

# A Strange Tale

a short story by

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"Can't think why she said that Dave, it's not true." Debbie, a petite blonde, with eyelashes beyond belief, was standing looking ever-so innocently at him. Dave was trying to contain himself, he had a soft spot for Debbie. "Don't worry Debs, I didn't believe it anyway. Sue always was a bit of a fibber." "Well... someone should tell her, and I say it should be you." Her smile had vanished, and suddenly she didn't look half as gorgeous as she did before. "Funny how things can change." Dave thought to himself. "Sorry Debs, I'm a coward when it comes to things like that." The feeble look on his face made her smile, and suddenly he was in love again.

The room they were in was warm and friendly, mainly due to the coal fire burning brightly in the grate. Dave's flat was spacious, but homely. Debs always enjoyed visiting, she was impressed at Dave's house keeping abilities, way beyond any of the other guys she knew. Dave saw her looking round, "Sorry it's in a bit of a mess, I got back from work a little later than usual." She didn't reply, other than by smiling warmly back at him. Dave blushed, something he hated with a passion. A ching in the kitchen told him that the food was ready. This was the other reason she liked coming here, Dave was a great cook. He jumped up and went to answer the ching, and was soon back with a tray filled with dishes. The smell was mouth watering, and Debs was up to the table without having to be asked. Dave dished up and they tucked in. Conversation was never a priority when Dave was the cook, so, other than the odd Mmmm, the room was silent.

It was during dessert that Debs spoke, "Do you know anything of the history of this flat Dave?" Dave's flat was actually an apartment in an old country house. Flaxley Manor had stood on this site for several hundred years, Dave wasn't sure just how long. "Strange you should ask me that Debs," Dave replied, "it so happens that I was down in the cellar this morning, and I discovered some old records tucked away in the corner." He pointed to a dusty old box lying on the floor beside his easy chair. "Fancy a little reading?" Debs nodded her head excitedly. "Bring the wine then," Dave said, getting up and heading for the box. Debs did, and followed him to the chair. Neither of them sat in it, choosing instead to sit on the rug in front of the fire.

Dave opened the box. The lid creaked as it opened, and some dust fell onto the rug. Debs shivered a little. "Cold?" He asked. "No," she smiled back, "it was just a shiver." "Perhaps someone walked on your grave," he grinned. Debs didn't appear to be amused. Dave's hand went into the box and came out clutching a bunch of old looking papers. He handed some to Debs, and kept some back for himself. "Here you are, see what you can find in these." She took the papers and blew some dust off them. Some of it got up her nose and made her sneeze. Dave smiled.

It went silent as they began to peruse the papers. The silence lasted fully five minutes

before Dave broke it. "Hey, this is interesting... Lady Grace Harding occupied the manor in 1823, she was a child bride, marrying Lord Harding when she was 15." Debs' head raised on hearing this. "A bit young don't you think?" Dave nodded. "Different times," he answered, "you got anything?" She looked back down at her papers. "Here's something... It's a death certificate. Lord Harding, died in 1835 of food poisoning." "1835, that's twelve years after their marriage, how old was he?" Debs scanned the paper. "72," she answered with a wry smile. "Well, that's it then," Dave said with a chuckle, "she bumped him off for his money!" "How can you say that?" Debs said indignantly, "Perhaps she was too much woman for him!" "At 15! That's not likely." "How do you know, some girls are quite grown up at that age, why I..." She broke off sharply. "Yes?" Dave insisted. She didn't answer, but looked down obviously embarrassed. Dave let it go.

"So what happened to her?" Debs asked after a pause. Dave looked through the papers searching for more information. "Hold on," he said, getting excited. He pulled out a news paper cutting and held it up. The headline read: "Lady Grace Harding hanged at Wormwood Scrubs..." "See, I was right, she did bump him off." "Just like a fellah," Debs butted in, "Blame the woman... He probably drove her to it." Dave scanned the article for clues. "There's nothing here," he said, looking up at her. "Well look in the box, there may be more in there." They were both hooked now, and wanted to know more. Debs waited anxiously as he fumbled through the contents of the box. It seemed like an age before he cried out "Eureka!" Debs jumped, and a noise behind her didn't help. "It's a diary," he said, holding it up for her to see. "You read it," Dave said handing it over, "a woman's diary should be read by a woman." Debs took it from him and opened it.

