Inheritance

a novelette by Paul J McAuley

There was no doubt about it: he was lost.

Robert Tolley crumpled the map with an abrupt motion and levered himself out of the rented Volkswagen -- no easy task, for he was a tall man running to fat, and the seat low-slung -- to get a better look at his surroundings. He had parked the car in an embayment before a gate in the hedgerow, so that he wouldn't block the narrow, unmarked road. Now, he lit a cigarette and leaned against the old-fashioned stile, looked across the rough meadow, and wondered if he shouldn't simply abandon the search and turn back to Oxford.

A fine rain hung in the air, the kind, slightly too heavy to be a mist, that the English called a mizzle. Quaint, like calling an elevator a lift, or fall autumn, or the way the peppy red Volkswagen was called a Golf rather than a Rabbit. Like, but not like. The way the fields, vividly green even at the beginning of December, were subtly different from the New Hampshire pastures of his childhood.

Tolley was about to climb back in the car when he saw two figures leave the cover of trees in the far corner of the field and start across it. A dog's bark lifted across the grass, flat-sounding in the damp air, and the animal, a black-and-white collie, reached him before its owners, wriggling under the gate and dancing about, barking. Tolley shifted back uneasily and murmured, "Good boy, good boy," afraid that it would jump up against his new Burberry, or worse.

One of the walkers, a man, climbed the stile and called to the dog. "Don't fret," he told Tolley. His voice was thick with some northern accent. "He doesn't bite."

"Maybe you can help me," Tolley said. "I guess I'm a little lost."

"Ask away." He was a wiry man of about sixty, a chequered cap pulled low over springy white hair, an expensive camera slung over the shoulder of his Norfolk jacket. He turned and held his wife's hand as she clambered over the stile -- at least, Tolley guessed that she was his wife, a small woman a few years younger than her husband, around Tolley's age. Her glossy black hair was bound back in a girlish ponytail, and a silk scarf peeking about the top button of her fur-collared coat lent her an exotic, gypsyish air. She raised her hand to her throat, and said, "You're American, aren't you? We have a son over there, in Boston."

"Harvard University," her husband added.

Tolley said, "I was looking for a place called Steeple Heyston. You know it?"

Clearly they did, for they exchanged a look. The man said, "You must have missed the turn. It's about a mile back, only a rough track and not signposted. Nothing there anymore."

"I understood there were ruins. An old manor house. That's what I've come to see; my family on my father's side lived there. Tolley. The name mean anything to you?"

Again that exchanged glance. The man said, "There's still a bit of the old manor house. Visiting on your own?"

Tolley explained that he was divorced, and had no children. "I guess you could say that I'm the last of the line," he said, and saw the woman touch her throat again. "I'm on sabbatical now," he added, "just touring around."

"Oh, you must be at a university too," the woman said. "Our son is a professor of biology."
"My field is history. The Italian Renaissance, specifically."
"That must be difficult, you in America and all."
"Oh, UCLA has plenty of documents, and the Getty Museum even more." Tolley smiled. "I'm afraid we've bought up a lot of your past. We don't have too much of our own, I guess."
"Tell you what," the man said. "When you've done at Steeple Heyston, you come back and have tea with us."
"Why, that's very kind of you."
"No trouble. We live in South Heyston, just two miles along this road here. Glebe Cottage, two doors down from the pub. You can't miss it. Come and see us when you've done at Steeple Heyston, and we'll tell you about it."
"You're interested in local history?"
The woman said unexpectedly, "It's a terribly sad place, Professor Tolley, terribly sad. The saddest place I know."
"She thinks she's sensitive, does our Marjory," her husband said, with a smile that indicated that he certainly didn't believe such nonsense.
"It's true enough," the woman said proudly. "The seventh daughter of a seventh daughter."
"Well," Tolley said, amused. Surely, here was a fine example of that famous English eccentricity. "It's kind of you to invite me to your home. But I didn't catch your name?"
"Beaumont. Gregory and Marjory." The man stuck out his hand, and Tolley shook it. "You best be getting on," Gerald Beaumont told him.
"It's not a good place to stay after dark," his wife added.
They watched as Tolley fitted himself into his rental car and awkwardly turned it in the narrow road, stalling once, because he wasn't used to the stick shift, before he was off, the pair and their dog dwindling down the perspective of hedgerows in the rearview mirror. "Not a good place to be after dark," Tolley said to himself, smiling: superstition and religion had no place in his world. After all, he'd done his thesis work, and subsequently published a book (which had gotten him his tenure) on the influence of the Renaissance philosopher Pietro Pomponazzi, who believed that all phenomena could be attributed to natural causes, admitting no miracles, no demons or angels. Of course, Pomponazzi hadn't dared take the next logical step, which was to eliminate God, but it seemed to Tolley that the light of science had penetrated every corner of the Universe, right down to the buzzing wavicles of fundamental particles, without any evidence of an Epicurean creator overseeing all. And as for ghosts . . . well, Steven Spielberg was welcome to make millions from films about them, but that was as far as their reality went.
Tolley found the turn and steered the car, its springs complaining, down the rough, unsurfaced track, which ended in a space of long grass with trees on one side and an unkempt hedge on the other. Tolley switched off the motor and clambered out. He could hear water running somewhere in the distance, and the lonely winter sound of rooks hoarsely calling across bare fields. The car motor, cooling, ticked behind him.
There was a gate in the hedge, sagging on its posts and held shut with a loop of orange twine. With the feeling that he was trespassing, Tolley lifted the loop and pushed through. Beyond was a wide, rough meadow, on the left bounded by a copse of bare trees, on the right sloping down

