

The Halt

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Allington should never have been in Brandeston in the first place. Until that day he had never heard of the village, and then on that occasion only by chance. Or at least that is how it appeared to him at the time. Later, he had reason to doubt that.

He was a Cambridge man, and he had determined to get away during the long Christmas holiday and spend a few days with his note book and camera travelling through the county of Suffolk. He had a passion for ecclesiastical architecture and reproached himself for his scant knowledge of that county's treasures. Among those he hoped he might find investigate during his adventures was the church of the Assumption, in the village of Ufford, where he was keen to make notes on the 15th century font cover and perhaps use several plates on it and the rest of the church.

So it was that a bleak day at the end of December found him settled in the corner of a carriage on his way from Haughley Junction to the market town of Framlingham, from where he would change and alight at Wickham Market, travelling the rest of the way by brougham.

His only companion in the carriage appeared to be asleep. He was a well-dressed gentleman of indeterminate age and indeterminate features, and Allington wished him well of his dreams. The countryside beyond the window looked bleak and

somewhat melancholy and presently Allington occupied himself with Pugin's *Treatise on Chancel Screens*, on which scholarly tome he spent the best part of an hour.

At some point, however, he became aware as he looked up from his reading that the other gentleman was regarding him in an oddly knowing way. Allington too felt a sense of recognition, though he could place no name upon his companion. The two men exchanged pleasantries, as they were bound to do in such circumstances, after which Allington could not help but enquire: 'Excuse my impertinence, but is it possible we have met before?'

The man laughed, as though Allington had made a joke without perhaps realizing it.

'No,' said he. 'I am sure we have yet to meet.'

The phrasing seemed slightly peculiar but there was something Allington could not place about the man's dress and demeanour which appeared foreign or otherwise exotic, and he put it down to that likelihood. Yet since he had brought up the subject, it seemed only proper to introduce himself.

The man nodded at Allington's name, as though in approval, and introduced himself as Charles Montague Roylance. Once the notion that the two men had met before was current in his mind, Allington was inclined to believe he also recognized his companion's name, though he was sure he would have remembered him.

'What brings you to this part of Suffolk if I may enquire, Mr Allington?' Roylance asked.

'Dear me!' laughed Allington. 'Is it so clear that I am a stranger?'

Roylance smiled.

'Not at all, my dear sir,' he said. 'But this is a small line and there are few enough scholars who travel into these parts.'

He nodded at Allington's Pugin by way of explanation. Allington laughed.

'From what I hear your churches deserve much better exploration than has been bestowed upon them to date, so I hope perhaps to put right that oversight,' he replied.

'Indeed,' Roylance agreed. 'One might almost say that they have been waiting for you.'

And so as men of learning will, they fell into a discussion of the churches Allington had listed on his itinerary.

'Then you will surely pause at Brandeston to spend an hour or two at All Saints,' said his companion at one point.

'Brandeston?' Allington repeated. His knowledge of Suffolk churches was sketchy, he had admitted, but he could not recall Brandeston having featured in any of the monographs he had read.

'You clearly do not know it, nor is there any reason why you should,' suggested Roylance with relish. 'That is hardly surprising. Its treasures have been almost entirely overlooked.'

You may imagine the interest which Allington paid to his companion's words. Like all amateur ecclesiastical scholars he cherished dreams of discovering miraculous survivors of Henry VIII's purges hidden away in untrodden corners of the country. So as his companion set out the treasures of All Saints church he took out his note book and began to scribble excitedly. If the church had anything like the treasures promised, it would be well worth an afternoon's study.

Allington thanked his companion profusely, and since the train was even now slowing for the tiny halt above the village he began drawing together his luggage.

'Oh, there is one thing more,' Roylance added as an afterthought. 'When you're done with the church itself you might like to spend a little time in perusing the churchyard. For most people there might prove nothing of any great significance, though interesting enough in its own way. But there are several grave stones there which you might find amusing. I am quite sure you are just the man to see the full significance.'

Roylance only smiled when Allington tried to press him for further information, but since the train had now heaved to a stop he had no time for more questions and, with last grateful thanks to his companion, he alighted.

He was the only passenger to do so. The engine heaved its gouts of steam and the station master whistled and waved his flag. As the train began to move past him Allington saw Roylance standing at the window, watching him. Being too encumbered by bags, Allington could only nod and smile at his erstwhile companion as the train drew slowly away. It seemed to him, however, that the face which looked back at him through the clouds of steam was also smiling, and went on doing so until the train had disappeared round the cutting.

There was no porter, nor any carriage, for which the station master apologized. But the village was only less than a mile away and so Allington was happy to walk. He crossed a broad and featureless common, all the more inhospitable on such a day, and made his way through woodland which crowded the narrow lane. From the woods the rooks began a mournful cawing sound which made the day seem even more chill, and in truth Allington was beginning to regret leaving the warmth of the train to set off on what might prove a wild goose chase.

