

Chapter 1

It was dark when Christer first arrived at the Manor. The rain was falling heavily against the windscreen of the taxi melting the road ahead into an impressionist painting of sunflowers. He reached in his pocket to feel the letter his cousin Sophie had written and was slightly reassured by its crisp reality. To see her again would be good. These last few months had seemed an age to him left alone since she had moved into the country.

Aunt Fi had recently remarried and taken Sophie with her to Major Houghton's home, Grant Manor, a small estate beside the Thames. In the letter she had told Christer how wonderful it was to have a Major for a new father, and to be able to ride horses whenever she wanted, and to go for boat trips in their very own boat. But that had made things worse. All his young life Sophie had been there to share his triumphs and his miseries, and since the death of her father the families had been thrown even closer together, with Christer assuming the roles of playmate and protector.

These last three months had been particularly lonely ones for him. He looked out at the rain ahead and his own reflection beside him.

He remembered the excitement he had felt when the letter came inviting him to the manor for Easter, spoilt a week later by the news that Sophie had suddenly become very ill. He looked into the eyes of the young face peering back at him from the streaming glass. What must they all think of him pleading with Aunt Fi like that to let him go anyway? He only wanted to see Sophie again, to see if, by being there, everything could be put right. Did they think he was terribly spoilt, jealous of his cousin's new life and wanting some of it for himself? Nothing could be further from the truth. If only they knew how he was feeling now; lonely, frightened and wishing he was safely at home in bed. But Aunt Fi had said that the sound of his voice might 'snap her out of it' whatever 'it' was.

And so it was, with the rain lashing around him, that Christer got his first view of the old building as the taxi driver rummaged in the boot for his suitcase.

Behind the steel grey curtain of the rain the house looked down at him. It was less awesome than he had expected. There was no vast tower or crenellated battlement, simply a tired old stone building, high gabled and clustered around with growths of ivy and cast iron. The curtain of rain parted and they entered the porch where a homely smell of dry wood and paint helped quell his nerves.

A burst of light from a brass lamp above their heads was the first response to the bell-pull, which had given no hint, outside in the storm, of working at all. They were standing beside a solitary, rather ragged, potted plant which stood guard against the glass, and Christer noticed a small black spider, startled by the sudden light and caught in the act of mending its web, pause to watch him. Still they waited, but now they were conscious of sounds a long way off, deep in the house.

“This place must go on forever,” he said. The driver merely grunted, but the waiting suddenly ended when, with the grating of a lock, the heavy door swung open.

A tall woman dressed in black stood out against the sudden screen of light. Her hair was grey and her face lined. The lines curled into a sudden smile.

“Oh Christer! How nice to see you. My, how you have grown!”

“Hello, Aunt Fi,” he said, then added, “I hardly recognized you.” He immediately wished he had kept that observation to himself, for her smile faded momentarily and her hand went up to push back a strand of hair. She looked tired, but the smile was quick to return.

“It really is good to see you, Christer,” and she hugged him, paid the taxi driver, then led the way into the house.

“Christer,” she began as they carried the case towards his room. “You may not want to stay long, now that Sophie is ill.”

He caught the hint of doubt and pleading in her voice.

“There are lots of things to do here, but please say if you want to go home. I'm afraid that she is very ill and I don't know whether your being here will make any difference to her at all. But your company is a chance worth trying. Heaven knows we've tried everything else.” These last words were muttered almost to herself.

The room that was to be his bedroom was large with dark brown, oak panels running even into the bay of the window. The ceiling was heavily patterned plaster with an ugly, tasselled lampshade hanging from the centre. The rain was chattering against the window in bursts caught by the wind, and with the hopelessness in Aunt Fi's voice Christer's spirits sank even lower.

“She is sleeping at the moment,” his aunt continued, “and as it's rather late I don't think we will disturb her tonight. When you have unpacked your things, come down to the dining room and have some supper.”

