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opening extract from

The Lady Grace Mysteries: Haunted

written by

Grace Cavendish

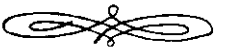
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The Fourth Day of July, in the Year of Our Lord 1570



In my bedchamber

It is nine of the clock and it is our first morning at Medenham Manor. We are on summer progress with Her Majesty and the Court.

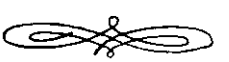
I am almost ready to attend the Queen, wearing a gown of carnation red, slashed all over with lozenge shapes to show the pink lining underneath. It was one of the Queen's and she gave it to me just before we came away. Now that it has been altered it fits very well, for I am almost as tall as Her Majesty, although I am skinnier.

I have dressed myself and the only thing I cannot do is tie on my sleeves. But everyone is too busy to help. They are fussing round Lady Sarah Bartelmy, who has suddenly insisted that she wants her new string of seed pearls stitched round her bodice, just as the Queen

has. Olwen, Lady Sarah's tiring woman, is struggling with the task because she will not stand still. Fran is trying to help Mary Shelton dress while Mary is trying to do Sarah's hair! It is Bedlam here, and quite comical to watch them all flapping about like chickens!

Of course, I would be ready if I had a tiring woman of my own instead of having to share Fran with Mary. Sometimes it is quite hard being the youngest Maid of Honour.

I have taken refuge on my bed with my new daybooke. It is a beautiful book with a cover of finest blue vellum and was given to me by a dear friend. I will take this time to record our arrival at Medenham Manor.



A few minutes later

I broke off just now to watch the fun. Poor Olwen is having a terrible time with her sewing. It is taking such an age – I could certainly not be bothered with it.

'Please could you stand still, my lady?' pleaded Olwen. 'My needle has come unthreaded again.'

'I have been standing still for more than an hour!' snapped Lady Sarah.

I felt like piping up that my peevish lady had not stood still at all, but I did not want anything thrown at me, so I kept quiet.

'Why do you not wear your green gown?' suggested Mary Shelton calmly, as she combed Lady Sarah's hair. 'It is very becoming and needs no ornament.'

'What!' exclaimed Lady Sarah. 'Last year's fashion? Have you lost your wits, Mary?'

It was brave of Mary to suggest this. She should have known that the ancient green gown (three months old) had been packed merely for extreme emergencies.

But I will block my ears to it all and write about Medenham Manor instead. This is the most modern house I have ever been in. Indeed, it is so new that it is not quite finished, and everywhere smells of paint and plaster and new wood. Our host, Lord Reynold

Waldegrave, the fifth Earl of Medenham, decided last year that the whole of his old house needed renovating. So he started knocking bits down and then rebuilding them in the latest style.

We are in the new west wing. Mary Shelton, Lady Sarah and I share a lovely chamber with a dressing room beyond. Our trunks are stowed in there. (The trunks are luckier than some members of the Court who needs must stay in the village. This often happens on progress. Few of the fine houses at which we stay are big enough to afford all of us chambers.) Our room is very spacious but Lady Sarah can make anywhere seem crowded.

I wonder where my good friends Masou and Ellie are. Mr Somers always makes sure that Masou and the rest of the Queen's tumbling troupe are comfortable, but poor Ellie will probably have to sleep on some floor or other. Being a mere laundrymaid, she never gets a bed or even a palliasse. But there is nothing I can do about it for I am not supposed to be friends with her – or with Masou – at all. It

is not thought seemly for a Maid of Honour. I think the Queen knows that I am friends with them but she pretends she does not so that she won't have to stop me.

We are to accompany the Queen to church soon – if we are ever ready! Lord Reynold has arranged a special service to give thanks for Her Majesty's safe arrival. After that we are to have a tour of this splendid house. At least, Lord Reynold has told us that his manor is splendid. We arrived here last night and it was too late to see for ourselves. Our journey was delayed by a sudden summer storm, so there was only time for supper and then bed. Lord Robert Dudley, the Earl of Leicester, did nothing but grumble at the supper table.

'My Liege,' I heard him complaining in a low voice to the Queen, 'do you truly need to bide here for a whole week? My home at Kenilworth is ready for you and I fear this storm presages some evil.'

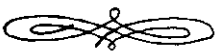
'Fie, Robert!' snapped the Queen, waving a chicken leg at him. 'We will be at Kenilworth anon. I have promised Lord Reynold I will

stay here and I look forward to it. As for evil, 'tis nothing but some drops of rain and rumbles of thunder!'

The Earl of Leicester always wants the Queen to himself. It is said he is in love with her, and he is indeed her favourite, but she does not like to have her actions questioned. Secretly, though, I wanted the Queen to take Lord Robert's advice. Not because of bad omens, but because the entertainments at Kenilworth are always marvellous, while I have the feeling that it is going to be boring staying here for a whole week!

Anyhow, this morning we are to go to church and then this afternoon we are to have the grand tour. Lord Reynold is desperate for the Queen to see the changes to his manor. He almost melted with joy when Her Majesty arrived and the royal feet actually stepped onto his flagstones!

