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ENDLESS NIGHT



Agatha Christie

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Endless Night

AGATHA CHRISTIE

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To Nora Prichard
from whom I first heard
the legend of Gipsy's Acre

Every Night and every Morn
Some to Misery are born.
Every Morn and every Night
Some are born to Sweet Delight,
Some are born to Sweet Delight,
Some are born to Endless Night,

William Blake
Auguries of Innocence

BOOK ONE

1

In my end is my beginning . . . That's a quotation I've often heard people say. It sounds all right – but what does it really mean?

Is there ever any particular spot where one can put one's finger and say: 'It all began that day, at such a time and such a place, with such an incident?'

Did my story begin, perhaps, when I noticed the Sale Bill hanging on the wall of the George and Dragon, announcing Sale by Auction of that valuable property 'The Towers', and giving particulars of the acreage, the miles and furlongs, and the highly idealized portrait of 'The Towers' as it might have been perhaps in its prime, anything from eighty to a hundred years ago.

I was doing nothing particular, just strolling along the main street of Kingston Bishop, a place of no importance whatever, killing time. I noticed the Sale Bill. Why? Fate up to its dirty work? Or dealing out its golden handshake of good fortune? You can look at it either way.

Or you could say, perhaps, that it all had its beginnings when I met Santonix, during the talks I had with him; I can close my eyes and see: his flushed cheeks, the over-brilliant eyes, and the movement of the strong yet delicate hand that sketched and drew plans and elevations of houses. One house in particular, a beautiful house, a house that would be wonderful to own!

My longing for a house, a fine and beautiful house, such a house as I could never hope to have, flowered into life then. It was a happy fantasy shared between us, the house that Santonix would build for me – if he lasted long enough . . .

A house that in my dreams I would live in with the girl that I loved, a house in which just like a child's silly fairy story we should live together 'happy ever afterwards'. All pure fantasy, all nonsense, but it started that tide of longing in me. Longing for something I was never likely to have.

Or if this is a love story – and it *is* a love story, I swear – then why not begin where I first caught sight of Ellie standing in the dark fir trees of Gipsy's Acre?

Gipsy's Acre. Yes, perhaps I'd better begin there, at the moment when I turned away from the Sale board with a little shiver because a black cloud had come over the sun, and asked a question carelessly enough of one of the locals, who was clipping a ~~hedge~~ in a desultory fashion nearby.

'What's this house, The Towers, like?'

I can still see the queer face of the old man, as he looked at me sideways and said:

'That's not what us calls it here. What sort of a name is that?' He snorted disapproval. 'It's many a year now since folks lived in it and called it The Towers.' He snorted again.

I asked him then what *he* called it, and again his eyes shifted away from me in his old wrinkled face in that queer way country folk have of not speaking to you direct, looking over your shoulder or round the corner, as it were, as though they saw something you didn't; and he said:

'It's called hereabouts Gipsy's Acre.'

‘Why is it called that?’ I asked.

‘Some sort of a tale. I dunno rightly. One says one thing, one says another.’ And then he went on, ‘Anyway, it’s where the accidents take place.’

‘Car accidents?’

‘All kinds of accidents. Car accidents mainly nowadays. It’s a nasty corner there, you see.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘if it’s a nasty curve, I can well see there might be accidents.’

‘Rural Council put up a Danger sign, but it don’t do no good, that don’t. There are accidents just the same.’

‘Why Gipsy?’ I asked him.

Again his eyes slipped past me and his answer was vague.

‘Some tale or other. It was gipsies’ land once, they say, and they were turned off, and they put a curse on it.’

I laughed.

‘Aye,’ he said, ‘you can laugh but there’s places as is cursed. You smart-Alecks in town don’t know about them. But there’s places as is cursed all right, and there’s a curse on this place. People got killed here in the quarry when they got the stone out to build. Old Geordie he fell over the edge there one night and broke his neck.’

‘Drunk?’ I suggested.

‘He may have been. He liked his drop, he did. But there’s many drunks as fall – nasty falls – but it don’t do them no lasting harm. But Geordie, he got his neck broke. In there,’ he pointed up behind him to the pine-covered hill, ‘in Gipsy’s Acre.’

