

THE CANDLE IN THE WINDOW

. The late afternoon sun was dancing off the water making it shimmer like a glitter curtain in a theatre backdrop, and fishing boats were rocking gently at anchor on the waves, when Susan turned to look at the view in the late sunshine. It was still not really cold down here by the sea, even though it was late November. She and her husband Jack had moved to this village at the top of a creek on this South Coast harbour, to escape from the crowds and aggressive atmosphere of London. They had found the cottage for sale when they had motored down on a day trip, and, in a moment of sheer madness had gone straight to the estate agent for details. So far, neither of them had regretted one moment, and now Susan was in the cottage garden of her new home, cutting some greenery from the shrubs that grew all round the edge of the lawn, to make a lovely big decorative Christmas display for the hall. Next Spring, when the weather was warmer, she would come to this spot and paint those boats. They would make a really lovely picture over the inglenook fireplace in the sitting room, a permanent reminder of why she and Jack had up sticks and moved here from London. She turned back to the foliage and as she did so she caught a glimpse of a light flash across the little window upstairs on the side of the house. Susan blinked. The light was gone. No, there it was again. Then it was gone. She looked behind her. Couldn't be the setting sun, it was facing the wrong way. A car perhaps? Reflections from it's windscreen? She listened hard, No sound came from the lane. Not a car then. With a slight shiver she started to go back towards the house. It was getting chilly as the sun was setting fast now and a thought pushed it's way into her head. What if there was someone in there? Susan wasn't the sort of person who imagined danger round every corner, but even so? You never really knew, and they had only been in the village for two weeks. Abandoning her task, taking the branches she had already cut, she walked quietly up the garden towards the house, keeping in the shade of the shrubs so she wouldn't be seen. She reached the back door, listening hard for any sound of movement inside. Her nerves were really on edge by now, and she was concentrating and listening so hard, that when something touched her lower leg, she jumped, and her heart started to thump in her chest. She couldn't stop herself giving an involuntary scream as she looked down, only to see a glossy black cat about to wind itself around her calf. Laughing with relief, her heart still hammering, but slowing now, she bent down and picked the cat up,. "Hello puss. Where have you come from then?" She looked to see if there was any collar or tag on it. "You are obviously at home here. Have you come to welcome us then?" There was no tag of any kind on the cat so Susan put it down and it immediately ran off into the house ahead of her. "Hey, come back." She called. The cat turned, looked at her and then set off again towards the stairs. Susan had forgotten about the light by now and chased after the cat which ran up the little dark

staircase and into the small bedroom with the window on the side wall. Arriving at the bedroom door, the cat was nowhere to be seen, and Susan was suddenly aware that the temperature had dropped considerably. She felt a shiver as she stepped over the threshold. The room was quite dark by now as the curtains were half drawn across the window because the room was not in use yet. There were odd shapes of boxes waiting to be opened still, and a smell which was difficult to place at first. Not a damp smell, or musty, but hot wax?

“Puss, Puss, come on Puss” Susan called. Silence. “Come on Puss, I’ll get some milk for you” Was the next try. Still no sound, but a slight movement of the curtain led Susan to the window. She pulled the curtain aside but still nothing. “Ok moggy, I’m going back downstairs to get you some milk and I expect to see you in two minutes. Got that?” Feeling slightly foolish and irritated Susan turned to go downstairs, and then remembered the light she had seen. It had been in this window. She turned back and went once again across the room pulling both curtains back. This time, she found an old fashioned candlestick and the remains of a candle on the windowsill. She picked up the candlestick and felt the candle. It was warm! As if it had been snuffed out only a few minutes ago, Yes, that was the smell, warm wax! Susan took a deep breath, closing her eyes. “Whoa there! Let’s take this slowly girl.” She said to herself. She looked through the glass and could see the distant harbour with the boats. Some of them had lights on now, twinkling in the gathering darkness. If she could see them, then they would be able to see the house lights in return. Was this significant? Susan took a deep breath. “Now you are letting your imagination run away with you big time. Come on, get a grip. It was trick of the light, the candle was left by someone, and we didn’t notice it before that’s all.” No need to get all worked up. “Why is the candle warm then?” A nasty little voice in Susan’s head popped up. “The sun warmed it through the window, that’s why. Yes it was the sun. Now get downstairs and get on with your decorations before Jack comes home and there’s no supper ready. Forget about phantom cats and old candles” Even as she was thinking this, Susan shivered again. The sun was not that strong then? Susan put the candle back on the windowsill and closed the curtains before leaving the room, with the door open in case the cat was still in there somewhere, and hurried back down the little staircase..

