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The Small Hand

A Ghost Story

Written by Susan Hill

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The Small Hand



A Ghost Story

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One

It was a little before nine o'clock, the sun was setting into a bank of smoky violet cloud and I had lost my way. I reversed the car in a gateway and drove back half a mile to the fingerpost.

I had spent the past twenty-four hours with a client near the coast and was returning to London, but it had clearly been foolish to leave the main route and head across country.

The road had cut through the Downs, pale mounds on either side, and then run into a straight, tree-lined stretch to the crossroads. The fingerpost markings were faded and there were no recent signs. So that when the right turning came I almost shot past it, for there was no sign at all here, just a lane

and high banks in which the roots of trees were set deep as ancient teeth. But I thought that this would eventually lead me back to the A road.

The lane narrowed. The sun was behind me, flaring into the rear-view mirror. Then came a sharp bend, the lane turned into a single track and the view ahead was dark beneath overhanging branches.

I slowed. This could not possibly be a way.

Was there a house? Could I find someone to put me on the right road?

I got out. Opposite me was an old sign, almost greened over. THE WHITE HOUSE. Below, someone had tacked up a piece of board. It hung loose but I could just make out the words GARDEN CLOSED in roughly painted lettering.

Well, a house was a house. There would be people. I drove slowly on down the track. The banks were even steeper, the tree trunks vast and elephantine.

Then, at the end of the lane I came out of the trees and into a wide clearing and saw that it was still light after all, the sky a pale enamelled silver-blue. There was no through road. Ahead were a wooden gate and a high hedge wound about with briars and brambles.

All I could hear were birds settling down, a thrush singing high up on the branches of a walnut tree and

blackbirds pinking as they scurried in the undergrowth. I got out of the car and, as I stood there, the birdsong gradually subsided and then there was an extraordinary hush, a strange quietness into which I felt I had broken as some unwelcome intruder.

I ought to have turned back then. I ought to have retraced my way to the fingerpost and tried again to find the main road. But I did not. I was drawn on, through the gate between the overgrown bushes.

I walked cautiously and for some reason tried not to make a noise as I pushed aside low branches and strands of bramble. The gate was stuck halfway, dropped on its hinges, so that I could not push it open further and had to ease myself through the gap.

More undergrowth, rhododendron bushes, briar hedge growing through beech. The path was mossed over and grassy but I felt stones here and there beneath my feet.

After a hundred yards or so I came to a dilapidated hut which looked like the remains of an old ticket booth. The shutter was down. The roof had rotted. A rabbit, its scut bright white in the dimness of the bushes, scabbled out of sight.

I went on. The path broadened out and swung to the right. And there was the house.

It was a solid Edwardian house, long and with a

wide verandah. A flight of shallow steps led up to the front door. I was standing on what must once have been a large and well-kept forecourt – there were still some patches of gravel between the weeds and grass. To the right of the house was an archway, half obscured by rose briars, in which was set a wrought-iron gate. I glanced round. The car ticked slightly as the engine cooled.

I should have gone back then. I needed to be in London and I had already lost my way. Clearly the house was deserted and possibly derelict. I would not find anyone here to give me directions.

I went up to the gate in the arch and peered through. I could see nothing but a jungle of more shrubs and bushes, overarching trees, and the line of another path disappearing away into the darkening greenery.

I touched the cold iron latch. It lifted. I pushed. The gate was stuck fast. I put my shoulder to it and it gave a little and rust flaked away at the hinges. I pushed harder and slowly the gate moved, scraping on the ground, opening, opening. I stepped through it and I was inside. Inside a large, overgrown, empty, abandoned garden. To one side, steps led to a terrace and the house.

It was a place which had been left to the air and

the weather, the wind, the sun, the rabbits and the birds, left to fall gently, sadly into decay, for stones to crack and paths to be obscured and then to disappear, for windowpanes to let in the rain and birds to nest in the roof. Gradually, it would sink in on itself and then into the earth. How old was this house? A hundred years? In another hundred there would be nothing left of it.