toward the river, presumably the Cherwell. Ahead was an embankment, and, as Tolley watched, a train drove out of the misty distance and slid past, the lights of its passenger cars like a string of yellow beads, the roar of its passage dragging behind as it dwindled towards Birmingham.
Tolley dipped his chin inside the collar of his Burberry and started across the grass. There had once been a narrow road there, a continuance of the track, but now it was overgrown. Humps on either side marked where houses and cottages once stood. Not a stone showed now.
He went on towards the copse and, as he walked past the first clump of trees, realised that he was amongst the ruins of the manor house his family had once owned. But curiously, the realisation struck no chord in him, for all that he had looked forward to the moment.
Perhaps it was because there was hardly anything left. Here was a low hummock, narrow and straight, all that remained of a wall; there was a huge brier patch that might have once been a rose garden. Beyond the trees was the only part of the house still standing, ragged shoulders of wall either side of a great chimney, a cluster of octagonal stacks that must have been Elizabethan. Here and there were heaps of stone blocks covered with ivy and grass; nothing else.
Tolley took a few photographs in the doubtful light with his pocket Olympus; only when he had finished did he notice the building standing a few hundred yards beyond the ruins, a small, undistinguished church with a low, square tower. The hedge around its graveyard had grown wild, long whips of briers trailing from it like unkempt hair, and the headstones stood in waist-high grass obviously untrimmed since spring. Yet the gravel path was free of weeds, and a hand-sized pane broken from one of the stained-glass windows had been patched with hardboard; obviously, the church was still cared for, although its congregation had long since deserted it, or lay under the long grass. Tolley stood at the wicket gate, then turned away. It was growing dark, the sun a smear in clouds low over the cold fields; too dark, he told himself, to examine the gravestones, to look in the church for relics of his family. He would come back tomorrow.
Perhaps it was just as well his grandfather had squandered the family fortune: these grassed-over ruins were not much of an inheritance. He wondered how it had come to such a state. The end of the line. Well, he might as well see everything, he thought, and walked down to the river. It was divided by a long, narrow island that lay in the shadow of the railway bridge; on the other bank were the remains of a big, square building. A mill of some kind, Tolley guessed, for the far stream of the bisected river dropped in a glassy rush over a weir. One wall still stood, surrounded by a clump of scrubby trees. As Tolley framed this in his viewfinder, it seemed that someone was standing in the shadows there, a man with an oddly shaped head. Or no, he was wearing a top hat --
A freight train trundled around the curve and crossed the bridge with a hollow roar, sounding a two-note horn. Tolley glanced up, then took his photograph. But the figure, if it had ever been there, was gone.

A tumbledown farm, a string of concrete-block council houses, and then a cluster of picturesque cottages around a tiny village green, a church steeple rising against the evening sky behind them. Tolley found Glebe Cottage easily enough. He would have preferred a stiff drink to the tea the Beaumonts had offered, but the pub was closed, and Tolley hadn't yet mastered the arcane English licensing laws to know when it would open.

Gerald Beaumont didn't seem surprised to see Tolley, and showed him into what he called the lounge, turning down, but not off, the big colour television that was showing some old B-movie. All the strange conversation that followed, the television flickered and mumbled in its corner like some idiot child.

Seated in an overstuffed armchair, Tolley began to relax, feeling like a fledgling cuckoo as the Beaumonts fluttered about, plying him with hot, milky tea and a stack of biscuits and small, buttery cakes. They were eagerly attentive to his descriptions of the States and, in particular, of Boston, as if he could somehow evoke their lost son. Gerald Beaumont was a mining engineer who had taken early retirement, and they had moved to be near their only child when he had been working at Oxford University; but then he had become another statistic in the Brain Drain and had left them stranded and alone in the soft Oxfordshire countryside. To hear them talk, it was as if they were exiles in a foreign land.

"Well now," Gerald Beaumont said at last. "What did you think of Steeple Heyston?"

Tolley licked his buttery fingers; he'd eaten all the cakes and most of the cookies (no, he remembered, biscuits). "You were right when you said there isn't much to see. Or at least, not in twilight. I must go back and look at it properly, take some more photographs."

He had forgotten until that moment the glimpsed, foreboding figure -- perhaps it had been nothing more than a figment of his imagination, conjured out of shadow and suggestion, but he still felt a shiver, an undeniable frisson, at the recollection.

Gerald Beaumont said, "It's a good place for photography. Wait a minute."

"Oh Gerald," his wife said, as he rooted in a cupboard. He drew out a large, loose-leafed book and passed it to Tolley.

Large eight-by-ten prints, black-and-white, one to a page. The church. Its serried ranks of gravestones, all sunlight and shadow. Weeds thrust up against a lichened stone. The rough scape of a frosty field, with the chimney of the ruined house standing against a bleak sky.

"Very professional."

"My wife doesn't approve," Gerald Beaumont said, shyly pleased.

"You know how I feel about that place," Marjory Beaumont said firmly. A lavender cardigan was draped over her shoulders like a matador's cape, a big Victorian brooch pinned to its lapel. The paste jewel flickered in the light of the open fire.

