

MYSTERY

# Camford Cottage

Michael Gilbert

“Local people won’t go into the cottage. . . . They think it’s haunted.”

Then I know it,” said Miss Symondson, “I’m certain I know it. It’s at the top of a cliff. Hardly a cliff, more a headland. It’s in a little garden of its own, with fields all round it. And there’s a long flight of steps leading down from it to a private landing stage.”

“The same place, without doubt,” said Miss Melchior.<sup>1</sup> “It’s some distance from any village. How did you come to be familiar with it?”

“I’d hardly call it familiar, since I had tea there, once only. But it was an exceptionally fine tea. That was thirty years ago. I cannot have been more than five or six at the time.”

“It must have been in the days of ‘Prince’ Camford, the artist. He had no use for architects, you know. The house, we were told, was built by local builders from a sketch he made on the back of a drawing pad. And very well built, too, in local brick.”

“I didn’t realize, of course, that he was a famous artist. To me he was just a funny man with a beard. He’d come on my older brother and sister and me, playing some game in the bushes at the top of the headland, Pirates or Indians. We were dressed in holiday rags and he got us to pose for nearly an hour while he made sketches of us. Then he took us down to the house for tea. Cornish butter and cream, on scones baked by his wife, a dumpy little woman with grey hair.”

“Also an artist,” said Miss Melchior. “A water-colorist. You can still see her Cornish sea-

scapes in the galleries.” Miss Melchior was a woman who knew things like that. “They are both dead now. My brother bought the cottage—it had some other name—I forget it—but he named it ‘Camford Cottage’ after its famous builder and owner. He and Patricia spent their honeymoon there. They were the only people who ever lived in it.”

“What a tragedy,” said Miss Symondson. She was not thinking of the honeymoon, but of what had happened at Camford Cottage some years later. A tragedy which had been widely reported.

Frank Melchior and his wife were keen sailors; Frank possibly a little keener than Patricia, who was apt to be sick if the sea was rough. They had set out one evening intending to sail down to the southwest, with a favoring wind, spend the night at sea, round the point of Land’s End, and finish up by beating up to Fowey, where they had friends. It was a trip they had made many times before. On this occasion they ran into rougher weather than they had catered for. Their boat lost its mast, the auxiliary engine failed, and they were driven on to the Pen-Gallion Shoals. Fishermen, who had

1. *Melchior* (mel’kyūr).

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observed their plight in the early dawn, picked up Frank; Patricia's body was never recovered.

"He shut the cottage up for years after that. No one was allowed into it. He wouldn't listen to any suggestion of selling it. Not that he had to bother about the financial side of it. Patricia was a Dupont, and her money went to him. Poor compensation for a broken heart, but on top of what he was earning already, it left him free to get on with his writing."

"I read his last one a few weeks ago, when I was in bed. The nursing home got it for me out of the public library. I can't afford to pay nearly four pounds for a detective story."

"I don't believe anyone can," said Miss Melchior. "Have you met my brother?"

"Yes, once, when he came to give a talk at the school. We were all introduced. I thought him rather formidable."

"It changed him, of course."

"Has the cottage been closed ever since—ever since it happened?"

"No. In the end I persuaded him that he was being selfish." Miss Melchior spoke with the firmness of an elder sister. "We took some of his nephews and nieces, and I went down with him. I told him, 'You'll find no ghosts in Camford Cottage. It's a happy place.' The holiday was a great success. Pol-en-Perro is a wonderful place for children."

"I certainly remember it as such," said Miss Symondson wistfully. "I suppose that development has spoilt it now."

"Not a bit. The land round the cottage is farmland, and very good farmland too, I believe. No one can touch it. And, of course, when the weather was fine the children enjoyed the tiny private beach at the bottom of the steps, and the boating. Frank was nervous about letting them use the boat at all, but I told him, 'Forget the past, live in the present.'"

