

tea, so holding hands, they passed rapidly from the tea-house, their mirth largely covered by a show of coughing. Outside, and clear of earshot, they burst into laughter. The trap was already there, and the driver recognized the colonel's niece. They mounted, holding hands and laughed riotously for the next three miles, even though the driver glanced back at them twice, evidently mystified by their behaviour.

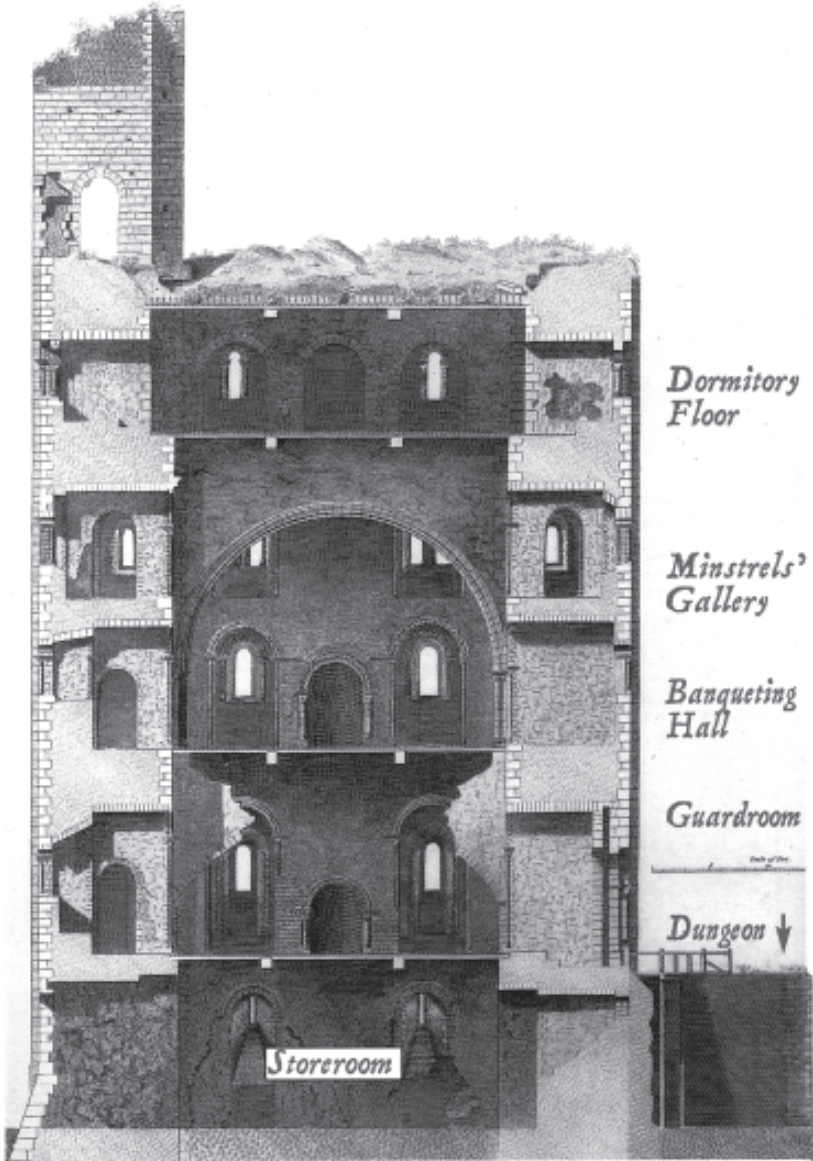
As they recovered their composure Simon realized that one of his problems was solved. He had wondered and wondered how to break the ice and enjoy a first moment of physical contact, given his inexperience in matters of the heart, the results of the isolated nature of his family background and of his employment, leading together to a total lack of personal familiarity in the area of romance. But the first physical contact had been achieved in the least predictable of circumstances.

