank noticed a man standing with others outside the pub. It was the old man he had seen twice at the cottage. He called out to the landlord, "Do you know who these people are in this picture?"

"Nope," came the reply. "But old Archie there will."

Archie struggled out of his chair and put on his glasses. "Yea, this was taken after a trip to the seaside. We all met here at the pub."

"Frank pointed to the man, "Who is this, can you remember?"

Archie put his face closer to the picture, "Yea, that's old Tommy Carter."

"Where does he live, I need to talk to him," said Frank very excited.

"You'll have a job," said Archie with a chuckle. "That old goat died near on ten years ago!"