

MURDER
BY
CANDLELIGHT
FAITH MARTIN



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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CHAPTER ONE

‘Oh, hello, Mr Swift, might I just have a quick word with you about my ghost?’

Now this somewhat unconventional greeting would no doubt have disconcerted anyone other than Mr Arbuthnot Lancelot Swift. However, Mr Swift – known simply as ‘that young fool Arbie’ to his more discriminating friends and family – was made of sterner stuff. Or so he’d like to flatter himself. The more honest explanation for this display of savoir-faire, however, lay in the fact that, having just written a best-selling book about some of the nation’s more prominent spooks, ghouls, spectres and the odd banshee or two, it could be argued that he was better placed than most to take this sort of thing in his stride.

‘Oh, good morning, Miss Phelps,’ he said, turning around to address the tall, grey-haired lady who was looking at him from a pair of thoughtful, watery blue eyes. ‘Lovely day and all that,’ he added cheerfully.

Naturally, that worthy lady batted away this piece of frippery with barely an acknowledgement.

Miss Phelps, he supposed, must now be in her late sixties, and was one of the wealthiest members of the Cotswold village of Maybury-in-the-Marsh. As a lifelong resident of the village himself, he was very much aware of the older lady’s standing in the community – not to mention her notoriously gimlet eye – and

could only hope that his Oxford bags and knitted jumper passed sartorial muster.

Her family had held sway at the Old Forge for generations, her antecedents starting out as mere humble smithies, but through luck, judgement, hard work and notorious parsimony had built up a business that was now the envy of many. But it had been her deceased brother who, like many industrialists, had made their biggest fortune from the Great War, and now the Phelps name could be seen written large on many a factory wall. Not to mention on the doors of a string of garages and scrap metal merchant yards in three counties.

Not surprisingly, Miss Phelps, as one of the very few remaining members of her family, bore evidence of her prosperity easily and without any apparent effort. Today, this took the form of an immaculately shabby tweed suit, specially tailored to fit her five feet eleven inches, a set of truly perfect pearls, the softest of kid-leather gloves and some sort of reptilian-skin handbag that even Arbie (not the most reliable judge of women's accessories) could tell was probably the envy of every woman for miles around.

But for once, Miss Phelps wasn't acting quite her self-important self. Normally she could be seen walking through the village like a member of minor royalty deigning to mix with the peasantry, but this morning she seemed to be lacking some of her usual vim and vigour, and her eyes darted nervously up and down Old Mill Lane.

'I was so hoping I might run into you, Mr Swift. I think you're just the person to advise me,' she said, though not sounding particularly convinced by her own statement. Which Arbie had to acknowledge was fair enough. It was rare indeed for anyone to ask his advice about anything. 'Since you know all about restless spirits and that sort of thing, I mean,' she added weakly.

Even as she made this request, the pale blue orbs of her eyes were running over him with obvious misgiving. No doubt she was recalling all the times when, as a boy, he'd regularly scrumped her

pears, gooseberries and plums, and, on one occasion, had been directly responsible for the rapid entrance of a cricket ball through her (regrettably closed) dining room window.

‘Oh, er, really?’ he responded uncomfortably. Whilst it behoved one to help out one’s neighbours when called upon, of course, it was not something a chap actively encouraged.

A lanky youth of six feet one with plentiful dark brown hair and fine grey eyes, he sought desperately to think of a way of disentangling himself from what looked like becoming a bit of a tricky situation. For the truth was, the last thing he wanted to do was discuss ghosts and their doings. He’d set out that lovely summer morning to stroll to the village shop for the papers and some tobacco and had intended to do nothing more strenuous afterwards than indulge in a spot of fishing in the river which ran along the bottom of his grounds.

Now, it was fair to say that everyone who knew Arbie well had been frankly astonished and bamboozled to see his first literary enterprise, *The Gentleman’s Guide to Ghost-Hunting*, become such a roaring success with the British reading public. His best friend from Wadham, Walter Greenstreet, who had gone straight into his family’s long-standing publishing business had, likewise, been utterly wrong-footed by it also.

The Gentleman’s Guide to Ghost-Hunting had only come about at all when the two young men had met up in their club one day, and over a very boozy lunch indeed, had found the conversation turning to the nation’s fascination with all things spook and spectre related. Everyone, it seemed, had a ghost story to tell, or an old family home that was haunted by a white lady, headless horseman or some other inconvenient poltergeist. Arbie had responded to this observation in an off-handed manner by saying that it was all too bad, and that someone should take the matter in hand in a logical and orderly way and publish a guide to it all, rather like the hill-walking or cycling tour guides that

were currently so popular. Only instead of visiting historical monuments or natural wonders, the tourists could indulge their appetite for spirits (of the non-alcoholic kind) instead.

