Opening extract from

The Ghost of Thomas Kempe

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Prologue

'What's this, then?'

The two men were in the roof of the cottage, working on the attic that was to be made into a bedroom. The floor was white with the plaster they had chipped away from the walls. Cobwebs trickled from the rafters. One of the men, prising a chunk of rotten wood from the window frame, had let fall a small bottle wedged behind. It broke as it touched the floor: greenish glass, with a sediment clinging to it.

The other man touched it with his foot. 'That's old glass, that is.'

'This is an old place. Look at the thickness of that wall. And the chimney goes right up through.'

The man who had dropped the bottle pushed the fragments of glass to one side, among plaster chunks, and curls of old wallpaper patterned with

green leaves. Whistling, he began to cut new wood for the window frame.

'There's a gap under that frame. Where the old wood come out.'

'I'll plaster it over.'

'Nice view out of there. Straight over to the church.'

'And the lock-up. Remind you to keep your nose clean, eh?' The men laughed.

'This room's not been used in years, I'd say.'

'No. There was an old couple lived here before. Didn't need the space. We had to break the door down, first time I come up here with Mrs Harrison, to see what work had to be done on it. Nailed up, it was. The dust was that thick it was like no one had been up here in a hundred years.'

'Make a nice room when we've done.'

'For the boy, she said. Room of his own, like.'

'We'll get cleared up. I want to get down to the allotment tonight.'

They began to stack tools, sweep the rubbish into a corner. Dust swirled like smoke in the shaft of evening sunlight from the small window: rolls of it

drifted over the floor, clinging to the men's feet and overalls.

'Draughty in here.'

'We'll have to see to that window. It wants refitting.'

The men picked up their tools and clattered down the wooden stairs. The door banged behind them, shaking more plaster from the walls, and their footsteps went away down the street. In the room, there was a gathering of air: it bunched and compressed into little winds that nosed the mounds of wallpaper, rustled them, and set the windows faintly rattling. Then it subsided, and the room was quiet: empty.

chapter 1

James Harrison and his mother turned out of Ledsham's main street into a lane that ran between terraced cottages. The lane ended abruptly at a gate and became a footpath which disappeared in a landscape of fields and trees, ridged with the dark lines of hedges. Their own cottage stood at the end: the last house in Ledsham. It was called East End Cottage and they had been living there for two weeks.

James walked five paces behind his mother, carrying her shopping basket, which he disliked because it banged against his bare legs and scratched him where the cane was broken. Also it had things like ladies' tights and cabbages sticking out of it, which was embarrassing. Tim, the dog, walked ten paces behind James. James looked back at him and tried to imagine him as one of those large, shaggy, responsible-looking dogs that carry folded-up

newspapers and shopping baskets. Tim, squat, square and mongrel, grinned back, independent and unobliging.

They passed under low eaves encrusted with swallows' nests, hanging above front doors that opened straight on to the pavement. Behind each small window were huge plants in pots, dimly green behind the glass, as though seen underwater, shielding murky rooms. In one, a ginger cat gloated at Tim, who scrabbled at the wall in a frenzy of frustration and evil language.

'Make him come,' said Mrs Harrison. 'He'll give us a bad name. Since we seem to have acquired him now, whether we like it or not.'

Tim had arrived at East End Cottage shortly after the Harrisons. He had been found sitting outside the back door, looking pathetic and homeless, had been fed, and within days had installed himself firmly within the house, establishing his rights and ingratiating himself with Mrs Harrison who he was quick to identify as the source of food. He was, clearly, a dog with a long, complicated and mysterious past. Sometimes other

people in the village glanced at him curiously, as though they could not quite place him. The postman said he could swear he'd lived at the butcher's at one time and Mr Harrison said grimly that didn't surprise him in the least.

James looped the belt of his jeans through Tim's collar and pulled him away. Tim immediately drooped his stumpy tail and assumed his ill-treated dog pose, for the benefit of an old lady watching from over the street.

'Huh,' said James. 'You don't fool me, you know.' He caught up with his mother.

'Anything for tea?'

'Food,' said Mrs Harrison. 'As usual. I'll have the basket now. Thank you for carrying it.'

'Not at all,' said James politely. He had just embarked on a policy of insurance against various crimes he was certain to commit before long, either with or without intending to. His mother gave him a startled look.

