



Something Wicked

E. X. FERRARS

Andrew Basnett #1

Chapter One

“**B**ut of course you must let me pay rent for the place,” Professor Basnett said. “I couldn’t think of staying there otherwise.”

“No, really,” Peter Dilly, his nephew, answered. “I don’t want any rent. It’s an advantage to me to have someone living there through the winter, seeing the pipes don’t freeze and that squatters don’t move in and settle, or burglars break in and steal my priceless treasures. If you’d really like to stay there, Andrew, you’ll be more than welcome.”

Though he was the son of Andrew Basnett’s sister, who had died when Peter was a child, he had never called Andrew uncle in his life. As a child of three Peter had settled for Andrew and had stuck to it ever since. Peter was now thirty-five and Andrew was seventy.

“Of course I realize the money doesn’t mean anything to you now,” Andrew said, “but perhaps if I paid in cash so that the taxman needn’t know...”

“That isn’t the point,” Peter said. “Don’t you understand, I *like* the thought of you living there if it’s got any attractions for you? I’m glad for once to be able to do something for you, instead of its always being the other way round. And a pretty small thing

it is, as I've just explained, since I'd far sooner have someone living there for the next few months than just leave the place empty."

"Very well, if you're quite sure. I'm very grateful."

They were having lunch together in Soho. The attraction for Andrew Basnett of borrowing his nephew's cottage in the Berkshire village of Godlingham was that his own flat in St. John's Wood was about to be redecorated. At last, after seeing it grow shabbier and shabbier since the death of Nell, his wife, ten years ago, he had made up his mind to have it painted right through, had given a good deal of thought to the choosing of new colours, had felt interested and stimulated at the idea of change, and then had thought with horror of having to live in the midst of the upheaval while the work was in progress.

The men on the job would probably bring a radio with them, which they would play all day at its loudest. At intervals they would want cups of tea. They would discuss football at the tops of their voices. The quiet life, which was the only kind of life that Andrew could endure nowadays, would be shattered. In a state of sheer panic he had almost made up his mind to cancel the whole project when his nephew, as they were drinking sherry before this lunch that they were having together, had asked if by any chance Andrew would care to borrow the cottage in Godlingham, as Peter himself intended to spend the winter in Paris.

"It's only three miles from Maddingleigh, which is less than an hour from Paddington," Peter said, "so you could get up to London quite easily and keep on with your work, and my precious Mrs. Nesbit would come in once a week to do the cleaning, just as she does for me, and I expect you'd find the neighbours friendly if you felt like company, though you can be as quiet as you like if you want. I know you like walking, and the downs are there, right at the back door, for when you feel like it." He finished his sherry and put his glass down. "Just a suggestion," he said. "Think about it. No need to make up your mind on the spot. I just thought perhaps you might enjoy a change."

It did not take Andrew a moment to make up his mind. But then there followed the inevitable argument about the

rent, though this was little more than a formality, since Andrew knew that Peter would refuse to accept any payment, as Peter had known that Andrew would do his best to insist on a normal businesslike arrangement between them. Luckily for both of them, the money was of little importance to either. Andrew, since his retirement three years ago, had an adequate pension as well as some investments left to him by Nell, and could easily afford to pay a reasonable rent, while Peter, who had started life as a schoolmaster but had recently discovered a knack for writing science fiction, which had turned out surprisingly successful, and who might almost be called rich, certainly had no need for any additional income. For his self-respect, however, each felt that there should be at least a token argument, though Andrew had known from the beginning that he would give in, since after all it was the rational thing to do, Peter being so obviously pleased to be able to make a generous gesture.

The work that Andrew was doing, to which Peter had referred, was the writing of a life of Robert Hooke, the noted seventeenth-century natural philosopher and architect, celebrated for pioneering microscopical work in a variety of fields, and particularly renowned as the first microscopist to observe individual cells. Andrew, who had been a professor of botany in one of London University's many colleges, had always felt a particular interest in him and for the last two years had made a habit of going twice a week to work on his papers in the library of the Royal Society in Carlton House Terrace. The first year after his retirement he had spent on a slow journey round the world, lecturing in the United States, New Zealand, Australia and India, but he had started his book soon after arriving home and had been absorbed in it ever since.

