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Opening extract from

Aldo Moon and the Ghost at Gravewood Hall

Written by

Alex Woolf

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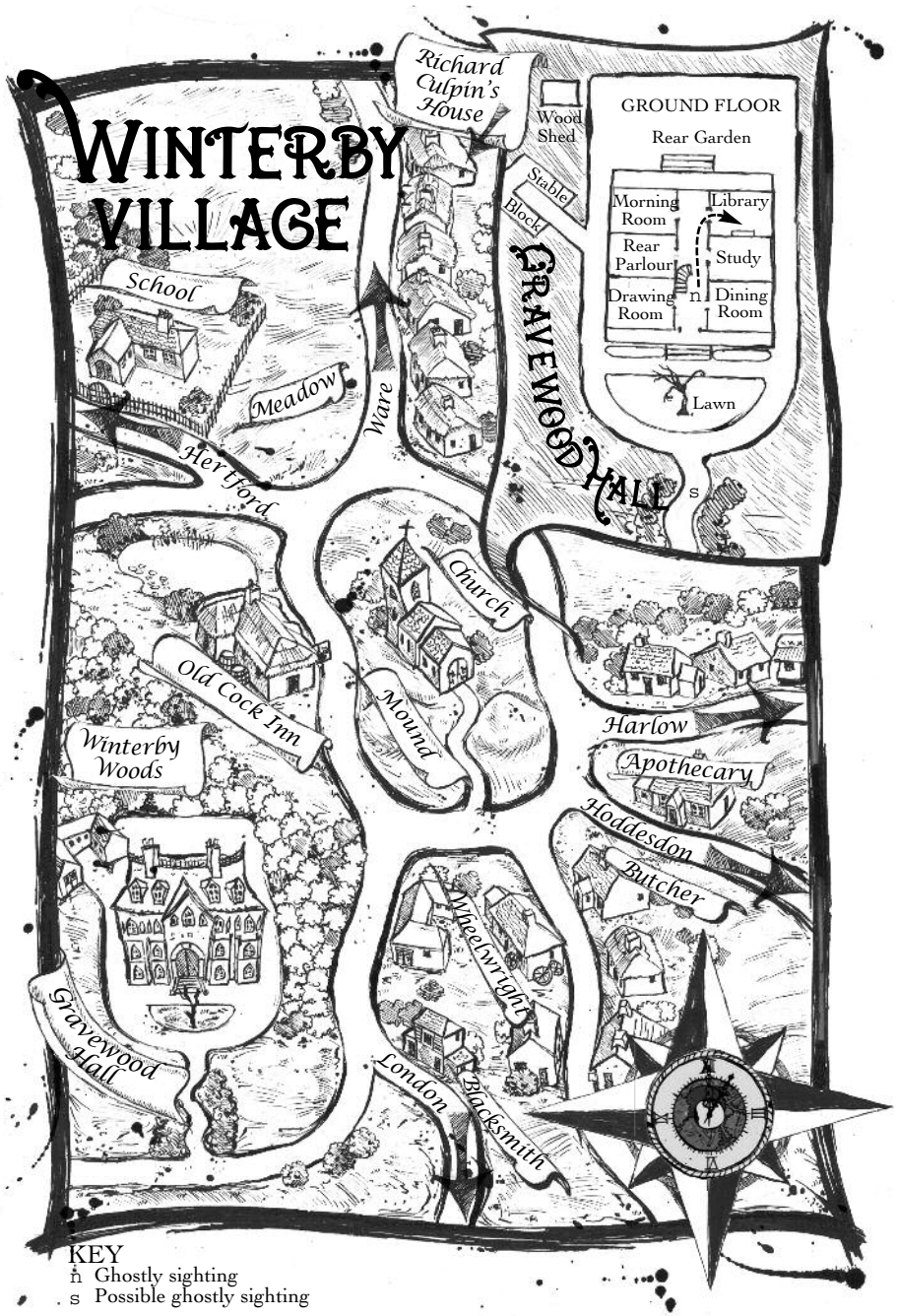
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Aldo Moon and the Ghost at Gravewood Hall

ALEX WOOLF

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Chapter



'It was a dark and stormy night,' I began. 'The skies were racked by thunder that rolled in waves across the valley. Lightning forked through the dismal clouds and lit up the trees in brief, angry flashes.'

Actually, it was a beautiful evening. The only celestial illumination was provided by the moon, which shone through wisps of London fog, falling silkily upon our rug. But that didn't seem right for my story, which was to be in the Gothic tradition and so required a more violent kind of weather.

Aldo watched me, an amused expression at play on his lean, angular face. I had hoped for at least a pretence of excitement, but was grateful that he

wasn't yet bored. I tried not to let his appearance put me off my stride. He looked ridiculous, as usual, in canary yellow trousers and turquoise waistcoat, with mermaids embroidered on the front. His baggy pirate shirt had lace frill cuffs that he twisted in his long, restless fingers. His hair was as dark and unruly as the storm I was trying to describe.