Tolley said, "You were going to tell me the story of Steeple Heyston."

Marjory Beaumont looked at her husband, who nodded fractionally. "Well," she said, leaning forward as if delivering a confidence, "you saw the railway a little past the ruins. That's the old Oxford-to-Birmingham line, and it was about a hundred years ago that the tragedy happened."

"A hundred and six," Gerald Beaumont said.

His wife ignored him. "There was a passenger train on its way to Birmingham, and a goods train going towards Oxford. Well, one of the wagons of the goods train jumped the tracks and pulled others across the line just as the passenger train was about to pass it. They used to say that you could hear the shriek of brakes in Oxford, that the sparks from its wheels set fire to a quarter mile of the embankment. Well, the passenger train couldn't stop in time, and hit the goods train. The first major railway accident that was, it killed over forty people. But not so many would have died if the people of Steeple Heyston had been allowed to

help them. The squire there wouldn't let them, you see. He had been against the railway from the start, because it came so close to his house. When the other passengers carried the injured away from the wreck, the squire told his tenants that they were not to go near. 'Let them use their blasted railway to save themselves,' he's supposed to have said. Well, it was more than two hours before a relief train arrived, and by that time many had died who might otherwise have lived. You can see where they're buried, in the churchyard. The squire tried to prevent that, too, but the diocese overruled him. Two graves under the old yew hold bodies that never were identified, a man and a woman. They say you can see them on the anniversary of the accident, searching the track."

Tolley smiled. "And have you seen them?"

"I wouldn't go near there on that night, or any other. It's a sad place at the best of times. I have a feeling of something in need, not at rest."

Gerald Beaumont said, "I'm not given to believing in ghosts and such myself, but it's true that Marjory fainted there once, won't go there again."

"It's the woman, I expect," Marjory Beaumont said softly, as if to herself. "It usually is."

Her husband said, "You didn't know about this, Professor Tolley?"

"Not a thing. My grandfather never said a word about what happened to the manor house. That he came from Steeple Heyston, I know only because my father saved his naturalisation papers. That's about all he left the family."

There had been money, but most of it had been squandered before Tolley had been born, the rest lost in the Wall Street Crash. All Tolley had inherited was an appetite for luxury and a careless attitude towards money; his ex-wife's accusations of profligate spending had stung when her other charges had not because Tolley knew that it was true. He had always wanted more than he could afford.

"Do you know what happened after the accident? No? It seems," Gerald Beaumont said, "that ten years after, there was a great fire in the manor house, and at the same time the mill burned down, too. That was the only reason the village existed, the manor house and the mill, and the people drifted away afterwards."

"I guess that was when my family came to the States. My grandfather was about eighteen then. Don't know anything about his father: he would be your squire, right?"

Abruptly, Marjory Beaumont got to her feet. "I'll make another pot of tea. You'll have a cup before you go."

"Why, thank you."

"Traffic's bad this time of night," Gerald Beaumont said as he carefully laid away his photograph album. "In half an hour the worst of the rush hour will be over."

"I appreciate it. I'm still not used to driving on the wrong side of -- "

The collie, which all the while had been dozing in the corner, scrambled up, looking at the door of the lounge and making a low noise that was half-whimper, half-growl. Then there was the sound of crockery smashing. Gerald Beaumont hurried out, and Tolley followed.

Marjory Beaumont was standing in the middle of the small, brightly-lit kitchen, her hand at her throat. Her husband asked what the matter was, and she pointed at the window. Her hand trembled. Backed by night, the glass had steamed over, and two letters were traced in the condensation,

an O and an R linked together.
"I saw it happen," Marjory Beaumont said in a small voice. The lavender cardigan had slipped down from her shoulders and lay on the floor. Her husband put an arm around her, and she added, "I didn't ever think it would come here. I'm sorry, Professor Tolley. I think you ought to go now."
Driving back to Oxford, headlights of homeward bound commuters flashing by one after the other, Tolley thought that it would have been easy for the woman to have set the whole thing up: the story, the excuse to leave the room, deliberately dropping a cup and acting out a pretence of shock. Crazy English, he would have nothing more to do with them. He lit a cigarette and switched on the radio: the car filled with the solemn tones of the BBC news. Steeple Heyston, the ruins, the shadowy figure, seemed far away.

Early the next morning, Tolley found an express photographic developer that promised to have his slides ready that afternoon, then walked to the Bodleian and bought a visitor's ticket. Another quaint English ceremony: reading aloud, he had to swear a solemn oath not to injure any volume or light fires in the library. He spent a couple of hours browsing in the local history section, utterly at home amongst the serried shelves of leather-bound books, the little desks walled off from each other. The librarian fetched up several accounts of the railway accident, all more or less confirming Marjory Beaumont's confabulation, and Tolley ordered references to the history of Steeple Heyston as well. It had been mentioned in the Domesday Book, but had seemingly declined in population ever since, a process Tolley's ancestors had speeded up by shrewd use of the enclosure acts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Steeple Heyston was no more than a hamlet dependent upon a small paper mill; then there had been the fire Gerald Beaumont had mentioned, the beginning of the end. The last cottage had been demolished after the Second World War, although the church was still occasionally used.
Tolley pocketed his notes and joined the press of laden shoppers slowly swirling past long lines waiting for double-decked buses. Street performers strummed guitars or juggled in shop doorways; at the Carfax crossroads, a Salvation Army band was playing carols beneath a huge plastic Santa Claus strung high in the cold air.
Tolley found a McDonald's and hungrily devoured a cheeseburger with all the trimmings, washed it down with a milkshake. Looking through the plate-glass window toward the tower of Christ Church, poised like a spaceship beyond the town hall, he thought: The hell with all the mystery; I'm on vacation, right? He spent the next couple of hours checking off the minor colleges he'd missed the first time around, and only reluctantly fought his way through the crowds to the photographic shop.
When the assistant handed him the envelope, he opened it straight-away. There were the shots he had taken at Stratford-upon-Avon, and the few of Oxford he had taken before leaving for Steeple Heyston, but that was all. He asked, "What about the others?"
The assistant, a teenager with streaks bleached into her hair, shrugged. Tolley looked in the envelope, found a strip of milky film, asked her what the problem was. She didn't know, and didn't seem to care. He waved the ruined film, protested, "It looks like you've made some kind of mistake."