She left him there. The large, pale blue suitcase on the bed was the only familiar thing around. Everything else seemed to have come from a different world. The furniture was dark and heavy.

The wardrobe was by far the biggest he had ever seen. It had knotty eyes in the polished wood which seemed to be watching him. They were quite friendly eyes he felt sure, but suddenly he had a feeling that eyes were watching him from the dark places in the corners of the room where the light struggled to reach. He opened the wardrobe door and was greeted by the overwhelming smell of mothballs. He now realized that the whole room had smelt vaguely of these all the time, but he had not clearly identified it until now. He hung his coat up and emptied most of his case into a large chest of drawers with squat legs. It was bow fronted and the handles looked like buttons on the waistcoat of a fat but stern old gentleman with bandy legs. All the while he kept glancing into the shadows working as fast as his trembling fingers would allow, and was glad at last to venture out into the corridor where a comfortable smell of thick carpets and bathroom soap helped quell his nerves.

Aunt Fi met him in the hall and led the way into a dimly lit room with a high ceiling. Major Houghton was there standing with his back to them in front of an enormous fireplace. He did not seem to notice them and was muttering something quietly under his breath.

'Oh dear!' thought Christer, 'The old fellow's a bit batty'. He had heard tales of the owners of manor houses sometimes acting strangely; tales of

mad counts murdering people after luring them into their homes.

Suddenly the major dropped to his knees and at the same time threw a small object across the room. Christer edged closer to his aunt, then jumped as a furry shape darted out from behind a chair and raced towards them.

“Do stop playing with Tinker, Jim and say hello to our guest.”

“Oh I'm so sorry! I didn't hear you come in. Tinker! Stop that.”

The furry shape reappeared from behind the settee, barked a couple of times at Christer then darted behind the tall man's legs to peer out, at intervals, at him.

“Hello Christer. Come and meet Tinker.”

The little dog rolled over on its back wagging its tail furiously.

'Things aren't as bad as all that after all,' thought Christer.

Chapter 2

A shaft of brilliant sunlight woke him next morning. It had forced its way between the curtains and had slowly moved from the tall wardrobe to his bed, warming the room as it went. It took a little while, lying in the comfort of near wakefulness, before he realized where he was. When, slowly, the memory of the rain soaked journey returned, and he knew that this was Grant Manor, he wondered what he ought to do. Should he stay in bed and wait to be called, or would they be waiting for him, thinking him terribly lazy? With an effort, he sat up, swapping the warmth of the bedclothes for the warmth of the sun. The door opened at that very moment and Aunt Fi walked in carrying his breakfast on a tray.

“Now don't you go expecting service like this every day, young man.”

He grinned at her, but he noticed how tired and drawn she looked in the bright daylight. She looked so much older than the Aunt Fi he used to see almost as often as his own mother a few months ago. She had the same kind expression about the eyes that his mother had, warm and smiling as if something deep inside was amusing her, that at least was unchanged.

When his breakfast was finished he dressed hurriedly, had his customary brief encounter with the face flannel and went downstairs.

“Where's Sophie, Aunt?” he asked expecting to see her there. He had thought a lot about what she must be like now. Having been unwell for a while he had expected her to be thinner, though she was thin enough before with her long legs, big eyes and a smile to match her mother's. He had prepared himself for her pale face and sunken eyes. He knew that when she saw him again all the memories they had shared would come flooding back and she would be as she had been before. This illness was probably the result of the excitement of all the new things wearing off to leave her feeling empty and alone. He knew those feelings well. Hadn't he been feeling low and a little lost without her? Well it was all right now because he was there!

The smile slid from his aunt's face, and Major Haughton put down the newspaper he had been reading and looked at Aunt Fi.

“She's in her room, Christer. Maybe you should come and see her now.”

Leading the way to the stairs, Aunt Fi said, “She is very ill you know. Maybe she's asleep. If she is, we'll just peep round the door.”