They were almost home now. James could see the window of his attic room, staring over towards the church. The cottage was small, square and

comfortable: coming to live in it had been like putting on an old coat. It had a sagging slate roof, a bulge at one end where once there had been a bread-oven, huge beams, creaking stairs, and stone floors with interesting cracks from which emerged, at night, large and stately black beetles. James was making a study of the black beetles: it was going to be called *The Life Cycle of a British Beetle* by Dr James Harrison, FRS, MP, D.Phil., OBE. Helen preferred the new houses in the estate the other side of Ledsham, where she already had a network of friends.

'They've got tiled bathrooms and fitted kitchens. And carpet all the way up the stairs. You ought to see, Mum.'

'I'm sure they're very enviable, dear. But your father and I rather fancied the cottage.'

Mum could be quite sensible about some things, you had to admit that. It makes you wonder, James thought bitterly, what she had to have Helen for. I mean, when you think of all the people she might have had, and she had to have Helen. Other people's sisters were pretty fearful too, but Helen

beat the lot. Tiled bathrooms . . . Ugh!

Helen, of course, had never discovered that you could climb the apple tree that overhung the back of the house and get from thence on to the ledge of the chimney stack. And she'd not noticed the possibilities of the rubbish heap at the far end of the orchard, full of stuff chucked out by the workmen, which he had yet to examine properly. And only he and Tim knew about the nettle-covered well by the fence, where, they strongly suspected, there were rats.

They had seventeen apple trees, instead of the lawn and flower-beds favoured by Helen. Splendid apple trees, with writhing twisted branches like a troupe of weird dancers frozen amid the long grass. The trees were sagging now, in autumn, with ripe fruit. Mrs Harrison, who was a practical person, had stuck a blackboard up outside the cottage. They could see it now, as they came towards the gate, propped up against the hedge. It said, in white chalk:

Bramleys – 5p. per pound
Worcesters 6p. ″ ″
Windfalls 3p. ″ ″

And underneath that it said:

Sorcerie
Astrologie
Geomancie
Alchemie
Recoverie of Goodes Loste
Physicke

Mrs Harrison put down the basket and read it through carefully. 'Very funny,' she said. 'Very witty. Though the spelling is a little archaic, if I may say so. I suppose I was asking for something like that, putting that board up. And now would you mind wiping it off before tea.' She went up the path and into the cottage. From within came the monotonous sound of Helen playing with a friend.

James studied the blackboard. Not Helen, certainly not Helen. Dad? But the blackboard had not been tampered with when Mr Harrison left in the morning, and he would not be back till later. So who, then? Somebody, thought James, bristling, having a go at me. There's that boy down the road.

Simon something. Or one of the other boys at school. How did they know all those words, though? You'd have needed a dictionary for that lot. I'm going to have to sort this out, he thought. Later.

He followed Tim round the back of the cottage, remembering some unfinished business they had with a hole between the roots of one of the apple trees. They were trying to see if it was possible to mine one's way right under one of the trees and come up the other side. Tim, whatever his other short-comings, was always game for that kind of thing: indeed, insofar as it is possible for a dog to do so, he even made suggestions himself.

They did some more work on their hole and then, finding themselves thwarted by a large root, decided to come in for tea. Helen and her friend, a pale girl with plaits, no doubt from the world of fitted kitchens and carpeted stairs, were already seated at the table. They watched him come in with a disapproving stare.

'That's my brother,' said Helen. The friend nodded sympathetically.

There were scones and swiss roll. James sat

down, feeling cheerful and hungry.

'Mother,' said Helen loudly, 'I do think James might wash his hands before he comes in to tea. Specially when I've got a visitor.' Calling Mum 'mother' was a new idea of hers: she thought it elegant. James glared at her.

'Point taken,' said Mrs Harrison. 'Go and wash them, James.'

He stamped up to the bathroom, and washed the backs of his hands, leaving the palms untouched. Helen needn't think she could win a total victory. His face, freckled, thatched with thick, butter-coloured hair, grinned at him from the mirror: he tried out some of his expressions, the bad-man-in-Western sneer, the Cup-Final captain's grin (holding Cup, or rather, tooth-mug, in upstretched arms), the boxing-champion's snarl (quite good, that one, with towel round neck and hair damped back). Overhead, in his bedroom, he heard a thump. That would be Tim, no doubt. He wasn't supposed to go into the bedrooms, since he made untidy nests on the beds, but there was no known way of stopping him. He was believed to have discovered how to open doors.

His mother's voice came up the stairs. 'James! I said "wash", not have a bath. We're waiting.'

