

504:

Visitors

[Sounds of writing]

Lenore: Keys are fascinating things. Mrs. Perrault keeps a small ring of keys in her apron pocket, for the closets and pantries and things she needs to open in her duties. Talbot has bigger keys, ornate things of iron and brass, that he uses for getting into outbuildings and the outer door to the cellar. I borrowed one from him once when I wanted to gather flowers from the greenhouse. The greenhouse key is old and has a long shank with a sort of Celtic knot at one end. It's made of iron and the wards are patterned like a labyrinth. I marveled at the skill it took to make something so intricate. Putting the key in the keyhole is an act of potential, a conscious creation of anticipation. Once the key has slid into its lock, into the one place made for it and it alone, there is a delicious feeling like a held breath. I can't see the workings inside the door, of course, so the ways the key interacts with the lock itself are always mysterious. Turning a key is like witchcraft, like casting a little spell to reveal secrets otherwise hidden. A kind of magic.

The key I found in Radcliffe's bureau is small and brass, with tiny wards so delicately cast they seem like lace. I can easily fit it in the palm of my hand, curling my fingers until it's invisible. When I dressed this morning I slipped it into the pocket of my dressing gown and said nothing about it to Mrs. Perrault. I feel it there even now, heavier against my hip than such a small thing has a right to be.

I have not used it. I am not sure I am going to. I am of course curious about what lies behind the door, but I also know that Radcliffe would prefer me not to open it, and it would be a betrayal to go there against his wishes. Marriages are built on trust, and to break that trust is to

tear at the very heart of the promises we made to each other. And surely, everyone is entitled to a few secrets?

[Theme music; credits]

[Sounds of writing]

I am writing this mid-morning. I slept in luxuriously late, only waking when I smelled Mrs. Perrault's bacon and coffee wafting up the stairs. I went straight down to breakfast in my dressing gown, scandalizing the poor woman, I'm certain.

I am so looking forward to today! Bella is coming in the afternoon, and I shall have a real live subject for my painting. It is strange, I suppose, how quickly I feel like I've found a close and important friend. Maybe I hadn't realized how much I longed for someone my own age to confide in. Yesterday our conversation ranged from village gossip to what it's like being married. Bella was fascinated by this last topic, asking question after question about Radcliffe and our life together. I felt I had truly found someone I could tell everything to. It's hard to explain exactly what I mean. I felt briefly like we were the same person. That sounds silly now that I see it written down. At any rate, I am very excited to see her this afternoon.

I feel traitorous writing this, but Radcliffe being away feels almost like a holiday. That's not to say that I need a break from Radcliffe—far from it! I miss him each moment he's away. He has given me so much, including the beautiful fountain pen I'm using to write these words. I just mean there is a sense that the rules have slackened, like I'm playing hooky while everyone else is in school. With Radcliffe away, I can be a few minutes late to breakfast and not feel like I've committed a transgression, and I can linger in the garden until after six if I so desire. Mrs.

Perrault will lay dinner whenever I ask her, and if she looks somewhat judgmental, am I not the mistress of the house?

But clock tells me the morning is waning. Mistress of the house or not, I should dress for the day. I must find the perfect dress to impress Bella!

[Sounds of writing]

Briefly, I must write down the terrible thing I've just learned. Just as I was finishing lunch (cucumber sandwiches on the patio), when Talbot announced the Rev. Baring-Gould and I asked for him to be shown into the parlor.

I have spoken of the Rev. Baring-Gould before in these pages, but I don't think I have described him. He is a shortish man, shorter than me, and he generally wears dark clothes under an old-fashioned frock coat. His salt and pepper hair is receding, and he habitually wears a small apologetic smile, as if he is sorry for intruding. He is certainly not the most interesting man I've ever met, but I like him. He seems, I don't know, sincere and very kind. He is a great scholar, I gather, and writes books on natural science.

But the news he brought me today is disturbing in the extreme. After some small talk and village gossip over a cup of Mrs. Perrault's tea, he turned solemn.

"I must confess, Mrs. Thorne," he said, "that I came not for idle chat but to make sure you knew what happened in the village last night."

His tone was so grave that I felt a chill. He had leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees, and I found myself unthinkingly mirroring his posture.

"There were several attacks last night," he said. "Two different farmers on the outskirts of

Gévaudin had livestock killed. Two cows and a pig. They were ripped open and partially devoured by something large and strong.”

“A wolf?” I said, remembering the howl I had heard last night, seemingly in my dream.

“That is the logical assumption. It is not the first time wolves have ravaged the area. But there is something worse.”

He leaned even closer, and his eyes were grim. “A child has gone missing. The young daughter of one of those farmers—she had a habit of visiting the animals in the paddock before going to bed. She did not come in last night when they called her, and they have been frantic searching.”

This was beyond what I had expected. “Do they think the wolf...?” I couldn’t finish the question.