Back downstairs in the kitchen, Susan first put a saucer of milk down on the floor for the cat and then turned to the business of getting the greenery in the bucket by the door. Before she could reach it however, the bell rang. Susan opened the door and it was Tom from the village. She smiled a welcome tinged with a bit of relief, and held the door open wide. “Hello Tom, how nice of you to call. Come in.” Tom stepped in over the threshold and sat on a chair in the warm kitchen. He was so friendly and kind, he had lived in the village all his life and was a real help when you needed him. He knew everything there was to know about the history of the houses there, not to mention the people who lived in them.

“Just dropped by to see if you were settling in all right. Said Tom. “It’s going to be cold tonight, Real Hunters moon coming up later, you’ll see. Wonderful on the water, couldn’t do it better if you tried.” He smiled. “Has the house said hello yet?”

“What do you mean, has the house said hello? Susan was mystified, but decided to humour Tom. “I was greeted by a black cat this afternoon, which reminds me, it hasn’t come back down yet. It ran off upstairs and disappeared just before you came.”

“Ah, that would be Jet. Was it the bedroom with the smugglers window with a candle on the windowsill that was still warm?” Susan nodded. “ Yes that was Jet “ continued Tom.. “Come to check you out I expect”

Susan was stunned by this. She sat down on the nearest chair. I thought I was letting my imagination get the better of me. Tom? What’s going on? Come on, tell me. I’m putting the kettle on now and you’re not leaving till you’ve told me.”

Tom laughed. “Ok missus, keep your hair on. If Jet has led you to it then you are welcome in the house and you’ll have no bother, as long as you keep an eye out. He’s very fussy is Jet.”

“Right, so Jet’s a fussy cat. Who owns him then? And why does it matter what he thinks?” Susan was getting impatient now, She set a mug of tea on the table in front of Tom and sat down again with one for herself.

“Jet belonged to Judith Fellowes who lived here from 1875 till 1890. The house was just a tiny two up two down cottage then and Luke, Judith’s husband was a fisherman, trying to scrape a living like everyone else in those days. As you can imagine, being a fisherman was real hard work with a very uncertain living to be had, and with all the creeks round here, smuggling was big business. Luke was up for a bit as much as anyone, and Judith’s job was to keep an eye out for the Excise men and warn the smugglers if they were around when they was about to make a drop. She would do this by lighting a candle in the window upstairs and if she did, then Luke could see the light from the water and would know it wasn’t safe to come in with the brandy or whatever. Well, one night, the excise men were out in force, so Judith lit the candle and put it in the window as usual. However, she didn’t notice that the window was slightly open and when she went back downstairs, a gust of wind blew the candle out. This meant of course that Luke thought the coast was clear and he came ashore with the contraband. The excise men were waiting for him and he was caught. He was marched off to the assizes, tried, and hanged six weeks later. Terrible times they were. The law was fast and furious in those days. No allowance for hardship and no appeal either. Judith never stopped blaming herself and she died of a broken heart they say, leaving Jet to fend for himself. He disappeared the same day and now he comes and goes as if he’s still looking for Judith. He must have taken a liking to you Susan, so keep the candle in the window for him.”

“I see, well that’s easy enough to do. Do you really think it was Jet? Or Jet’s ghost?”

“Oh yes, it would be Jet all right. Other cats won’t come near the place, you see. Not today anyway”

“ Why? What’s significant about today?” Asked Susan.