The room was in semi-darkness, but two renegade shafts of light trespassed through a gap in the curtains making spotlights for the dust to dance

in. It was much more of an ordinary room than the one in which Christer had spent the night: the furniture was light and new; the wallpaper pale blue with a swirling pattern of flowers; and it was full of toys. On a table by the window was a doll's house which looked very like the Manor itself, and a host of dolls of varying sizes perched on every piece of furniture. Along one side of the room was the bed and there amongst the dolls Christer could see Sophie's pale face framed by her golden hair. She was very still.

“We'll come to see her later on,” whispered Aunt Fi, pulling the door quietly closed behind them.

“Do you like listening to music?” Christer nodded, “Sophie did. I expect you had some favourite tunes when you used to play together. There are lots here and maybe if you played them quietly, when she wakes up, it may make her feel happy.”

Christer was led into the room next to Sophie's. It was a kind of playroom; the sort of place where there is always something to do even on the wettest of days. There was a deep bay window directly opposite the door, with a well-padded window seat smothered with velvet cushions. Cupboards and shelves were everywhere, some with books, or games in neat boxes, others with toys tidily displayed. There was a huge grandfather clock

in one corner and a table on which the music centre waited beside its silent racks of cds, tapes and old records.

“Just play them quietly, all the ones you like.” She closed the door carefully and left him there. He felt bewildered. They were trying not to waken Sophie yet they wanted him to play music in the room next door. He looked closely at the rack of cds and tapes. They were mostly classical cds with a few modern ones at one end. The tapes were old radio programmes with the exception of two collections of nursery rhymes. He turned to the rack of records. Sophie had always liked the pictures on the sleeves, great swirling Celtic dragons, fairy-tale castles and mysterious forests.

‘I don't fancy any of these,’ he thought. The one that he and Sophie had played a lot was just not there. It was a special record to him because it had occupied many a wet afternoon when they were together. Its sleeve showed a picture of a galleon sailing into the sunset, and it would last for nearly an hour and had poems and songs with the occasional story about some daring adventure. It had caught their imagination and started many games that lasted for days afterwards.

He picked out another record he recognized and put it on the machine. The room filled with music. He hastily turned the volume down in case his aunt should think it far too loud. Secretly he

hoped that the loud burst would wake Sophie up so that they could talk and play together. But when a few minutes had passed and no one had come to see him he settled down to explore the room.

On the window seat he found a book with a metal clasp keeping it closed. It opened easily and inside the front cover it said:

*“This book belongs to Sophie Lawrence
Very private property
Keep out.”*

‘Huh! Some silly diary,’ he thought, closing it again. He dropped it onto the windowsill so that he could lie stretched out on the velvet cushions.

If only Sophie would wake up this would be a brilliant place to play. He imagined that he was sailing away on his velvet, cushioned boat to have an adventure on the far side of the world.

“Sophie is awake now, Christer,” Aunt Fi’s voice broke in across the crash of the waves, and the adventure came to an abrupt end. He jumped down from the window seat and ran to the door, his voyage forgotten.

“She’s not herself, Christer. Don’t be surprised if she doesn’t recognize you.”

‘She’s bound to recognize me,’ he thought. ‘No matter how ill she is she could never fail to recognize me.’

But when, once more, they entered her room and Christer peered through the half-light of drawn curtains, he was hit by a vacant expression and an empty stare which looked right through him. Recognize him? She did not even know he was there.

“What's the matter with her?” he asked a cold empty feeling creeping through him.

“We just don't know. The doctor says that she is in a state of shock. He has examined her thoroughly and there is nothing physically wrong with her. He thinks that hearing familiar, friendly sounds could snap her out of it. That is why we still wanted you to come. But I realize now that it's being very unfair to you.” She put her hand on his shoulder.

“It's alright, Aunt Fi,” he said. “I'm glad I came. I only hope I can help.” But inside he wished that he had never left the street, which, though empty without Sophie, was at least secure and did not pose problems which he could not understand.

