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The Third Door

by Rob Keeley

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Outside Stipley Hall, two boys were kicking a football. They were bouncing it off the wall of the house, catching it then kicking it again, ignoring the annoyed looks of elderly passers-by and the sign that said NO BALL GAMES. Their aim wasn't too good, and the ball kept hitting the diamond-paned window that overlooked the terrace. In a moment, the old glass would break.

Out of the house came a teenage girl in maid's uniform. She stopped and stared at the game. Then her eyes narrowed. She was standing very close to the two boys, yet neither of them saw her.

Slowly, the girl raised her hand.

The first boy kicked the ball again. But it never reached the window.

He watched his football as it stopped in mid-air. It grew smaller and smaller, until it was only the size of a snooker ball.

Then it flew back and landed in his hand.

Both boys stared at the ball. Then the first boy dropped it and ran. His friend followed.

Mary Holborn smiled. Carelessly, she pointed at the ball again and watched as it rolled away towards the shrubbery. A small, blond boy in a tweed suit walked across the terrace to her.

"There we are, Edward. My good deed for the day."

"Jolly well done." Edward gave Mary an admiring glance as he followed her down the stone steps. "Oh, Mary, if only you were a few years younger. And a bit less common. Aarghh!"

He gave a yell, as he stepped off the bottom step and found himself standing in a pit, up

to his knees. Mary smiled again, sweetly.

Edward scrambled free. Behind him, the pit shrank and disappeared.

They walked on into the floral gardens. Several middle-aged tourists walked right past them, with no idea that two ghostly young people were there.

When they reached the centre of the gardens, where there was a paved area with benches, Mary motioned to Edward to stop.

Approaching was Safia, the Site Manager of Stipley Hall, and with her was Louise, one of the tour guides. Safia was wearing a purple suit and had nail varnish to match.

Already standing in the centre was a cheeky-faced youth of eighteen whose designer tracksuit, trainers and baseball cap marked him out from anyone else who wore a Journeyback badge saying *Volunteer*. The badge also gave his name. *Ashton*.

He was talking to a middle-aged lady who wore a black and silver trouser suit and a determined expression.

Mary and Edward stood and listened.

“So I like gaming, and laser battles,” Ashton was saying. “But now I’m like, really into heritage. I’ll be going to uni, in September. History and Performing Arts.”

He turned as Safia and Louise reached them.

“This is Safia, she’s like the manager. Louise is like a guide. This is Mrs Buttress.”

Edward sniggered at the name.

“I see Ashton’s looking after you,” said Safia. “He’s been on placement with us for two weeks.”

She shook hands with the visitor.

“It’s a great pleasure to meet you. I’ve been Site Manager at Stipley for five years. But I

never thought I'd meet anyone whose ancestors lived here."

"Right back in the sixteenth century." Mrs Buttress had an American accent. "I can trace the line, all the way to Felicia Connelton, the youngest sister. But it's her brother I'm most interested in. Sir Arthur."

"The great traitor?" Louise smiled. She stopped smiling as she saw the look on the visitor's face.

"I don't believe he was. I believe Sir Arthur was framed. And I'm hoping my visit to Stipley will prove it. If you can help."

"We'll do all we can," said Safia. She turned to Louise. "Perhaps you'd like to take Mrs Buttress on your tour? It starts in ten minutes... it mentions Sir Arthur..."

They moved away, back towards the house. Ashton put his hands in his pockets and followed.

Mary turned to Edward.

"Sounds interesting. Sort of thing Ellie would have loved."

Edward was looking at the ground.

"You miss her, don't you?" Mary came over and ruffled Edward's hair. Edward spluttered and tried to smooth it down. "Me too. But what can we do?"

Edward moved towards the house.

"We can carry on her work. Come on."

The three women were already halfway back to the terrace, and Ashton was mooching up the steps after them. Edward and Mary gave chase.

