

THE GHOSTS OF CAMALS COLLEGE

Annette Siketa

A GRACE DARLING MYSTERY

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Annsarann lodge,
15th September, 2010.

Dear Reader,

I really hope you enjoy the book. If you happen to finish it before your friends do, please don't tell them what happens because they will never guess how it ends.

Something strange happened during the writing of this book. Have you ever been alone, especially late at night, and had the feeling someone was standing behind you? Or perhaps you had your nose in a book and thought someone was reading over your shoulder? Well that's exactly what happened to me. Perhaps it was the subject matter, or the long nights pounding the keyboard. Either way, I am absolutely sure that someone, or something, was following my every move.

As if that wasn't bad enough, several other 'odd' things happened as well. My sandwich maker suddenly went on a go slow, the automatic toaster refused to pop-up, and I daren't even tell you what happened to the hair-dryer. During this time, I also bought a new TV, but within days of bringing it home, the people on the screen took on a hazy, almost ghostly shadow. Spooky eh?

I would really like to know if anything 'odd' happens while you're reading this book. ENJOY!

Yours,

Annette Siketa

For Albert and Peter – In loving memory

Chapter 1

The decision

Professor Lution stood in her office and absently gazed out of the window. In her hand, was a cup of her favourite Hackleberry's Roast Hazelnut Coffee, which she sipped slowly, occasionally letting out a short, troubled sigh. Although she shunned the title, Professor Lution was regarded as the greatest woman in the world, at least, the world where she lived...and she had a problem.

There was a balloon-sized cluster of pink bubbles rolling across the window, as though it was washing the glass, which in point of fact, it was. Professor Lution ignored it. Nor did she pay much attention to the weather, which somewhat curiously, kept changing from bright and sunny to dark and overcast every few minutes. Even when everything was suddenly plunged into darkness, Professor Lution showed only the mildest interest.

Professor Lution was short and slender, with expressive brown eyes and a proud, Roman nose. She always wore her iron-grey hair in a bun on the top of her head, and her kind, matronly smile conveyed wisdom and maturity, although her real age was a closely guarded secret. She was dressed in a smart black business suit, a crisp white shirt, and had a pair of silver framed glasses hanging from a chain around her neck. She could easily have passed for a Bank Manager or a Doctor, but Professor Lution was neither of these things. In fact, she had never been inside a modern day bank in her life, and

the last time she'd seen a medical Doctor professionally was...well, more years ago than she cared to remember.

The only 'oddity' about her appearance, was a gold salamander brooch positioned on a lapel. At first glance the tiny creature appeared perfectly ordinary, but when she stroked it with a finger, it blinked its ruby red eyes as though to say, "What did you wake me up for?" and ran up her jacket. Clearly it was not 'normal', but then, neither was Professor Lution.

Professor Lution was the Chancellor of the College of Customs and Myths and Legends, or Camals for short. Camals was located not so much in another time, but in another realm – a place called Zanterus, and was home to a huge variety of ghosts, spirits, and manifestations. Camals also accepted 'mortals' from the age of 12 onwards, however, the selection criteria was to say the least, unusual.

There were two levels of entry, the first being a direct connection to the spirit world, such as being the son or daughter of a Witch Doctor, a Sharman, or a Medicine Man. The second level were those who had demonstrated exceptional boldness, braveness, or compassion. Academic qualifications, or indeed lack of them, played absolutely no part.

The selection process began with the Gatherers. Gatherers were specially trained spirits who, because of their ability to 'blend' into the mortal world, were sent to watch and report on prospective students. The woman who owned the corner shop, a bus driver, an art teacher or sports master, even a neighbour mowing the lawn, any one of them could be a Gatherer.

It was one such report that was causing the problem, for as soon as it was known that Grace Darling was being considered, not only were the halls and corridors rife with excited gossip, but there was considerable sneering and opposition as well. Camals College, or so it seemed, was divided.

Professor Lution looked at the sky again, which was now a dull sombre grey. "Oh dear," she said with a heavy sigh. "Doctor Ambit must be teaching a class. Which reminds me, I must put in an order for balmy weather for the Polynesian feast on Saturday evening. After the last fiasco, I really hope he gets it right this time. Perhaps I

should have a quiet word to him about retirement. At 126 years of age, I'm sure he'd like to rest."

"Talking to yourself?" said a heavily accented voice from behind. Professor Lution turned and smiled benignly at a portrait of the Mona Lisa who, instead of the usual dowdy black dress, was wearing a bright yellow concoction, along with a pair of dangly purple earrings.

The walls of Professor Lution's office were lined with copies of some very famous paintings. However, unlike their mortal counterparts, these pictures could 'change'. Today Van Gogh's vase of 'Sunflowers' was sporting a bunch of pink roses, which also smelt. In addition, the paintings were haunted by the people portrayed, and although a figure could move inside its frame, only its spirit was free to come and go as it pleased, which made them very handy for running errands.