Whether it would ever be finished was a matter of uncertainty. As he kept destroying almost as much of it as he added to it week by week, it never seemed to grow any longer. Nevertheless, the work was important to him and one of the attractions of Peter's offer was that although Godlingham was

in the country, the journey to London was so short that it would be easy to keep up those bi-weekly visits to the Royal Society.

Apart from that, Andrew knew the cottage, knew that it was comfortable, well heated, convenient and quiet. He had spent several week-ends there with Peter while he had still been a schoolmaster, teaching in the nearby school known as Newsome's, named after the family who had once inhabited what was now only a small portion of the buildings. Peter had left his job soon after his books had begun to sell successfully, but had kept on the cottage. Andrew knew that nothing could suit him better.

"When shall I take over?" he asked once the matter of the rent had been disposed of. He was thinking of the men with their radio and their cups of tea and their football talk and was hoping that after a brief talk with their foreman to make sure that he understood what was to be done, he could arrange to avoid them altogether. The key to the flat could be handed over to the porter, who was an obliging and responsible man and could safely be left in charge. "When are you leaving?"

"Next Friday," Peter said, "but you needn't hurry to get down before that unless you want to. I can leave a key with my next-door neighbour, Jack Fidler, and you can pick it up from him. I can't remember if you ever met him when he came down to see me. He's a teacher of biology at Newsome's. He'll be interested to meet you. I'll give you his phone number and you can ring him up when you want to collect the key."

"I don't think I've met any of your neighbours," Andrew said, "except for a tall, diffident individual who came once to return a book. But seeing a stranger there, he vanished as fast as he could."

Peter smiled. "That sounds like Godfrey Goodchild." Peter's smile was bright and lit up his pale, deceptively blank face very charmingly. He was a small man and in a neat, small way was good-looking, with small, fine hands and fair, straight hair which he kept thrusting back from his forehead, but which instantly tumbled forward again almost into his grey eyes. "Godfrey's retired, I'm not sure from what. He doesn't

talk about himself and makes you feel it would be the height of impertinence to question him. He's my next-door neighbour on the other side from the Fidlers. He and Hannah have been living there since long before I moved in and we're quite good friends, but it's extraordinary how little I know about him."

"Surprising, considering how curious you are about people," Andrew said. He was much taller than his nephew and in fact, if he took the trouble to stand erect, was even taller than he looked, but in the last few years he had allowed himself to get into the habit of stooping. He was a spare man with bony features, short grey hair and grey eyes very like Peter's, under eyebrows that were still black. His long sight was still good and he needed glasses only for reading. "You must do a lot of listening and watching when you look as if you're thinking about nothing at all."

Peter shook his head. "The people I write about are complete fictions. They couldn't possibly exist. I don't have to tell you that, do I? I don't think I'm at all clever at understanding real people. For instance, I've never been able to make up my mind about our murderess."

"Your *what*?"

"Our murderess. Do you remember the house on the hill-side opposite mine—good Georgian, red brick, nice parapet round the roof, fine windows and a rather handsome portico. It's called Godlingham House and our murderess lives there."

"I remember it, but I never met the lady. What kind of murders does she go in for?"

"Oh, there was only one, if that. That's what I've never been able to make up my mind about. Did she do it or didn't she?"

"You know her well?"

"Hardly at all, and you aren't likely to meet her. She keeps herself very much to herself."

"What was her sentence?"

"Oh, my goodness, she wasn't sentenced. She wasn't even charged. She had a perfect alibi."

"Then doesn't that answer your question? She didn't do it."

Peter made one of his attempts at thrusting back his hair. “Ye-es. One has to accept that. But one can’t help wondering...”

“Who was it you think she may have murdered?” Andrew asked.

“Her husband.”

“Why?”

“Oh, for money. He was immensely rich. He was a brother of Henry Hewison’s—you know, the man who started Newsome’s. The two brothers inherited a lot of money when they were in their forties or thereabouts from some rich relative, and Henry put all his money into the school, which has always been his passion, while Charles, the elder... But you don’t want to know all this. As I said, you won’t meet her.”