"Friday, May 7th," she began. "It's been so long since I saw mummy, I do miss her. My husband has forbidden me to write, and he wont let me have my letters when they arrive. Tuesday, May 22nd. There was a caller at the door today, it sounded like a woman's voice, though I couldn't hear because of his shouting. The door slammed before I could see who it was, and he beat me when I asked him. O mummy, I do miss you." Debs flicked through some empty pages. "Wednesday, June 29th. He's sick. The doctor has been called, but no one will tell me what is going on. They wont even let me into his room to tend him. I'm so miserable I want to die. Saturday, July 17th. They say he's dying. I haven't seen my husband these last two months, I am in despair. I hear ghastly noises coming from his room, even at night they don't stop." Debs shivered again. "Are you all right?" Dave asked. "Yes, fine." Came the reply.

"August 12th. He's dead, my husband is dead. Finally, they let me see him. It was ghastly, his face almost black and so contorted. He must have been in so much pain. The funeral is next week. August 19th. The funeral was today. I wept as they lay my husband in the ground... Good bye... September 2nd. The police came, they think I poisoned my husband. How can I tell them I didn't. They questioned me for an hour, I hate them. September 5th. I over heard the housekeeper talking today. She poisoned my husband for his money, and wants me to take the blame... I'll show her." Debs fell silent. "Go on!" Dave said impatiently. "That's it, there is no more." Dave looked up in frustration, "there must be, maybe there's another diary." He went back into the box to look.

"There isn't!" A gruff voice said from the shadows. Debs turned and screamed loudly as the ghostly figure appeared in the corner of the room. There before them was a semi transparent figure, floating about a foot off the floor. The figure was female, and clothed in filthy rags that were blowing in a ghostly wind that they couldn't feel. The temperature dropped rapidly so that they could see their breath as it left their mouths. Dave grabbed Debs and held her close, she was shaking violently. "And who are you?" He asked. The apparition made no reply. "What do you want with us?" Debs said, half hysterically. "I want you to know." The ghost replied in a thin harsh voice, "I want you to know so I can be free." On hearing this, Debs began to calm down, Dave too. It was obvious that the ghost meant them no harm. "What is it you want us to know?" Dave asked, almost calmly. "The truth," came the reply, "she wants you to know what really happened." "She?" Asked Debs. "Aren't you Lady Grace?" The figure rose a little higher, "No!" It replied loudly. Dave and Debs decided to shut up and let things happen.

After a short pause, the ghost began. "They came and arrested her the following day." "Hence no more entries in the diary," Debs whispered. "In court, the judge was swayed by the housekeeper's testimony and found her guilty. They hanged her." "Yes, we read that." Dave said softly, "But she was innocent wasn't she." "Yes, she was innocent." The ghost replied. "Then why didn't she protest her innocence?" Debbie asked. "Because she was guilty!" Came the loud reply. "Guilty of killing the housekeeper. She poisoned the sherry. The housekeeper was always stealing the sherry." "So," Debs said, "she went to the gallows for the housekeeper, not her husband." The figure settled a little. "That's a tragic story," Dave said, "tell me, how do you know all this?" The ghost rose higher again, as if in anger. "I WAS THERE!" It roared. "I put the papers in the box." "So who are you?" Debs asked. "I'm Alice Harding, Grace's daughter. I had to live with the shame of what had happened, I ended up in a workhouse and died a pauper. I've waited all these years for someone to find my box, now I'm free."

Slowly, the apparition faded, and the room warmed up again. "Some night eh?" Dave said with a nervous grin. Debs was still shaking a little, and Dave was still holding her. "Let's burn them," she said softly. "Yes, you're right, they've served their purpose now," Dave replied. Slowly, he got up and threw the papers onto the fire. They both watched them burn; and in the smoke, as it rose, they saw two faces smiling at them, Lady Grace, and her daughter Alice. A few seconds later, they were gone, and a peace settled over the old manor, such as it had not known in a very long time.