

Victoria Holt

The House of a Thousand Lanterns



THE HOUSE OF A THOUSAND LANTERNS

By Victoria Holt

THE HOUSE OF A THOUSAND LANTERNS

THE CURSE OF THE KINGS

ON THE NIGHT OF THE SEVENTH MOON

THE SHADOW OF THE LYNX

THE SECRET WOMAN

THE SHIVERING SANDS

THE QUEEN'S CONFESSION

THE KING OF THE CASTLE

MENFREYA IN THE MORNING

THE LEGEND OF THE SEVENTH VIRGIN

BRIDE OF PENDORRIC

KIRKLAND REBELS

MISTRESS OF MELLYN

VICTORIA HOLT

The
House of a Thousand
Lanterns

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ROLAND'S CROFT

I

When I first heard of The House of a Thousand Lanterns I felt an immediate curiosity to know more of a place with such a name. There was a magical, mystical quality about it. Why was it so called? Could there be a thousand lanterns in one house? Who put them there? And what significance had they? The name seemed to belong to a fantasy from something like the Arabian Nights. Little did I realize then that I, Jane Lindsay, would one day be caught up in the mystery, danger, and intrigue which was centered in that house with the haunting name.

My involvement really began years before I saw the house, and I had had my share of heartbreak and adventure even then.

I was fifteen years old at the time my mother became housekeeper to that strange man Sylvester Milner who was to have such an influence on my life and but for whom I should never have heard of The House of a Thousand Lanterns. I have often thought that if my father had lived we should have gone on in a more or less conventional manner. I should have led the life of a well-bred though rather impecunious young lady and would most likely have married and lived happily, if less excitingly, ever after.

But the marriage of my parents was in its way unconventional, though the circumstances were not unusual. Father was the son of a landowner in the North; the family was wealthy and had occupied the ancestral home, Lindsay Manor, for about three centuries. The tradition was that

the eldest son became squire, the second went into the Army, and the third into the Church. Father was destined for the Army and when he rebelled against the career chosen for him he fell into disfavor and after his marriage he was completely estranged.

He was an enthusiastic mountaineer and it was when he was climbing in the Peak district that he met my mother. She was the innkeeper's daughter, pretty and vivacious; he fell in love with and married her almost immediately in spite of the disapproval of his family, who had other plans for him concerning the daughter of a neighboring landowner. So incensed were they that they cast him off and all he had was an annuity of two hundred pounds a year.

My father was a delightful man, charming, and interested in any form of art; he knew something about almost everything in this field. The one thing he was not particularly good at was earning a living, and as he had been reared in the utmost comfort he was never really able to adjust himself to circumstances other than those in which he had been accustomed. He painted in a manner which could be called "quite well" but, as everyone knows, to paint quite well very often means not quite well enough. He sold the occasional picture and during the climbing season worked as guide. My earliest memories are of seeing him set off with a party, armed with crampons and ropes, his eyes alight with excitement, because this was what he wanted to do more than anything.

He was a dreamer and an idealist. My mother used to say to me: "It's a mercy you and I, Jane, have our feet firmly planted on the ground, and if our heads are often in these Derbyshire mists they're never in the clouds."

But we loved him dearly and he loved us and he used to say we were the perfect trio. As I was their only child they contrived to give me the best possible education. To my father it seemed natural that I should go to the school which the female members of his family had always attended; as for my mother she believed that my father's daughter must have only the best, and so from the age of ten I was sent away to Cluntons', that very genteel school for the daughters of the landed gentry. I was a Lindsay of Lindsay Manor and although I had never seen the place, and was in fact banished from that holy ground, I still belonged to it.

Financially uncertain but secure in our love for each other and having Father's annuity and his sporadic earnings to help us, we struggled gaily on until that tragic January day. I was home for the Christmas holidays.

The weather was bleak that year. Never had I seen the Derbyshire mountains so menacing. The sky was a leaden grey, the wind icy and

some five hours after my Father and his party set off, the blizzard began. I never see snow without recalling that terrible time. I still hate that strange white light which permeates the atmosphere, I hate the silent snowflakes falling thick and fast. We were shut in a weird white world and somewhere up the mountain was my father.

"He's an experienced climber," said my mother. "He'll be all right."

She busied herself in the kitchen baking bread in the enormous oven beside the fire. I always connect the smell of freshly baked bread with the tragedy of those dreadful hours of waiting, listening to the grandfather clock ticking away the minutes, waiting . . . waiting for news.

When the blizzard subsided the snow lay in drifts in the lanes and on the mountains. The searchers went out; but it was a whole week before they found them.