I turned. I could barely see ahead now. Whatever the garden, now ‘closed’, had been, nature had taken it back, covered it with blankets of ivy and trailing strands of creeper, thickened it over with weed, sucked the light and the air out of it so that only the toughest plants could grow and in growing invade and occupy.

I should go back.

But I wanted to know more. I wanted to see more. I wanted for some reason I did not understand to come here in the full light of day, to see everything, uncover what was concealed, reveal what had been hidden. Find out why.

I might not have returned. Most probably, by the time I had made my way back to the main road, as of course I would, and reached London and my comfortable flat, the White House and what I had found there in the dusk of that late evening would have

receded to the back of my mind and before long been quite forgotten. Even if I had come this way I might well never have found it again.

And then, as I stood in the gathering stillness and soft spring dusk, something happened. I do not much care whether or not I am believed. That does not matter. I know. That is all. I know, as surely as I know that yesterday morning it rained onto the windowsill of my bedroom after I had left a window slightly open. I know as well as I know that I had a root canal filling in a tooth last Thursday and felt great pain from it when I woke in the night. I know that it happened as well as I know that I had black coffee at breakfast.

I know because if I close my eyes now I feel it happening again, the memory of it is vivid and it is a physical memory. My body feels it, this is not only something in my mind.

I stood in the dim, green-lit clearing and above my head a silver paring of moon cradled the evening star. The birds had fallen silent. There was not the slightest stirring of the air.

And as I stood I felt a small hand creep into my right one, as if a child had come up beside me in the dimness and taken hold of it. It felt cool and its fingers curled themselves trustingly into my palm

and rested there, and the small thumb and forefinger tucked my own thumb between them. As a reflex, I bent it over and we stood for a time which was out of time, my own man's hand and the very small hand held as closely together as the hand of a father and his child. But I am not a father and the small child was invisible.

Two

It was after midnight when I got back to London and I was tired, but because what had happened to me was still so clear I did not go to bed until I had got out a couple of maps and tried to trace the road I had taken in error and the lane leading to the deserted house and garden. But nothing was obvious and my maps were not detailed enough. I needed several large-scale Ordnance Survey ones to have any hope of pinpointing an individual house.

I woke just before dawn and as I surfaced from a dreamless sleep I remembered the sensation of the small hand taking hold of my own. But it was a memory. The hand was not there as it had been there, I was now quite sure, in the dusk of that

strange garden. There was all the difference in the world, as there was each time I dreamed of it, which I did often during the course of the next few weeks.

I am a dealer in antiquarian books and manuscripts. In the main I look for individual volumes on behalf of clients, at auction and in private sales as well as from other bookmen, though from time to time I also buy speculatively, usually with someone in mind. I do not have shop premises, I work from home. I rarely keep items for very long and I do not have a large store of books for sale at any one time because I deal at the upper end of the market, in volumes worth many thousands of pounds. I do collect books, much more modestly and in a disorganised sort of way, for my own interest and pleasure. My Chelsea flat is filled with them. My resolution every New Year is to halve the number of books I have and every year I fail to keep it. For every dozen I sell or give away, I buy twenty more.

The week after finding the White House saw me in New York and Los Angeles. I then went on trips to Berlin, Toronto and back to New York. I had several important commissions and I was completely absorbed in my undertakings. Yet always, even in the midst of a crowded auction room, or when with a client, on a plane or in a foreign hotel, always and

however full my mind was of the job I was engaged upon, I seemed to have some small part of myself in which the memory of the small hand was fresh and immediate. It was almost like a room into which I could go for a moment or two during the day. I was not in the least alarmed or troubled by this. On the contrary, I found it oddly comforting.

I knew that when my present period of travel and activity was over I would return to it and try both to understand what had happened to me and if possible to return to that place to explore and to discover more about it – who had lived there, why it was empty. And whether, if I returned and stood there quietly, the small hand would seek mine again.

