

# Dolly



A Ghost Story

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# Iyot Lock



On an autumn night and the fens stretch for miles, open and still. It is dark, until the full moon slides from behind a cloud and over the huddle of grey stone which is Iyot Lock. The hamlet straddles a cross roads between flat field and flat field, with its squat church on the east side, hard by Iyot House and the graveyard in between. On the west side, a straggle of cottages leads to Iyot Farm, whose flat fields bleed into the flat fens with no apparent boundary.

It is rare for a night here to be so still. The wind from the sea keens and whistles, though that sea is some miles away. Birds cry their eerie cries.

And then, a slight, thin movement of the air, from inland. It skims over the low dykes and watery

ditches, rattles the dry reeds and rushes, rustles the grasses along the roadside.

It strengthens to a low wind and the wind weaves through the few trees in the churchyard and taps the branches of the creeper against the windows of Iyot House.

Nobody hears, for the house is empty and surely the sleepers in the churchyard are not disturbed.

The grasses whisper, the wind moves among the gravestones. And somewhere just about here, by the low wall, another sound, not like the grass but like paper rustling. But there is no paper.

The creeper scrapes the windowpanes. The moon slips out, silvering the glass.

The wind prowls around Iyot Lock, shifting the branches, stirring the grasses, swaying faintly, and from somewhere nearby, hidden or even buried, the sound of rustling.

## I



It was a November afternoon when I returned to Iyot Lock and saw that nothing had changed. It was as I recalled it from forty years earlier, the sky as vast, the fen as flat, the river as dark and secretly flowing as it had been in my mind and memory. There had sometimes been sunshine, the river had gleamed and glinted, the larks had soared and sung on a June day, but this was how I knew it best, this landscape of dun and steel, with the sky falling in on my head and the wind keening and the ghosts and will-o'-the-wisps haunting my childhood nights.

I drove over Hoggett's bridge, seeing the water flow sluggishly beneath, and across the flat straight road,

past the old lock keeper's cottage, abandoned now, but then the home of the lock keeper with a wen on his nose and one glass eye, who looked after his sluices and his eel traps in sullen silence. I used to steer clear of Mr Norry, of whom I was mortally, superstitiously afraid. But the blackened wood and brick cottage was empty and the roof fallen in. As I went by, a great bird with ragged wings rose out of it and flapped away, low over the water.

I could see far ahead to where the fen met the sky and the tower of Iyot Church, and then the house itself shimmered into view, hazy at first in the veils of rain, then larger, clearer, darker. The only trees for miles were the trees around the churchyard and those close to Iyot House, shading it from sight of the road, though few people, now as ever, were likely to pass by.

I parked beside the church wall and got out. The rain was a fine drizzle lying like cobwebs on my hair and the shoulders of my coat. Mine was the only car, so unless she had parked at the house, I was the first to arrive. That did not surprise me.

I pushed open the heavy greened wood of the gate and walked up the path to the church door. Crumpled chicken wire had been used to cover the

arch and keep out birds, but it had loosened and old twigs and bits of blackened straw poked through where they had still managed to nest. I lifted the iron handle, twisted it and the door creaked open. The cold inside the porch made me catch my breath. Beyond the inner door, inside the church itself, it was more intense still and smelled of damp stone and mould. It seemed to be the cold of centuries and to seep into my bones as I stood there.

I did not remember anything about the church, though I was sure I must have been there on Sundays, with my aunt – I had a folk memory of the hard polished pews against my bony little backside and legs, for I had been a thin child. It was dull and pale, with uninteresting memorial tablets and clear glass windows that let the silvery daylight in onto the grey floor. Even the Lion and Unicorn, the only touch of colour in the church, painted in red and faded gold and blue on a wooden panel, and which might have taken the attention of a small boy, was quite unfamiliar. Perhaps my memories had been of another church altogether.

I wandered about, half expecting to hear the door open and see her standing there, but no one came and my footsteps were solitary on the stone floor.

The lights did not come on when I clicked the switch and the church was dim in the sullen

November afternoon. I made my way out again, but as I stood looking out at the path and the graveyard, I had a strange and quite urgent sense that I ought to do something, that I was needed, that I was the one person who could rescue – rescue what? Who? I could not remember when I had had such an anxious feeling and as I walked out, it became stronger, almost as if someone were tugging at my sleeve and begging me to help them. But there was no one. The churchyard was empty and it felt desolate in the gathering dusk, with the brooding sky overhead, though it was only just after three o'clock.