We knew though before that. I remember sitting there in the kitchen, the warmest place in the house, with my mother while she talked of their meeting and how he had bravely defied his family and given up everything for her. "He was the sort who would never give in," she kept saying. "In a minute he'll be back. He'll be laughing at us for being afraid."

But if he could defy his family he was no match for the elements. The day they brought his body home was the saddest of our lives. We buried him with four members of his party. There were but two survivors to tell the tale of endurance and suffering. It was a common enough tale. It had happened many times before.

"Why do men have to climb mountains?" I demanded angrily. "Why do they have to face dangers for no reason?"

"They climb because they must," said my mother sadly.

I went back to school. I wondered how long I should be there, for without Father's annuity we were very poor indeed. With her accustomed optimism my mother believed that the Lindsays would take over their responsibilities. How wrong she was! My father had offended the family code and when my grandfather had said he would be cut off he had meant it. They did not own us.

My mother's great concern was to keep me at Cluntons'. How, she was not sure, but she was not one to wait for something to fall into her lap. When I came home after that term she told me of her plans.

"I have to earn some money, Jane," she said.

"I too. So I must leave school."

"Unthinkable!" she declared. "Your father would never hear of it." She spoke of him as though he were still with us. "If I could find the right sort of post we'd manage," she added.

"What as?"

"I have my talents," she answered. "When my father was alive I helped him run the inn. My cooking is good; my household management excellent. In fact I could enter some household as a housekeeper."

"Are there such posts?"

"My dear Jane, they abound. Good housekeepers don't grow on trees. There will be one stipulation."

"Shall you be in a position to make stipulations?"

"I shall enter the household on my terms, which are that my daughter shall have a home with me."

"You set a high price on your services."

"If I don't no one else will."

She was self-reliant. She had had to be. I thought then that had she been the one to die suddenly my father would have been completely lost without her. She at least could stand on her own feet and carry me along with her. And yet I thought she was asking too much.

I had another term at school before we should have to face the embarrassment of considering whether we should be in a position to pay the bills and it was during this term that I first heard the name of Sylvester Milner. My mother wrote to me at school.

My dearest Jane,

Tomorrow I am traveling down to the New Forest. I have an interview at a place called Roland's Croft. A gentleman by the name of Mr. Sylvester Milner is in need of a housekeeper. It is a large establishment I gather and although my condition of accepting the post has not exactly been agreed to, I have stated it and am still asked to attend for the interview. I shall write to you to tell you the result. If I am accepted my remuneration should be enough to keep you at Cluntons', for I shall need little, as I shall have bed and board provided, as you will during the holidays. It will be an admirable solution. All I have to do is convince them that they must employ me.

I imagined her setting off resolutely for the interview, ready to fight for her place in the sun—not so much for herself as for me. She was a very small woman. I was going to be tall for I took after my father and was already several inches higher than my mother. She had rosy cheeks and thick hair, almost black with a touch of blue, the sort of color one sees in a bird's wing. I had the same kind of hair but my skin was pale like my father's, and instead of her small twinkling brown

eyes I had my father's large deep-set grey ones. We were not in the least alike—my mother and I—except in our determination to sweep aside all barriers which prevented our reaching the goal we had set ourselves. In this case, particularly when so much depended on the outcome, I felt she would have good hopes of success.

I was right, for a few days later I heard that she was settling into her new post at Roland's Croft, and when the term ended I went to join her there.

I traveled down to London with a party of girls from Cluntons' and there I was taken to the train which would carry me to Hampshire. When I reached Lyndhurst I was to board a local train. My mother had written the instructions very carefully. At the halt of Rolandsmere I would be "met" and if her duties prevented her from coming in the trap, she would see me as soon as I arrived at the house.

I could scarcely wait to get there. It seemed so strange to be going to a new place. My mother had said nothing about Mr. Sylvester Milner. I wondered why. She was not usually reticent. She had said very little about the house except that it was big and set in grounds of some twenty acres. "You will find it very different from our little house," she wrote unnecessarily really, because I certainly should. Oddly enough she left it at that and my imagination was busy.

Roland's Croft! Who was Roland and why a croft? Names usually meant something. And why did she say nothing of Mr. Sylvester Milner, her employer?

I began to build fantasies around him. He was young and handsome. No, he wasn't, he was middle-aged and had a large family. He was a bachelor who shunned society. He was tired of the world and cynical; he shut himself away at Roland's Croft to keep from it. No, he was a monster whom no one ever saw. They talked about him in whispers. There were strange sounds in the house at night. "You take no notice of them," I would be told. "That is just Mr. Sylvester Milner walking."

My father used to say I should curb my imagination, for at times it was too vivid. My mother said it ran away with me. And as it was accompanied by an insatiable curiosity about the world I lived in and the people who inhabited it, these made a dangerous combination.

