

Ghost from the Past: The Mystery of Latham Cottage

By Mary Maden
Illustrated By Vicki Wallace



THE STORY SO FAR...

Toby and his best friend Ali hang out near a spooky, abandoned beach house, Latham Cottage. Ali's dog chases a cat into the cottage and they must go inside to get him. The house, boarded up for a hundred years since two mysterious deaths occurred there, has a strange effect on Toby.

Chapter Two **The Monster Behind the Door**

Toby wiggled past the board over the window and dropped to the floor. He was inside Latham Cottage!

There was an unearthly stillness in the house. Dim light filtered in, throwing eerie shadows inside the dark interior of the cottage. Except for the thick layer of

dust, it looked as though someone still lived there. Toby felt as if he had stepped back in time!

Ali and Toby walked slowly through the dark, silent house. Their footprints made clear tracks in the dust on the once-gleaming floors. The air was thick and heavy. Nothing had disturbed the dead quiet of the house in over a hundred years!

"Wow!" Ali exclaimed. "This place is like a museum!"

"More like a tomb," added Toby, rubbing the goose bumps on his arms. The house gave Toby a strange, spooky feeling. Toby was afraid to talk above a whisper. Instinct told him that their voices were disturbing something in the house. He couldn't explain it, but the house seemed *alive* to him.

Just then, Ali called out, "Buddy! Here, boy!" Toby jumped. The sound of

Ali's voice seemed unnaturally loud. Her words seemed to tear apart the very air in the room. Toby could almost *feel* it!

"Sshh!" Toby hissed. "Not so loud!"

"Why are you whispering?" Ali asked. "There's nobody here—just us and that ornery mutt of mine!"

"Just not so loud," muttered Toby.

"You don't have to scream!"

"What's the matter with you, anyway? You're scared!" teased Ali. "Are you afraid I'll wake up a ghost? Hello there, Mr. Ghost! Yoo-hoo! Mr. Ghost!"

"I'm not scared!" declared Toby. "I just don't want anyone to hear us."

"Don't worry," said Ali, "there hasn't been anyone around here for years. C'mon!"

Toby ran into a giant cobweb.

"Gross!" Toby wiped the spider web from his face. He couldn't help but shiver as he followed Ali deeper into the house. They came to a huge entrance hall. A curving staircase wound up to the second floor. A gigantic crystal chandelier hung above them. Toby looked up in awe. As he looked around, something caught his eye. A large oil painting hung on the wall. Light came from somewhere and was shining on the painting. It seemed to glow!

"Look at this," said Toby. Toby and Ali walked over to the painting. It was the portrait of a teenage girl. She sat in an old-fashioned chair in a paneled room. She was wearing an odd-looking costume and held a mask of feathers in her right hand. A glittering gold chain hung around her neck. Dangling from the chain was a gold key. The girl had long, dark hair that was arranged in curls around her lovely, heart-shaped face. Toby thought everything about the girl was pretty—maybe even beautiful, but her eyes... well, her eyes were like none he had ever seen! They were a deep,

dark purple! Toby had never even *heard* of purple-colored eyes before. But, what struck Toby even more was the sadness in the girl's eyes.

"She's beautiful," Ali commented. "I'll bet she used to live here. She must have been happy living in a place like this."

"Maybe once," Toby mused, "but something must have happened. You can tell by her eyes."

"I thought I was the one with the imagination!" said Ali. "Come on, we have to find Buddy. Let's look back there."

"Okay," Toby mumbled, still fascinated by the portrait.

Ali left to search for Buddy. Toby paused to take one last look at the painting. The girl almost seemed alive! He looked into her beautiful, sad eyes. Suddenly, Toby felt strange. His skin tingled all over. The air seemed to become lighter. He smelled a faint, sweet odor. It smelled like... well... like vanilla! Toby couldn't seem to move. He was standing still, but at the same time he felt as if he was falling. Falling down, down, down, into those deep purple eyes! Toby sensed something. But no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't quite make out what that something was! It was like the feeling you have when you know the answer to a question, but you just can't think of it. You think really hard until you can almost get the answer. The harder you try, the closer you come. Until you are right on the edge of remembering...

Toby's thoughts were interrupted by a faint cry. "Help me!" called a far-off voice. "Help me, please!" It was a girl's voice!

Suddenly, the light, sweet air went away. Its absence made the air feel even heavier than before. Toby woke up as if he had been dreaming or in a trance of

some kind. A strange loneliness washed over him. He could still hear the echo of the girl's cries in his ears.

"I'm coming," Toby answered, hurrying out of the room. "Hold on!"

Toby ran out of the entrance hall and toward the back of the house. "I'm coming... Ali, I'm coming!"

Toby burst through the kitchen door.

"You almost knocked me down!" Ali cried. "What's the matter with you!"

"You yelled for help," Toby replied. "I thought something was wrong!"

"I didn't yell for help," Ali stated. "I haven't said a word."

"I heard a girl call, 'Help me!' " Toby argued. "I thought it was you. You had to have heard it, too!"

"I didn't hear anything," Ali assured Toby. "Honest!"

"I heard a voice," Toby said, now not so sure. "At least I thought I did..."

"This house is getting to you," Ali teased. "That painting sure got to you. I think you have a crush on that girl in the picture!"

"That's crazy!" cried Toby, his face red with embarrassment. "She's not even real... not any more... I mean she lived a long time ago!"

"Maybe it was *her* calling you," mocked Ali. "Toby, help me! Oh, Toby... help!" Abruptly, Ali stopped teasing Toby.

Her eyes grew wide with fear. "I heard something!" Ali managed to whisper.

"Yeah, right..." A terrible noise stopped Toby in mid-sentence.

"Ooow!" came a pitiful, unnatural wail.

Terrified, Ali and Toby stopped dead in their tracks. This time they both heard it! It was like nothing they had ever heard before!

"Oooww!" The noise was even louder now. "Ooow! Ooow!"

The two friends stared at each other in horror. The awful cry seemed to be coming from somewhere behind the door. What kind of monster could make a sound like that? Whatever it was, it was coming closer. And closer... and closer... and closer!

Thump! Something bumped hard against the kitchen door. Toby grabbed Ali's hand. Her hand was trembling.

"What is it?" Ali whispered.

Toby swallowed hard—barely able to contain his terror. "I don't know!" he croaked.

Then... very slowly, the door began to open!

Next Time... Chapter Three:

A Voice From the Past

Quality Serials by Mary Maden

© 2002 by Mary Maden.

All rights reserved.