"It's the first sign of madness you know," said Mona, smiling broadly.

"Quite right Madam," said the portrait of Sir Isaac Newton in a breathless voice, his static painted figure having just sprung to life.

"Ah so you're back Sir Isaac, any problems?" asked Professor Lution politely, although given his flushed face and sweating brow, she thought she already knew the answer. Obviously the little 'clean up' job she'd sent him on, had not gone well.

"My dear lady," said Sir Isaac, mopping his face with a lace handkerchief. "Anyone who has the misfortune to encounter that scoundrel Edmund Hawkins, will always have a problem. Never during my 30 years service at the Royal Mint, had I ever witnessed such shameful behaviour. He is a disgrace to us spirits and should be sent packing." The figures in the other paintings pretended they hadn't heard, but it was obvious from their jerky movements or a slight turning of a head, that they were listening to the brilliant scientist keenly.

"Oh dear," said Professor Lution, stifling a chuckle. "What else did he do?" Before answering, Sir Isaac poured a glass of claret from a decanter painted into the picture, and raised it in salute.

“Your health Madam,” he said drinking deeply. “I was successful in correcting the date on the newly minted coins. Fancy changing the date from 2011 to 1002, such childish behaviour. No, the problem occurred when I attempted to disgorge him from the stamping machine. He slipped out of the back and floated into a tearoom.”

“A what?” screeched the portrait of Whistler’s Mother. “Speak up man, can’t hear you.”

“Use your ear trumpet mother,” said Professor Lution raising her voice.

“What for? I’m not deaf. It’s him, he talks too low.”

Professor Lution let out a small exasperated sigh. “A tearoom mother,” she patiently explained, “is a common refreshment area. Please continue Sir Isaac.”

“Well I was in the process of extracting him from a tea urn when a female employee entered. The unconscionable devil deliberately made himself visible, pulled his head off...and rolled it across the floor like a bowling ball. Regrettably, the woman saw everything and collapsed in terror.”

Every painting rang with laughter. Even Professor Lution, who always maintained a respectful dignity, shook with mirth, and it was a moment or two before she regained her composure. Nevertheless, her voice still held a note of bemusement when she next spoke.

“You shouldn’t blame poor Edmund too much. After all, he was falsely accused of stealing from the Mint and executed in 1888. Where is he now?”

Sir Isaac hesitated then said in a dignified voice, “In the mayhem that followed he...departed.”

“He lost him!” cried Whistler’s Mother from her rocking chair, which tilted dangerously as she howled with laughter. “Some genius you are.”

“That’s enough everyone,” said Professor Lution firmly. “It was not Sir Isaac’s fault. Edmund is, to use a mortal expression, a slippery customer, and I’ve no doubt he’ll soon re-emerge.”

“That Madam,” said Sir Isaac stiffly, “is not a prospect I shall anticipate with any joy. If you would excuse me, I wish to bathe and change.” He bowed and exited the portrait, the original painted figure snapping back into position. Professor Lution smiled then noticed that the pink bubbles, which were now decidedly gray, were bobbing wildly in order to get her attention.

“Ah yes, sparkling as usual,” she praised while seating herself behind a large oak desk. The bubbles broke apart and reformed in the shape of a tick, their vocabulary being very limited, and then POPPED out of sight.

Professor Lution finished her coffee then switched on a desk lamp, instantly illuminating a magnificent crystal bell. About the size of a milk bottle, the bell had strange symbols and markings etched into the glass, and although it was completely inert, the refracted light cast slowly revolving splotches of colour on the walls. The desk lamp also shone down on an unusual royal blue carpet. Patterned with planets, moons, and constellations, every image was either moving, revolving, or twinkling. There was a low humming noise in a corner. A large globe as big as a beach ball, slowly rotated in a carved wooden stand, and as it turned, tiny pinpricks of coloured light appeared for a few seconds then went out. Professor Lution read the Gatherers report one more time, sighed heavily, then touched a symbol on the bell.

A short squat gnome dressed in an emerald green jacket and red and gold striped trousers, instantly materialised in the room. Due to his long pointed ears, a ‘pork-pie’ hat sat rather high on his knobby head, and his thick snowy white beard, even though it was tied in several knots, almost swept the ground. His nose was the size and shape of a ping-pong ball, and his black, almond-shaped eyes, held a sly, suspicious look.

“Bryan,” said Professor Lution with a touch of impatience. “How many times have I told you, in civilised societies we use the doors.”

“Tell that to all the arrogant ghosts around here,” he said grumpily. “That Quaker fellow, Amos what’s-his-name, walked right through my cave the other day, came out of one wall and went straight through the other, nearly gave me a heart attack he did.”

