

Times Lost and Forgotten
By Ruqaiyah Damrah

Standing alone in the dark winter woodlands of the English countryside is the enormous Berkenshire House. It is surrounded by dirt, peppered with patches of grass. The wind is blowing just barely, a soft beckoning whisper. You begin walking up the cracked stone steps, approaching the huge door with the broken brass knocker. The ivy-covered walls of the manor have begun to break and crumble off. Some of the hundreds of windows are cracked or shattered.

You turn the handle, and the door swings open easily. You walk into the entrance hall. It's very hard to see anything in the dusty darkness, lit only by the moonlight from outside the door. Without any apparent reason, goose bumps rise on your arms. Shattered glass is scattered on the floor. The ground creaks and glass crunches beneath your feet. There are small tables lining the hall with threadbare doilies and broken glass ornaments sitting on top. It's hard to see in the darkness, but you can make out a rat scurrying through a hole. You run a hand over the wall and feel the wallpaper crumbling away under your fingertips.

The girl and boy laughed and giggled as they raced up the stone steps. The warm sunshine and summer breeze on their skin might have been the cause for their delight, or it might have been that they had just been told by their Papa, Lord Berkenshire, that they would be getting a new governess today. It doesn't matter what the reason was, anyway; it's not important. They ran ahead of their Papa, under the canopy of the oak and helm trees. The house looked magical at that moment, tucked into the lush English countryside as the cows grazed in the pastures in the distance and the dandelion fluffs dotted the grass.

They ran through the hall in one of those fits of irrational happiness that so brightens childhood. Stopping and staring at the family portrait, with all of them standing so solemnly, was enough to get them into another fit of giggles.

You arrive at a door that is broken off its hinges, but you turn the handle and open it anyway. Inside is the parlor. The carpet is shagged and torn, the soft chairs ripped open with the stuffing coming out. The wooden cabinet on the side of the room is broken, and whatever was in

there is gone now. The silk curtains are still there, floating about in the air, but the windows are completely rid of their glass panes. The chilling wind is in the room, mixing dead leaves and dirt around. There is a table in the middle of the room with chairs around it, no doubt for having tea when there was company. “What happened here?” you wonder. “Is this from age alone?”

The girl and boy sat in the red chairs, fidgeting with anticipation and boredom. Why do adults like to talk so long about nonsense anyway? They watched their young governess closely, trying to determine if she'd be hired for the job or not. The last governess had been fired for trying to administer poison in the children's tea. Papa had always told them that there were many people who didn't like them and wished them dead. What they didn't know was that the Berkenshire family had a past, a past full of enemies, brawls, and thievery. But they were young and naïve; how could they know this?

Mama and Papa and the governess sat on the chairs, sipping tea and chatting. Papa asked her all the necessary questions, the ones about her experience, where she got her education, and such. Suddenly, Papa put down his cup. “Miss Presley,” he said, leaning forward. “It is no secret that many people wish us dead.” The governess nodded seriously. “I am going to be clear from the beginning,” Papa continued. “We are going to be watching you very carefully. Now, I do not wish you to feel unwelcome, but we must very watchful for our own safety. Surely you understand?”

“Yes, Lord Berkenshire,” said Miss Presley, smiling sweetly, but the smile didn't reach her eyes. “I understand.”

You wander around the house a bit until you come to the kitchen. It's very big and roomy, but it's hard to imagine any cooking being done in this dark and damp room. The room reeks of something rotten and burned, and you gag reflexively. Green mold climbs up the walls. The countertops are yellow with stains. The stove is burned black and the stone hearth and oven have collapsed on themselves. You open a cupboard and see some pieces of moldy cheese and bread, which no doubt the rats will take care of.

Finally, after the meeting is over Miss Presley was sent upstairs to her room to unpack and relax. The children were free again, and they wandered into the kitchen, tired out from their antics. As soon as they opened the door, the bright, cheerful light hit them, and so did a wonderful aroma. Basil, oregano, garlic, thyme, bread. It all wrapped around them in one amazing smell.

The cooks were busy, expertly chopping, stirring, sautéing, kneading, and baking without a rest. They secretly smiled when the children came in, for they enjoyed their company. The children watched as one cook kneaded dough, shaped it into a loaf, and placed it carefully in the stone-brick oven. When the children began misbehaving again, the cooks shooed them out and told them to go somewhere else.

As you gaze at the family photos of the Berkenshire family, you wonder what happened to them. Did they move? Abandon the mansion? Or did something more sinister occur? You decide to go into the servants' quarters. Maybe you can find out more there.

As you make your way into one servant room after the other, you notice nothing out of the ordinary. They are simple rooms, with a bed, bureau, writing desk, and the other simple furnishings. You stop when you come to the last room. There are framed black-and-white pictures of a young woman and a boy on the bedside tables. The bureau has several faded gray dresses hanging up. There is also a small bottle. You inch closer and examine it. There is no label, but the bottle looks cold and dangerous.