“I’m very interested.” If Peter had written detective stories instead of science fiction, Andrew would have read them eagerly. As it was, he had tried to read them out of affection for Peter, but had given them up. He admitted that Peter wrote very well and sometimes used his fantasies to make comments of some penetration on social affairs. His first book, called *Whalewater*, was about a species of whale that had learnt to fly and which mankind had naturally recognized at once as a most valuable addition to their stockpile of armaments, since these amiable and very teachable mammals, which had not the imagination to know fear, could be both airships and submarines. Peter’s second book, *Camellords*, was about some scientists who by a remarkable feat of genetic engineering had managed to create men with the heads of camels. These, unfortunately, had had all the hauteur of the camel together with all the most aggressive instincts of man, and had soon established an élite that had gradually reduced ordinary men to helpless slaves, a condition which it turned out they enjoyed. It had been obvious to Andrew that Peter, whose subject had been classics, had no fragment of knowledge about genetic engineering, but then neither had his readers, and the book had sold very well and had had a television series based on it.

“Well then,” Peter went on, “the rumour was that Charles Hewison was going to put a lot of money into his brother’s

school, which wasn't flourishing quite as was hoped and had eaten up most of H.H.'s capital. H.H. is what we always called Henry Hewison. Charles had been in the Foreign Service, living mostly abroad until he retired, when he bought Godlingham House and came to live there to be near his brother. Charles was married, Henry isn't. I believe Charles married fairly late in life a woman who was at least twenty years younger than he was and had a daughter. I remember when they first came to the place they were friendly, sociable sort of people and were generally liked and seemed to be happy enough with one another. And then one evening Charles Hewison was murdered."

"How long ago was that?" Andrew asked.

"About six years," Peter said. "It happened just after Christmas. There was a big freeze-up at the time—d'you remember it? It was fearsomely cold and as we had a power failure in the district at the time that cottage of mine was like an icebox. I hope nothing of the sort happens to you this year, because, as you know, I'm entirely dependent on electricity. There isn't a fireplace in the house. The central heating's oil-fired, but of course there's an electric pump and that wouldn't work, so the radiators went stone-cold. The cut lasted for about two days and snow had blocked the road to Maddingleigh and I'd been fool enough not to buy one of those portable gas heaters—you'll find there's one there now—and I couldn't get into Maddingleigh to buy one, so there was nothing for it but to sit there and freeze, though the neighbours with less modern, labour-saving houses than mine were very kind and brought me hot food and asked me in to sit by their fires."

"Just a moment," Andrew said, feeling that Peter was losing track of the subject in which he himself was interested. "How was Charles Hewison killed?"

"Shot through the head," Peter answered.

"What with?"

"Some gun or other. I don't know much about guns."

"Did it turn up afterwards?"

"No, it clean disappeared."

“What time of day did it happen?”

“Between five o’clock and five-fifteen.”

“How can they be so exact?”

The first course of their lunch had just been delivered to them. Peter picked up his knife and fork and began on it.

“As I remember what I heard,” he said, “Charles phoned H.H. at just about five o’clock. I believe it was something to do with Charles putting money into the school. Anyway, the police had H.H.’s word for it that Charles was alive at five. Then at about five-fifteen Mrs. Nesbit phoned Godlingham House and got no answer. She was working for the Hewisons as housekeeper at that time and she stayed on with Pauline Hewison for a time after the murder, but then she got married and gave up the job. She just does a bit of daily work around the village these days. Well, it happened to be her day off and she’d gone to visit her sister in Maddingleigh and in the normal way would have come home in the evening. But the blizzard started sometime in the afternoon and the road back to Godlingham was blocked and the bus couldn’t get through, so she tried telephoning the Hewisons to tell them she was stuck and wouldn’t be home till next day. And she got no answer. So the police assumed that that was because Charles was dead already. Apparently that fitted quite well with what the pathologists had to say about it, and when the police came round the village and questioned us all about where we’d been and so on, that seemed to be the only time they were interested in.”

“Where was Mrs. Hewison while all this was going on?” Andrew asked.

“Ah, that’s the point,” Peter said. “She was with the Fidlers, playing bridge—cutthroat, that’s to say, because that evening there were only three of them, Jack and his wife Amabel and Pauline Hewison. The fourth person was normally H.H., but he’d rung up to say he couldn’t get through the snow from Newsome’s. He lives there in a flat at the top of the building. The place was empty, of course, except for him and the caretaker and one or two of the domestic staff, because the Christmas holidays were on.”