It had sometimes occurred to Miss Symondson that the reason Miss Melchior, who was handsome and well endowed, was not married might be on account of her firmness with every-

one. She was one of the governors of the school where Miss Symondson taught, and ruled the Chairman and other governors with a rod of iron. Nevertheless, she could be kind. She had been very kind to her, when a bout of influenza, coming on top of an exceptionally hard term's work, had nearly carried her away. It was Miss Melchior who had whisked her out of her lodgings and into a private nursing home; and it was Miss Melchior who had dragooned the doctors into taking her case seriously. Now she was proposing a further kindness.

"A week will do you all the good in the world. It will quite set you up for the coming term. I'll order a stack of logs for the sitting-room fire. The cooking is all done by bottled gas. I'll have two cylinders delivered. They'll be outside the front door. I'm afraid you'll have to do your own cleaning. Local people won't go into the cottage—not since the tragedy."

"Oh, why?"

"They think it's haunted," said Miss Melchior, in the robust voice in which common-sense people speak of ghosts. "I'm sure you're not one of these people who believes in ghosts."

"If there was one, it should be haunting the Pen-Gallon Shoals, not Camford Cottage."

"*Exactly* what I told my brother. And I can assure you that when we all went down there, there were no psychic manifestations."

"But on previous occasions," said Miss Symondson, "it's only the family who have used the cottage? Are you sure your brother won't mind? Oughtn't we to ask him?"

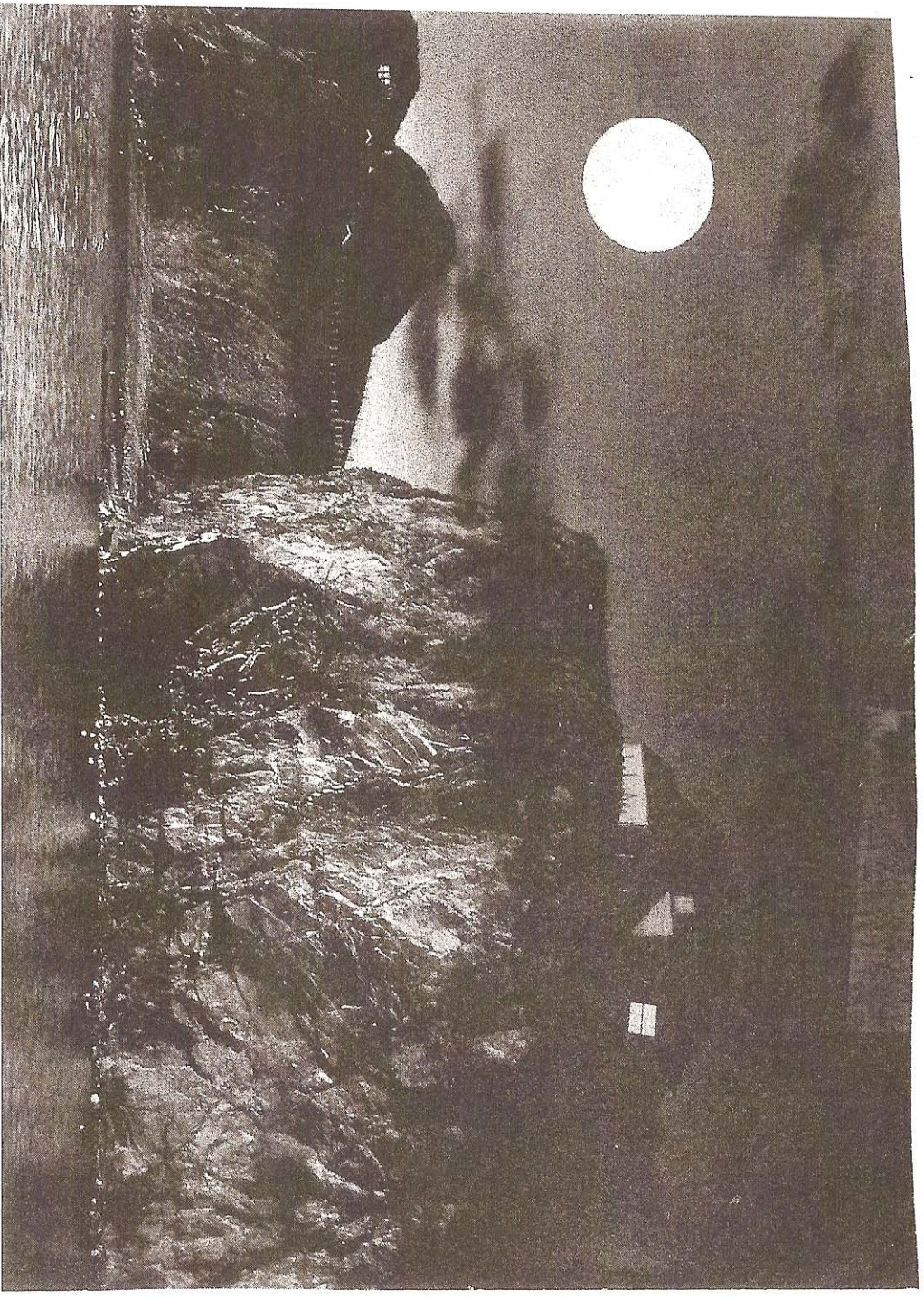
"To the best of my knowledge, my brother is in Tangiers, gathering material for a new book. He was uncertain of his movements, and left no address. It could take weeks to get an answer."

