

PROPERTY OF  
A LADY

Sarah Rayne



# ONE

*Maryland. October 20—*

**M**ichael,  
Is there any possible chance you could sneak a day or two away from Oxford and take a look at a house for me? We just had this amazing letter straight out of the blue, from some English lawyers I never heard of, saying Liz has inherited a house from a great-aunt or tenth cousin or something who she never knew existed!

It's like the start of a Victorian English novel, isn't it – the long-lost heiress from overseas coming back to the ancestral home. *Bleak House* or one of those huge tomes you teach to your adoring female students who hang on to your every word, only you never notice it. Except I don't think we'll be coming to the ancestral home until at least the end of the year, and I shouldn't think there's likely to be much of the 'ancestral home' about it. It'll most likely be an ordinary house in a village, and from the sound of it pretty derelict as well, because the lawyer says it's been empty for years. Apparently they didn't know they held the deeds to the place until some ninety-year-old partner in the firm died four years ago and they went through his files! They've been trying to find a descendant of the original owners ever since.

Anyway, the house is in a place called Marston Lacy (????!!) in Shropshire. I looked it up on one of the Internet maps, and it's the tiniest speck of a place you ever saw, just about where England crosses over into Wales. Why do they say Salop on some maps, by the way?

I want to sell the place without even seeing it – the lawyer over there could do it – but Liz is wild to keep it if we can. She has this crazy idea of discovering her English ancestors, (since she never knew she had any English ancestors until this week, that strikes me as pretty off the wall, but there you go, that's Liz). She says why don't we restore it and use it for vacations or even rent it. Either way it will be an investment

for when Ellie's grown up and at college or getting married or taking a trip round the world, or whatever kids will be doing in about fifteen years' time. I guess Liz has a point; real estate values bounce up and down according to the season, but when you come down to it, land is still the best investment. Land doesn't get up and walk away.

So we've agreed on a compromise. And since I value your common sense and intelligence highly (ha!), you get to be the compromise. Could you possibly go over to this Marston Lacy any time soon, and look at this house for us? The address is Charect House, which sounds pretty grand, although I've no more idea of what a charect is than fly to the moon.

Typing this email, I'm imagining you in that dim English study with all the books and the untidiness, and Wilberforce snoozing in a patch of sunlight from the quad.

Anyhow, what we'd really like is a few photos so we know what the place looks like, and some idea of how many rooms there are. Also whether it really is Bleak House or somewhere for ordinary people.

Till soon,  
Jack.

It was typical of Jack to send an email of this kind, and it was typical of him to think it would be easy for Michael to travel to the unknown Shropshire house. Americans always had the impression that England was tiny enough to make darting from one end of the country to the other a matter of a couple of hours.

Michael folded the letter into his wallet so it would not get lost, because important letters had an extraordinary habit of going astray if he left them on his desk. Shropshire might be manageable at the weekend. He could probably stay overnight, although he would have to be back on Sunday night. This term was quite a lively one; a gratifying number of students were taking his course on the metaphysical poets – it was true that more than half of them were females, but that was pure chance.

He got up to look up the exact meaning of charect, switching on the desk lamp to see better, because his study was in a small rather obscure corner of Oriel College, as befitted a junior don. The windows overlooked a tiny quadrangle which most people

forgot was there, but which in summer was harlequined with green and gold from the reflections of trees in upper-storey windows. Just now it had the faint cotton-wool mistiness of autumn, with scatterings of bronze leaves on the stones. Michael liked his study, and he liked the view, although at the moment it was slightly obscured by Wilberforce, who had gone to sleep on the window sill.

Here it was: *charect*. An obsolete word for a charm: a spell set down in writing – literally in characters – to ward off evil.

He thought he would tell Jack and Liz this, and then he thought perhaps he would not. It begged the question as to why the house had been given such a name. What evil had to be warded off?

*Maryland, October 20—*

Michael,

That's great news that you think you can get to Marston Lacy this weekend. I've emailed the lawyers, authorizing them to hand the keys to you. They suggest you book into the Black Boar for Saturday night, and they'll get the keys to you.

We haven't mentioned this to any of the family here – Liz's cousins would go wild with curiosity and excitement, and some of them would demand why it's Liz who's inheriting the place and not them. We'd never have any peace. And her godmother would want to pay for all the work, which we wouldn't allow, and even then she'd end up taking over the entire project. You met Liz's godmother at our wedding, didn't you? If you remember her (and everyone who meets her always does), you'll know what I mean.

But one thing Liz has done is get in touch with an antique dealer in the area, to see if any of the house's original furniture can be tracked down. The dealer is called Nell West, and she runs Nell West Antiques in Marston Lacy itself. She's already found a long-case clock that apparently belonged to the house, that's being auctioned locally on 10th of next month. I'm mailing you the catalog.

We'll try to get to England for the Christmas vacation. It's far too long since we saw you, and Ellie was seven last birthday, so she's due some attention from her godfather. She's already making up stories about the people she thinks lived in Charect

House – including someone called, of all things, Elvira. I swear the child will end up being a writer, which means permanently broke. I certainly won't be able to help her – this English house will have bankrupted us long before then.