"I dunno, it's all done by computers and stuff. Maybe your camera's broke."
"Let me speak to your manager, if you won't help me."
"She won't be in until the day after tomorrow. It's Christmas, see."
"Not really," Tolley said, but this wasn't the first time he'd come across such wilful unhelpfulness in England. He paid and left to look for lunch. Anger always made him hungry.

That afternoon, his stomach comfortably distended by steak and kidney pie, his anger tempered by several pints of bitter, Tolley returned to his hotel, intending to take a nap. But when he pushed open the door of his room, it stuck halfway. Something was lying on the floor behind it; the case he'd set on the folding frame. He reached around and shoved until the door opened far enough for him to be able to squeeze through. And then the smell hit him: a dense stench of burning, thick as molasses. Yet there was no smoke. His case and its contents, mostly underwear, lay on the floor behind the door, and the quilt and sheets had been pulled off the bed.
Tolley opened a window to get some fresh air, and dialled the reception desk. His first thought was that the room had been burgled; but his camera was sitting on the night table, next to his Walkman and Bach tapes. And then he noticed the carpet. Scraped into the pile were the letters O and R, linked in just the same way they had been on the Beaumont's kitchen window. Just then the clerk answered, and Tolley set the 'phone down.
There were two explanations, he thought, as he drove the rental car up the Banbury Road out of Oxford. Either the Beaumonts were hounding him for whatever crazy reason, had broken into his hotel room, even bribed the photographic shop to ruin his film . . . either that, which was so utterly unlikely, or what Marjory Beaumont had told him was true. And he couldn't believe that, either. But he wanted to go back to Steeple Heyston: in full daylight this time, and preferably not alone.
Gerald Beaumont looked surprised when he opened the door, but after Beaumont had ushered Tolley inside, his wife came out of the lounge and said, "I thought you might be back, Professor."
Tolley managed a polite smile, told them that his camera had broken and couldn't be repaired here . . . but he would like some pictures of steeple Heyston, and wondered if Gerald Beaumont would mind . . . ? He'd thought this up as he had navigated the country lanes, not a great excuse, but better than telling the whole truth. If the couple was behind this, perhaps he could lull them; perhaps they'd commit some obvious error.
Marjory Beaumont said, "Is this important to you?"
"Well, I promised myself I'd take back some pictures of the old ancestral home. I'll pay whatever it costs, of course."
"I'd be delighted," Gerald Beaumont said. "We'd best hurry to catch the light."
Tolley saw the look his wife gave him, stern yet at the same time worried.
"Be careful now," she said. "Do be careful."
"Stuff and nonsense," Gerald Beaumont told her amiably. He said to Tolley, "She had quite a shock last night, I'm afraid."
"I'm sorry if it had anything to do with me," Tolley said disingenuously.
Marjory Beaumont touched her throat and smiled; Tolley saw for an instant the vivacious girl she had once been. "I know it was nothing conscious on your part, and we invited you here, after all. So you believe it now, Professor?"