"If you're sure he wouldn't mind."

"I am ab-so-lutely sure."

When Miss Melchior was ab-so-lutely sure, there was nothing more to be said.

For the first six days it was as agreeable as Miss Melchior had promised. Although it was



still early April, the summer, as sometimes happens in Cornwall,<sup>2</sup> had seemed to come earlier than it did elsewhere. The days were warm enough for strolling over the headlands and through the deep lanes, already yellow with primrose and white mayflower. The evenings were cool enough to enjoy the fire of logs which blazed in the wide brick fireplace, set squarely in the middle of the living room wall.

The nights were a little troublesome at first. Miss Symondson put it down to sleeping in a strange bed, but she was honest enough to admit that it was more than this. She was a child of the city, born and brought up among streets of houses full of people. Holidays had been things you took, with others, in camps or hotels or hostels which were even fuller of people.

Here she was conscious of being surrounded by emptiness. On one side, the sea. On the

other three sides, fields. The nearest human habitation was the farmhouse which she visited daily for milk and eggs, half a mile inland down a track which was easily negotiable at this time of year by the tradesmen's vans and by the old taxi which had brought her from Pol-en-Perro Station. It must have become difficult in winter. Her only direct connection with the world outside was a telephone line; a single umbilical cord joining her to the world of men and women.

In the times when she lay awake she comforted herself with what Miss Melchior had said. It was *not* an unhappy house. Why should it be? The tragedy had not happened here, in this snug and civilized cell, but out on the wild gray sea.

<sup>2</sup> *Cornwall*, the most southwestern of the counties in England, bounded on two sides by the Atlantic Ocean, on a third by the English Channel, and on the fourth by the county of Devon.

in a driving wind, among mountainous waves. Sometimes she visualized the helpless boat, its mast gone, its engine useless, drifting on to the fangs of the Pen-Gallion rocks.

She had never herself been on the sea in anything smaller than a cross-Channel steamer, and it is possible that she exaggerated its perils. She looked down on it, timidly, from the edge of the cliffs, but had never even ventured to descend the steps down to the beach and the jetty. They seemed to her to be steep and dangerous. Adequate, no doubt, for nimble children in gym shoes, or for active men and women who took care to use the tarred-rope side rail.

It was on the evening of the sixth day, with the taxi ordered for nine o'clock the next morning, and she was standing at the top of these steps, when it happened.