## Chapter 16

*Castle Hedingham, early afternoon the same day.*



**T**hey reached the village of Castle Hedingham just before two o'clock and, passing over the handsome Tudor bridge which, Theresa remembered, had been built at the time of Henry VII, they came to the large garden that surrounded the ancient stone keep. At one time the garden must have been magnificent, but it was now largely spoilt, partly by neglect, and partly by a series of diggings evidencing the beginning of some kind of archaeological exploration of the inner bailey.



*Cross section of Heddingham Castle*

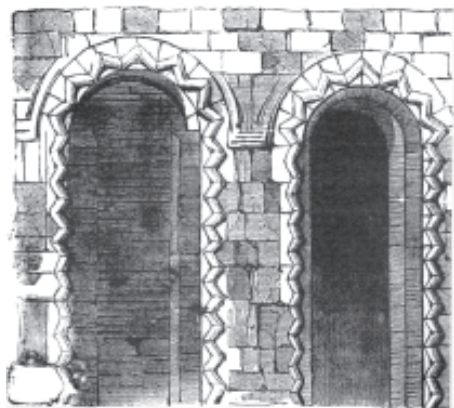
Since the weather was unusually warm for the time of year, they spread out their picnic in one of the grassy areas and sat down on cushions. The driver withdrew, promising to return at four o'clock, and reminded them that the colonel had arranged for the custodian to be there at 2.30 to show them round, which would give them an hour and a half to explore.

The castle was impressive, and, as Simon had learned from the Master, built on almost exactly the same plan as the keep at Cambridge. The nearly square tower was fifty to sixty feet in breadth and length, with slight thickenings at the corners, and a 'splay' or 'plinth' round the bottom courses of stone. (The plinth rendered attack with battering rams much harder and, at the same time, caused rocks thrown from the battlements to bounce off the stonework and fly straight at any enemy who was near the base of the tower.) Another similarity was not obvious at first sight, but Simon had read about it after deciding to gather more information on the keep at Hedingham. Both castles were provided with fireplaces (two at Hedingham and four at Cambridge) and instead of flues that ran right up to chimneys at roof level, as in most castles built after the middle of the thirteenth century, the relatively short flues led directly to holes in the walls, set immediately above the fireplaces. This was a system that produced a lot of internal smoke when the wind was in the wrong direction, as Simon knew from the rare occasions in winter when they lit fires at the De Vere keep. In order to prevent this smoke some fellows had suggested putting in flues that ran right to the battlements and then to chimney pots, but others had objected to such a drastic change to an ancient fabric. In the end nothing was done, not least because the mason's estimate for the work was huge.

The basement had small ventilation slits, above which the entrance floor had modest windows, above which were the windows of the Great Hall, doubled in the case of the gallery. On the top floor there was one more set of windows, placed immediately above the others, once again in the round style of the Normans, but here at Hedingham they were crowned with fine chevron carvings that typified the period.

Despite the similarities, four things made the exterior of this tower

different from the one at De Vere, with which he was familiar. The first he had noticed on their approach: the presence of large and ugly holes made into the basement on the east side of the keep, which Theresa told him had been put there in the eighteenth century to make easier access when the castle was used for storage. The second was that the forebuilding here was a ruin, while at De Vere both storeys were still intact and comprised the old dungeon underneath the



entrance way, only reached by an exterior door and now used as a storeroom, and the entrance way itself, which had its own set of battlements and a high-pitched wooden roof. (The ruined forebuilding at Hedingham, Simon recalled, was exactly what the left-hand panel of the portrait had indicated.) The third difference he had spotted

when he first saw the distant view of the castle in the painting in the Master's Lodge. At De Vere, the windows at the top level were doubled, in exactly the same way as in the gallery, which, Simon thought, gave a particularly pleasing appearance to the Cambridge example. Finally, the battlements at De Vere had been restored, whereas these had disappeared.

The custodian, a pleasant woman in her forties, who introduced herself as Mrs Pine, turned up on time and led them to the entrance. They climbed the outside staircase (the upper part of which would originally have been within the forebuilding) and a huge, old-fashioned key was turned in the lock. Before going in she pointed to the gardens below. "I'm sorry about the mess. It usually looks much tidier than this, but Mr Majendie – that's the present owner – has agreed to an exploration of the site. There used to be many other stone buildings round the inner bailey and they're trying to find out where."