'The wind,' I said, 'was howling through the trees.'

'Doesn't it always!' groaned my cousin Lily, the third person in the room.

'Nothing in this universe, my dear girl, is so predictable that one can say it will *always* be so,' said Aldo. 'Although Nathan's stories may yet prove the exception.'

'You mean he won't ever surprise us?'

'I fear not.'

'Excuse me!' I interrupted. 'I'm trying to conjure an atmosphere here.'

'Well how about conjuring some characters and a plot,' said the heartless Lily.

We were in the sitting room of our home in St John's Wood, London, the three of us, passing the time before bed by telling stories. I slowly paced the rug in front of the fireplace, hoping for inspiration, and feeling a little irked at my audience's lack of appreciation so far. I had grown up on a diet of popular adventure stories, read to me by my father,

and their legacy was a head full of over the top description. Rain always fell in torrents, blood always boiled and girls' eyes were never anything but meltingly blue. It's not the way I speak normally, you understand. Normally I'm as restrained as the next fellow. But ask me for a story and I'll offer up enough wooden phrases to build a fleet of ships. I simply cannot help it.

Lily was perched on a sofa on the far side of the room from Aldo. She was a pretty girl, I always thought, although she did not seem to think herself so, and made every effort to be plain. Her dark curls were pinned tightly back, exposing her ears. Her high-collared dress, with its vertical strip of buttons, went almost up to her chin. The result was a severity of appearance that even the cheerful glow from the fireplace could do little to mellow. She had ambitions to be a scientist, but she looked more like a strict governess to a bunch of rowdy young boys.

They waited, none too hopefully, for the continuation of my tale.

'The clouds,' I said to them, 'were racing across the sky, and the rain… the rain was lashing at the windows of the rickety old house in the woods.'

'I think that's quite enough about the weather, don't you?' said Lily, not even bothering to stifle her yawn. 'Now please get on with the story, Nathan Carter, or I shall be forced to go to bed.'

Lily was just sixteen, a full year younger than myself, and a mere girl, yet these facts did nothing to curb her tendency to mock and disparage me at every opportunity. She believed herself my superior in most things, and certainly in breeding. You see, although we were first cousins, Lily and I, her mother – my father's sister – had married into the Morelles, an ancient Anglo-Norman family that traced itself back to the time of William the Conqueror. Both her parents were now dead, and Lily had been living here as the guardian of my father since she was ten, yet she retained a condescending air of superiority, especially with me. She could send me into such a rage when she wanted to. Indeed, if she hadn't been a girl, and a relative, I'm afraid there were occasions when I could cheerfully have clobbered her. Even now I could feel my muscles tensing and the heat rising beneath my collar, and it took considerable effort to maintain my composure.

'Kindly stop your continual interruptions, cousin,' I barked. 'You have utterly ruined my flow.'

'I believe someone is about to knock,' Aldo suddenly announced.

'Thank-you, Aldo,' I grimaced. 'Yes. Someone is indeed about to knock at the door of the rickety old house in the woods.'

'No, dear brother, you misunderstand,' he

interrupted. 'I mean to say that I have picked up a ripple in the ether. I sense a change in the weather – in the cosmic weather, I mean. Someone is about to knock at the front door of this house, and this knock, I fear, will have grave consequences for all of us.'

'You're a fraud and a charlatan, Aldo Moon,' said Lily crossly. 'You heard a carriage pull up in the street.'

The sounds of the street would have had to carry up the staircase and through at least three walls if they were to reach us here in the parlour – surely beyond the range of any human ear. Lily knew this as well as I, yet she would sooner be rolled in marmalade and dangled in front of a nest of angry wasps than admit that Aldo had *actually* picked up anything in the ether.

I glanced at the grandfather clock. It was past eight. 'Who the devil would be calling at this hour?' I asked rhetorically.

'Alas, my powers do not extend that far,' Aldo replied.

'Your powers extend no further than luck and inspired guesswork can carry them,' stated Lily, who had never believed in anything that could not be tested under laboratory conditions. She knew, even as she said this, that Aldo was rarely wrong in his predictions, and that at any moment Graves

would be letting us know we had a visitor. I had to admire the obstinacy of her scepticism in the face of Aldo's self-evident gifts. But Lily was nothing if not obstinate – and sceptical – about most things.



Aldo once remarked to me that 'many things begin in unexpected places'. He may have been thinking of himself. He was a foundling, you see, discovered in a tea crate on a North London street in the year 1865. One of the nurses at the London Foundling Hospital, where he was subsequently reared, named him Aldo because she thought he looked in some way 'old and Italian'. As for his surname, that came from the location where he was found: Moon Street in Islington. At the age of seven, he was adopted by my father, who desired a companion for me. I was also seven, and somewhat at sea in a house full of adults. I remember my new brother as a thin, grubby boy with poor manners, little education and a general disregard for matters of hygiene and appearance. Yet, even then, he had a quality that marked him out from everyone else I knew. The closest I can come to describing it would be an 'off-centredness', as if his inner compass guided him along alternate paths to those followed by the rest of

humanity. Several of father's acquaintances, who should have known better, voiced their suspicions that he was the son of a witch. Father always laughed off such speculations, saying it was far more likely his parents were something in the tea trade, to judge from the receptacle he had been found in.