I was therefore in a state of high expectancy when I reached the little haunt of Rolandsmere. It was December and there was a faint mist in the air which obscured the wintry sun and gave an aura of mystery to the little station with its name worked in plants on the platform.

There were very few of us to alight and I was seen immediately by a big man in top hat and a coat frogged with gold braid.

He strode along the platform with such an air of authority that as he came to me I said: "Are you Mr. Sylvester Milner?"

He paused as though with wonder at the thought and let out a roar of laughter. "Nay, miss," he cried. "I be the coachman." Then he muttered to himself, "Mr. Sylvester Milner. That be a good one. Well," he continued, "these be your bags. Just from school, are you? Let's get to the trap then." He surveyed me from head to foot. "Ain't like your mother," was his comment. "Wouldn't have known you for hers."

Then with a sharp nod he turned and shouted to a man who was lounging against the wall of the little booking office. "Here, Harry then." And Harry picked up my bags and we made a procession, myself behind the coachman who walked with a swaggering gait as though to indicate that he was a very important gentleman indeed.

We went to a trap and my bags were put in. I scrambled up and the coachman took the reins with an air of disdain.

"Tain't like me to drive these little things but to oblige your ma . . ."

"Thank you," I said. "Mr. er . . ."

"Jeffers," he said. "Jeffers is the name." And we were off.

We drove through leafy lanes that edged the forest where the trees looked darkly mysterious. It was very different country from our mountainous one. This, I reminded myself, was the forest in which William the Conqueror had hunted and his son William Rufus had met his mysterious death.

I said: "It's odd to call it the New Forest."

"Eh?" replied Jeffers. "What's that?"

"The New Forest when it's been there for eight hundred years."

"Reckon it were new once like most things," answered Jeffers.

"They say it was built on the blood of men."

"You got funny ideas, miss."

"It's not my idea. Men were turned out of their homes to make that forest and if anyone trapped a deer or a wild boar his hands were cut off or his eyes put out or he might have been hanged on a tree."

"There's no wild boar in there now, miss. And I never heard such talk about the forest."

"Well, I did. In fact we're doing Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman invasion at school."

He nodded gravely. "And you're spending the holiday with us. Surprised I was when that was allowed. But your mother stuck her foot

down and it had to be. Mr. Milner gave way on that, which surprised me."

"Why did it surprise you?"

"He's not one to want children in the house."

"What sort of one is he?"

"Now that is a question, that is. I reckon there's no one knows what sort of man Mr. Sylvester Milner is."

"Is he young?"

He looked at me. "Compared with me . . . he's not so very old but compared with you he'd be a very old gentleman indeed."

"Without comparing him with anyone how old would he be?"

"Bless you, miss. You're one for questions. How would I be knowing how old Mr. Sylvester Milner be."

"You could guess."

"I wouldn't do to start guessing where he were concerned. You'd sure as eggs come up with the wrong answer."

I could see that I should get little information about Mr. Sylvester Milner through him, so I studied the countryside.

Dusk of a December afternoon and a forest which my imagination told me must surely be haunted by those whom the Norman kings had dispossessed and tortured! By the time we had reached Roland's Croft I was in a state of great anticipation.

We turned into a drive on either side of which grew conifers. The drive must have been half a mile in length and it seemed a long time before we reached the lawn beyond which was the house. It was imposing and elegant and must have been built round about the time of the early Georges. It struck me at once as being aloof and austere. Perhaps this was because I had been imagining a castle-like dwelling with battlements, turrets, and oriel windows. These windows were symmetrical, short on the ground floor, tall on the first floor, a little less tall on the next and square on the top. The effect was characteristic of eighteenth-century elegance removed as far as possible from the baroque and gothic of earlier generations. There was a beautiful fanlight over the Adam doorway and two columns supported a portico. Later I was to admire the Greek honeysuckle pattern on these but at the time my attention was caught by the two Chinese stone dogs at the foot of the columns. They looked fierce and alien in comparison with so much which was English.

The door was opened by a maid in a black alpaca dress and a white cap and apron with very stiffly starched frills. She must have heard the trap pull up.

"You be the young lady from school," she said. "Come in and I'll tell Madam you're here."

Madam! So my mother had assumed that title. I laughed inwardly and that pleasant feeling of security began to wrap itself around me.

I stood in the hall and looked about me. From the ceiling with its discreet plaster decorations hung a chandelier. The staircase was circular and beautifully proportioned. A grandfather clock standing against the wall ticked noisily. I listened to the house. Apart from the clock it was quiet. Strangely, eerily quiet, I told myself.

And then my mother flashed into sight on the staircase. She ran to me and we hugged each other.