“Come and sit over here by the window and I'll tell you what happened. I think it is good that she hears our voices.” Aunt Fi drew the curtains back a little and a wide shaft of sunlight burst through sending the edges of the room into contrasting darkness as she began talking again.

“We were so happy at first, Christer. Sophie seemed to find such a lot to do and was so excited

exploring the new things here that we didn't think she might be lonely. It wasn't until afterwards we realized that she had been spending hours up here all alone, more and more in fact as the days went by. She seemed to go off her food too just before it happened.”

“What did happen then, Aunt Fi? Did she fall and hurt herself or something?”

“We don't really know. It had been a very stormy day; you know the kind, heavy and wet with the occasional roll of thunder. Sophie had spent nearly all day up here, playing records I think, when there was the most terrific crash of thunder I ever heard. It shook the whole house and really frightened me I can tell you. Well I ran upstairs to see if Sophie was all right. I half expected to see a hole in the roof, but everything was fine except for Sophie. She was lying on the floor by the grandfather clock, and she's been like this ever since.”

He looked at Sophie's pale face staring blankly out into the room.

“You think she was afraid of the thunder then, Aunt Fi?”

“I don't know what to think, Christer. I only hope that rest and familiar sounds will help her.”

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The weather slowly deteriorated as the day crawled on. There was little for Christer to do but to sit in the playroom listening to records. When the rain started he went to the window to watch it blowing like folds in a flimsy shroud across the distant hills. As he knelt on the window seat he saw the diary with the metal clasp. He opened it and started to turn the pages, just glancing at the neat, small writing and thinking that if he had kept a diary it would be most untidy by comparison. How could girls think of so much to say anyway? By looking at the dates it was obvious that this diary had only been running for a couple of months and yet pages and pages had been filled. Suddenly, in the midst of a page of black writing his eye caught on word; his name! It was as if no other words inhabited that page. He had found his name in her diary. He had never intended reading it, because diaries are private things, but this one seemed to be talking to him.

“Oh Christer, I’m so lonely. If only you were here!”

He turned back to the beginning and began reading. The first few pages were about how exciting life was at the manor: everything new and interesting. As he read, his thoughts drifted homewards and he wondered how long he would have to stay. He realized that Sophie would not be

better this holiday and he would have to amuse himself. But he could not rush off home too quickly because that would be hurtful to his Aunt. The pages had been turning monotonously and very few of the words he was reading were registering in his mind, when he read his name again. Like a naughty boy caught day-dreaming in class the sound of his name, even as an echo in his mind jolted him back to reality.

“Oh Christer, I'm so lonely. If only you were here! It's no fun having all these things if there's no one to share them with. I'm going to pretend that you are here. Then every day I can share my secrets with you.

“There's a room next to my bedroom which I call my den. In it is the most enormous grandfather clock, and I'm sitting by it now listening to it tick. It seems to talk to me. 'Get on! Don't stop!' it seems to say, over and over again. It never rests; sometimes it makes me feel quite tired.”

He looked at the date of the next entry and noticed that it was just two weeks ago. So the novelty of her new life had worn off just two weeks before Easter. He read on:

“Hello Christer, I'm bored again today. I think the rain is to blame. I've been in my den here for hours listening to records. Do you remember that one we used to play that had poems and songs on? I've been listening to that mostly. Something exciting did happen earlier on though. You know that old houses are full of secret passages and things, well I didn't find a passage exactly, but I found a secret compartment in the panelling by the window. I was just lying on the window seat tapping the wall with my foot when a small piece of the panelling opened inwards. I put my hand in and felt around, but I couldn't feel any levers or buttons that might open a secret door. It wasn't completely empty though. There was a small, silver key wedged in the corner. I thought it was a lever at first, but when I pulled it out nothing happened and there are no keyholes anywhere around that it might fit so it's a bit of a dead loss really. I do wish you were here. It would be fun looking for secret passages together.”

He put the diary down and examined the window panelling carefully. There was nothing unusual about it and he certainly could not find any movable panels. He began tapping at about the height her feet would have been when she was lying on the seat but nothing happened. He tried at the other side but again with no success.