"I admit to being kind of sceptical before," Tolley said tactfully. He was wondering if she was trying to con out of him. Maybe something to do with her son.
She followed them out to the car, watched as Gerald Beaumont fussily settled his equipment on the backseat. "Take care," she said, then turned and hurried into the cottage.
As Tolley shifted into first gear, he said, "I hope I haven't upset your wife."
Gerald Beaumont was fiddling with the seat belt. "She doesn't mean anything by it. High-strung, you see, and after last night. . . . I'm not what you'd call a spiritualist, Professor. I've always believed that there's an explanation behind everything, if you look hard enough. Being an engineer, you see. But last time we went to Steeple Heyston, you know, a couple of years ago now, she fainted. Sensitive to atmospheres. D'you think there's something to the idea that places might be printed by things that happen there, if you follow me? That would be your ghosts, you see. Perhaps you acted like a catalyst, your family being from there."
"That was a long time ago." Tolley was tempted to tell Beaumont about his ransacked hotel room, the stench of burning, the initials in the carpet pile. But that might blow the whole thing; instead, he pretended to be intent on driving. Soon, the car was bumping down the track, and he pulled up in the same place as the previous afternoon.
The air was cold and sharp. Frost still lay in hollows, and a light mist floated above the water of the divided river. Tolley felt a little frisson, pure anticipation, when he saw the ruined stub of wall amongst the scrubby trees on the far bank. He had Beaumont take a couple of photographs of it, waiting patiently as the older man fussed with his camera and (of all things in this electronic age) a light meter. The frost made the contours of the ground easy to read, and Tolley could make out the long strips of the ancient field system beyond the hummocks where the village had been. Everything was quiet and still, the solitude emphasised when a train passed.
"It's a lonely place," Beaumont remarked, uncannily echoing Tolley's thoughts. "But it's not as bleak as this in summer. Buttercups all over the place, boats on the river. People like to picnic here."
"Yeah? You know, I wish the title to the land was still in the family. This would be a great place for a hotel; just think of those ruins as a feature in the grounds."
"It's nice enough as it is," Beaumont said stiffly.
"I'm sorry. I forgot you English don't like things to change."
"And you Americans don't know anything else; that's why you think the past is quaint instead of real." Perhaps it has been intended as a rebuke, but the man was smiling, and after a moment Tolley smiled too.
They were amongst the scattered remnants of the manor house now. Beaumont laboriously framed and took a picture of the chimney, then turned up the collar of his Norfolk jacket and asked, "Did you have a look at the cemetery?"
"The graveyard? Just a glance."
"They still use the church a few times a year, you know. Come on, I'll show you the gravestones. Some of the inscriptions are rather funny."
But first he led Tolley beneath the spreading shade of the yew tree behind the church, where two gravestones stood apart from the others, their brief inscriptions blotted by lichen. "Them are the buggers that are causing the

trouble, according to Marjory."
"I thought your wife said it was the woman?"
"Who knows? Seems daft to me, talking like this. It's this place, Professor Tolley, if it's anything. Not anyone who was buried here. Down in the mines, you know, there are galleries you don't like to be alone in, old workings with a funny feeling to them. Miners are as superstitious as sailors; like it or not, I suppose a bit of that rubbed off on me. About places, though, not ghosts."
Tolley thought of the initials scrawled in the steam on the kitchen window, then thought of his room. How could a feeling, a sense of place, do that? He said, "Let's take a look at those inscriptions you mentioned."

Rather than funny, Tolley found them prim and touchingly pious, almost wistful. Death had not been an end to these people, but an interval, a sleep. He left Beaumont photographing them, and stepped inside the porch of the little church. The iron handle of the door was stiff; then it gave, and the door creaked open.
It was colder than outside. Tolley shivered, looking at the brief row of pews either side of the aisle, the plain pulpit and the draped altar beyond. The windows were narrow, their slots edged with dogtoothing: Norman, perhaps, although the glass was Victorian. Below, tablets were set in the rough stone walls, one listing the names of those killed in the Great war, a dusty poppy wedged in the iron holder beneath it, another mentioning a Victorian incumbent of the parish. The next was in memorium of Alfred Tolley, squire of this parish, and his wife Evangaline, both dead in the same year, 1886. Was that when the manor house had burned down? Beyond were other memorials of his family, and, as Tolley began to examine them, he thought he heard the door creak open. He said, "How old is this place, Mr Beaumont?"
Silence. Tolley looked around. He was alone. The door was closed.
It was then that he heard a distant, drawn-out metallic screeching, a frantic sound keening towards the edge of disaster; and then it cut off.
He smelled the same, gritty, sulphureous stench he'd encountered in his hotel room, and a voice said out of the air, "You'll none of you help them! Let their damned engines come to their aid!"
Tolley grasped the edge of a pew, and the prick of a splinter in his palm brought him to himself. His first step turned into a stagger, and then he ran, wrenching back the door and bursting out into the bleak daylight.
Gravel scraped under his shoes, and he stopped, gasping, air achingly cold on his teeth. The church door hung ajar on the merest sliver of darkness; with an effort, Tolley turned away from it. Near the gate in the overgrown hedge, Gerald Beaumont was preparing to photograph yet another head stone.
Tolley called, "Did you hear something just then?"
Click. Beaumont looked around. "What was it?"
Tolley's hands were shaking; he couldn't stop them shaking, jammed them into the pockets of his Burberry. He thought, for a moment only, of a tape recorder, a hidden speaker. . . .
He said, "I don't know. Like . . . no, forget it. Maybe we should quit. It's getting dark."
"There are memorials to your family in the church. Did you see them? I've my flash attachment, I could -- "
Tolley began to walk towards the gate. "No, no, that's OK Let's go, huh?"
Beaumont fell in beside him. "Are you all right? You look as if you've had

a shock."
"No, no." I'm not crazy, he thought. I'm not. Suppose this guy is trying something on, him and his weird wife. But that's as crazy. He said, "Maybe a little jet-lag. I should get back to my hotel, sleep a little."
Tolley looked at the ruins amongst the trees, half-expecting to see a shadowy figure there. Nothing. Suddenly, urgently, he felt the need to escape, and in the car startled Gerald Beaumont by popping the clutch and spinning the wheels of his Volkswagen as if he were a teenager laying down rubber in the drive of his girlfriend's house.