“It would also not be the first time,” he said, sitting back on the settee. “I tell you not to terrify you,” he went on, though he seemed gratified at my expression of horror, “but merely to say be careful. You are isolated up here, and I wouldn’t want you to come to harm.”

“I appreciate that, Rev. Baring-Gould, but we have Talbot, and I do not usually linger outside after dark.” I said this with confidence, but inside I wasn’t so certain. There is no doubt I looked carefully around the front lawn while I stood at the door as he took his leave.

“Thank you for stopping by,” I said, and he bowed slightly and took my hand. And then I realized his story had affected me more than I realized. As he straightened up, a cloud passed over the sun, and I suddenly had an impression—an imagining? Like a waking dream. It suddenly seemed to me that the Reverend was much taller, and clad in shadows, like the figure I had seen in my dream, lurking behind the woman who showed me the key. He was speaking, to tell me goodbye, I supposed, or some other social pleasantry, but all I heard was static, like a

radio straining for reception. Behind him I could see the big oak tree, and hanging from its branches was a child's swing, two ropes with a flat wooden seat. A woman was in the swing, swaying slightly as she gripped the ropes. Her face slipped away when I tried to look directly at her. I had a strong sense of foreboding, and I knew something else was nearby, something viscious rushing towards me through the trees.

And then everything was as it was before. The sun was shining, and we were alone. The reverend was looking up at me curiously, and the oak was standing red and bronze behind him. I told him I was feeling faint, and he suggested I lie down. He took his leave, walking away down the road toward Gévaudin.

The whole thing has upset me greatly. Bella is coming in an hour. I think I *will* lie down for a few minutes.

[Sounds of writing]

Bella came as we had planned, and her light and airy presence dispelled the dark mood the Reverend's visit had plunged me into. She arrived in a rush of lace and floral perfume, wearing the beautiful velvet choker as before. Her first words to me were "Lenore! You must see the dress I've found!" and she showed me a picture of an adorable peacock-patterned frock in a Parisian fashion magazine she had with her. I told her I had something similar in my wardrobe, and we went inside to find clothes for her.

In my bedroom, we laid several dresses across the bed, and Bella stripped down to her shift and held one against her to see the fit. It was perfect.

"These are yours?" she asked. "We must be exactly the same size!"

"I haven't worn them all," I told her. "Radcliffe had a lot of these here waiting for me when I moved in."

“He is a very generous husband,” Bella said. She had slipped the dress on and turned for me to fasten it. It was a dark silk with gold orchids patterned across the bodice, and looked as if it were made for her. “Is he generous...everywhere?” She grinned mischievously and glanced at the bed.

I blushed. I don't know why. I'm not a prude, and normally would find such talk exciting in a scandalous way. But I suddenly felt strangely reluctant to talk about Radcliffe with Bella. I didn't want to think about him. I watched Bella spin in the dress from my wardrobe, and I felt a strange little thrill. I wanted to paint her.

“Let's go outside,” I said.

We grabbed a bottle of wine and two glasses from the kitchen. Bella had brought a package of Gauloises, and as I set up the easel she put two in her mouth, lit both with a match she struck against her thumb, took a drag, and handed one to me. It was ringed with her lipstick and I drew deeply on it. I choked and coughed, and we both laughed.

We drank most of the bottle and smoked half the Gauloises, feeling very Parisian. Eventually I took up my brush and tried to capture her on the canvas while she lay in the grass halfway between the stone patio and the treeline. As always, the ravens watched from the ash trees.

We passed a happy hour, and I felt my painting had begun to resemble something not unlike Bella. She sat up on the grass to pour another glass of bourdeaux, and as she did so she looked over her shoulder at the trees.

“What's back there?” she asked.

The afternoon sun crowned the trees in glory, and the entrance to the path into the woods was sharply outlined with gold.

“Once you get through the trees,” I said, “it leads to the cliffside overlooking the sea.”

“Oh! Is it far? Can we go?” Bella clapped her hands and then reached out for me.

I have not often ventured through the trees to the cliff trail. So many of Mrs. Perrault’s stories start with someone wandering into a forest and straying from the path. Our woods are not large, certainly not large enough to warrant being called a “forest,” but they cover a few acres or so, and are thickly woven with underbrush. The path is the only sure way through. And I have so often heard the sounds of big animals at night in the trees. It’s not that I’m afraid of the woods, exactly. I’ve just stayed closer to home so far.

And of course, I was keenly aware of the story the Rev. Baring-Gould had told me a few hours before. The idea of a wolf (or worse, *wolves*) marauding the countryside was a direct reason not to venture out of sight of the house.

But all these thoughts seemed silly sitting in the sunshine with Bella. Whether it was the wine or her smile, I found I could not tell her no. We left our glasses and cigarettes in the grass, and Bella took my hand and led me into the woods.

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