I had one disconcerting moment in an airport while buying a newspaper. It was extremely busy and as I queued, first of all someone pushed past me in a rush and almost sent me flying and then, as I was still recovering myself, I felt a child's hand take my own. But when I glanced down I saw that it was the real hand belonging to a real small boy who had clutched me in panic, having also been almost felled by the same precipitate traveller. Within a few seconds he had pulled away from me and was reunited with his mother. The feeling of his hand had been in a way just the same as that of the other child,

but it had also been quite different – hot rather than cool, sticky rather than silky. I could not remember when a real child had last taken my hand but it must have been years before. Yet I could distinguish quite clearly between them.

It was mid-June before I had a break from travelling. I had had a profitable few weeks and among other things I had secured two rare Kelmscott Press books for my client in Sussex, together with immaculate signed first editions of all Virginia Woolf's novels, near-mint in their dust wrappers. I was excited to have them and anxious to get them out of my hands and into his. I am well insured, but no amount of money can compensate for the loss or damage of items like these.

So I arranged to drive down with them.

At the back of my mind was the idea that I would leave time to go in search of the White House again.

Three

Was there ever a June as glorious as that one? I had missed too much of the late spring but now we were in the heady days of balmy air and the first flush of roses. They were haymaking as I drove down and when I arrived at my client's house, the garden was lush and tumbling, the beds high and thick with flowers in full bloom, all was bees and honeysuckle and the smell of freshly mown grass.

I had been invited to stay the night and we dined on a terrace from which there was a distant view of the sea. Sir Edgar Merriman was elderly, modest of manner and incalculably rich. His tastes were for books and early scientific instruments and he also

had a collection of rare musical boxes which, when wound and set going, charmed the evening air with their sound.

We lingered outside and Sir Edgar's blue-grey coils of cigar smoke wreathed upwards, keeping the insects at bay, the pungent smell mingling with that of the lilies and stocks in the nearby beds. His wife, Alice, sat with us, a small, grey-haired woman with a sweet voice and a shyness which I found most appealing.

At one point the servant came to call Sir Edgar to the telephone and as she and I sat companionably in the soft darkness, the moths pattering around the lamp, I thought to ask her about the White House. Did she know of it? Could she direct me to it again?

She shook her head. 'I haven't heard of such a place. How far were you from here?'

'It's hard to tell ... I was hopelessly lost. I suppose I'd driven for forty-five minutes or so? Perhaps a bit longer. I took a byroad which I thought I knew but did not.'

'There are so many unsigned roads in the country. We all know our way about so well, but they are a pitfall for the unwary. I don't think I can help you. Why do you want to go back there, Mr Snow?'

I had known them both for some four or five years

and stayed here overnight once or twice before, but to me they were always Sir Edgar and Lady Meriman and I was always Mr Snow, never Adam. I rather liked that.

I hesitated. What could I have said? That a deserted and half-derelict house and overgrown garden had some attraction for me, had almost put me under a spell so that I wanted to explore them further? That I was drawn back because ... how could I have told her about the small hand?

‘Oh – you know how some old places have a strange attractiveness. And I might want to retire to the country some day.’

She said nothing and, after a moment, her husband returned and the conversation turned back to books and to what he had a mind to buy next. He had wide-ranging tastes and came up with some unusual suggestions. I was always challenged by him, always kept on my toes. He was an exciting client because I could never second-guess him.

‘Do you know,’ he asked now, passing me the decanter, ‘if another First Folio of Shakespeare is ever likely to come up for sale?’

I almost knocked over my glass.



IT WAS HALF an hour later but the air was still warm as we gathered ourselves to go inside. I was fired with enthusiasm at the same time as I was coolly certain that no First Folio was likely to come my way for Sir Edgar. But even the speculative talk about it had made me think of his wealth in quite new terms.

As I was bidding him goodnight, Lady Merriman said suddenly, 'I think I have it, Mr Snow. I think I have the answer. Do just give me a moment if you would.' She went out of the room and I heard her footsteps going up the stairs and away into the depths of the house.

I sat in a low chair beside the open French windows. The lamp was out and a faint whiff of oil came from it. The sky was thick with stars.

And I asked in a low voice, 'Who *are* you?' For I had a strange sense of someone being there with me. But of course there was no one. I was alone and it was peaceful and calm.