He took the towel off hastily, arranged it on top of the half-open door as a Helen-trap, and hurried downstairs, saying 'Coming, mother. Sorry, mother.'

'That'll do,' said Mrs Harrison. 'I'm beginning to feel like a lady in a Victorian novel. Any more of that and I'll get you a frilly shirt and satin knickerbockers.'

Helen and the friend tittered. Something with the bristly texture of a pan-cleaner rubbed against James's leg: it was Tim, dropping hints about the swiss roll. James gave him a puzzled glance. Had he learned to fly, too?

'More cake?' said Mrs Harrison. 'Julia? Helen? No, James, that is the cake, not the slice, if you don't mind. What are you girls planning to do after tea?'

They exchanged looks and began to giggle. 'We'll tell you later,' said Helen, in a heavy whisper. James arranged his face into what he hoped was an expression of deep, seering contempt. That was one of the things about girls – one of the many, many things – this business of going all secret and

ridiculous and pretending they were up to something when you knew perfectly well they were too dim to get up to anything at all except some daft business messing about in the kitchen. He sighed deeply, and stared out of the window, with the preoccupied look of someone who has real concerns.

'And you, James? Oh, but you have a job to do, haven't you? That board.'

'We knew it was you,' said Helen. 'We thought it was silly.'

James closed his eyes and assumed an expression of tired resignation.

'Pointless. I s'pose that's why you were late for school.'

James opened one eye and looked balefully at her.

'Not again, James,' said Mrs Harrison.

'And it was all spelt wrong, anyway,' Helen went on.

'All right, then,' said James, goaded beyond endurance. 'Bet *you* don't know what astrology means.'

'I do.'

'What, then?'

'Not telling you,' said Helen.

James said 'Huh'. He fetched the dishcloth from the sink, damped it under the tap, and went out to the gate. Scrubbing the unwanted writing from the board, he thought that whoever had done it had really made rather a good job of it with those curly s's and funny e's. It looked a bit like the writing on old stones, or memorials in churches. All the same, he'd have to find out who it was. You couldn't have people coming along and doing that kind of thing without asking: that was cheek. I'll start with that Simon person, he thought, I bet it was him. He'd noticed him vaguely at school, a short, stumpy boy with immensely thick, round glasses.

He damped the dishcloth a bit more in a puddle and arranged it on the saddle of Helen's bike. Then he set off for Simon's house, which was at the other end of the lane, towards the High Street.

Simon was conveniently available outside his house, lying along the top of a stone wall. His bespectacled face stared down at James like an amiable gargoyle. 'Hello,' he said, in a friendly, unconcealing voice, not at all like someone who has

just been responsible for some kind of trick. Unless, of course, he was a skilled actor.

James found himself at a loss. He stared at Simon for a minute, doubtfully, and then said, with less conviction than he had intended, 'Very funny joke. Ha ha.'

'What?' said Simon.

'Very funny. What you wrote on my mum's blackboard. Very humorous.'

'Hang on,' said Simon. He took off his glasses, which were deeply encrusted with dirt, and rubbed them on his shirt-sleeve, as though a clearer view of the world might help him to understand better. He put them on again and said, 'What blackboard?'

'You know.'

'No, I don't.'

'The one outside our house.'

'Let's see,' said Simon, sliding down from the wall.

'I've rubbed it off now. Have you got a pencil?'

Simon felt in his pocket and fished out a chocolate label and a slightly chewed biro. James leaned the paper on a brick and wrote, as nearly as he could remember, the words. 'There!'

Simon peered at them thoughtfully. 'It wasn't me,' he said. 'I promise. For a start I don't know what they mean. Except Sorcerie – that's obvious. And Physicke – that's old-fashioned language for medicine. And Recoverie of Goodes Loste just means finding things, I suppose. Anyway,' he went on with disarming honesty, 'I couldn't have spelt them.'

'They're spelt wrong, actually,' said James.

'Oh, are they?'

James studied Simon. There are some people you feel inclined to believe, whatever they say, and others you don't: Simon, he felt, belonged to the first lot.

'Honestly?' he said. 'Swear?'

'Swear.'

'Who do you think it was then? Someone from school?'

'I dunno,' said Simon vaguely. 'Might have been.' He seemed to be losing interest in the problem. 'I've climbed your apple trees,' he said. 'Before you came. The people didn't notice. I accidentally ate an apple, too. The best ones are on the tree right at the end.'

'I know,' said James. 'Come on. I'll show you my hole, if you like.'