'It must be here somewhere,' he thought as he began systematically tapping every inch of the window panelling. After five minutes' unsuccessful effort he gave up and turned once more to the book.

"Christer, the key is really exciting. I tried every lock in the house and it didn't fit any of them. I'd nearly given up when as I was trying it again in the grandfather clock I noticed that there were two key holes: one at the front and one at the side. The key fits the side one perfectly and opens a door big enough to get through. You can just squeeze in behind the pendulum, which never seems to stop even if you knock it. I think there must be a doorway into the wall from there, but I haven't found it yet."

Christer jumped down from the window seat and walked over to the clock. It was by far the largest grandfather clock he had ever seen. It towered above him frowning down, behind its glass, from a heavily patterned, silver dial. Staring him in the face from the dark wood of the case was a metal-rimmed keyhole, but when he looked around at the side there was no key-hole to be seen. On the left hand side was a brass plate with the maker's name engraved very faintly amidst a strange, swirling design, but there was nothing else. Dejectedly he went back to the window seat and lay down.

‘I’ll bet she made it all up for a bit of excitement and the boredom drove her mad in the end,’ he thought, laying back against the panelling and looking out at the grey, rain soaked, day. ‘If I stay here much longer it will drive me mad too.’ The clock’s slow tick, no more than a whisper behind his mind took up his thoughts.

“Drive me .. crazy .. drive me .. crazy.”

“Oh stop it!” Christer said aloud to the empty room and realized that he had even been tapping the rhythm out on the windowsill. He went downstairs to try to find his aunt.

Chapter 3

Sophie was no better after lunch. Aunt Fi had spooned food into her and she had swallowed it mindlessly.

‘The part of Sophie that wrote the diary just isn't here at all,’ Christer thought as, once again he lay by the window watching the rain as it gushed fitfully down the glass, making the world beyond twist and bend into unfamiliar shapes.

His foot was idly tapping the wall to the infernal rhythm of the great clock when suddenly there was a sound that made him sit up. It was a dull, rushing sound followed by a sharp click. There it was, just above where his feet had been, a small opening in the panelling about the size of the book Sophie had chosen for her diary. Jumping up, he felt inside the hole, but, as he expected, the hole was empty. Anything that may have been there Sophie would surely have taken out by now.

‘Still,’ he thought, ‘this proves that she wasn't completely potty when she wrote this.’ He patted the diary affectionately, then glanced at the clock. The tapping of his feet to the rhythm of the clock must have opened the panel. He felt the boredom melt like mist in the summer sun.

Sliding from the seat he paced the room proud of this deduction and wondering what Sophie would say when he told her that he had found out the clock's secret. After all, he told himself, she only opened it; she didn't know how it worked.

He glanced again at the clock, then with rising interest looked again. The little brass plate had moved. He was sure that it had been square to the case, but now it hung at a strange angle, and there, revealed from behind it, was the lost keyhole.

He wondered what Sophie had done with the key and began hunting in all the sorts of places a key could have been put for safety.

'Typical of a girl,' he thought, 'to put something away so safely that it can't ever be found again.' He remembered his mother often saying that she knew something would be safe in such and such a place, but could never be sure exactly where it was now. He opened drawers, moved books about in the book case, opened pots and even checked beside the turntable of the record player although he thought that he was bound to have seen it if it had been there, all to no avail. He looked around the room wondering where else might a key be put for safety. The only place left was the top of the clock. It was very high and Christer thought it most unlikely that Sophie would have put it there, but he remembered that his mother always kept keys to cupboards on

top of the cupboards themselves, so what was good enough for a cupboard was good enough for a clock.