Ashton caught sight of the miniature football. Curiously, he reached down and picked it up.

He slipped it into his pocket.

“The Conneltons were the original owners of Stipley Hall,” Louise told the tour party. “They were country gentry... Sir Arthur was the local squire in the reign of Queen Elizabeth the First. Unfortunately, he was also something it was very dangerous to be, in those days. A Catholic.”

She was standing in the entrance hall, in front of a large portrait that showed a man with a reddish-brown, pointed beard, who was dressed in Tudor costume. At the back of the group of tourists, Mrs Buttress was looking bored. She obviously knew all this already. Ashton was there too, shuffling his feet.

Nearby, the face of a grandfather clock disappeared, and Mary’s face looked out from behind the hour and minute hands. Opposite, the visor of a suit of armour opened to reveal Edward. They had found excellent places to hear about Sir Arthur.

“In 1586,” said Louise, “things were coming to a head. There were Catholic plots to kill Elizabeth, the Protestant Queen, and replace her with Mary, Queen of Scots. In September of that year, one of Elizabeth’s examiners came to Stipley. Sir Henry Fitzberranger.”

Inside his armour, Edward’s eyes widened.

“Two letters were found,” Louise went on, “which showed Sir Arthur was involved in an assassination plot. He was taken away, and executed within a month.”

“Even though there was no other evidence against him,” Mrs Buttress said loudly. Everyone turned to look at her. Louise seemed rather annoyed at being interrupted. But Mrs Buttress didn’t care. “Sir Arthur was a local squire... as you say... he had no interest in politics. We know his family heard Mass in private... he knew powerful Catholics who may have been

out to get Elizabeth... but there's nothing else to suggest he would get involved in a plot himself.

And would he really leave evidence lying around?

'I believe those letters were forged, and planted on him. Perhaps by Elizabeth's spies. Maybe they wanted to get Sir Arthur out of the way. Just in case.'

"Mrs Buttress, incidentally..." Louise started to explain.

"Sir Arthur was my ancestor," Mrs Buttress told the crowd. "And I intend to prove he was innocent."

Everyone was listening to her now, and she was moving forward to face the group.

"Shall I tell you something else that's interesting? Sir Arthur was married, to Lady Isabella. But there's no record of what happened to her after his death, or who inherited Stipley Hall. The next fifty years are a complete blank."

"The records have been missing for a long time..." Louise started again.

"Or deliberately hidden," Mrs Buttress said. "I believe that somewhere within this house lies a clue to what really happened."

She jumped as Edward's visor fell down behind her.

"If we could move on to the ballroom now?" said Louise. "Then afterwards I'll take you to the Site Office, Mrs Buttress. We'll see if we can find out any more. Though, after all this time..."

The party was drifting away. Edward stepped through the front of the suit of armour. Automatically, he lifted Ashton's cap, then dropped it back onto his head. Ashton put a hand to it, and Edward grinned to see the teenager's puzzled look. He watched as Ashton raced off after the crowd.

"Did you hear that!" Edward floated over to Mary as she stepped out of the clock. "Sir

Henry Fitzberranger... he was the first of my family to live at Inchwood! The Queen gave the Manor to him.”

“And he was one of her spies?” Mary grinned. “Snooping, and sending people to have their heads chopped off... Edward, have you got *any* nice ancestors?”

“He was only doing his duty.” Edward looked rather sniffy. “Seeking out traitors to the Queen. After all, you can’t go around plotting to kill people.”

“Even though he did? For her?”

Edward ignored this.

“I’m sure I know that other name, too. Lady Isabella... I wonder what happened to her?”

“I know one thing,” Mary said. “I want to be a fly on the wall in that Site Office.”

Half an hour later, in the Site Office, two flies walked across the flower-patterned wallpaper.

“This was a bally silly idea, wasn’t it?” Edward fluttered his wings. “Who told you how to shape-change?”