Miss Presley allowed the children to help her unpack. They watched as she carefully placed framed pictures of her and a little boy on her table. "My brother," she said with a sad smile. "He resides at the Institute for the Blind now." As she folded and put away her clothing, she told the children stories of her childhood and homeland on the prairies of Minnesota. As she hung up her gray governess dresses – which the children thought quite drab – they smiled at each other. They could tell that they were going to like their new governess.

Upstairs you find a set of very grand and intricately carved doors. You know before opening it that this is the lord and lady's bedroom. Inside is a huge bed with a delicate canopy. The dressers, tables, and reading chairs are smashed and strewn around the room. The room must have once had a charming and romantic feel to it, but it's all gone now.

The boy and girl were bored. They went upstairs to see if their mama or papa could play something with them. The girl was about to knock on their door, but the boy stopped her. Their parents were whispering agitatedly in the room. Even in their young age, they knew that something wasn't right.

"What shall we do, Thomas?" whispered their mama. They could tell she was crying. "Surely they will catch up to us someday."

"I know, my dear." This was the low, scared whisper of their papa. Their papa scared? Surely something was wrong. "I've always known Worthington wouldn't rest until he killed me. I've made arrangements to end this feud once and for all. Don't worry."

"I know," she whispered sadly. "I'm so worried about the children. And Lord Worthington will not let you off easily... Oh, Thomas, I'm so dreadfully frightened."

The children couldn't listen to them anymore. They ran back downstairs.

You decide to go back downstairs and into the dining room. Surely there are more clues there. As you open the grand solid oak doors, you take sight of a very long dining table lined with numerous chairs. You walk closer and see that dinner had been set for four. The plates and dishes are empty, but they are still there, obviously used. It's as if no one bothered to clear the table, as if no one had time to clear it.

Later that evening the children ate dinner with their parents. The cooks had prepared them a quite extravagant dinner of roast beef, tiny potatoes sprinkled with exotic herbs, and other delicacies. The servers seemed quite down and sad, but no one noticed. The children were anxious to go back upstairs to their nursery; Miss Presley had promised them more stories before bed, and they had never heard anyone tell stories as well as her.

Something in you tells you to go to the nursery. Without really thinking, your feet lead you to a set of double doors. You open them and take in everything in the room: the faded baby blue wallpaper, the chest of toys, the small writing desk, the empty bookshelf, the torn books strewn across the stained carpet, the cracked mirror and bureau, and the two small beds. A tremor ripples through your heart.

The girl and the boy lie down on their beds, listening to Miss Presley's story. She was telling them of the time that she and her brother had gotten lost at a train station, and the children listened intently. When she reached the end of the story, she tucked the covers up to their chins and kissed them good night. "We will start our lessons tomorrow," she said softly. "Good night, my dears. Sweet dreams." She left the room and closed the door behind her. The children smiled serenely and fell asleep.

You crouch down near the doors and examine the carpet. There are heavy footprints, still noticeable after many years. You know that an ordinary maid wouldn't be wearing this kind or size of shoes.

In their dreams, the children felt a cold, thick liquid slide against their lips and down their throats. Several minutes later, they were aware of voices, yet still asleep. It was as if they were trapped in some kind of awake-sleeping state. "It's done," rumbled a low gruff voice. "Did ya take care of the governess?"

"Yes," came an equally gruff voice. "We put the bottle on her table. Don't worry, sir, the blame's on the dead."

"Good. The boss'll be happy." They heard some scuffling and tossing of things. They wanted to scream for their mama and papa that there were strangers in their room, but nothing came out.

"Come on, let's get outta here. We need to destroy some of the rooms. The parents are already well-off." A low chuckle sounded out.

Your eyes fall on the beds. You didn't notice before, but there are two tiny lumps under the covers and sheets.

"Emily!" the boy wanted to scream, but nothing came out. So he thought it instead. He hoped his sister could hear. "My tummy hurts."

The girl on the other bed was also trapped in her thoughts. "I feel funny, Thomas," she wanted to say. "Am I dying?"

You pull back the covers and stifle a scream. There is a boy and a girl, each about six years old. They appear to be twins.

They began to fade away, lost in the fog of forgotten times, away from the world that despised them.

Your falling tears mark the dusty sheets as you pull them up to cover the children. Why the children? you wonder as you leave the room. Why the children? They did nothing, had not yet made their marks on the world. You leave and close the door behind you. "Good night," you whisper. "Good night, my dears. Sweet dreams."

You step out of the house and back into the world. You can finally breathe again. Before you leave, you turn and look at the house once more. The children had fallen out of the world, and no one had noticed or known the truth. Is that how it works? you wonder, walking away on the path. Do people just fade away while no one notices? Dawn begins breaking and, as the sun dries the wetness on your cheeks, you realize that the lost are not always forgotten.