"It was a regular arrangement for the four of them to play bridge, was it?"

"More or less, on Saturdays. Pauline Hewison sometimes went over to the Fidlers for tea about half past four and H.H. would turn up a bit later and leave in time to take the school prayers at eight o'clock."

"Charles Hewison was never in on it?"

"No, he didn't play bridge. He said it bored him."

"But when he was murdered Mrs. Hewison was definitely with your friends, the Fidlers, playing cutthroat? You've their word for that?"

"Yes."

"Then I don't see where the problem about her arises. She couldn't have murdered her husband." Andrew looked thoughtfully at Peter's pleasant but unrevealing face. "Or don't you trust the Fidlers?"

Peter did not answer at once. Then, laying down his knife and fork, he said, "I told you, I'm not clever at understanding people. I like Jack, though he's got a vile temper. Sometimes I hear him shouting at Amabel in the garden in a way that makes me fear for her safety. Luckily it never seems to upset her. I've never seen her upset about anything. But the thing is, there's something about Pauline herself... I know this is highly slanderous, but she could so easily be a murderess."

Andrew laughed. "I'm glad you realize it's slanderous. Do you go around saying this sort of thing to many people?"

"I think this is the first time I've ever talked about it," Peter answered. "But a lot of other people still believe she did it. It's something in the woman herself that provokes it. And of course, she'd a whale of a motive. All that money that Charles was going to hand over to H.H."

"Suppose she did do it," Andrew said, "it means that the Fidlers lied on her behalf and that would be a pretty big risk for them to take. It would make them accessories after the fact. Are they very close friends, or perhaps even more than that? I was thinking, is there by any chance something between her and Fidler?"

"I'm sure there isn't," Peter said. "Jack and Amabel, after their fashion, which I admit wouldn't suit me if I ever got married, seem to be very happy together. I don't think Jack's ever cared for anyone else, and Pauline, even in the old days, never seemed to have more than a neighbourly, rather patronizing, bridge-playing sort of relationship with the Fidlers and nowadays doesn't have anything to do with them. She's cut herself off from everybody, lives alone in that great house except when her daughter visits her occasionally, and has a foreign couple to run the place for her, who change fairly frequently and don't mix much with the locals."

"Is that because she feels people think she's guilty?"

"It could be."

"Then why doesn't she simply move away? If she's got plenty of money, she could settle abroad or anywhere where people don't know the story."

"I know that's strange. I thought perhaps it might be pride."

"What about grief? Isn't that possible? Perhaps when she lost her husband she lost her interest in life. That can happen to a person." Andrew had believed it had happened to him when Nell died after her hopeless fight with cancer. Not many people had recognized how long the wound had taken to heal over, in so far as it ever had, and he had had work to help him. Not like the woman whom Peter had been describing, who lived alone in a big house with nothing to do and nothing to interest her, not even those evenings of bridge with her neighbours. "Was anyone ever charged with the murder?"

"No," Peter said. "I believe the police picked up a couple of boys who'd been in trouble before for break-ins and who'd been seen about the place, but there wasn't any real evidence against them and they were let go. But a window had been broken in the kitchen and someone had climbed in and some money had been taken, and there was no suggestion that the Hewisons had ever owned a gun, so the thing was written off as a robbery."

"And isn't that probably the truth?"

"I suppose so."

“I imagine with the snow there was no chance of finding footprints, or anything like that.”

“No.”

“Now about my going down to the cottage, Peter...”

Peter gave his cheerful smile again. “I hope my flow of gossip hasn’t put you off the idea of going.”

“Not at all. But I don’t think I can get away before Friday. I’ll have to arrange things with the decorators, if they’re to do the job when I’m not there to keep an eye on them, and I’ll have to get organized generally. I should think it’ll be Tuesday or Wednesday next week before I can get down. So if you’ll give me the telephone number of your friends who’ll have the key, I’ll get in touch with them when I know where I am.”

Peter found an address book in a pocket, gave Andrew the Fidlers’ number and Andrew wrote it down. They talked for a while then about Peter’s plans for the winter, agreed, though at first Peter resisted the suggestion, that even if Andrew was to pay no rent he should at least pay Mrs. Nesbit’s wages, and that he should have the use of Peter’s car, which would be left in the garage. Andrew had no car of his own, holding that it was a waste of money to keep one in London, but he realized it would be an asset in the country. It was nearly three o’clock when, with affection on both sides and more thanks from Andrew, he and Peter parted, and Andrew, very pleased with the arrangements that had been made, made his way home to St. John’s Wood by the underground.