Yes, I suppose that’s how it began. Not that I paid much attention to it at the time. I just happened to remember it. That’s all. I think – that is, when I think properly – that I built it up a bit in my mind. I don’t know if it was before or later that I asked if there were still

gipsies about there. He said there weren't many anywhere nowadays. The police were always moving them on, he said. I asked:

'Why doesn't anybody like gipsies?' ^{He said}

'They're a thieving lot,' he said, disapprovingly. Then he peered more closely at me. 'Happen you've got gipsy blood yourself?' he suggested, looking hard at me.

I said not that I knew of. It's true, I do look a bit like a gipsy. Perhaps that's what fascinated me about the name of Gipsy's Acre. I thought to myself as I was standing there, smiling back at him, amused by our conversation, that perhaps I *had* a bit of gipsy blood.

Gipsy's Acre. I went up the winding road that led out of the village and wound up through the dark trees and came at last to the top of the hill so that I could see out to sea and the ships. It was a marvellous view and I thought, just as one does think things: I wonder how it would be if Gipsy's Acre was *my* acre ... Just like that ... It was only a ridiculous thought. When I passed my hedge clipper again, he said:

'If you want gipsies, there's old Mrs Lee of course. The Major, he gives her a cottage to live in.'

'Who's the Major?' I asked.

He said, in a shocked voice, 'Major Phillpot, of course.' He seemed quite upset that I should ask! I gathered that Major Phillpot was God locally. Mrs Lee was some kind of dependent of his, I suppose, whom he provided for. The Phillpots seemed to have lived there all their lives and more or less to have run the place.

As I wished my old boy good day and turned away he said:

'She's got the last cottage at the end of the street. You'll see her outside, maybe. Doesn't like the inside of houses. Them as has got gipsy blood don't.'

So there I was, wandering down the road, whistling and thinking about Gipsy's Acre. I'd almost forgotten what I'd been told when I saw a tall black-haired old woman staring at me over a garden hedge. I knew at once it must be Mrs Lee. I stopped and spoke to her.

'I hear you can tell me about Gipsy's Acre up there,' I said.

She stared at me through a tangled fringe of black hair and she said:

'Don't have nought to do with it, young man. You listen to me. Forget about it. You're a good-looking lad. Nothing good comes out of Gipsy's Acre and never will.'

'I see it's up for sale,' I said.

'Aye, that's so, and more fool he who buys it.'

'Who's likely to buy it?'

'There's a builder after it. More than one. It'll go cheap. You'll see.'

'Why should it go cheap?' I asked curiously. 'It's a fine site.'

She wouldn't answer that.

'Supposing a builder buys it cheap, what will he do with it?'


She chuckled to herself. It was ^{malicious,} unpleasant laughter. *malicious, unpleasant laughter*

'Pull down the old ruined house and build, of course. Twenty - thirty houses, maybe - and all with a curse on them.'

I ignored the last part of the sentence. I said, speaking before I could stop myself:

'That would be a shame. A great shame.'

'Ah, you needn't worry. *They'll* get no joy of it, not those who buys and not those who lays the bricks and mortar. There'll be a foot that slips on the ladder, and there'll be the lorry that crashes with a load, and the slate

that falls from the roof of a house and finds its mark. And the trees too. Crashing, maybe, in a sudden gale. Ah, you'll see! There's none that'll get any good out of Gipsy's Acre. They'd do best to leave it alone. You'll see. You'll see.' She nodded vigorously and then she repeated softly to herself, '*There's no luck for them as meddles with Gipsy's Acre.* There never has been.' 

I laughed. She spoke sharply.

'Don't laugh, young man. It comes to me as may be one of these days you'll laugh on the wrong side of your mouth. There's never been no luck there, not in the house nor yet in the land.'

'What happened in the house?' I asked. 'Why has it been empty so long? Why was it left to fall down?'

'The last people that lived there died, all of them.'

'How did they die?' I asked out of curiosity.

'Best not to speak of it again. But no one cared to come and live in it afterwards. It was left to moulder and decay. It's forgot by now and best that it should be.'

'But you could tell me the story,' I said, wheedlingly. 'You know all about it.'

'I don't gossip about Gipsy's Acre.' Then she let her voice drop to a kind of phoney beggar's whine. 'I'll tell your fortune now, my pretty lad, if you like. Cross my palm with silver and I'll tell your fortune. You're one of those that'll go far one of these days.'

'I don't believe nonsense about fortune-telling,' I said, 'and I haven't any silver. Not to spare, anyway.'

She came nearer to me and went on in a wheedling voice. 'Sixpence now. Sixpence now. I'll do it for sixpence. What's that? Nothing at all. I'll do it for sixpence because you're a handsome lad with a ready tongue and a way with you. It could be that you'll go far.'