“Pa.” The Mary fly grinned. “It’s a little trick he used. When he was finding out what James Meadowes did to me.”

“It’s not very dignified,” Edward buzzed. “We’re meant to be finding out about Sir Arthur, but I keep thinking about strawberry jam... they’d better not swat us...”

“Ssh!” Mary was looking down into the room. Safia was at her desk, with Louise and Mrs Buttress standing alongside. At the next desk, Ashton was supposed to be sorting papers, but kept peering over to see what the women were doing.

On Safia’s computer screen were scans of some old, handwritten letters.

“There,” Louise said. “In the Journeyback archive. A kitchen-maid’s letter home.” She

pointed. "Look at this part, here."

"But there's something strange about the attics, Ma," Safia read. *"My rooms... oh, someone teach this girl to use apostrophes... my room's just along the corridor from a room they don't use any more. When I went in there, Mr Carr gave me a right telling-off. He said it was the family's place, and I had no business there. Even though the room was empty."*

"Mr Carr was the butler of those days," Louise said. "I know the room she means. We were going to use it as a storeroom. But it was too damp. There's nothing in there at all."

"I think it has a secret to hide," Mrs Buttress said. "Maybe some of the family knew."

Across the room, Ashton was looking more and more inquisitive. He craned his neck to see the screen.

"I know that room, too," Mary whispered. "We was never allowed in there, either. We got told there was dry rot in the floorboards. Housekeeper said we could fall straight through."

Safia looked up at the sound of loud buzzing.

"We've been pestered to death by flies, this summer." Her purple nails flew across the keyboard. "That letter was written in 1895. So if there is a secret, it was kept for over three centuries."

"And then forgotten?" Mrs Buttress suggested. "As the house changed hands. I wonder if the missing records might be there."

"I don't see where you could hide anything," Louise said. "There's no furniture... not even a fireplace."

"Let's get the keys." Safia got up. "We can go and take a quick look." She glanced at Ashton, who was getting up from his desk, and looking eager. "Ashton, could you do something for me?"

“Sure.” Ashton was already moving towards the door.

“Kill those flies.”

Mary and Edward shot up to the ceiling.

Ashton’s face fell. But he wasn’t one to be left out. He waited a moment, then made off after Safia and her party.

The door closed.

“Crikey.” Edward drifted down to ground level, and popped back into human form.

Mary followed. Edward stretched. “Oh... that’s a relief. My shoulders weren’t built for wings.”

“I wonder what’s in that room?” Mary said.

She stopped.

At the same moment, both of them became aware that there was someone else in the office.

They turned to the fireplace to see a figure sitting in the shabby wing-backed chair.

It was a lady in the clothes of the Tudor era. She wore green and gold and looked quite grand... but her face was thin and pale. She held a handkerchief to her eyes.

Mary and Edward heard the sound of sobbing.

“Mary!” Edward grabbed her arm. “Help! It’s a ghost!”

Mary looked at him. Edward would have blushed, if he could.

“Well, one forgets.”

Slowly, Mary took a step towards the lady.

“Hello... anything we can do?”

The lady lowered the handkerchief.

“Too late, child. My husband is dead... wronged. And no one knows the truth.”

“I say.” Edward stepped across the room. “Are you Lady Isabella?”

The lady nodded.

“I overheard all that was said. The woman from the New World is right. My husband was an innocent man. And those records must be found.”

“So where are they?” Edward asked.

Lady Isabella took a ring from her finger. She handed it to Mary.

“Take this. Wear it when the time is right. Then, you may speak to the colonial woman. And aid her in her search.”

“I don’t understand,” Edward said. “Did my ancestor... did Sir Henry get it wrong? What happened to you?”

He stopped.

The chair was empty.

Mary stood holding the ring. For a moment, she wondered whether to put it on. Then she placed it in the pocket of her apron.

“Let’s get up there.”

Mary and Edward materialised on the top floor of the house long before the mortals reached it.