In fact it was on Wednesday of the following week that he took the train down from Paddington to the small town of Maddingleigh and then took a taxi to the village of Godlingham. But on the Sunday before that he had telephoned the Fidlers to inquire when it would be convenient for him to pick up the key of Peter’s cottage and the car-key. A deep, booming voice had answered him, announcing, “Fidler speaking.”

“Mr. Fidler, my name is Basnett,” Andrew said. “I believe my nephew, Peter Dilly, told you I shall be spending some time—”

“Ah yes, in the cottage,” Jack Fidler interrupted. “And you want to pick up the keys. Splendid. I’m so glad you’re coming, Professor. Much nicer than to have the place next door standing dark and empty all the winter.”

“Thank you,” Andrew said. “If you could tell me—”

“When to collect the keys. Any time you like. If I’m not here, Amabel’s sure to be in.”

“I’m planning to come down on Wednesday. I was thinking of taking the eleven-forty from Paddington, which gets down to Maddingleigh—”

“At twelve-nineteen,” Andrew was told before he could say so himself. He had a feeling that Jack Fidler made a habit of interrupting people, using that fine voice of his to flatten out their less resonant tones. “Then you can take a taxi—there are always plenty at the station—and you’ll get here in about a quarter of an hour. I’ll almost certainly be at home, as I generally come home for lunch. Term hasn’t broken up yet, there’s still about a week to go, but the chances are I’ll be here. And if not, as I said, Amabel will be in and can take you to the cottage and show you where everything is.”

“It’s very kind of you—”

“Not at all, not at all. We’re looking forward to meeting you. And if there’s anything we can lay in for you in advance—milk, I mean, bread, eggs, whisky, anything else you’d like, just let us know.”

“It’s very kind—”

“No trouble at all. There’s an excellent shop in the village where you can get everything. Amabel will tell you all about it. Just make a list of what you want and let us have it before Wednesday and she’ll see your refrigerator’s stocked up for you. By the way, you are the Andrew Basnett who explored the development of metabolic activity in cells as they matured—”

“Yes, yes.” It was Andrew’s turn to interrupt. “We’ll talk about it some other time. And again, thank you for your help. You’re very kind.”

He rang off swiftly, wondering uneasily if he would find Jack Fidler a little much to cope with. Andrew was a friendly man who in general enjoyed the company of many and varied people, but he had an illusion about himself that the one thing in life that he desired was peace and quiet. Actually he had a considerable fear of loneliness and at the back of his mind when he accepted Peter’s offer there had been a faint dread that he might find himself too much alone in Godlingham and that for all its charm, he might soon find himself hankering for his London flat, decorators, radio, cups of tea and all. All the same, he did not like being interrupted and he did not want to find that his life was being organized for him by the firm hand of the obliging Amabel.

However, it was plain that the Fidlers had only meant to be friendly, and for a moment Andrew had thought that perhaps he really ought to make out the list of groceries that Jack Fidler had suggested so that he should not seem to be ungratefully rebuffing a well-meant offer. But then Andrew had reflected that as he would be arriving in Godlingham by lunch-time, he could eat in the village pub and then himself buy what he needed in that excellent shop that Fidler had mentioned. When Andrew set off for Paddington on the following Wednesday he had not been in touch with Fidler again.

The December day was very cold, the sky was a flat, dull grey, the trees to be seen from the train in their wintry bareness were dark and motionless. There had been frost in Maddingleigh and the puddles that had been left by recent rain in the car-park outside the station were slippery with ice. Andrew skidded on one of them and nearly fell. He had been athletic when he was young and still had not accustomed himself to the fact that at seventy it was wise to watch with a certain caution where he was going when he strode ahead.

He still walked fast, his long legs sticking to their old habit of taking big strides, and it puzzled him a little that they seemed to

tire sooner than he thought they should. He had brought two suitcases with him, one of them filled mostly with books and papers and very heavy, but he had left his typewriter behind, as Peter had assured him that there was one in the cottage. Also, as Jack Fidler had said, there were plenty of taxis waiting at the station.