“Well there you have it. The day that Luke was arrested. It was November 12th 1890. Today, and he was hanged six weeks later, the day before Christmas Eve. Had to make an example of him they said. Hah! Pure vindictiveness I say. You can bet anything they had the confiscated Brandy for themselves. Bet they had a fine old Christmas – bastards!” On that note, Tom finished his tea and stood up. “ I must be off. You’ll find details in the Parish records up at the church. Judith is buried in the graveyard up there too. They do say that Jet sits at the headstone sometimes, but that could be just fantasy.” Tom winked at Susan. Now you know the story, you will look after Jet won’t you?”

“Of course we will.” Susan hesitated. “Who was Judith, Tom? She was more than just a village housewife wasn’t she?”

“She was my Great Aunt, and my Mum was her niece, so, yes, she was more to me than just a village housewife. Bye.” Tom turned to go and headed for the door.

“You know that you are welcome to come here any time you feel like it. I think Judith is still here and if you want to feel close to her, just come.”

“Thanks Susan, I will. That’s very understanding of you. Just make sure you keep a good stock of candles won’t you?”

When Jack came home that evening, Susan re-told her tale of the afternoon, with Tom’s story of Judith and Jet. Jack was appalled at the treatment of the fishermen and was in full agreement with Tom’s opinion of the Law and Excise service of the day.

Susan and Jack were quiet when they went to bed that night, and it was a sombre pair that thought of the hardships and severe punishments of the 19th century. Poor Judith, poor Luke and poor Jet. Susan snuggled up to Jack in the warm comfort of their big double bed. “We must make the house comfortable for them Jack. I want them to feel they are welcome here. I’ll go and buy some more candles tomorrow, and make sure the window shuts properly” Susan was sure this would be the best thing to do. Judith would like that. She drifted off to sleep, her brain planning how she would improve the cottage so Jet and Judith could have some peace and comfort to share with them. Suddenly she was awake again. Was that a door shutting and footsteps? Tap tap tap. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as she strained to listen. Jack slept on beside her, completely relaxed. Very carefully, Susan slid out of bed and crept across the carpet on tiptoe, listening all the while for any more sounds of movement. Tap tap tap. It was coming from the next room, the one with the window.

With her heart in her mouth, Susan very carefully opened the door of the room. The wind whipped her hair around her face, with a hissing sound, making her disorientated. The window was wide open and there was a branch from a nearby tree tapping against it in the wind. Lifting her hair back off her face, Susan crossed the room and shut the window. In the bright moonlight she could see the fishing boats moving in and out as they finished their night’s work. She breathed a sigh of relief. Only an open window and an old tree branch. She closed the window and curtains, and then realized that the candle

holder and candle were gone. She searched around for it, and discovered that it had blown over and off the windowsill on to the floor. Putting it back on the sill, Susan made sure that the window was shut tight, and she then returned to bed to find that the bedside clock was showing that it was 12.30am. Where had the last hour gone? She was shivering again now but the bed was warm and inviting and as she lay down, Jack's arm came over in a comforting embrace. The house was quiet now and the wind had dropped completely, allowing Susan to slip back to sleep until the alarm went next morning. When Susan went downstairs to the kitchen to make breakfast, she noticed that in the middle of the table was a small package, wrapped in what looked like old newspaper. Thinking that perhaps Jack had put it there, she put the kettle on for coffee, then turned to the table and picked it up and looked at it. It was old newspaper. The paper was stained brown and very brittle, breaking up as she touched it. Handling the package carefully, trying not to tear it she eventually managed to unwrap the paper to find a small bottle of old French Brandy in the middle of it. The label was torn and stained, but the lettering was still clear. The paper was almost crumbling away as Susan tried to smooth it out and read what was written on it. After a few goes, and with some difficulty, she managed to see the heading with a date printed in the corner. Holding her breath in case it crumbled away completely she saw it. The date on the newspaper was November 12th 1890, and the heading was recording the capture of a dangerous felon while he was landing a quantity of French Brandy in the creek. Luke!

Susan sat down on the kitchen chair and stared at the wall. Where? Who? How? Looking around her she eventually looked down towards the floor. The saucer of milk was empty, and there was a definite sound of purring in the air..