Outside the Beaumonts' cottage, Tolley thanked the man for taking the photographs, and promised to send him copies.
"I've my own darkroom. I could develop the film now, if you like."
"That's very kind, Mr Beaumont, but I can get it done in town."
"Well, come in anyway, while I unload the camera. Marjory will make you a pot of tea. It'll help your jet-lag." Beaumont twisted the key in the lock and pushed open the door, saying, "I'll write my address on -- " And then he saw the dog scratching at the closed kitchen door at the end of the hall. "Bill! Bill, what's wrong, boy?"
The dog glanced back and whined, then resumed its patient scratching, pressing its nose to the joint at the door. Beaumont twisted the handle and the door gave, but only a little. Beaumont pushed harder, grunting, and then the door scraped open and both men saw what lay beyond. The dog barked and bounded inside to lick his mistress's hand where it lay outstretched on the floor.

After Marjory Beaumont had been taken from the hospital's Emergency Room to a ward, her husband following the porter who wheeled her stretcher towards the elevators, Tolley asked at the desk whether he could get something to eat, and was directed through a long hall and up a flight of stairs to a snack bar set up in the blind end of a corridor. But the cheese roll sat like a cannonball in his stomach, and the coffee, faintly greasy and with grains of undissolved powdered milk floating on the surface, was undrinkable.
He sat for an hour at the little Formica table, listening to the chatter of the people around him but not taking any of it in. Once, he absently traced the letters OR in spilled sugar grains, then hastily erased them. The mark had been all over the kitchen, scraped in pools of flour and salt on the floor, in drying tomato sauce (they'd first thought it was blood) on the appliances and on the windows. Whatever had done it seemed to be single-mindedly trying to communicate something. Someone's initials? Its own? At any rate, Tolley no longer believed that the Beaumonts had anything to do with the disordered state of his hotel room. It was something else.
At last, Beaumont, his face stiff and pinched, pushed through the swing doors; Tolley stood and met him halfway. "How is she?"
"Sleeping now. They gave her something."
Tolley said, as they walked towards the exit, "Do you know what happened?"

"She said that she thought she glimpsed someone through the kitchen window, but she can't remember anything after that, next to waking up in the hospital."
"Who? A man?"

"She can't remember, and I didn't press her. She needs her rest."
"I'm sorry."
"There was something else. Just as she was drifting off, she said something, a name. Orlando Richards. Mean anything to you?"
"O R!"
"That's what I thought. And then she said, 'One wants rest, the other worse."
Tolley held the door for Gerald Beaumont before following him into the parking lot. The air was cold and dark; sodium streetlights dropped pools of orange light amongst the rows of parked cars. Tolley said, "I remember your wife saying that the woman is stronger, when it comes to ghosts, but isn't Orlando a man's name?"
"I suppose. These are deep waters, Professor Tolley." Gerald Beaumont looked across the top of Tolley's rental car. The lines on his thin face were accentuated by orange glow, deep vertical creases seeming to pull his mouth downward, his eyes shadowy pits. He said, "I don't suppose by any chance you're Catholic."
"I'm not anything. What are you thinking, exorcism? Come on, the Pope banned all that, didn't he? The best thing to do is forget this."
"How can I now, with my wife in the hospital? It's all very well for you -- you can just run away. We have to live with whatever it is you've disturbed."
"Me? I didn't do anything but come here."
"Aye, well," the man said truculently.
"Look, if you go to a priest and tell him your wife was attacked by a ghost, do you really think that he is going to believe you, in this day and age? Let it go, Mr Beaumont," Tolley said, and unlocked the car.
During the fifteen-minute drive back to South Heyston, the two men hardly exchanged a dozen words. Gerald Beaumont's silence was downright accusatory, but rather than guilt, Tolley felt a growing anger. Why should it have anything to do with him? He didn't choose his ancestors. Marjory Beaumont was the believer, not he: why should he be blamed? Still, outside the cottage, he was moved to ask, "Will you be all right?"
"Leave it be," Beaumont said shortly, and got out of the car, then dipped his head and added, "Maybe without you, things will calm down." Then he shut the door firmly, before Tolley could reply.

One wants rest, the other worse. It ran through Tolley's head like maddening jingle as he drove back to Oxford. Worse, presumably, meant revenge. It had torn up his room, let him know its name through Marjory Beaumont . . . and next? The best thing to do would be to leave for London a day early; surely he would not be followed there.
But at the hotel Tolley was unwilling to return to the menacing disorder of his room. He took an early supper in the dining room, lingered over a couple of scotches at the bar. But at last he could put it off no longer; he had to pack, and if he didn't make a move he wouldn't find a room in London in time. The noise of the key turning in the lock of the door to his room was loud in the deserted corridor. He waited half a minute, then pushed the door open.
He had a nasty moment groping for the light switch, remembering an account, surely the world's shortest ghost story, of how someone had awoken with a start and groped for matches to light a candle . . . and felt something place them in his hand. The light came on.

The room was as it should have been: his case on its stand, the bed-covers neatly stretched over the mattress, one corner turned back and a chocolate mint wrapped like a gold medallion on the plumped pillow. Of course, the maid had been in. Even the initials scraped into the carpet pile had been erased by vacuuming. He crossed to the bed and picked up the 'phone to call the desk.

And, twenty minutes later, set it back angrily. He had tried to get a room in the hotel he'd booked for tomorrow: no luck. And no luck either at the half dozen others he'd tried. The desk clerk had suggested that he try a bed-and-breakfast place, and Tolley had lost his temper.

"I want proper accommodation, not someone's second-best bedroom. Why is that such a problem?"

"It's Christmas, I'm afraid, sir."