To emphasise his point, Bryan twisted his face into a pained expression and dramatically clutched his chest. As he pretended to stagger towards the desk however, his ‘pork-pie’ hat dropped by a fraction. To anyone who had studied Gnomish society, and Professor Lution was an expert on the subject, this was a danger signal.

There were two types of gnomes in Zanterus, domesticated and native, or as the gnomes insultingly referred to each other, Picklebutts and Grimesters. Native gnomes lived in pleasant underground villages with quaint names such as Martins Muckpuss, Strawberry Muckhill, and Hamlin-In-The-Muckhole. Access was gained by the simple expediency of walking through a tree. However, as the trees in question were buried amongst millions of others deep within the vast Zanterus forest, the villages were not easy to find. Native gnomes had their own laws, their own television network, the current favourite being Skimp Implee, host of the popular programme ‘Wheel of Misfortune’, and considered the picking of their long curled toenails after dinner, the height of good manners.

Domesticated gnomes were those who had chosen to live, and abide by the laws, above ground. Native gnomes considered them outcasts and traitors, although they could re-join their underground brethren, but only on payment of the ultimate sacrifice – the removal of their beard. With a handful of exceptions, those gnomes who worked at Camals, and there were quite a few of them, had converted their rooms into a vague representation of their home village, by adding several tons of soil. As the saying went, ‘You can take the gnome out of the muck, but you can’t take the muck out of the gnome’.

Whether Domesticated or Native, gnomes were renowned for their mystical powers, their cunning and/or wisdom... and their tantrums. It was said that The Great Gnome Rebellion of 1666, was sparked by an argument over a slice of toast. It was well known that gnomes’ ears ‘drooped’ prior to a tantrum, and although Bryan's were obscured by his hat, Professor Lution had seen it drop, and quickly steered his attention in another direction.

“What an excellent impression Bryan. Have you ever considered joining the ZADS?”

Bryan almost choked. “The ZADS?” he repeated scornfully. “The Zanterus Amateur Dramatic Society? What would I want with a bunch of namby-pamby actors?”

“The ZADS is comprised of some of the greatest actors, actresses, and playwrights that ever lived, and judging from the little performance you just gave, you would fit right in. As for Amos, I’ll have a word with him if his sudden appearances distresses you so, but don’t try and hoodwink me by twisting the subject. As you well know, passing through objects is not the same as arching. I’ve spoken to you about this before.”

“But what’s the point of running up and down stairs and opening and closing doors when I can simply arch?” he said in a rush, his pork-pie hat ominously twitching.

“Arching is only to be used in emergencies or when it’s warranted, and receiving a general summons to my office is not one of them. Please don’t do it again.” As Bryan removed his hat and swept her a low bow, Professor Lution saw that his ears were almost flat. He rammed his hat back on his head and waited – he was not best pleased, but no tantrum. Professor Lution inwardly sighed before continuing, “Please ask Abacus Miller and King Arthur to come to my office. Mr Miller will probably be in his laboratory in the dungeon, and King Arthur will be in the Department of Parties. Oh what am I saying? I keep forgetting that since Doctor Inoot arrived and modernised certain areas, it’s now called The Faculty of Ceremonial Observances. Anyway, the King will be on the fourth floor with the ZADS. Apparently Shakespeare has written a play.”

“Oh not another one,” said Bryan groaning. “What is it this time?”

Professor Lution gave a slight embarrassed cough. “I believe it’s called...Justin and Tracy. It’s supposed to be some retro, modern day take on Troilus and Cressida.” Bryan’s hat was now so low, it almost covered his eyes. A first-class tantrum was pending. Fortunately, Professor Lution knew exactly how to diffuse it. “In fact Bryan, perhaps you could ask Miss Shorestump about joining the ZADS while you’re there, and Bryan, don’t...” SLAM “...slam the door on your way out.”

Abacus Miller was the first to arrive. He was the deputy head of Alchemy, and had been teaching at Camals for two years. He was a short, pale faced man running to fat. A childhood injury had set his top lip in a permanent curl, consequently, nobody quite knew whether he was snarling or smiling. His greasy thinning hair was always styled in a ridiculous comb-over, and nobody had ever seen him dressed in anything other than a pale blue Safari suit. By contrast, King Arthur arrived impeccably groomed as usual. He was wearing a sparkling gold crown and a green velvet tunic, and his thick white hair was so stiff and perfectly curled, it could have been a wig.

“Gentlemen,” said Professor Lution sounding business-like. “Thank you for coming at such short notice.”

King Arthur stood up, and placing a hand over his heart, said in a dramatically deep voice, “Fair Lady, thou only hast to whisper on the wind and with all haste, I shall heed the call.”