He pulled a chair over, placed it beside the clock and climbed up. There was a hollow on top that he could just get his fingers in, but he could not reach to the back even on tiptoes. He climbed up onto the high back of the chair and stretched. His fingers slid into a soft and feathery clump of dust that had been waiting for generations for someone to find it just so that it could fool them into believing it to be a little, furry animal, and make them jump. It made Christer jump. The chair slid sideways and Christer fell sprawled out on the floor with an enormous thump. As he lay there, feeling rather foolish and hoping that his aunt had not heard him, he saw, under the great clock, amidst the dust, long forgotten marbles and lost puzzle pieces, a little, silver key. He picked it up, all thoughts of the fall forgotten, and tried it in the hidden keyhole. It turned easily and a doorway, cleverly concealed by the grain in the wood, swung open. He realized that his heart was beating fast as he peered inside the clock. There was just room enough to squeeze behind the bars that obviously protected the pendulum as it swung with its slow, steady beat.

“Christer!” Aunt Fi was calling him. She must have heard his fall after all. He felt a sudden desire to keep the key and the door a secret, and was about to close it when he noticed a record cover lying in

there, propped up against the wooden side of the case. It was the very record he had been looking for; the one that had been their shared favourite. He closed the door quietly taking the record with him, then jumped up onto the window seat and shut the panel. As he left the room he slipped the key into his pocket.

“Whatever happened up there just now?” asked Aunt Fi as she led him down to tea. But without really waiting for an answer she told him that arrangements had been made for him to return home the following day.

“It was rather foolish of us to expect a miracle and you must be getting so bored.”

“I quite enjoy playing upstairs,” he tried to reassure her. “That grandfather clock is so big I've never seen anything like it before.” He had said it because it was the only thing that fluttered in his muddled mind. Send him home? He was only just beginning to find out some of this house's real secrets and now they wanted to send him home! He wished he had not mentioned the clock. Somehow this secret was too raw and confusing yet and it needed time to explore before he could share it.

“That old clock?” his aunt began. Christer tried to change the subject.

“Yes, dear,” she continued almost ignoring him “It's very old you know and such a strange place for a clock. Did you know it's built right into the

wall? Jim says that he thinks the house would fall down if it was moved.”

“Aunt Fi? I've found that record that Sophie and I used to play. I'll play it after tea if you like and see if that helps her to remember.”

Jim Houghton appeared round the door. “Sorry I'm such a mess Fi, but I've found the oil leak on the car.”

“I hope you're going to clean yourself up before tea.” Aunt Fi ushered Christer through into the dining room. “Christer and I have been talking about that old clock in the playroom.”

Christer scowled.

“It is very old, isn't it?”

“Oh my goodness yes. This house is older than it looks, Christer, but it's been modernized from time to time and they say that the clock has stood there hundreds of years. It is rumoured that this house boasted the safest priest hole in all England during Tudor times. When Queen Elizabeth 1st was trying to catch catholic priests, houses had hiding places built into the walls, and the oldest part of this house had one. There was something almost sinister about the secret. Priests would sometimes go into it and never reappear. Heaven knows what happened to them. Well anyway the playroom is in the oldest part of the house and I think the old clock has been built into the priest hole. Least-ways I'm sure it goes right into

the wall. It's a shame really. Just think how good it would be if we had a real secret hiding place here. I'm sorry, Christer, the old house is a bit dull these days."

"For goodness sake, Jim, you're making dirty marks all over the door."

He winked at them and left. Christer liked this very ordinary owner of Grant Manor.

He returned to the playroom after tea, put the record on and settled himself down to read the last part of Sophie's diary.

The weather had obviously improved for a few days as she had spent some time riding and playing in the manor grounds, but she was still lonely and at the end of each short entry she would write a few words for Christer.

"I wish you could have come riding with me today"

or

"You would have loved playing hide and seek in the garden."

The last entry of all followed a return to bad weather.

"It's been an awful day outside today. The wind has been howling and now it's thundering, but I've found out something else about the clock. I was listening to our record and that poem about

'Time' was being read. You know the bit, 'You can stop with your hand the hand of the clock.' Well you can't. I tried it. I thought that there might be a secret passage behind the clock that could open if I stopped the pendulum swinging. The strangest thing happened when I tried. No matter how I tried I couldn't stop it. It's difficult to get your hands through the bars, but when I did nothing happened. It was almost as if I wasn't really touching it. It was too dark to see what was happening. I'm going to get a torch and explore the clock carefully. There must be a secret passage there. I'm sure there is."