Eventually, she returned carrying something.

'I am so sorry, Mr Snow. What we are looking for has always just been moved somewhere else. But this may possibly help you. It came to me as we were sitting there after dinner – the house. The name you gave, the White House, did not register with me because it was always known as Denny's House,

to everyone locally – it is about twenty miles from here, but in the country that is local, you know.’

She sat down.

‘You really shouldn’t have gone to any trouble. It was a passing whim. I don’t quite know now why it affected me.’

‘There is an article about it in this magazine. It’s rather old. We do keep far too much and I have quite a run of these. The house became known as Denny’s House because it belonged to Denny Parsons. Have you heard the name?’

I shook my head.

‘How quickly things fall away,’ she said. ‘You’ll find everything about Denny Parsons and the garden in here.’ She handed me a *Country Life* of some forty years ago. ‘Something happened there but it was all hushed up. I don’t know any more, I’m afraid. Now, do stay down for as long as you like, Mr Snow, but if you will excuse me, I am away to my bed.’

I went out on to the terrace for a last few moments. Everything had settled for the night, the stars were brilliant, and I thought I could just hear the faint hush of the sea as it folded itself over on the shingle.



IN MY ROOM I sat beside my open window with the sweet smell of the garden drifting in and read what Lady Merriman had found for me.

The article was about a remarkable and ‘important’ garden created at the White House by Mrs Denisa – apparently always known as Denny – Parsons and contained photographs of its creator strolling across lawns and pointing out this or that shrub, looking up into trees. There was also one of those dewy black-and-white portrait photographs popular in such magazines then, of Mrs Parsons in twinset and pearls, and holding a few delphiniums, rather awkwardly, as if uncertain whether or not to put them down. The soft focus made her look powdery and slightly vacant, but I could see through it to a handsome woman with strong features.

The story seemed straightforward. She had been widowed suddenly when her two children were nine and eleven years old and had decided to move from the Surrey suburbs into the country. When she had found the White House it had been empty and with an overgrown wilderness round it, out of which she had gradually made what was said in the reverential article to be ‘one of the great gardens of our time’.

Then came extensive descriptions of borders

and walks and avenues, theatre gardens and knot gardens, of fountains and waterfalls and woodland gardens set beside cascading streams, with lists of flowers and shrubs, planting plans and diagrams and three pages of photographs. It certainly looked very splendid, but I am no gardener and was no judge of the relative ‘importance’ of Mrs Parsons’s garden.

The place had become well known. People visited not only from miles away but from other countries. At the time the article was written it was ‘open daily from Wednesday to Sunday for an entrance fee of one shilling and sixpence’.

The prose gushed on and I skimmed some of the more horticultural paragraphs. But I wanted to know more. I wanted to know what had happened next. Mrs Parsons had found a semi-derelict house in the middle of a jungle. The house in the photographs was handsome and in good order, with well-raked gravel and mown grass, fresh paint, open windows, at one of which a pale upstairs curtain blew out prettily on the breeze.

But the wheel had come full circle. When I had found the house and garden they were once again abandoned and decaying. That had happened to many a country house in the years immediately after the war but it was uncommon now.

I was not interested in the delights of herbaceous border and pleached lime. The house was handsome in the photographs, but I had seen it empty and half given over to wind and rain and the birds and was drawn by it as I would never have been by somewhere sunny and well presented.

I set the magazine down on the table. Things change after all, I thought, time does its work, houses are abandoned and sometimes nature reclaims what we have tried to make our own. The White House and garden had had their resurrection and a brief hour in the sun but their bright day was done now.

Yet as I switched out the lamp and lay listening to the soft soughing of the sea, I knew that I would have to go back. I had to find out more. I was not much interested in the garden and house. I wanted to know about the woman who had found it and rescued it yet apparently let it all slip through her fingers again. But most of all, of course, I wanted to go back because of the small hand.

Had Denny Parsons stood there in the gathering dusk, looking at the empty house, surrounded by that green wilderness, and as she made her plans for it felt the invisible small hand creep into her own?