I fished a sixpence out of my pocket, not because I

believed in any of her foolish superstitions but because for some reason I liked the old fraud even if I did see through her. She grabbed the coin from me, and said:

‘Give me your hand then. Both hands.’

She took my hands in her withered claw and stared down at the open palms. She was silent for a minute or two, staring. Then she dropped my hands abruptly, almost pushing them away from her. She retreated a step and spoke harshly.

‘If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get out of Gipsy’s Acre here and now and you won’t come back! That’s the best advice I can give you. Don’t come back.’

‘Why not? Why shouldn’t I come back?’

‘Because if you do you’ll come back to sorrow and loss and danger maybe. There’s trouble, black trouble waiting for you. Forget you ever saw this place. I’m warning you.’

‘Well of all the –’

But she had turned away and was retreating to the cottage. She went in and slammed the door. I’m not superstitious. I believe in luck, of course, who doesn’t? But not a lot of superstitious nonsense about ruined houses with curses on them. And yet I had an uneasy feeling that the sinister old creature had seen *something* in my hands. I looked down at my two palms spread out in front of me. What could anyone see in the palms of anyone’s hands? Fortune telling was arrant nonsense, just a trick to get money out of you – money out of your silly credulity. I looked up at the sky. The sun had gone in, the day seemed different now. A sort of shadow, a kind of menace. Just an approaching storm, I thought. The wind was beginning to blow, the backs of the leaves were showing on the trees. I whistled to keep my spirits up and walked along the road through the village.

I looked again at the pasted-up bill advertising the

J.B. 7/12
my kind friend

auction of The Towers. I even made a note of the date. I had never attended a property sale in my life but I thought to myself that I'd come and attend this one. It would be interesting to see who bought The Towers. That is to say interesting to see who became the owner of Gipsy's Acre. Yes, I think that's really where it all began. ... A fantastic notion occurred to me. I'd come and pretend to myself that I was the man who was going to bid for Gipsy's Acre! I'd bid against the local builders! They'd drop out, disappointed in their hopes of buying it cheap. I'd buy it and I'd go to Rudolf Santonix and say, 'Build me a house. I've bought the site for you.' And I'd find a girl, a wonderful girl, and we'd live in it together happy ever after.

I often had dreams of that kind. Naturally they never came to anything but they were fun. That's what I thought then. Fun! Fun, my God! If I'd only known!

2

It was pure chance that had brought me to the neighbourhood of Gipsy's Acre that day. I was driving a hired car, taking some people down from London to attend a sale, a sale not of a house but its contents. It was a big house just at the outskirts of the town, a particularly ugly one. I drove an elderly couple there who were interested, from what I could overhear of their conversation, in a collection of *papier mâché*, whatever *papier mâché* was. The only time I ever heard it mentioned before was by my mother in connection with washing-up bowls. She'd said that a *papier mâché* washing-up bowl was far better than a plastic one any day! It seemed an odd thing for rich

people to want to come down and ~~but a collection~~ of the stuff.

However I stored the fact away in ~~my mind and I~~ thought I would look in a dictionary or read up somewhere what *papier mâché* really was. Something that people thought worthwhile to hire a car for, and go down to a country sale and bid for. I liked to know about things. I was twenty-two years of age at that time and I had picked up a fair amount of knowledge one way and another. I knew a good deal about cars, was a fair mechanic and a careful driver. Once I'd worked with horses in Ireland. I nearly got entangled with a dope gang but I got wise and quit in time. A job as a chauffeur to a classy car hire firm isn't bad at all. Good money to be made with tips. And not usually too strenuous. But the work itself was boring.

Once I'd gone fruit picking in summer time. That didn't pay much, but I enjoyed myself. I'd tried a lot of things. I'd been a waiter in a third-class hotel, life guard on a summer beach, I'd sold encyclopaedias and vacuum cleaners and a few other things. I'd once done horticultural work in a botanical garden and had learnt a little about flowers.

I never stuck to anything. Why should I? I'd found nearly everything I did interesting. Some things were harder work than others but I didn't really mind that. I'm not really lazy. I suppose what I really am is restless. I want to go everywhere, see everything, do everything. I want to *find* something. Yes, that's it. I want to find something.

From the time I left school I wanted to find something, but I didn't yet know what that something was going to be. It was just something I was looking for in a vague, ~~split~~ unsatisfied sort of way. It was *somewhere*. Sooner or later