Andrew hailed one, gave the driver the address of the cottage in Godlingham and, looking at his watch as he settled back in his seat, saw that the train had been only ten minutes late, which was not bad as things went nowadays. Once he had picked up the keys and deposited his luggage in Peter's cottage, he thought, he would go straight out to the pub which he remembered having visited with Peter, where they did a very good scampi and chips, then he would unpack and get generally settled. It was pleasant to think that the cottage would be warm, since the central heating would have been left on for him by Peter, that the water would be hot and that Mrs. Nesbit, whom Andrew had still to meet, had promised to leave his bed made up for him. He had a bottle of whisky in one of his suitcases and if he felt inclined could spend a somnolent afternoon, allowing for the trip that he must make to the shop to buy himself some supper. Some more extensive shopping to cover his needs for the next few days could be left till tomorrow.

Peter's cottage, which was beyond the Fidlers', overlooked the main road from Maddingleigh to Reading, a little before the turn-off into the village of Godlingham itself. The two cottages were very similar in appearance, both of them small, simple, white buildings, two storeys high, pleasant and unpretentious and only about fifteen years old. Each stood in a garden of about a quarter of an acre, set on a slope well above the road, so that the paths up to the front doors and the drive-ways to their garages were steep and today very slippery. The Fidlers' garden, bare as it was at this time of year of all but a few evergreen shrubs and a faint glimmering of frost on the dark soil of the empty flowerbeds, looked noticeably better kept than Peter's. There were two other cottages, making a row of four on the slope there, one of them before the Fidlers' cottage and the other beyond Peter's.

The first one of these was half-timbered and thatched and extremely small and had a certain air of neglect about it. The farther one was a square, red, early Victorian box with a slate roof and a great deal of ivy over its façade.

Facing these, on the upward slope on the other side of the road and set far back from it, was a handsome Georgian house that Andrew remembered, a building of great dignity with a background of fine woods. Except for a few pines and holly trees these were leafless now, but the twigs of beech and oak made a pleasing tracery against the leaden sky. Godlingham House, that was what Peter had told Andrew it was called.

He asked the driver to stop outside Peter's cottage, paid him, then was surprised and pleased, as it was not the sort of thing that happened often in London nowadays, when the man carried the two suitcases up the slippery slope to Peter's door. As the taxi drove off, Andrew returned down the path to the road, then climbed up the one next door to the Fidlers' house, rang the bell, almost immediately heard footsteps inside and the door was opened.

Jack Fidler was a younger man than Andrew had expected from the rich sound of his voice. He had expected someone of at least fifty with all the self-assurance of middle age. Instead he saw a man who was probably no older than Peter, although he was nearly bald already, with only a few strands of reddish hair plastered across the crown of his head. It made his forehead look very high and might have given an intellectual cast to his face if it had not been so round and plump, with slightly protuberant blue eyes, full, ruddy cheeks and a small, pouting mouth. He was of medium height and in spite of a noticeable paunch looked vigorous. He was wearing an old tweed jacket and corduroy trousers. He shot out a large, thick-fingered hand.

"Professor Basnett? So glad you got here safely. Nothing much in the way of a journey, of course. What about your luggage? Not left it in the road, have you?" The voice was the same that Andrew had heard on the telephone, though somehow, when it was not directed straight into his ear, it did not

sound quite so powerful. "We're a pretty law-abiding neighbourhood on the whole, but you never know who's going to go by on the main road. We have our share of vagabonds and hooligans."

"As a matter of fact, I left it on Peter's porch," Andrew said. "I thought if you'd just very kindly give me the keys—"

"Yes, yes, the keys, of course," Jack Fidler said. "But you're coming in for a drink, aren't you? And Amabel's expecting you to lunch... No, no," he went on quickly as Andrew opened his mouth to speak, "no trouble at all. Nothing special, you know, just what we're having ourselves. You don't want to be bothered with getting something for yourself right away."

"It's very good of you," Andrew said, wondering how often he had already said this to Fidler, "but I ought to put my luggage indoors, and I thought I'd just go and have a snack at that pub in the village—"

"The Green Dragon—oh, I shouldn't do that. Not that it's all that bad, but Amabel's expecting you. Steak and kidney pudding, I believe. Just the right thing for a cold day like this."