Jack

As Michael worked on his students' essays about Byron and Shelley, Jack's letter, which had arrived that morning, was propped up on the edge of the desk.

He finished marking the essays, added a few notes, then reached for the catalogues Jack had sent. Lot No. 521 was circled in ink, and Jack had stuck a yellow Post-it note next to it, on which he had scribbled the words 'Note the reserve price! See what I mean about impending bankruptcy!'

Messrs Cranston & Maltravers, Auctioneers of Fine Arts and Furniture (est.1922)

*Lot No. 521.* The property of a lady. Nineteenth-century long-case clock by Crutchley's of Shropshire. Mahogany inlaid with rosewood, made c.1888. Brooke Crutchley was the last of the famous clockmaking family, and this piece was made for William Lee. In view of the manner of William Lee's death, this item is expected to realize a high figure.

Michael glanced at the reserve price and was not surprised Jack was prophesying bankruptcy. But as he stared down at the smudgy reproduction of the photograph showing the long-case clock, he was aware of a vague unease. In view of the manner of William Lee's death . . . What did that mean? Something slithered within his mind, and for a moment it was as if a soft voice whispered a warning. You'd be much better not to meddle, said this voice. You'd be much better to throw the whole lot on the fire and tell Jack you're too busy to trek into the wilds of Shropshire.

But of course he would go into Shropshire, and of course he would take a look at Charect House. He went downstairs to ask the porter about feeding Wilberforce over the weekend, promising to leave some tins of cat food and an extra pint of milk in his rooms. He would be back on Sunday night, he said. Yes, he would have his mobile phone with him in case

anyone needed him. No, he would not forget to charge it this time.

He drove out of Oxford early on Saturday morning. He would have preferred to travel by train, because even though he had mapped out the route with diligence, he knew perfectly well he would get lost. Several of his students had said he should buy satellite navigation, which was really cool and you absolutely couldn't get lost with it. Michael had promised to consider the idea.

In the event, he did not go out of his way too many times, and he reached Marston Lacy shortly before lunch. The Black Boar appeared to be the traditional oak-beamed inglenook-fireplaced inn. Charles II had hidden here, Elizabeth I had slept here, and Walter Scott had written something here.

'At separate times, of course,' said the manager with the automatic geniality of one who produces this epigrammatic gem for all newcomers.

'Of course.' Michael signed the book, collected the keys which the solicitors had left for him as promised, and deposited his overnight case in a chintz-curtained room on the first floor. Then he went in search of Jack and Liz's house.

'It's along the main street towards the A458,' said the Black Boar's manager. 'Turn left at the end by the old corn market, then left again into Blackberry Lane. It's about a quarter of a mile along. You won't miss it, Dr Flint.'

Blackberry Lane was a winding bouncing lane with bushes and thrusting thorn hedges that pushed against the sides of the car, and whippy branches that painted sappy green smears on the windscreen. A thin rain was starting to fall, making everything look mysterious and remote. Michael began to wonder if he had fallen backwards into somebody's gloomy metaphysical elegy without realizing, and whether he might encounter flitting shades among tombstones, or disconsolate wraiths, wringing their hands. The lane wound round to the left, and quite suddenly the house was there, set a little way back from the track, standing behind a tangle of briar and blackberry. There were no shades or wraiths, but seen through the rain the house was misty and eerie. Michael regarded it for a moment, then got out of the car, turning up his collar against the rain. There was a low brick wall enclosing the

house, and a rusting gate half off its hinges that shrieked like a banshee when he pushed it open. I'm stepping into a house whose name was once a spell against evil, he thought.

Charect House was larger than he had expected. It was a red-brick, four-square building with the tall flat windows of the Regency and crumbling stone pillars on each side of the front door. The brick had long since mellowed into a dark, soft red, and some kind of creeper covered the lower portions. Even with the rain it was possible to see the dereliction. The upper windows had shutters, half falling away, and all the window frames looked rotten. The roofline dipped ominously.

But the locks still worked, and the door swung open easily enough. The scent of age met Michael at once, and it was so strong that for a moment he felt his senses blur. But this was not the musty dankness of damp or rot; this was age at its best and most evocative: a potpourri of old seasoned timbers and long-ago fires, and a lingering scent of dried lavender. A gentler age, when ladies embroidered and wrote letters on hot-pressed notepaper and painted dainty watercolours, to the gentle ticking of a clock . . .

The ticking of a clock. He could hear it quite clearly, which was unexpected because he had thought the house entirely empty of furniture – in fact the auction that included the long-case clock was not until next week. Perhaps there was an old wall clock or a kitchen clock somewhere.

He walked through the rooms, listing them carefully and making notes about them. Three reception rooms on the ground floor – one of which was a beautiful long room with windows overlooking the tanglewood gardens and a deep window seat. There was a dingy fireplace with bookshelves on each side.

At the back was a big stone-floored kitchen. When Michael tried the water in the outer scullery something clanked and shuddered in the depths of the house, then a thin reddish stream came from the tap. He turned the tap off and went back to the front of the house. The clock was still ticking away to itself somewhere. It was rather a friendly sound; people did not have ticking clocks very often these days.