“Oh sit down Arthur,” said Abacus Miller testily. “Leave that kind of ridiculous play acting for the ZADS.” Professor Lution, who’d rather enjoyed the flowery piece of flattery, shot him a reproachful glance.

Even after two years of service, Professor Lution was still unsure of Abacus Miller. Apart from a few rumblings and grumbings, his record was impeccable, yet there was something creepy, almost sinister about him. He rarely mixed socially, and when he wasn’t teaching, he was locked in his laboratory deep within the bowels of Camals. He had requested ‘a quiet place to work’ when he’d first arrived, explaining that, as many of his experiments were highly sensitive, he did not want to be disturbed. To the best of Professor Lution’s knowledge, nobody had ever set foot inside.

“If I could come to the point gentlemen,” said Professor Lution, and pointed to the file on her desk. “This is a Gatherers report. It concerns a young girl who, by virtue of birthright, is eligible to attend Camals, even though at present she is unaware of our existence. She is articulate, possesses an extremely vivid imagination, and in general, is kind and considerate.”

“Sounds like a perfect candidate,” said King Arthur evenly, then added hopefully, “I don’t suppose she can act as well? We could

do with some fresh young talent in the ZADS.” Professor Lution held up a hand, this was not the time to be discussing recreational activities.

“Her name is...Grace Darling,” she announced, her eyes never leaving Abacus Miller. The alchemy teacher’s only reaction was to raise his deformed top lip a fraction. King Arthur on the other hand, roared with laughter. He stamped a heavy boot on the carpet, narrowly missing the planet Pluto, which promptly ducked out of the way.

“So,” said the King between guffaws. George Darling’s little girl, the granddaughter of Digby Darling, is coming to Camals. Goodness me, wait till that gets out.”

“I believe there are rumours already circulating to that effect,” said Professor Lution, then looked at Abacus Miller inquiringly. “And your opinion?” she asked.

“You hardly need to ask,” he said tonelessly. “Even by Camals standards, Digby Darling is an eccentric old fool with peculiar ideas. If the girl is of similar mind, she may well encourage dissent. There are already those who have naively raised Digby Darling to hero status, and the presence of his granddaughter would only increase this stupidity.”

“I say, that’s a bit harsh,” said Sir Isaac Newton from his painting. He had changed into a purple frock coat and a flowery pink cravat, and was puffing on a long-stemmed clay pipe. “I have always found Digby Darling a most affable fellow. Granted some of his ideas do seem radical, but then so did mine when I was alive.”

“Thank you Sir Isaac,” said Professor Lution quietly. “Well gentlemen, it seems we are divided on the issue. Fundamentally speaking the question is this, there have been Darlings at Camals for centuries, so are we to end this tradition simply on the basis of something Grace ‘might’ do?”

“I say yes,” said Abacus Miller resolutely. Someone in a painting muttered, “What a surprise,” but Miller ignored it. “If there’s even the slightest chance she’ll cause disruption and promote dissent, she should not be admitted.”

“It would certainly liven things up though,” said King Arthur brightly. “Quite frankly, if I’m forced to act in one more

Shakespearean play, I think I'll take a holiday. I've always had a hankering to seek out the Loch Ness Monster."

There was an awkward silence then Professor Lution said, "Actually Arthur, I think I can provide you with a better excuse. I agree with Mr Miller's point of view, although perhaps not as passionately. Conversely, I am not prepared to wipe out centuries of tradition on the possibility of a 'maybe', so I propose conducting..."

"...A test!" King Arthur positively beamed in approval. He jumped to his feet and eagerly paced the carpet. The planets and stars directly in his path instantly dodged out of the way. "Why my dear lady that's an excellent idea. We haven't conducted a test in decades and...oh the possibilities. Every ZAD member will want to participate, and of course we'll need the scenario so we can develop the script, and then there's the costumes and make-up." The medieval monarch could hardly contain his excitement as he asked, "When can we start?"

If she were honest, Professor Lution was secretly relieved by King Arthur's reaction. Although sometimes considered a doddering old fool – well at over half a century old who wouldn't be? – He was a popular figure in Zanterus, and his enthusiasm would help quell the divided atmosphere, at least for the time being. After that, who knew?

As he stood up to leave, Abacus Miller narrowly missed colliding with the exuberant King Arthur, who was still merrily chatting away. He had his own work to do, and it certainly did not involve any play-acting. No, he was playing for much higher stakes, and he would not allow years of planning and scheming to be thwarted by a silly schoolgirl, especially the granddaughter of Digby Darling.

"If you would excuse me," he said stiffly, and without waiting for a response, slipped out of the room. "Grace Darling attend Camals?" he muttered angrily as he hurried to his laboratory. "Over my dead body."