"But my luggage—"

"Oh yes, your luggage. You're quite right, we oughtn't to leave it outside. We'll just go round and put in indoors, then come back and have a drink. I think you'll find everything in order in the house. Mrs. Nesbit's invaluable. I think I saw her in there this morning. She may have been putting some flowers there for you. It's the sort of thing she'd do. She's got a key, of course, and she'll come and go without bothering you. You can trust her absolutely. Now just let me get the keys Peter gave me for you."

Fidler vanished abruptly into the house.

A moment later he was back with a small bunch of keys in his hand. However, he did not offer them to Andrew, but kept them in his possession while he ushered Andrew down the garden path and then up Peter's, and had used one of the keys to unlock Peter's door before it appeared to occur to him that it might have been appropriate to let Andrew do this for himself. He had pushed the door open before he held out the bunch to Andrew.

“Here you are—the front door, the back door, and that’s the key of the garage and that’s the car-key,” he said. “Not that we bother a great deal about locking up here, but still, as I said, we’re on the main road and things sometimes do happen... Now where’s your luggage? Ah yes.” He stooped quickly and picked up Andrew’s two heavy suitcases. For a man as plump and soft-looking as Fidler was, he moved surprisingly swiftly and lightly and lifted the cases without any sign of strain. “Now let’s go and have that drink. You’d like a drink, wouldn’t you? Come along.”

The truth was that Andrew felt he would like a drink very much and the thought of a good hot steak and kidney pudding, rather than a snack in a pub, was distinctly appealing. But having said that he would very much enjoy having lunch with the Fidlers, he added that he would like just to take a quick look round the cottage before leaving it.

Not that there was anything unfamiliar about it. It was only a year since he had last spent a week-end there with Peter, who did not seem to have made any significant changes since that time. At one end of the living-room, a quite big room which occupied nearly the whole of the ground floor and had a small kitchen opening out of it, there were bookshelves from floor to ceiling. At the other end there was a small Regency dining-table with chairs of approximately the same period. There were several easy chairs and there was a window which took up most of one wall. There was no fireplace, but a long radiator ran almost from end to end of the room under the window. On a low table in front of it there was a big white jug filled with branches of holly, smothered in scarlet berries. It was a reminder that Christmas was only ten days away and indicated that Fidler had been right when he had guessed that that morning Mrs. Nesbit had brought in, if not flowers, the next best thing that she could manage to greet the newcomer. The room felt warm and snug and welcoming.

“Very nice,” Andrew said, moving towards the window and looking out. “I’m going to enjoy being here.”

He could see both the little old cottage with the thatched roof from the window and the red brick Victorian house.

“Who lives there?” he asked, gesturing at the cottage as Fidler came to stand beside him.

“A young fellow called Simon Kemp,” Fidler answered. “He’s the games master at Newsome’s. He took the cottage about a year ago when he got married, but his wife walked out on him almost at once, no one knows why, and he’s stayed on there ever since, letting the place go pretty much to pieces. Amabel’s sorry for him and does her best to look after him, but my own belief is he doesn’t mean to stay. He’s always talking of going to New Zealand. We’ve had a good many changes around here recently. Peter of course doesn’t spend much of his time here any more since he got so successful, and we miss him because we always found him good company. And we miss the old couple who used to live in Kemp’s cottage. They were real locals, nothing to do with Newsome’s, and they’d been living there for half a century before we came, but they died, one quite soon after the other, a couple of years ago. The only people who stay on are the Goodchilds. They’re your neighbours on that side...” He nodded towards the red brick house.

Remembering the tall, exceedingly diffident man who had appeared on one of his earlier visits to Peter to return a book, Andrew said, “I think I’ve met Mr. Goodchild.” He looked out of the window at the charming old house that faced the row of cottages from the other side of the road. “And that’s Godlingham House, is it?”

“That’s right,” Fidler said. “Beauty of a house, isn’t it? If I’d any ambitions, and it isn’t wise for a schoolmaster to have ambitions, it would be to live in a house like that. Mrs. Hewison lives there. She’s the sister-in-law of our headmaster. Strange woman. Tragic, really. Been a bit peculiar ever since her husband’s death. You probably won’t see anything of her.”

Andrew nearly said, “Ah yes, your murderess,” but he stopped himself just in time.



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