Theresa was running her hands over the outside stone, and

admiring the carving above the main door. “This stonework seems to be in excellent shape. Is it the original material?” she asked.

Mrs Pine was pleased to show her knowledge and to stress the impressiveness of the castle.

“Yes indeed. This is the original ashlar, brought here all the way from Barnack quarries in Northamptonshire. The entire exterior of the keep is faced with it, which must have been an extraordinary expense at the time. It explains why the basic structure is still in such excellent condition, despite the vandalism such as those dreadful openings on the other side.”

As they passed through the door she added, “Perhaps we should begin with the Great Hall. It’s the most impressive part of the castle, and still beautiful, despite the years of neglect.”

Once inside she led them through a short passage on the left that entered into the great spiral stairway, some thirteen feet in diameter, that ran from the basement to the top of the castle.

“I can’t help thinking of all the people who have climbed these stairs, ever since around 1140,” said Simon. “How worn they look.”



“Yes, they’re well used,” replied Mrs Pine, “but in fact you’re not walking on the original stones. They were so badly trodden that these red bricks were set into the stone about the time of Henry VII: but now even these are badly worn.”

After a whole turn the staircase opened directly onto the Great

Hall, and they stepped inside.

Theresa gasped. The room was sensational, even though it was unfurnished, its walls covered with decayed whitewash, and the windows dirty. It was roughly forty feet long by thirty wide, with a great stone arch, decorated in the Norman manner, dividing the ceiling into two equal sections, allowing wooden beams crossing from the walls to the top of the arch to bear the weight of the floor above. Simon later measured the arch to be twenty-eight feet in span. Each of the four sides of the hall had two windows, with single lights on the lower floor, while the gallery – which ran right round the upper floor – had almost identical windows immediately above them except, as Simon had noticed from the outside, these each had two lights. On the south side – facing the arch – was a fireplace, and Simon felt his eyes drawn to the gallery window above it and to the left. This was where the clue told him to look!

“Can one walk round the gallery?” asked Simon.

“Yes, of course. Just follow the staircase and it opens onto it.”

Leaving the two women to continue their admiration of the great arch, Simon climbed the stairwell. Theresa seemed to have sensed something of his inner excitement, since, just as he set off, she glanced at him with a puzzled expression. However, for a minute or two he wanted to be alone in that window, to put his hand exactly where the bishop’s ring had been, and – perhaps – to see if the top of the window seat could be moved. He had envisaged how an expert mason could have used a stone seat as a kind of door: one that slid outwards as one pulled on the curved end of the stonework, and he had almost convinced himself that this would be the entrance to a secret room that held the Lolworth treasure. If he found a door, he would have to come back again, and he would have to provide some explanation why he needed time alone in the castle. Perhaps, he thought, he could say that he needed to take a whole series of careful measurements so that he could write an article on the relationship of the two keeps.

As Simon mounted the stairs he felt a tightening in his chest, and he knew that his rapid breathing was not caused only by the exercise. Once at the level of the gallery he went quickly to the window

indicated in the painting.

There was the double window, but, unlike the situation at the De Vere keep, there was no window seat! He crouched down and examined the stone floor. There was no evidence that there had ever been a stone seat, or of any interruption in the fine stonework that could indicate the presence of a secret door. Moreover, because the gallery passage at Hedingham was considerably broader than the one at De Vere, there was, in fact, almost no room for a seat between the passage and the window. Either the painter of the Tudor portrait had invented the seat, or this was not the right castle!

Simon recalled what it had felt like as a boy when one was bitterly disappointed. There was a lump in his throat which, when he was younger, would have been the prelude to tears. He heard the approach of the women and quickly stood up, making a show of looking at the view from the window. This view, he realized, was similar to that shown in the left-hand panel of the portrait. Despite the recent decay he could see that the general outline was the same. But how could this be? How could the painting be so right about the view of the castle, including the layout of the gardens and the poor state of the forebuilding, and so wrong about a vital detail of the interior?