Heavens be praised! I think Fran has finished dressing Mary! It must be my turn at last.



About ten minutes later

I am still not dressed, but no matter! I have something of great interest to record. Fran had just finished with Mary Shelton when the door to the bedchamber was flung open so suddenly that it nearly knocked her out of the window! Lady Jane Coningsby burst in with Carmina Willoughby close behind. The room felt even more crowded now that there were five Maids of Honour and two tiring women within.

'Girls,' breathed Jane, putting her hand dramatically over her heart, 'you will not believe what we have heard—'

'Then there is no point in telling us!' snapped Lady Sarah. Lady Jane is not Sarah's favourite person in the world and she was getting very impatient with Olwen's slow, careful stitching of the pearls, especially as Fran was now trying to help too.

'But we *must* tell you,' squeaked Carmina excitedly, 'else I shall burst!'

'That would be most unpleasant,' laughed Mary Shelton. 'You had better give us the story straight away.'

'Well,' whispered Carmina, drawing us around her, 'we overheard the two servants who brought us our water this morning—'

'It was *I* who was telling the tale,' Lady Jane interrupted crossly. 'It seems that this house has a dread secret. It is—'

'Haunted!' shrieked Carmina, looking terrified and tremendously excited at the same time. 'One hundred years ago the first Earl was murdered, and because he met his death so violently his ghost used to walk in this very house! And now it is said that, since the building work began, he has been seen again in the old east wing!'

Jane looked most put out at having her moment of glory stolen like that – but everyone else gasped and Lady Sarah turned quite pale. I have to confess I felt a flutter of excitement. I hope the story is true. I have never seen a ghost before.

'I have heard something of the first Earl,' said Mary Shelton. 'Lord Reynold told me that his ancestor made money selling arms. And this was at the time of the war between the Yorkists and the Lancastrians, so there was a great demand for weapons and armour. The Earl did very well.'

''Tis a pity he did not keep some armour for himself,' I couldn't help saying, 'for then he might not have been murdered!'

'Lord Reynold did not mention a murder,' said Mary, picking through her box of gloves. 'But it is true that the first Earl did not stay long at Medenham Manor.'

'So what happened to him then if he wasn't done to death?' demanded Carmina, who obviously didn't want her ghost story to be spoiled.

'Lord Reynold said the first Earl ran away to Cornwall with his mistress,' replied Mary. 'His son took over his house and all his business.'

'Then there cannot be a ghost,' I said in disappointment, 'unless it travelled all the way back from Cornwall!'

But Carmina was not going to let the ghost

lie. 'This house must be haunted,' she insisted, 'for the Queen has heard of it!'

'Has she?' gasped Mary Shelton, forgetting all about her gloves.

'Yes,' said Carmina. 'She knew about it even before we started on progress.'

'I am surprised the Queen let us come here then,' sniffed Lady Sarah.

'Well, apparently the Queen threatened not to come,' Lady Jane put in, determined to have her say. 'But Lord Reynold assured her that the stories were mere tittle-tattle.'

'That is what I would say too' – I laughed – 'if I was hoping for a visit from Her Majesty. I would claim that all the tales were untrue and hope the ghost didn't appear while she was at my house.'

'But imagine the trouble if it did,' said Carmina, wide-eyed. 'The Queen would be furious. When they realized we had heard them, the servants begged us not to tell anyone. Her Majesty has forbidden any talk of ghosts, for she does not want her Court gibbering and twitching with fear at every turn.'

'I hope she did not include us!' retorted Lady Sarah, pulling away from Olwen and turning in front of the looking glass to inspect her pearls. 'I have never gibbered or twitched in my life, and I am not afraid of ghosts.'

'I am!' declared Carmina, peering anxiously around the room.

'You heard a great deal from those two servants,' I said curiously – I confess I was impressed with their spying!

'They thought us asleep' – Carmina giggled – 'and we kept our heads under our covers so we would hear all.'

'Servants are such gossipmongers!' said Lady Jane scornfully.

I wanted to laugh. Lady Jane had not wasted a moment in passing the gossip on to us!

I wish we did not have to go to church this morning. It is not that I am irreverent. I am just eager for the tour to start, especially as there may be a ghost about! I think I shall try to stay at the back of the party and hope for a visitation. How silly of me to think that when we arrived here at Medenham Manor,

I would be bored. It seems there is a ghost to be found! And who better to search for it than Grace Cavendish, secret Lady Pursuivant to Her Majesty. None of the Court knows that the Queen has appointed me to seek out all those who would trouble her peace. And if a ghost wouldn't trouble her peace, I don't know what would! There is only one problem: I do not think Her Majesty would want me to go ghost hunting. Still, if I do not tell her anything about it, I will only be following her own orders that we are not to speak of the ghost!

Mary Shelton says that her groom does not believe in ghosts. I thought that strange, for surely everyone knows that sometimes a dead soul cannot rest and so returns to haunt the living. I have never heard tell of someone who did not *believe* in ghosts before. Mayhap he will see the ghost while we are staying at Medenham Manor and so will change his mind!

Hell's teeth! I can hear the bells calling us to the service and I have still not got my sleeves on!