The day had been the warmest so far, more of an autumn than a spring day, the heat no longer fresh, but turned damp and stale. As she looked out to sea, it was as though a veil, thin at first but thickening, was being drawn across her whole field of vision. The effect was so startling that she passed a hand across her eyes to wipe away what seemed to be a blurring of her sight. Then she realized what was happening. A white fog was rolling up towards the mouth of the Bristol Channel.

It came with astonishing speed. One moment she could see. The next she was blind. One moment she was warm. The next she was shivering with cold. Thank goodness, was her first thought, that I wasn't out on the cliffs, miles from home. I shouldn't have known what to do. She turned round, with great care, took six paces up the path which led from the stairhead, found the front gate, and was soon back inside the cottage.

She turned on the lights in the sitting room, and put a match to the fire, which was neatly laid. Warmth and light soon worked their magic. The fog was outside. She was inside, safe and sound. The next few hours were pleasantly occupied with cooking and eating supper. For this

last meal of the holidays she had saved a half-bottle of red wine; and, greatly daring, she drank it all, finishing the last glass with her coffee.

As she sat, pleasantly drowsy, in front of the fire, she found her thoughts going back thirty years. How odd to think that she, the very same person that she was now, changed in body but the same in essence, had sat at almost exactly the same spot that she was sitting at now. Her brother had been on her right, at the top of the tea table, piling the delicious scones with butter and cream and honey, and stuffing them into his mouth one after another. She didn't want to think too much about him. His body was in northern France, near the spot where his fighter plane had crashed.

Her sister had been sitting beyond him, half scandalized at the amount her brother was eating, half determined not to be left behind. Married now, with children of her own.

And what of herself? If she tried hard, could she summon back the six-year-old child, with pigtails, dressed in shorts and a grubby aertex shirt, with sandals on the end of brown, scratched legs. She had always been the thoughtful one, the one who noticed things. What had she been thinking about, what had she been looking at, on that summer afternoon, thirty years ago?

There had been a tiny golden clock on the mantelshelf. That had gone, of course, and had been replaced by two vases. To the right of the fireplace, there had been bookshelves. This worried her. Because she was certain that the bookshelf had not been a detached piece of furniture. The shelves, five or six of them, had been fitted into the alcove on the right of the chimney breast. Yes. And in the corresponding alcove on the other side had stood the old grandfather clock. She could remember thinking, how unusual to have two clocks in one room. Big clock and little clock. Grandfather and grandchild.

Why in the world, she said to herself, should anyone have bricked up those two alcoves, so

that the wall now stretched level with the front of the fire, from side to side?

As she asked the question, the room seemed to change. She was looking at it as it had been. The books were back on their shelves on the right, the gold clock winked on the mantelshelf, and old grandfather swung his pendulum solemnly from the recess on the left. She knew that if she could turn her eyes she would see her brother and sister, and their kind host at the other end of the table, but her head was held, as in a vise.

Something was happening to the lights. They were dimming. And the room had grown deadly cold. But it was now, once again, the room of the present, not the past. She was looking at the blank stretch of bricks on the left of the fireplace and at the lady standing in front of them. She felt unsurprised, and unafraid. The lady was smiling. Clearly she meant her no harm. It was not Mrs. Camford. This lady was younger, slimmer, and more fashionably dressed than that gray-haired, dumpy water-colorist. Surely she knew the face? She had seen it somewhere, in a fashion magazine. Of course, it was Frank Melchior's wife, Patricia.

Who was dead.

Drowned, battered to pieces, her bones washing about on the floor of the sea, under the Pen-Gallion rocks.

What was she doing here? Why was she standing, quietly, patiently. Standing like someone who had been waiting for help, and knew that help was at hand?

All at once Miss Symondson knew the terrible answer. Moreover, she knew what she had to do, and she was locked to the chair; her body shaken with uncontrollable spasms, the sweat cold on her face.