They walked along a narrow, gloomy passage where the floorboards were bare. Even on a summer’s day, it felt cold and damp.

“I used to have to sleep up here.” Mary grimaced. “And look what happened to me.”

“It’s frightful.” Edward gave her a sympathetic glance. “Must have been awful, for working-class folk like you.” He dodged as Mary aimed a kick at him. “So, where’s the mystery room?”

“Along here.” Mary walked to the end of the passage, and straight through a door.

Louise had been right. The large, square room was totally empty. There were more bare boards, and plastered walls with several cracks. The single, narrow window looked as if it hadn't been cleaned for years.

“Nothing here.” Edward walked into the middle of the room. “Couldn't hide a thimble, let alone ancient records.”

“Ssh!” Mary turned towards the door, as she heard footsteps. “They're coming.”

She and Edward moved to one side, stood invisibly and watched.

Safia entered the room, followed by Louise and Mrs Buttress. Ashton strolled after them. Safia gave him a look. She didn't seem to want him there.

“We meant to restore these rooms, but funding's always a problem. We've had so many issues with the roof... moisture getting in...”

Ashton moved to the far wall. It had brownish stains and looked swollen, as well as cracked.

“All wet and clammy, innit?”

“Yeah...” Louise stepped nearer to him. “It's this old lime plaster. No good once the water gets to it.”

“Euww...” Ashton put up a hand.

Louise blinked.

“Hey, I wouldn't poke it...”

Ashton gave a yell, as a huge chunk of plaster crumbled and fell. Two more followed it. A moment later, all four of them looked as if they were covered in icing sugar.

“Whoa!” Ashton brushed soft plaster from his designer gear. Safia's smart suit was

ruined. “Sorry.”

“Ashton!” Safia shook her head. Dust fell from her immaculate hair. “Why can’t you leave anything alone? How many decades has that been up there...?”

She turned to their visitor.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs Buttress... it must have been about ready to go...”

All of them stopped.

The falling plaster had revealed some brickwork.

And written across the bricks were some words.

The First Floor

The Second Corridor

The Third Door

“Ashton...” Mrs Buttress didn’t seem daunted, despite her clothes having changed colour from black to white. “You found it! That must be what they hid up here!”

Ashton’s look of guilt gave way to a cheeky grin.

“Any time.”

“What did they write that in?” Louise very carefully ran her fingers across the brickwork. “I’ve seen writing printed on bricks... but not from so long ago...”

Invisibly, Mary met Edward’s eye.

She mouthed two words.

Spirit writing.

“I could tell,” Mary said, back on the ground floor. “Father taught me all about spirit messages. The message would have stayed, even if the house was rebuilt. It was a ghost wrote that.”

“But which ghost?” Edward asked. “Sir Arthur? Lady Isabella? And what does it mean?” He giggled. “Wasn’t it funny when the plaster fell down? I wish I’d thought of that myself.”

“Don’t you dare,” Mary told him. “You’ll have the whole place down.” She paused. “*First Floor, Second Corridor*. Well, I know where that is. Carried tea up there, many a time. The Misses Connelton had their sitting-room up there. But... *The Third Door*? There are only two doors, lead off there. The sitting-room and the housekeeper’s room. Where’s the third?”

Edward frowned.

Mary took a look towards Mrs Buttress, who was standing alone by the great fireplace, still looking rather dusty. Safia had returned to the Site Office, muttering something about other duties. She had very firmly taken Ashton with her. Louise had looked more interested in the clue, but had another tour to conduct.

“Perhaps we could help her...”

“Don’t be silly,” said Edward. “We’re ghosts. She can’t see us. Or if she did, she’d start screaming or something. You know what mortals are.”

Mary reached into her apron.

“What about this?”

She slipped Lady Isabella’s ring onto her left hand.

At once, she became solid, and visible.

“I say...” Edward stared.

Mary reached out and touched him.