"Don't tell me," Tolley said, "no room at the inn." And slammed down the 'phone. Well, perhaps he'd be safe here. He checked that the window was locked, and went down to the bar, spent a couple of hours in conversation with a married couple from Idaho -- she had majored in architecture, and was in her element, while her husband grumbled half seriously about the bad service, the appalling plumbing, the litter everywhere . . . in short, the lack of all the comforts any truly civilised country could afford in this last quarter of the twentieth century. Tolley agreed with all this, while wistfully eyeing the deep valley visible between the woman's breasts (thank God that décolletage was back in fashion) and thirstily drinking half a dozen double scotches. At last, dizzy with drink and suppressed lust, he staggered back to his room, remembering only as he was crawling into bed that he shouldn't be there. Warmed through with dutch courage, he even switched off the light.

And woke with the 'phone warbling beside his bed. He groped for the light switch, picked up the instrument. "Call for you, sir," the desk said, and then there was a click, and Gerald Beaumont's voice said, "Professor Tolley?"

"Sure." It was half past six in the morning. Tolley's teeth felt as if they had been rubbed in ashes; there was a burning edge to his stomach.

"Look, Professor, I didn't want to ring you, but there's no one else I can turn to. And you're involved after all, you understand.

"It's Marjory. She left the hospital."

"She's been discharged. Isn't it kind of early -- "

"Not discharged. When the nurse brought her breakfast half an hour ago, she found that Marjory was gone. She's taken her clothes, too. I think I know where she's gone, Professor, and so do you."

Tolley was abruptly clearheaded. "Shouldn't you call the police?"

"And tell them she's possessed by a ghost? They'd put me away. But I might have to tell them something, if I don't get any help, and I still have those photographs of Steeple Heyston. You've got to live up to your responsibility in this, do you see?"

"I understand what you're trying to tell me, Mr Beaumont."

Beaumont's voice said, "I'm sure that when I find her, she'll come out of it. It needs someone familiar, that's all."

"If you really think that's where she is, I wouldn't like you going to look for her alone."

"I'm going over there now. I'll hope to see you."

"I said I'll come, Goddamnit!" But there was only the buzz of the

disconnected line.

More than Beaumont's feeble threats, it was the residue of the past evening's binge that got Tolley down to his rental car and onto the road north out of Oxford. By the time he was bumping down the rough lane towards Steeple Heyston, fear was beginning to cloud his light-headed recklessness, but it was too late to turn back.

There was already a car, a little hatchback, parked in the space at the end of the track; in it, and beyond it the gate in the hedge stood open. Tolley called out to Beaumont. The darkness took his voice: swallowed it. His skin prickling, he picked his way over the ground, frost crackling under his shoes. It was bitterly cold, dawn a curdled gray limning the railway embankment.

Tolley quartered the hummocky ground where the village had once stood, but there was no sign of Gerald Beaumont. He was about to turn back when he glimpsed movement amongst the trees ahead, the trees around the ruins of the manor house. He froze, his blood knocking heavily in every corner of his body: but it was only the Beaumonts' dog. It came towards him uncertainly, its tail low.

"Good boy," Tolley said. "Where's your owner, huh?"

The dog whined, then started towards the trees; when it saw that Tolley wasn't following, it danced back, barking. Tolley called again.

"Beaumont!"

Night. Silence. Tolley's breath plumed in the air.

And then he heard, faint and far off, a harsh squealing, metal on metal. Every hair on the back of his neck rose as a kind of tide of coldness swept across his skin. He turned and saw, against the advancing light of dawn, a black figure on top of the embankment. It was still for a moment, then seemed to swoop down the steep slope, moving as swiftly as a gliding bird. Already, Tolley's line of retreat was cut off; he turned and began to run, the dog following for a moment before breaking back towards the trees.

Tolley ran on, breathing hard and hardly daring to look back, nothing in his head but the thudding of his pulse and the blind imperative to flee, flee before the thing was upon him. He blundered through the church gate, gravel scattering under his flying feet. The door, the door. . . .

It gave. Tolley stumbled through and leaned against it. A great wind got up around the church, howling and howling, rattling the panes of stained glass. Tolley fumbled inside his coat for a book of matches and, by the light of one, found the door's iron bolt and pushed it home just as something crashed into the door on the other side. The wind was even louder now: the hardboard that had patched the broken window flew in with a clatter, and a thick stench of burning began to fill the dark space of the church. The match stung Tolley's fingers. He dropped it and instantly lit another. To be alone in the dark was intolerable.

Whatever was on the other side of the door began to turn the handle back and forth. Tolley retreated, and something struck the back of his knees before toppling to the stone flags. Tolley struck another match. A bench. A pile of little books that had been stacked on one end spilled at his feet. Prayer books. He picked one up, and its limp red cover fanned like the wings of a dead bird. Dead, dead and buried. He understood that it was his only hope.

First, he had to have light.

He lifted one of the thick candles from the altar and used several matches to get it alight, then stuck it to the rim of the pulpit with its own wax drippings. All the while the wind howled and keened, and the hammering at the door never let up, underscored by scratchings like fingernails on the stained glass of the broken window. Tolley saw with horror one glass fragment and then another fall, brief twinkling meteors. He scrabbled through the thin pages of the prayer book until he came to the Service for the Burial of the Dead, and began.