"My dear child, so you've come. I've been counting the days. Where are your bags? I'll have them taken up to your room. First of all, come to mine. There's so much to say."

She looked different; she was in black bombazine which rustled as she moved; she wore a cap on her head and had assumed great dignity. The housekeeper of this rather stately mansion was different from the mother in our little house.

She was a little restrained, I thought, as arm in arm we mounted the staircase. I was not surprised that I had not heard her approach, so thick were the carpets. We followed the staircase up and up. It was constructed so that from every floor it was possible to look down into the hall.

"What a magnificent house," I whispered.

"It's pleasant," she answered.

Her room was on the second floor—a cosy room, heavily curtained; the furniture was elegant and although I knew nothing of these matters at that time I later learned that the cabinet was Hepplewhite as were the beautifully carved chairs and table.

"I'd like to have had my own bits and pieces," said my mother, following my gaze. She grimaced ruefully. "Mr. Sylvester Milner would have been horrified with my old stuff, but it was cosy."

It was beautiful and elegant and right for the room, I realized, but it lacked the homeliness of our own rooms. Still, there was a fire in the grate and on it a kettle was singing.

Then she shut the door and burst out laughing. She hugged me once more. She had slipped out of the dignified housekeeper's role and had become my mother.

"Tell me all about it," I said.

"The kettle will be boiling in a jiffy," she answered. "We'll chat over our tea. I thought you'd never get here."

The cups were already on the tray and she ladled out three spoonfuls of tea and infused it. "We'll let it stand for a minute or two. Well!" she went on. "Who would have thought it? It's turned out very well, very well indeed."

"What about him?"

"Who?"

"Mr. Sylvester Milner."

"He's away."

My face fell and she laughed at me. "That's a good thing, Janey. Why, we'll have the house to ourselves."

"I wanted to see him."

"And I'd thought you wanted to see *me*."

I got up and kissed her.

"You're settled then, and really happy?" I said.

"It couldn't have been better. I believe your father arranged it for us."

She had believed since his death that he was watching over us and for this reason no harm could befall us. She mingled strong occult feelings with strict common sense and although she was firmly convinced that my father would guide us as to the best way we should go, at the same time she put every effort in arranging it.

It was clear that she was happy with her post at Roland's Croft.

"If I'd planned a place for myself I couldn't have done better," she said. "I've got a good position here. The maids respect me."

"They call you Madam, I notice."

"That was a little courtesy I insisted on. Always remember, Janey, that people take you at your own valuation. So I set mine high."

"Are there many servants?"

"There are three gardeners, two of them married, and they live in cottages on the estate. There's Jeffers the coachman and his wife. They live over the stables. The two gardeners' wives work in the house. Then there's Jess and Amy, the parlormaid and housemaid; and Mr. Catterwick the butler and Mrs. Couch the cook."

"And you are in charge of it all."

"Mr. Catterwick and Mrs. Couch wouldn't like to hear you say that I was in charge of *them*, I can tell you. Mr. Catterwick's a very fine gentleman indeed. He tells me at least once a day that he's worked in more grand households than this one. As for Mrs. Couch, she's mistress of the kitchen and it would be woe betide anyone who tried to interfere there."

My mother's conversation had always been gay and racy. I think that

was one of the characteristics which had attracted my father to her. He himself had been quiet and withdrawn, all that she was not. He had been sensitive; she was as he had once said like a little cock sparrow ready to fight the biggest eagle for her rights. I could imagine her ruling the household here . . . with the exception of the cook and the butler.

"It's a beautiful house," I said, "but a little eerie."

"You and your fancies! It's because the lamps aren't lit. I'll light mine now."

She took the globe off a lamp on the table and applied a lighted match to the wick.

We drank the tea and ate the biscuits which my mother produced from a tin.

"Did you see Mr. Sylvester Milner when you applied for the post?" I asked.

"Why yes, I did."

"Tell me about him."

She was silent for a few seconds, and a faint haze came over her eyes. She was rarely at a loss for words and I thought at once: There is something odd about him.

"He's . . . a gentleman," she said.

"Where is he now?"

"He's away on business. He's often away on business."

"Then why does he keep this big houseful of servants?"

"People do."

"He must be very rich."

"He's a merchant."

"A merchant! What sort of a merchant?"

"He travels round the world to many places . . . like China."

I remembered the Chinese dogs at the porch.

"Tell me what he looks like."

"He's not easy to describe."

"Why not?"

"Well, he's different from other people."

"When shall I see him?"

"Sometime, I daresay."

"This holiday?"

"I should hardly think so. Though we never know. He appears suddenly . . ."

"Like a ghost," I said.

She laughed at me. "I mean he doesn't say when he'll be coming. He just turns up."