Edward became solid too.

“Good grief.” Edward put a hand to his arm, then his face. “Solid human being again. Haven’t done that for a while.”

“Come on!” Mary was already walking across towards Mrs Buttress. “It might wear off!”

“Excuse me?” Mary raised her voice. “Excuse me?”

Mrs Buttress looked at the two young people.

“Hey. I like your outfits. Part of the tour, are you? Period costume?”

“We were in the Site Office,” Mary said. “We heard about the clue you’ve found. And ... we’d like to help.”

“Well, that’s real nice of you.” Mrs Buttress allowed herself to be led away, back towards the main staircase. “Do you live around here? Isn’t this a fascinating house? Some say it’s haunted... but I don’t believe in all that nonsense. Do you?”

Together, they went up to the first floor, then along until they reached the second turn-off to the left. There were indeed two doors.

“I don’t get this,” Mrs Buttress said. “The Third Door? Maybe we’re on the wrong corridor?”

“Maybe it’s the second corridor the other way?” Mary suggested. “No.... there are only two doors there, too. Guest rooms.”

“But one comes to the first floor this way...” Edward stopped. “Mary, could I have a word, old thing? Excuse us, Mrs Buttface.”

He drew Mary aside.

“I’ve just had a brainwave.”

“What with?” Mary grinned.

Edward scowled.

“Didn’t your father tell you about Das Zentrum? It’s the place I visited with Ellie. It wasn’t actually there. It only existed inside people’s minds. And it was the powers of the spirit world that made it happen.”

He went back to Mrs Buttress.

“Just been thinking. If there *were* a third door here... what would it look like?”

Mrs Buttress looked puzzled.

“Well, I guess... it would look like these others, here. Heavy, oak panelled... but perhaps more ornate. If it held the answer to a secret...”

“With a polished, brass handle.” Mary joined in. “And a golden light, shining from beyond...”

She stared. They all stared.

In the middle of a blank wall, a door was appearing. It looked just like the one they had imagined.

“Quick!” Edward said. “Concentrate on it! Don’t let it go!”

All of them focused on the door.

They saw it take solid form.

Mrs Buttress looked at it, open-mouthed.

Then she walked along the corridor and pushed the door open.

The golden light flooded out.

They entered a chamber that was far grander than anything else the house had to offer. It looked like a reading-room in some great library, with shelves of leather-bound books up to the ceiling. The light was coming through a vast stained-glass window, directly above. There were clearly no damp attics above or beyond the Third Door.

In the centre of the room, upon a lectern, was the biggest book that Edward or Mary had ever seen.

As if in a dream, Mrs Buttress drifted over to it.

The lettering on the cover said:

The Ancient Records of Stipley.

“At last...” Mrs Buttress’s awe had given way to her usual briskness. She flicked quickly through the pages. “They’re arranged year by year... here we are. Sir Arthur’s death. And here’s what happened to Stipley. Lady Isabella inherited the house, and the estate... well, no surprise there. But then she married again. To...”

She turned and looked at Edward and Mary.

“To Sir Henry Fitzberranger.”

Out of the shadows came a figure.

Lady Isabella stood before them.

She was no longer crying, but smiling.

“I thank you. Too bad you shall not leave this house to tell your story.”

She pointed at Mrs Buttress. A vortex of light spun from her fingers and encircled the visitor, trapping her, paralysing her.

Edward and Mary stood petrified with fear.

Lady Isabella stepped towards them.

“Did you not know, Edward? That *I* was your ancestor, too?”

“So you and Sir Henry... were in on it together...” Mary blinked. “You had Sir Arthur executed...”

“My poor foolish husband.” Lady Isabella laughed. “With his endless Latin Masses... and his rosary... He was not fit to hold these lands! I had managed the estate for years. And learned to forge his hand.”

“So you always planned to marry Sir Henry?” Edward blinked. “And once Sir Arthur was dead... you were free. The Queen gave you Inchwood.”