The wind did not die as he read the psalm, but the banging of the door became staccato, and no more fragments of glass fell. When he reached the middle of the lesson, the banging ceased. Tolley read on, a weight seeming to lift from his chest, the wind dropping around the church, a mumbling moan that seemed at the edge of words. Danger, danger. And as he read, it seemed that he was no longer alone in the church, that a dark shadow occupied the middle of the front pew. He dared not lift his eyes from the page lest he stumble in his recitation, yet the shadow tugged at the corner of his vision, undefined, insubstantial, but definitely there.

And then, his throat dry, Tolley came to the end of the lesson, and realised that he would have to read the last part at the grave. He hesitated, and the wind rose again, the candle flame flickered. There was nothing for it: the forms had to be gone through.

The shadow melted from the pew as, holding the candle before him, Tolley walked down the aisle and fumbled with the door's heavy bolt. It slid back, and he turned the handle.

Wind blew in his face.

The candle flame winnowed flat but did not quite go out.

There was nothing outside but gray-edged darkness.

As he walked amongst the ranked gravestones towards the isolated pair beneath the yew, Tolley felt a kind of pressure at his back, but steeled himself not to look around. He faced the grave of the unknown man and by the light of the candle began to read the final part of the service.

"Forasmuch as it hath pleased Almighty God of His great mercy to take unto Himself the soul of Orlando Richards, here departed, we therefore commit his body to the ground. . . ."

As he read, the words became more than words: every one a weight that had to be lifted and laid, each a single stone in the solemn edifice he was constructing. He came to the final prayer and, despite his aching throat, read it loudly, almost triumphantly. After the final amen, he heard, far off in the winter dawn -- for it was dawn now, although still so dark that he could distinguish no colours -- a cock crowing, the traditional end to a night of magic. Tolley blew out the candle and, with the blunt edge of his car key, inscribed the name Orlando Richards on the headstone. Done.

Every step was light on the frosty ground as he walked away from the church. It was over, he thought, his hands trembling lightly with relief. Over. I've done my duty, atoned for what my great-grandfather did. As he skirted the trees and the ruined chimney of the manor house, the dog came bounding towards him, barking frantically, dancing around and running back towards the ruins, turning and barking. Tolley followed it.

"What is it, boy? Quiet now. Where's your master? Where -- "

And then he saw Gerald Beaumont.

The man's body was slumped in a tangle of briers at the base of the great chimney stack. The face was entirely gone, a mess of blood and bone, but

Tolley recognised the Norfolk jacket, the checkered cap that lay a little way off.
He turned aside and vomited, though there was little to come. As he straightened, wind blew around him out of nowhere, shaking the bare branches of the surrounding trees. Tolley began to run, the dog at his heels. Wind bent the frosty tufts of grass, whirled leaves into the shape of a human figure before collapsing and blowing on, always in front of Tolley, who was now only stumbling as best he could, his terror leached by exhaustion. All he could think of were Marjory Beaumont's words about female ghosts, that they were stronger than those of men. And their hate stronger, too, strong enough to last a century even after the object of her hate had fled its first malignant flowering, strong enough to destroy Beaumont, poor bastard, who had only been at the edge of things. The ghost of Orlando Richards had not been the danger; perhaps he had even tried to warn Tolley of his companion. And now Tolley had laid him to rest.
Panting, Tolley pushed through the gate, saw with dull shock the figure waiting beside his car. For a moment he thought that his heart would stop; then the dog bounded ahead, and he realised that it was Marjory Beaumont, and he wondered how he could tell her about her husband. But then she spoke, he voice halting and heavy. Her voice, but she was not using it.
"I've waited so long for this. So long."
The last thing Tolley saw was the axe she carried.

Afterword

'Inheritance' was first published in The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction in 1988 and has not been published since; I'm pleased to be able to revive it. It was written while I was living in Oxford, and two things in it are true: the lost village with its ruined mill and burnt-down manor house (although I've changed the name); and the railway accident. Some of the initial ruffles of the haunting were drawn from a local newspaper story; I leave it to the reader to decide which are reported and which invented.
With regard to ghosts, my position is that of Gerald Beaumont. We respond to places, and ghosts spring from our response. And we respond to any place which was once inhabited in a different way to places which have always been wilderness. The latter we say are empty because they have no human history, and it is human history, the traces of the passage of people like us, to which we are most sensitive. Despite its American protagonist (who shares some of my own culture shock: I returned to Oxford after two years in Los Angeles) this is a very English ghost story. It deliberately echoes those of the doyen of English ghost story writers, M R James, although James was a Cambridge man, and would, of course, never have written about Oxford.
Almost every square metre of England is resonant with past lives, but the most peculiarly haunted place I have encountered is a little canyon, Walnut Canyon, in the arid forests near Flagstaff, Arizona. Here, a few miles from the observatory where Lowell believed he saw traces of habitation on the disc of far distant Mars (the ghosts of his imagination have haunted SF writers ever since), there are the remains of Indian dwellings tucked into ledges eroded from softer strata in the steep cliff faces. It is a quiet, peaceful place. Its inhabitants were hunter gatherers, and would not have needed to work hard to find food. Think of them singing to each other, in the blue desert evening, from one side of

the winding canyon to the other, harmonising with the echoes of their own voices. If they left behind ghosts, they are content to rest, and watch the sunlight move across the face of the cliffs and the turkey vultures wheel in the high clear air as they wheeled when the ghosts were alive. But that is another story.

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