But the lane now led through open country falling away towards the village, and in the distance he could see the tower of the church. When eventually he arrived at All Saints, however, he found it to be a handsome enough building in the simple manner of this county, set in parkland beside a substantial property dating Allington thought probably from the early 16th century. A well trimmed yew hedge led to the porch. Once inside, Allington quickly made his way to the chancel, but here he felt

disappointment. It was well enough fashioned, true, but amounted to nothing like that which Roylance had seemed to promise.

Or perhaps Allington had let his imagination get the better of him. But still, while he was there he decided he would expose some plates and catalogue what there was of the church, with a view to writing up his notes later. And so Allington made himself busy with camera and notebook as the afternoon wore on.

At some point he was interrupted by the vicar, a thin man of middle years and of that class of Englishman who could have been born to the clergy. The man showed enthusiasm in Allington's endeavours and seemed pleased to find such interest in his church. He gave the impression that visitors were few and Allington's hopes of discovering something of real interest began to lift.

The vicar was happy to show Allington around the church and gave every impression of pride in doing so. For his part, Allington showed as much enthusiasm as he could, though in truth he was disappointed at not finding more. Although the afternoon was not more than half passed, the bleak sunlight was already beginning to slip below the ledge of the west window. It was certainly past the point at which the camera could be used, and Allington packed up his plates and his notes and made ready to be on his way, thanking his host for his interest and extolling lavishly the delights of his church.

But as they stood in the porch Allington suddenly remembered what Roylance had said about the churchyard. Perhaps there might be something more to add lustre to his visit after all, and he mentioned it to the vicar. The man frowned.

'Amusing grave stones,' he mused aloud, apparent disapproving of the very idea. 'I am not sure I know to what your friend was referring. I know of no stones here I would call amusing, though there is one which has gained a certain local notoriety.'

'I expect that was the stone to which my friend referred,' Allington told him. 'Might you show me where to find it?'

'Assuredly,' said the vicar. He led Allington round to the north side of the church to a patch which had been allowed to become unkempt and overgrown. A few stones sprawled at angles close to the long grass, their names all but indecipherable. The vicar picked his way towards the back of the plot, lifting his skirts slightly to avoid wetting them, before pausing before another stone set aside by itself.

'This must be the stone to which your friend referred,' he said.

Allington stooped over it but found difficulty in deciphering its inscription in the waning light.

'Yes, it's in a poor way, I'm afraid. It's apparently never been tended since the poor fellow was interred, or so local opinion has it. He had no family, as far as could be told, and none of the locals have ever fancied having much to do with it.'

'He was not a local man, then?' Allington enquired.

'No, not a bit of it. There lies the mystery, in fact. I daresay if it had been a member of some local family then some of the stories which have grown up about it would not be so widely believed. You know what country people are. They attribute the strangest properties to those things they do not understand.'

'There is a mystery, then,' said Allington, pleased at least to find something more to entertain him before he returned to the station to continue his journey.

'Oh yes, I should think so. It's said he was passing through, like yourself. Nobody knows what brought him to Brandeston at any rate, though it is known he arrived by train. He simply had lunch at the inn and came down here to explore the church a little, such as you have today.

'After that, nobody knows quite what happened. It seems he may have been on his way back to the station when some ill fortune befell him. There were strange sounds after dark on that day, so they say, such as rooks might make - though nobody who heard them really believed the noises to be of rooks. Or so it is said. It has become part of local folklore, I am afraid, though people mostly prefer not to speak of it.

'The reports of those who found the body are quite garbled, I daresay the natural result of the excitable temperament of the locals and the ghastly circumstances in which the body was found.

'The police investigated, of course, and the coroner made all necessary enquiries, but nobody could explain the kind of injuries from which he died. The constable apparently declared he had neverⁱ seen anything like it. They say the look on the poor victim's face when found kept those who saw it awake for many a long night afterwards.'

Allington leant closer to the grave, his flesh beginning to creep with a dread to which he could not put a name.

'He was found here?' he asked.

'Oh no!' the vicar declared. 'Not on consecrated ground, thank the lord. Given the circumstances of the death I daresay there would have had to be some kind of reconsecration otherwise. No, he had left the church and was found some way up the road, towards the common. It was assumed at the inquest that he was making his way back to the train. He had some documents with him which identified him to the inquest, at least by name, though no relations ever came forward in spite of extensive enquiries. That is why it was assumed he was a stranger.

'Such a tragedy. Particularly so because according to the landlord of the inn where he took lunch he told him he had only visited the church on the advice of somebody he had met. He should never have been in Brandeston at all, poor devil.'

The vicar rubbed his hands together vigorously, feeling the cold.

'Now if you will forgive me, I will bid you good day and leave you to what little is left of the afternoon. I find the gathering darkness at this time of the year a little too maudlin to the spirits.'

The vicar's footsteps faded with the light, the rays of which now slanted across the gravestone in such a way as to bring up the inscription in relief, and in the glow of the last of the sun's rays, Allington read: 'Charles Montague Roylance'.

In the deepening dusk, the rooks in the woods by the common began their raucous call.