“And I made sure that was mine, too,” Lady Isabella said. “Yes, I married Sir Henry. Long enough for him to make a will.” Her smile grew wider. “Then he fell from his horse, while out hunting. Too bad.”

“And you didn’t want anyone finding out the truth, did you?” Mary asked. “You were afraid it would all come out...” She paused. “But why didn’t the Spirit Guides punish you? You must have had a trial, we all do...”

Edward took a step forward.

“Is that why you hid the records? In this place? A place no one could find... unless they thought of it... yes! With a spiritual barrier around the place, no one could know! Not even the Spirit Guides. So you made it to the afterlife... you hid the truth...”

“Until now,” said a voice.

Edward and Mary turned to see Henry Holborn step from behind a bookshelf.

“So that was your game, Lady Isabella. I congratulate you. Few have managed to fool the trial process.”

“And no one shall ever know.” Lady Isabella reached out her hand. A jet of fire flew from her fingers. She began to direct it towards the book. “Stay, Master Holborn. Unless you wish your children to burn, along with your evidence.”

“There’s just one thing you’ve forgotten.” Edward spoke quickly. He was trying to sound brave... but Mary could hear the terror in his voice. “This room’s only here because we all think it’s here. You created it, Lady Isabella, and we made it happen. If something were to break your concentration...”

“And who will do this?” Lady Isabella laughed. She moved the flames nearer to the book. “I destroyed more than one man who stood in my way, Edward. Do you think I am frightened... of a mere child?”

Something struck Lady Isabella across the forehead.

It was a miniature football.

They all turned to see Ashton standing in the doorway.

Then several things happened in seconds. Edward heard Lady Isabella scream... saw Ashton lower the arm he had used to throw the ball...

The room was shrinking, disappearing into itself. Lady Isabella was making a last, desperate grab for the book...

Then she and the book and the room were gone.

Edward and Mary and Henry found themselves in the corridor outside, staring at an empty wall.

Slumped on the floor, lying unconscious against the wall, were Ashton and Mrs Buttress.

“So you didn’t find the answer after all?” Safia asked. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, I found it, all right.” Mrs Buttress was smiling. “Except that no one back in Massachusetts will believe me. Perhaps I’ll turn it into a novel, instead. People love a good ghost story.”

She shook hands with Safia and Louise.

“Goodbye. And thank you. Take care of this young man.”

She pointed towards a grinning Ashton.

“I think he might go places, with Journeyback.”

She stepped through the ancient doorway. As Safia and Louise moved back into the house, Mrs Buttress stopped, and raised her voice as loud as she dared.

“Goodbye Edward, Mary. And thank you.”

Edward and Mary stepped through the wall, and stood looking on as Mrs Buttress walked off towards the car park. Mary had removed Lady Isabella’s ring, and they were transparent again. They gave her a wave.

“So...” Edward paused for thought. “Who sent Ashton up there?”

Henry materialised between them. He put his hands on their shoulders.

“Well I did, of course. I went into the Site Office, and whispered in his ear. He knew where he had to go. And what he had to do. At last, Lady Isabella can face a proper trial for what she did. And you’ve cleared Sir Arthur’s name. You’ve done well, my children. Ellie would be proud of you.”

“Two husbands dead...” Edward shook his head. “Crikey. I’m glad I never married.”

“Come along.” Henry led them indoors. “Your mother will return from Inchwood shortly, Mary. She will be pleased to hear all you’ve done. And you’ve filled a gap in Inchwood’s history. As well as that of Stipleby.”

They disappeared into the house.

From within, Ashton's voice was heard.

“Safia? You know it's like my last day today? Well, can you sign my form? I've filled in all the stuff I've done. Helping to solve an ancient mystery. Finding hidden clues on a wall. Defeating a spooky woman from the sixteenth century... oh, and some filing. That should be OK. Shouldn't it?”

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