Aldo and I were sent to St Paul's School for Boys, but his strangeness attracted the attention of bullies, and I often felt called upon to rise to his defence. Consequently, I acquired a mostly unmerited reputation for violence. Eventually, father decided to take us both out of school and hire private tutors to complete our education at home. Now, aged seventeen, Aldo was very much the young gentleman, though, like Lily, he had never entirely managed to shake off his origins. He retained something a little wild in his manner and bearing. He had an animal quickness, combined with an eccentric style of dress. He could charm people, but he could also bemuse and scare them. And he had his powers. As he described it, he had learned to 'feel the ripples in the ether' – enabling him to predict things like knocks on doors.



The knock came.

'Come in, Graves,' I called.

Graves, the butler, entered. He was a tall man, grey and stooped with age after nearly four decades in my family's service. 'The master,' Graves informed us, 'has invited you to join him in the library, where he is entertaining Mrs Rathborn and her son, Mr Daniel Rathborn.'

'Have they just arrived, Graves?'

'Yes, sir,' he bowed.

'By jove, you were right, Aldo!' I exclaimed. 'What about that then, Lily? Isn't he always right about these things?'

Lily did not comment. She was currently standing before the mirror above the sideboard, checking her appearance. Mr Daniel Rathborn was twenty-five, wealthy and unmarried. He had recently taken over the family legal practice following the death of his father, and must now be considered extremely eligible. Lily would never admit to an interest in him or any other man. She claimed to loathe the very idea of marriage. And yet here she was straightening her collar and patting down a stray hair. But then Lily was nothing if not contradictory.



My father, Samuel Carter, was a lifelong booklover, who had managed to turn his passion to profit with the founding, nearly twenty years ago, of Carter & Jackson Publishers. His partner, Thomas Wilberforce Jackson, retired nine years later, leaving father as sole proprietor and editor-in-chief. His keen nose for a popular yarn and clever reissuing of classic tales for younger readers, had reaped him financial rewards, as well as influence in London society. More importantly, as far as father was concerned, it had helped pay for an extensive collection of first editions of classic adventure novels, now proudly displayed on several of the oak shelves that lined three sides of the library. In the centre of the room, beneath the chandelier, were a pair of Rococo-style sofas on which were seated my father and his guests.

When he saw us enter, father's eyes twinkled behind the gold-framed spectacles perched on his large, strong nose. 'Come and sit down, you three,' he said. 'You remember the Rathborns, don't you?'

Daniel Rathborn was a tall man with a long, thin nose, high cheekbones and a way of tilting his head back so that he was always looking down on people. I was fairly well acquainted with him, as his father had been, for many years, Carter & Jackson's legal advisor, and Daniel had, in recent times, begun to take over that role. I cannot say I ever much cared

for him. Though undoubtedly competent, he had none of his father's jovial, good-natured charm. He affected a kind of graciousness in father's presence, because he had to, but he had always been rather stiff with me, and scarcely bothered to conceal his dislike of Aldo. I suppose it's possible he feared us – Aldo for his gifts, me for my reputation as a brawler. Or maybe, as I suspected, he was simply not very nice. Tonight, however, he appeared more agitated than rude. He kissed Lily's proffered hand in a perfunctory way with barely a word of greeting, to her obvious disappointment. As I shook his hand, he didn't meet my eye, and looked like he would rather be anywhere but here.

Mrs Mary Rathborn, by contrast, was always a pleasure. I guessed her to be in her mid-forties at that time, and still a most handsome lady. If her son was a hawk, she was a sparrow, with her petite figure, sharp eyes and quick little movements. Yet this evening, she, too, seemed far from her usual sprightly self. She was wearing the black silk crepe of deep mourning, her husband having passed away less than four weeks earlier, and this emphasised her pallor and the dark smudges of fatigue under her eyes. Naturally, I kept these observations to myself, and merely expressed my delight at seeing them.

'Mrs Rathborn wrote to me the other day,' father

explained. 'She mentioned a problem that she and Daniel are experiencing, of a domestic nature–'

'That *she* is experiencing,' interrupted Daniel.

'We happened to be in town this evening,' added Mrs Rathborn quickly. 'We were having dinner with my late husband's executor. And Mr Carter very kindly invited us to come along here afterwards.'

I was gratified that father had thought to include us in his little evening gathering. It was a sign that we had come of age and were ready to take our places in the world. Gradually, however, as we sat there listening to what the Rathborns had to say, it became apparent that we – or at least one of us – had been called in here for a very particular reason.