The others joined him at the window. "It's funny you should come straight to this spot," said Mrs Pine. "That's exactly what the gentleman did who came here on Thursday!"

Theresa looked at Simon while he stammered slightly. "H- how odd," he said, "I thought you had very few visitors until the summer season got under way."

"That's right, but this was a gentleman from Cambridge – like yourself sir. He was a Dr Jones, but I don't know from which college he came. Mr Majendie passed on his letter to me asking if he could see the castle as soon as possible, and I showed him round all by himself. He went all over the castle, but this is where he wanted to go first."

"I know one Dr Jones, a rather large man, I mean both tall and with a large figure – about sixty I should think. He teaches Latin at St John's College."

“I don’t think that could be him. This man was about average height, and looked quite trim, and I don’t think he could have been more than forty-five.”

Simon said nothing more, but he was both worried and puzzled. It couldn’t be just by chance that another Cambridge fellow should be anxious to see Hedingham Castle and, it would seem, pay special attention to the same window in the gallery! Was Dr Jones his real name? It was possible, since he certainly didn’t know all the dons in Cambridge, but when he got back he could soon check up on how many Dr Joneses there were among the fellows of all the colleges.

They continued with the tour. The top floor, to Simon’s surprise, was arranged differently from that at De Vere’s. Here, there was simply a large open space with thick wooden posts supporting the roof. In earlier days, as Mrs Pine explained, the space would have been divided up by partitions or curtains in order to make private sleeping quarters for the Earl of Oxford and his family and retainers. However, at De Vere’s the top storey was divided by a stone wall, three feet thick, placed immediately above the arch. The roof beams there ran from the exterior walls to the top of this dividing wall.

There was one other significant difference that Simon noticed. At Hedingham there was just the one large spiral stairway that ran from top to bottom, whereas at De Vere’s, in addition to an equivalent large stairway, placed right by the entrance, there was a much narrower spiral staircase in the opposite corner that also ran from the basement to the battlements, a mere six feet in diameter and used, he presumed, as a kind of servants’ route between the floors.

They went to the roof level, and walked carefully right round the castle, keeping well back from the edge because of the absence of battlements, Mrs Pine, meanwhile, indicating how easy it would be to see enemies approaching from any direction. Then they went down to the entrance floor which, as at De Vere, contained a guardroom and a kitchen (although at Hedingham they were not separated by a wall); then they surveyed the vaulted basement.

“At one time,” said Mrs Pine, “there used to be a well here, but for some reason it got blocked up, perhaps when they started using

this place for storage in the eighteenth century and made those horrible openings. We're not sure where the well was."

"I seem to remember being told there was once a secret passage," said Theresa. "Perhaps, if there were one, it ran from the well shaft, as it does in the great Norman keep at Bamburgh."

"Yes," said Mrs Pine, "that's possible. The story goes that the passage ran from somewhere down here to the fishponds in the outer bailey, and that during one of the famous sieges of the castle, the soldiers on the battlements fetched some fish and threw them down onto the attackers – just to let them know they weren't short of supplies. The idea was to make them give up. I don't know that I believe it, but it makes a good story."

They went back into the garden, and chatted while they waited for the pony and trap. Theresa was clearly aware that Simon had a special agenda and was anxious to quiz him about it, but while Mrs Pine was present she contented herself with asking whether there was a similar story of a secret passage at De Vere's keep.

"No," said Simon, "I've never heard tell of one, and I don't think it's really a possibility, as it is here. Our keep is built right by the river, and although the floor of the basement is above the water level I don't think you could build a secret tunnel out of the keep that wouldn't get flooded. The setting's quite different here, with the castle on top of a small hill – partly natural, by the look of it, and partly built up from an early earth-work. Here, I could imagine a passage to the fishponds, but not at De Vere."