I shook myself, to be rid of the inexplicable feeling and walked briskly to the car and drove the short distance to the house, the back and chimneys of which were hard to the road. There were the wooden gates, which I remembered well. If I opened them I could swing into the yard and park behind the scullery and outhouses, but the gate was locked and seemingly barred on the inside, so I returned to the lay-by beside the church and set out to walk back along the deserted lane to Iyot House. I glanced down the road but there was no sight of a car, even far away, no moving dot in the distance.

And then, it was as if something were tugging at my sleeve, though I felt nothing. I was being urged to return to the churchyard and I could not disobey,

whatever was asking me to go there needed something – needed me? What did it want me to do and why? Where exactly was I to go?

I turned again, feeling considerably annoyed but unable to resist, and the moment I set off I sensed that this was right, and that who or whatever wanted me there was relieved and pleased with me. We all like to please by doing the thing we are being asked, in spite of our misgivings, and so I retraced my steps briskly the hundred yards to the lych gate. That was not quite far enough. I must go through and into the churchyard. By now the dark was gathering fast and I could barely see my way, but there were still streaks of light in the sky to the west and it was not a large area. I moved slowly among the gravestones. It was almost as if I were playing the old childhood game of Hide and Seek, one in which the inner sense was saying ‘Cold’ ‘Cold’ ‘Warm’ ‘Very Warm’.

It was as I neared three gravestones that were set against the low wall at the back that the sense of urgency became very strong. I went to each one. All were ancient, moss and lichen-covered and the names and dates were no longer visible. Even as I got near to the first I felt a peculiar electric shock of heat, followed immediately by a sense of release. This was it. I was there. But where? Wherever I was meant to be? Then by whom, and why?

I stood still. The wind was keening, the darkness shrinking in to swallow me. I was not exactly afraid but I was uneasy and bewildered. And then I heard it. It seemed to be coming from the ground in front of a gravestone. I squatted down and listened. The moan of the wind was blocked out by the wall there, and it was very still. At first I could not make it out but after a few moments, I thought it sounded as if something was rustling, a dry sound, like that made by the wind in the reed beds, but softer and fainter. It came from under the grass, under the earth. A rustling, as if someone were . . .

No, I could not tell. I stayed for some minutes and the rustling came again and again, and each time it made me feel as one feels when a name one has forgotten is almost, almost on the tip of the tongue. I knew the sound, I knew what was making it, I knew why . . . but it hovered just out of reach, like the elusive name. I knew and then did not know, I remembered – but then it was gone. I waited for a few more minutes. Nothing else happened, I heard nothing else and not least because by this time I was thoroughly chilled. The east wind was whistling across the fen even more strongly and I left the churchyard and returned to Iyot House.

It was in pitch darkness and the wind had got up

even more in that short time and was dashing the trees against the walls and rattling the ivy. Stupidly I had not brought a torch and had to edge my way through the gate and up the narrow path between thickly overgrown shrubs to the front door. I had the key ready and to my surprise the lock was smooth and opened at a turn. I felt about for a switch – there was none in the porch but once inside the hall I found the panel of them to my left. The hall, staircase and narrow passageway were lit, though the bulbs were quite dim. But at once, the past came rushing towards me as I not only saw but smelled the inside of the house where I had once been a small boy on occasional and always strange visits. The pictures on the wall, one of a half-draped woman by a rock pool, another of sheep in the snow, and two portraits whose eyes pierced me and then seemed to follow me, as they always had, reminded me of the past, the feel of the polished floor beneath the rug at my feet, the great brass dinner gong, the once-polished and gleaming banister, now filmed and dull, reminded me, and the silent grandfather clock, the frieze of brown carnations running along the wallpaper, the dark velveteen curtain hanging on a rod across the drawing room door, all these things reminded me . . . As I looked round I was eight years old again and in Iyot House for the first time, anxious, wary,

full of half-fears, jumping at my own shadow as it glided beside me up the stairs.

But I was not afraid of anything there that late afternoon, merely affected by the atmosphere of sadness and emptiness. Iyot House had never been full of light and fun but it was not a gloomy house either and people who had lived there had looked after me as best they knew, and even loved me – though perhaps I had little sense of it as a boy. I had been afraid of shadows and darkness, of sudden sounds, of spiders and bats but I had never believed Iyot House had any ghosts or malign forces hanging about within its walls, at least not until . . .

I stopped with one foot on the stairs . . . until what? It was teasing me again, that sense of something just out of reach, almost remembered but then fluttering off just as I grasped it.

Until something had happened? Or was it to do with *someone*?

It was no good. I could not remember, it had danced away, to tantalise me yet again.

I went round the house, putting on the lights as I did so, and each room came alive at the touch of the switch, bedrooms, dressing rooms, bathrooms, their furniture and curtains and carpets exactly as I had