Why, it could become more popular than bird-watching or nature study, he'd declared airily, getting somewhat carried away. (In his defence, the club's fine port may have had something to do with his growing fervour.) Arbie had waxed so lyrically and enthusiastically at this bright new idea of how to titillate the bored well-to-do, that Wally had challenged him to go ahead and compile such a volume. After all, he'd pointed out with a wry smile, Arbie had nothing better to do with his time since he was determined not to work for a living, and writing such a guidebook might be a bit of a lark at that. But only if he was up to it, that is.

Naturally, Arbie hadn't been able to ignore the challenge or back down in the face of his friend's provocation, and had said grandiosely that he'd write it if Wally's firm would publish it, fully expecting that to spike his friend's guns. However, Walter, thus hoisted by his own petard, had instantly agreed to such an enterprise, and had had a contract ready for his friend to sign before the week was out.

This, obviously, left Arbie in something of a pickle. Apart from the fact that he now had only the vaguest of recollections of what they'd discussed at lunch, the same sense of honour that had resulted in the production of the contract had obliged him to take up the challenge and sign the datted thing.

And so it was that one fine morning he'd found himself with an unwanted publishing deal under his belt and a book to write. And after some weeks of gloomily cursing fate and his treacherous friend – not to mention the club's fine port – Arbie had set off on a tour of the south of England, suitcase and portable typewriter in hand, in search of ghosts.

And had found, rather to his surprise, that it *was* all a bit of a lark. Oh, not the actual ghost-hunting itself. That had been

tedious in the extreme and usually consisted of sitting in the dark and waiting for something to happen, which never did. But the actual travelling around in his black Alvis saloon had been a delight. Moseying along from seaside towns to attractive villages and staying at accommodating village inns or boarding houses as the whim – or hot tips about local ghosts – had taken him, had given him a wonderful sense of freedom. And since the majority of his commercial hosts and hostesses were willing to bend over backwards to make his stay comfortable in exchange for a good ‘write-up’ about their establishments in his new guidebook, the fact that Arbie had lived like a king might have had something to do with his enjoyment of the venture.

Once he’d returned home, he tidied up his ‘working notes’ and delivered the completed manuscript to Walter. His old pal had then, naturally and somewhat hastily, passed it over – unread – to a junior editor to deal with and had promptly forgotten all about it.

Until it was published three months later – and became something of a sensation. For some reason, a vast percentage of the reading public liked Arbie’s easy, witty style. His habit of describing various holiday hotspots, mixed with his self-effacing ‘tussles’ with ghosts, vastly amused and entertained everybody from housewives to country solicitors, farmers to bus drivers, dowager duchesses to kitchen maids. And Walter Greenstreet, blast him to the moon and back, had all but taken to camping out on Arbie’s doorstep and waving a contract under his nose, desperately promising a higher and higher rate of royalties every time his friend showed his face.

But Arbie’s lazy nature had had ample time to reassert itself, and the thought of actually producing a second book was giving him a case of the jitters. For the last month he’d been so determinedly fending off Wally’s pleadings to take up the ghost-hunt again, that finding himself unexpectedly accosted by a member of his own village asking him about ghosts was the last thing he

needed. If Walter's big ears got to hear about it, he would insist that Arbie had no excuse whatsoever for not starting a new book now that he had a 'case' right on his doorstep.

So it was that Arbie cast what he hoped was a winsome smile on the wealthy spinster in front of him and said, 'Well, Miss Phelps, as a matter of fact I've sort of retired from all that sort . . .' but the lady, he could see, was going to have none of it. He could tell by the way her spine stiffened, with her upper lip following suit, that he was not going to be allowed to wiggle free. Manfully, he reminded himself that he was a mere boy no longer, and fought against the instilled urge to buckle under her gaze.

'And honestly, I'm not really such an expert on ghosts as all that, you know,' he began hopefully. 'Writing what was really a glorified holiday guidebook isn't . . .' but it was no use. He was doomed, for already Miss Phelps was opening her mouth to cut across his stumbling efforts to extricate himself. She simply wasn't going to accept anything other than his promise to come and investigate her wretched spook for her – which would probably turn out to be nothing more than the wind in the chimneys or a tree twig scratching against a windowpane somewhere.