As she struggled to move, and realized she was helpless, the spell was suddenly broken.

The telephone was ringing.

A male voice said, "Miss Symondson?"

Scarcely able to speak she gasped out something.

"I can't hear you."

"Yes. It's Miss Symondson."

"My sister told me you were using the cottage. Is something wrong?"

"No. Yes."

"What is it? You're very indistinct."

Miss Symondson said, in tones of one stating some unimportant but incontrovertible fact. "I have just seen your wife. She came out from the recess which used to be beside the fireplace in the sitting room."

During the long silence which followed, she began to realize what it was she had said. He must think her absolutely mad. Perhaps she was mad. People had sometimes told her she was psychic. Had she passed over the borderline between sanity and insanity?

"I'm sure you'll think I'm raving mad," she said, with a pathetic attempt at lightness, "perhaps it was the fog and the general atmosphere and knowing—knowing the story——"

When the man spoke again it was a surprise. Before, his voice, without being rude, had been cold and formal. Now it had reverted to a friendly, conversational level.

He said, "I was interested in something you said just now. You mentioned that this—this apartment—came from the recess which used to be beside the fireplace. How did you know that there was once a recess there?"

"I came to the cottage many years ago, when I was a child. I had tea here."

"That would have been in Prince Camford's time."

"Yes."

A further silence. Then, "I don't want to alarm you, Miss Symondson, but I think you may be in some danger. I don't think you ought to spend tonight alone in the cottage."

"But how——"

"I'm speaking from Plymouth, where I landed earlier today. Is the fog very thick?"

"Yes, very."

"It usually clears before midnight. It will only take me a couple of hours to get to you. I'll

fix a room for you at Truro. Sit tight, and, Miss Symondson——”

“Yes?”

“My advice to you is, keep out of the sitting room. Light the stove in the kitchen. You should be safe there.”

He rang off.

She had noticed the old black stove in the kitchen, but had not dared to tamper with it. Now she got sticks and paper, and a shovel full of coal, opened the front, and set it going. It showed a tendency to smoke, but this soon cleared, and she was able to put on a few small logs on top of the coal and closed the front. The stove gave out a companionable roar.

To be doing something was a comfort. It helped to keep her mind off the problems of what danger could possibly be lurking in that front room. It helped to pass the time. And that needed help. Only forty minutes since the telephone call. If the mist stayed thick it might take Melchior hours to reach her. He might not be there until morning.

There was a basket full of logs in the front room. They would keep the stove going for an hour or so. The alternative was to fetch a fresh supply from the woodshed, but this would involve making her way out into the fog and crossing the back yard. Surely it could not be dangerous, simply to go back into that room, just for a moment?

When she opened the door she remembered that she had turned out the light, and the switch was on the far side of the room.

She said, out loud, “Don’t be such a goose.

*There’s nothing in the room that can hurt you. Just walk across and turn on the light.”*

The fire in the grate had burned low, but it gave enough light for her to see, and avoid the furniture. Her hand was on the switch when she stopped.

The sound was definite and unmistakable. Someone was coming up the front path.

By the crunch of the footsteps on the gravel it was a man. He was coming cautiously, but was unable to avoid making some sound.

Miss Symondson was so paralyzed with fear that she was unable even to raise her hand to the light switch. She stood in the darkness of the sitting room and watched the figure loom closer through the fog.

Now he was at the door. A hand came out to try the door. Very gently.

Thank God she had bolted it, top and bottom.

The man stood still for a moment, his head bowed as though he was listening. Then he turned and marched straight up to the window, and pressed his face against it.

Miss Symondson, cowering inside, recognized him at once.

It was Frank Melchior.

She was filled with unimaginable terror. The first words which came into her head were “He’s come back for his wife.”

Plymouth? That was nonsense. He must have lied about that, and lied quite deliberately.