They walked down the lane together. At the gate James paused and looked suspiciously at the apple-board, but all was as it should be. Tim was sitting outside the gate, staring up at James's bedroom window, making unpleasant growling noises in the back of his throat.

'What's up, Tim?' said James.

'He's saying there's someone he doesn't like in that room,' said Simon.

'It's my room. I bet those stupid girls are in there. Helen's always nosing about. I'll just . . . No, not now, or we won't have time for the hole. I'll see about her later.'

They spent a happy hour or so on the hole, and discovered a way round the root. Then they did some climbing and worked out a new route up the north face of the largest apple tree. Finally they lay down in the long grass and ate as many apples as they could comfortably manage, throwing the cores to Tim who ate them all, not because he liked them but because he was a dog who had learned never to

let an opportunity pass, lest one regret it later.

'I'll have to go,' said Simon finally.

'Bye then. See you.'

'See you.'

There was cauliflower cheese for supper: not one of James's favourites. He tried unsuccessfully to share it with Tim under the table, but Tim, perhaps, had overdone it with the apple cores because he rejected the offerings and circled the kitchen restlessly, as though he had something on his mind. Eventually he went out into the garden, growling.

'Shut the back door, James,' said Mrs Harrison. 'This house is draughty, there's no getting away from it. There's been a cold wind round my feet for the last half-hour.'

'Julia's house is ever so warm,' said Helen. 'It's got central heating.'

'I'd sooner have beetles than central heating,' said James. And mice, he added, but under his breath because that was something he was keeping to himself in case it occurred to anyone that they ought to be trapped.

'Typical,' said Helen. 'Do you know, Mum, he's

found someone else just like him. Even grubbier, if possible. They were up the apple tree together.'

'How nice,' said Mrs Harrison. 'Now you've both got a friend.'

James remembered that he still had a score to settle with Helen. He accused her of invading his room. Helen, in exaggerated tones of outrage, said she wouldn't be seen dead in his room. James said he *knew* she'd been there, and it wasn't fair. Both appealed to their mother.

'Stop it, both of you,' said Mrs Harrison. 'I'm a mother, not a referee.'

James, struck with the happy thought of his mother in shorts with a whistle round her neck, began to howl with laughter. Helen glowered at him: she took arguments seriously and liked to pursue them to the bitter end.

'And another thing, Mum, he put a filthy dishcloth on my bike saddle and I sat on it and Julia saw. I mean, it's awfully *embarrassing* in front of my friends.'

'I daresay they've got brothers too,' said Mrs Harrison. 'James, you're to leave your sister alone, do you hear?'

But James had already retreated upstairs.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, undressing, he contemplated his room with satisfaction. It was a jolly good room. The walls and ceilings all sloped wildly in different directions, so that it seemed geometrically impossible that they should all come together in the right way to make up a room at all. The floor was crooked: if you put a marble down it would roll very slowly from one end to the other. You had to stoop a little to see out of the window, but there was a good view, over the rooftops of Ledsham, a clutter of slate and thatch, to the square tower of the church, with swallows dipping round it and the odd little building in the old market place that had once been the village jail and was now the Public Library. There was a table, a chest, and a couple of shelves where James kept his books, his fossil collection, his shells and various other things, including the clay models he'd made at school last week, two of which, he saw with irritation, had been knocked on to the floor. So she had been up here. Liar.

He rearranged the models and got into bed. He

reached under the pillow for his Personal Notebook and began to fill in various details for the day. Under the heading 'Financial Situation', he wrote 'Same as yesterday. I owe Simon 1p. now for winning bet about spitting apple pips farthest. He owes me two sherbet sticks. No pocket money till larder window is paid for.' He turned over the page and put 'Weather good. Wind moderate and coming from west (I think. Unless weathercock on church tower is stuck).' The next page was headed 'Food', and he wrote 'Cottage pie for lunch. Smashing. Three helpings. Cauliflower cheese for dinner. It is the only thing Tim will not eat.' He turned over again, to the page headed 'Future plans'. This was always very full. Now he wrote 'Make complete tunnel from one end of orchard to the other. If successful, send plans to people who are going to build Channel Tunnel. Rig up trap to stop Helen getting into my room. Get hold of a dictionary, and look up "alchemy". Train Tim to carry shopping-baskets.'

Then he put the notebook under the pillow once more, turned the light out, and went immediately to sleep.

During the night he woke feeling cold, and found the eiderdown had been twitched off on to the floor. There was a draught, too, from under the door or somewhere. Crossly, he rearranged the bed, and went to sleep again.