The main hall had the wide, elegant stairway of its era. The stairs went straight up to a big landing, then swung back on themselves in a hairpin bend, a smaller, narrower flight obviously winding up to the second floor. Attic stairs.

It was barely half-past four, but the light was already fading, and Michael thought he would come back tomorrow and see the rest of the place in daylight. He had reached the front door when unmistakably and disconcertingly three loud knocks sounded somewhere inside the house – peremptory, fist-on-wood rapping, startlingly loud. Michael’s heart jumped, and he turned back to the hall, but nothing moved anywhere and the only sound was the ticking clock still faintly tapping out the minutes somewhere. Probably, it had been his imagination, or a bird in the eaves or even old timbers creaking somewhere. Or someone outside? He opened the front door and looked out, but there was only the dismal drip of rain from the leaves, so he came back in and rather apprehensively looked into all the downstairs rooms. Nothing. But as he went into the long drawing-room there was movement in the shadowy garden beyond the windows, then something pallid pressed itself against the glass. Someone’s out there, thought Michael, trying not to panic, but feeling his pulse racing. Someone’s standing in the garden, knocking at the window to come in.

And then he saw that after all it was only the remains of an untidy shrub that had dipped its boughs against the window pane. As he watched, it moved again, claw-like branches brushing the glass with a faint, goblin-claw scratch. That was certainly not the sound he had heard.

He was in the hall when the rapping came again, and this time it was unmistakably overhead. It was coming from the bedrooms.

It was probably perfectly innocent – a window open and banging against the wall, or a trapped animal. No, an animal would bark or yowl. Wilberforce had once been accidentally shut in a cupboard on one of Oriel’s landings, and the entire college had heard his indignant demands to be rescued. And this sound was sharp and echoing and somehow filled with desperation. Michael remembered, and wished he had not, the Rachmaninov suite that began with three sonorous piano chords intended to represent a man buried alive knocking on the underside of his coffin lid to get out. He was so annoyed with himself for remembering this that he started up the stairs before he could change his mind. The stairs creaked ominously, and he expected the knocking to ring out again at any moment. It did

not, but Michael had the strong impression that someone was listening.

As he reached the main landing, the knocking suddenly came again, louder and more frenzied. Did it spell out a plea? Was it saying: *let-me-out* . . . Or was it: *let-me-in* . . . ? On the crest of this thought something moved on the edge of his vision, and Michael looked across to the attic stair.

Fear rose up, clutching at his throat, because there was someone there. Within the clotted shadows was a thickset figure crouched against the banisters.

For several seconds Michael stood motionless, staring at the figure, a dozen possible actions chasing across his mind. There was a confused impression of a pallid face, with the eyes so deep in the shadows that they appeared to be black pits, and of thick fingers curled round the banister rails.

Michael heard himself say, challengingly, 'Who are you? What are you doing here?' and at once the man moved, flinching back into the shadows. There was a scrabbling movement, and the man turned and ran up the narrow stairs to the top floor.

Michael thought he was as brave as most people, but he was damned if he was going to confront an intruder in a deserted attic with nobody in calling distance. He ran back down the stairs, slammed the door and locked it, then dived into his car and reached for his phone to call the police.

By the time a portly constable arrived, the intruder appeared to have got away.

'Very sorry indeed, sir, but it seems he's escaped us.'

'It's impossible,' said Michael as they stood outside the house, staring up at the windows. 'He was on the stairs, and he went up to the top of the house – I saw him go up there. There can't be any way for him to have got out. In any case, I locked the front door when I came out – to keep him in there. And I waited in my car until you got here.'

'You saw for yourself, Dr Flint,' said the policeman. 'We went in every room and every last cupboard.'

'Yes, we did,' said Michael, puzzled.

'And the two other outer doors were locked. The scullery door, and the garden door at the side, as well.'

'There were no keys in any of the locks,' said Michael,

frowning. 'Which means that if he got out that way, he could only have done it by unlocking a door and locking it again behind him.' He looked at the policeman. 'And that's absurd. Unless—'

'Unless what?'

'Unless he's got keys to the house,' said Michael slowly and unwillingly.

'Surely not. Likely, he managed to climb out through a window at the back while you were phoning. It'll have been some tramp looking for a night's doss-house.'

'He didn't look like a tramp,' said Michael, remembering the round, pallid face and the black-pit eyes. 'I think I'd better have the locks changed while I'm here. Is there a locksmith who'd do an emergency job at the weekend?'

'No one in Marston Lacy, sir, but I can give you a couple of numbers a bit further afield.'

Michael wrote down the numbers and drove back to the Black Boar, puzzled and vaguely disturbed.

It was not until he was showering before dinner that he realized there had been something else that was even more disturbing. All the time he was in the house he had heard the ticking of a clock – at times quite loudly, at other times fainter, as if the ticking was coming from behind a closed door.

But he and the policeman had searched Charect House from cellar to attic, and every room had been empty. There had been no clock anywhere.