Why had he told her to sit in the kitchen? Was it so that no light would shine out from the front room indicating to any chance passer-by that she was in the cottage?

The man was moving now, quietly, away from the window, on the path that would take him round the house and directly to the kitchen door.

Which, she realized with frozen horror, she had left unlocked.

She tiptoed across to the front door and, with fingers which seemed not to belong to her, slid back the top bolt, and stooped to open the bottom one.

At that moment she heard the sound of the kitchen door being opened, and a voice which said, “Hello, Miss Symondson. Where are you hiding?”

The second bolt slid back. She straightened up and eased the front door open. Gently, gently.

Footsteps crossing the kitchen floor, and the voice again, “Are you in there? I thought I told you not to go in there.”

Then she was stumbling down the front path.

The front door, as she let go of it, swung shut behind her. The noise must have warned the man that she was escaping. As she reached the front gate she heard heavy footsteps on the path. She stepped off the path, just inside the gate, and covered down like a wild beast. Like a wild beast, she had the sense to realize that if she moved the man would hear her; and if he heard her, he would catch her.

The footsteps crunched past. The man was outside the gate now. His steps were moving away, casting uncertainly, to right and left; lunging into the fog at some supposed shadow.

A sudden scratching of nails, on rock. A wild scream, and a series of horrible bumping noises. Then silence.

Miss Symondson got to her feet, and edged her way out of the gate until she felt the ruts of the track which led to the road. Down it she stumbled for an eternity of time, blinded by fog, her heart hammering, choking, kept going only by fear of what might be behind her.

As she reached the main road a light showed through the mist: there was a squeal of brakes and a car slid to a halt almost on top of her. The Cornish voice of Police Constable Greig said, "Why can't you look where you're going?" And then, "Why, Miss Symondson. What's to do here?"

"A killer," said Superintendent Assher to the Chief Constable of Cornwall. "A careful killer, and a killer for money."

They were standing in bright sunshine outside the door of the cottage, watching the workmen finish the demolition of the brick wall which concealed the recess behind the fireplace; a recess from which a skeleton, already identified as Patricia Melchior, had been removed and carried to the mortuary.

"You said, a careful killer?"

"Very careful. He must have been planning it for at least a year. He built that little summer-house with his own hands." He pointed to a neat construction, in the same brick as the house, which stood at the end of the lawn. "He

ordered a few hundred more bricks than he needed. And he taught himself, carefully and slowly, how to lay them. I expect his wife watched him, and admired his increasing skill. When the time was ripe, he strangled her, put her body inside, and bricked her up. To balance things, and make the wall look natural, he bricked up the other recess as well."

"Why not just bury her somewhere outside?"

"He was a writer of detective stories, sir. He knew that digging in farmland leaves traces. And if the body was recovered from the sea, the pathologist would know she'd been strangled. Safer to keep her in the house. No one had ever used it, except the two of them. No one ventured in afterwards. Maybe he spread the story of its being haunted. Later, of course, he didn't mind family parties as long as he was there to keep an eye on things. And then, by one chance in ten million, it was let, behind his back, to a woman who'd known the place as a child."

"What do you think he'd have done to her?"

"Thrown her down the steps, no doubt. Everyone would have assumed she was out in the fog, and had slipped, and killed herself. As he did."

The Chief Constable thought about it. He said, "Did you believe what she told us?"

"Most of it," said the Superintendent cautiously.

"About Mrs. Melchior appearing to her."

"I saw no reason to disbelieve that."

"Then you believe in ghosts."

"Certainly," said the Superintendent with a smile. "Good ones and bad ones. This was a good one. She'll sleep easy now, poor soul."

He was smiling because he knew that ghosts were hard things for a stolid Devonian<sup>3</sup> like the Chief Constable to credit. He himself had been born and bred west of the Tamar, and like all Cornishmen knew everything there was to know about ghosts.

<sup>3</sup> *Devonian*, a native of Devon, the county adjacent to Cornwall.