That was the last entry in the diary.
Christer got up and turned the record over
and played the part with the poem on it.
A dark, earthy voice began,

“The Grandfather clock that stands by the
wall
Strikes out the hours each day.
And I thought, with a shock like a warning
call,
That it's ticking my life away.
If I could stop, with the hands of the clock,
The passing hours each day,
I could do all the things I have wanted to do
And have plenty of time left to play.

I can stop with my hands the hands of the clock.

I can stop the pendulum's sway.

But whatever I do does not matter at all:
Time keeps racing and racing away.”

Christer picked up the torch, which was lying on a small table beside the clock and once again opened the secret door. The brightness of the room lit the inside of the clock with a dull light, but as he stepped in his body blocked most of it leaving him peering into deep shadow. He switched on his torch. There was nothing unusual to be seen there except the dust scuffed and disturbed by his and Sophie's feet, and the course and roughly finished jointing of the ancient cabinet. He shone the torch upwards and there above his head was a handle with pictures on the wood on either side which looked like map symbols or heraldic crests. One was shaped like flowing water, the other like a tongue of flame. Both were carved into the wood and softly tinted with colour. Another carving, on the wall beneath the handle, was like a scroll with writing on it. It had lost most of its colour and was almost impossible to read. Some words looked familiar, but it seemed to be mostly in a language Christer did not understand.

He swung the torch round and there above the door by which he had entered was a piece of paper-like material yellowing with age, and on it Christer read:

“THE KEY OF THE WORLD

*There are worlds before and beyond to see
But TIME is the prison that holdeth thee.
To escape its grasp there lies a key
That dwells in the darkness secretly.*

*The key of the world is silvered small.
When used in faith TIME'S guard will fall.
But if thou wouldst return at all,
**REPLACE THE KEY IN THE HOLLOW
WALL.”***

The shape of the letters was a bit strange. In some places it seemed as if the wrong letters had been used, but at least this could be read.

‘So there is a passage after all,’ he thought. ‘Sophie must have found it then fallen getting out of the clock, and bumped her head.’

He reached up to pull the lever. He wondered why it moved in two directions and which direction he should move it. He began, slowly, to re-read the parchment hoping for some clue, but he felt sure that the real instructions lay in the carved writing that he could not read.

*“But if thou wouldst return at all,
**REPLACE THE KEY IN THE HOLLOW
WALL.**”*

It seemed a rather strange instruction, but Christer thought that he ought to follow it as carefully as possible, especially as the others were impossible to read. Squeezing his way out he put the little key back behind the panel, closed it and returned to the clock. He placed the torch on the floor so that its light shone onto the handle, then he reached up and pulled it, gently at first, towards the fire symbol. Try as he might, the handle would not move. 'Obviously stiff with age,' he thought, trying it the other way, towards the water. It moved very slowly and only a little. It seemed to be on a spring, for as he released it it pushed itself back to the centre. Nothing happened; there was no grating sound followed by an opening door to some secret passage; nothing happened and Christer was just about to get out of the clock when the door slammed, shutting him in. He picked up the torch to see if there was a catch on the inside, when the clock began to move, slowly at first, so slowly that he thought that it was only his own fear making his head spin. But then it seemed to rotate. Round and round it went. The more it spun the slower beat the pendulum, and the slower the beat the louder it

seemed in Christer's ears, until it was thundering and he just had to get out. His legs were like jelly and he had a horrible feeling in the small of his back. The clock lurched like a bucking horse and he was pitched heavily against the door, which sprung open, and he was thrown through, out and down. He was falling over and over into darkness and as he fell he caught a glimpse of the clock disappearing into the distance. Everything went black.