With slumping shoulders, he resigned himself to the inevitable. Perhaps, he comforted himself, he could be in and out in one quick visit, before his publishers even became aware that he'd been asked to investigate at all?

'But you have to help me, Mr Swift,' the usually stalwart Miss Phelps said rather piteously. 'You see, this is no ordinary ghost. I think it's trying to kill me.'

'Eh?' squawked Arbie, thoroughly rattled.

It was not, perhaps, a particularly erudite response from one of the nation's favourite authors. But it conveyed his feelings pretty adequately, nonetheless.

It was at this moment, whilst Arbie was gaping at Miss Phelps like a stunned mullet, that he saw movement out of his peripheral vision, and turned his head slightly to see a familiar sight.

Maybury was a small village with one major road – Old Mill Lane – running through it. On this road most of the village’s prominent residences and amenities had been built, including The Dun Cow Inn, the manor house, the Old Forge and the village shop. Off it, however, ran a few minor lanes and tracks, leading to various cul-de-sacs of cottages, and Church Lane, which led to the Norman church, its adjacent vicarage and finally, Arbie and his uncle’s own residence, a converted chapel. And it was from this direction that a large black boneshaker of a bicycle had turned onto the main village street, bearing astride it a striking figure.

As usually happened whenever Arbie saw Valentina Olivia Charlotte Coulton-James, the vicar’s daughter, whizzing along on her bicycle, he could hear in the back of his head the stirring music of Act 3 of *Die Walküre*, and Richard Wagner’s rousing piece, ‘Ride of the Valkyries’. This may have been due to the fact that Val, at five feet eleven, was a strapping girl, former hockey champion at her school and all-round athlete. Tennis, swimming, archery, whatever the sport, Val could beat anyone hands down. Or it may have been the fact that she had long, very straight and very fair hair that streamed out behind her in a rippling stream as her muscular legs pumped up and down, getting astonishing speeds out of her hand-me-down vehicle.

More likely, it was probably his memories of their shared schooldays at the village primary school, when Val had regularly duffed him up in the playground.

Now, if someone had told Arbie earlier that morning that he’d be pleased to see Val bearing down on him with her usual expression of mild scorn mixed with reluctant affection, he’d have told them to go boil their head. But as she applied the rather haphazard brakes on her contraption and brought herself

to a shuddering halt just in front of himself and Miss Phelps, he did indeed feel inordinately happy to see her.

If anyone could deal with beleaguered ladies with a persecution complex, it was Val. As one of the vicar's huge brood (how many children did the Reverend have now – eight, nine, ten?), she was used to dealing with anything.

'Ah, Val, you're just the ticket,' Arbie said gratefully.

Val put one sturdy foot on the ground to balance herself and looked at him suspiciously. 'Oh?' This was not the sort of greeting she'd been expecting. In her experience, Arbie Swift usually lived up to his name whenever he saw her, and swiftly made excuses to depart. So perhaps she could be forgiven if her gaze travelled suspiciously from his innocent smile to Amy Phelps's unhappy visage and then back to him again. As she sensed the atmosphere, her face darkened.

Arbie shuffled his feet, which was his usual response to being put on the spot.

'Have you been upsetting Miss Phelps?' Val demanded flatly.

'What? No! As if I would,' Arbie yelped, stung by her immediate assumption that, whatever was going on, he was to blame. Just for that, he had no more qualms – not that he'd ever had any in the first place – in setting about transferring his problem onto her sturdy shoulders.

'As a point of fact, Miss Phelps was just telling me about a little problem she has that really needs your father's sensitive touch,' he informed her loftily. Sensing that Miss Phelps wasn't happy with this opening gambit and was about to put her foot in it by saying that she'd asked for no such interference from the church, Arbie rushed on. 'And you're just the person to help arrange it. Miss Phelps you see—'

'Miss Phelps can speak for herself, thank you,' the lady interrupted firmly. 'Good morning, Miss Coulton-James,' she added, giving the vicar's daughter a gracious inclination of her head. As she did so, she cast her eyes disapprovingly over the mannish trousers and loose jersey that Val wore when out on her bicycle.

In her day, women rode side-saddle on horses with dresses down to the ankle.

Val, easily interpreting the other woman's glance, did her best to ignore her unspoken censure and continued to scowl at Arbie. 'Daddy's always very busy, you know, and right now he's got a visit from the Bishop in the offing, so the whole house is in uproar,' she said dampeningly. Although she might not know exactly what was going on between her two disparate neighbours, she was confident that whatever it was, Arbie was, as usual, trying to duck out of something.

'Ah, but I'm sure your father is never too busy to help a parishioner in distress,' Arbie shot back.

At this, Amy Phelps bridled. 'Mr Swift, I'll trust you not to break my confidences. I told you about my ghostly difficulties only on the tacit understanding that you would be both professional and discreet.'

Now it was Val's turn to shoot her a bemused look. 'I'm sorry, Miss Phelps, did you say *ghostly* difficulties?'

'Exactly so. Which, I'm sure we all agree really does fall under the purview of the Church,' Arbie slipped in triumphantly. 'If Miss Phelps needs some sort of exorcism perform—'

'Exorcism?' hissed Miss Phelps, scandalised.

'Exorcism?' Val hissed, at the same time, even more scandalised.

Under the barrage of their combined displeasure, Arbie miserably shuffled his feet. 'Er, well, you know . . .'

'I'll have nothing to do with exorcisms,' Miss Phelps said, mortally offended.

'Daddy really doesn't do exorcisms,' Val added, equally as mortally offended.

Arbie shuffled his feet some more.

Both women looked at him in disgust for a moment longer, then mutually but tacitly acknowledging that he was a broken reed, turned instantly to one another to get things sorted out properly.

‘What’s the problem, Miss Phelps?’ Val asked kindly. ‘I’m sure between us we can see a way clear.’

‘Well, Miss Coulton-James, it’s like this . . .’ Miss Phelps hesitated and glanced around cautiously. Although the small village was never exactly crammed with passers-by, there were always one or two people about, going to or from the shop, or working in their gardens. And the last thing she wanted was gossip about her family running rife all over the place. ‘Perhaps you and Mr Swift could come to tea later on and we can discuss things more comfortably?’

‘We’d love to, wouldn’t we, Arbie?’ Val said instantly, shooting him an acid smile.

Knowing when he was beaten, Arbie inwardly heaved a deep sigh but outwardly shot out a smile. ‘Of course, Miss Phelps, we would be delighted,’ he lied smoothly.

Miss Phelps, having achieved her aims (when had she ever not?), nodded in satisfaction, bid them good day until later and marched off. Arbie sadly watched her go. Then, turning to his satisfied companion, said reproachfully, ‘I say, Val, what on earth did you let us in that for?’

Val regarded him with an aloof and disappointed air. ‘Oh, Arbie, couldn’t you see that underneath all that prim and properness that poor lady was really worried about something? I mean, genuinely upset and not just, you know, playing the “grand dame” or something?’

‘Well . . .’ Arbie felt himself flushing. Because, in truth, he had found it discomfiting to see the usually imperious Amy Phelps so unlike her old self. Why was it that Val had always been able to make him feel like a worm with just a few snappy words and a pleading glance from her big blue eyes?

Sensing weakness, Val pressed home her advantage. ‘You know Miss Phelps. When has she ever asked anybody for help?’ she demanded.

‘Well . . .’

‘Exactly! Her generation would rather die than admit to any kind of weakness. But it was as plain as the nose on your face that she was worried sick. And there you were, dithering about, and trying to wriggle out of any unpleasantness, as usual. Well, this time, you can jolly well step in and do your bit. Now, what’s all this about exorcisms and ghosts and things?’

‘She says the Old Forge is haunted,’ Arbie said, a shade sulkily.

‘Well, everyone knows that,’ Val said dismissively. ‘Half the village is said to have ghosts flitting about. Isn’t the Old Forge haunted by a past smithy who was said to have died after falling into his fire or something?’

‘No, actually,’ Arbie said, glad to be able to correct her. As a bit of an expert now, he knew about such things. ‘He just died of pneumonia, brought on by TB.’

‘Oh,’ Val said, a little crestfallen. ‘That doesn’t sound like something a person would get particularly upset about and start haunting a place for, does it? Didn’t a lot of people die of things like that? What’s he got to complain of any more than anyone else?’ Even the dead, it seemed, weren’t safe from Val’s firm view of how things ought to be.

‘Ghosts aren’t exactly known for their reasonableness,’ Arbie pointed out dryly. ‘And this one seems to have been very cross indeed about something or other.’

Something slightly gleeful in his tone made Val look at him closely. Sensing that Arbie wasn’t as thoroughly subdued as he might appear, her chin came up pugnaciously. ‘Oh?’ she said cautiously. ‘Why do you say that?’

‘Because if Miss Phelps is to be believed, this family ghost is trying to kill her,’ Arbie said nonchalantly.

‘Oh,’ Val said blankly.

‘Still looking forward to taking tea at the forge, old thing?’ he asked jovially.