

# Storylandia

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Kathryn L. Ramage

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Cousin Wilfrid

By Kathryn L. Ramage

# The Abrupt Disappearance of Cousin Wilfrid

## 1

Abbotshill had never been Frederick Babington's home, but he was as fond of it as he was the environs of Marsh Hall. This tiny village ten miles from Ipswich had once been the site of a medieval abbey, now in ruins. In these modern times, a collection of quaint cottages, a post office, and a brown-timbered tavern sat at the convergence of five country lanes on one side of a mill pond. On the other side of the pond was the old mill with its enormous wheel, more cottages, and shops around a green. The Mill Wheel Inn sat adjacent to an on-request railway platform.

Babingtons had owned the former abbey lands since the days of the Reformation and had been a prominent family in the area for centuries. Many of them still lived in the vicinity... which was where the problem began.

After the tragedy at Marsh Hall, Freddie returned to his flat in London emotionally drained and physically exhausted. The death of Bertram Marsh and the terrible suspicions that had subsequently fallen on certain members of the Marsh family could be endured, but the death of his cousin Agatha could not. Freddie would always feel that his bungling amateur attempt at playing detective had led to that tragedy.

He hadn't argued when his friend and manservant Billy Watkins had sent him straight to bed. He was grateful for the enforced rest. The injuries he'd received during the Great War had taken a long time to heal and he still suffered from occasional nervous relapses in times of distress, just as he'd suffered at Marsh Hall.

During the week that followed, he ate whatever food Billy put before him without the usual protests about not being hungry, slept, read, and looked over his notes for the book he planned to write about his experiences during the war. For years, he hadn't wanted to recall what he'd seen in France, but now it seemed preferable to thinking about what had just occurred at his old home. He might still be in bed if his uncle Sir Hilliard Babington hadn't come for an unexpected visit.

Sir Hilliard was famous as a world traveler and adventurer, an expert on the cultures of the Middle East as well as a scholar of the classics, but he rarely left his home near Cambridge since his retirement.

"I needed to refresh my memory. Some blasted fool's published an article in some archaeological journal about that Egyptian dig I joined back in the '90s," the old gentleman had explained. "He refers to some artifacts we brought back, but he's got it entirely wrong. I mean to write a stiffly worded letter to the editors to refute him. Those artifacts are part of the British Museum's collection, and so are my original notes from the dig—I wired one of the curators, my old friend Thaddeus Barnstaple, that I was coming to see them. I daresay most of what I want is tucked away in storage drawers, but he's sure to let me have a look. You won't mind if I make use of your spare room? It's a good thing you live so near the Museum,

Freddie. Quite convenient. I won't be more trouble than I can help."

Sir Hilliard proved as good as his word. He spent most of his time at the Museum and dined out with his curator friend; Freddie only saw his uncle when Hilliard stuck his head into Freddie's room to ask how he was and how Freddie's own writing was getting on. In spite of Sir Hilliard's encouragement, Freddie felt less inclined to take up the task now that his famous uncle was present. His own life seemed much less interesting by comparison.

One morning, when Freddie felt well enough to get up and dress, he found Sir Hilliard in the sitting room with a tea tray and a number of opened letters forwarded from Cambridge. Hilliard was holding up one letter and frowning at it.

"What's wrong, Uncle Hill? Is it bad news?"

"It's your Aunt Dodo." Hilliard waved the letter with a crackling *snap*. "Lydia and her boy Wilfred have been making a nuisance of themselves over Abbot House."

"I thought that matter had been settled ages ago when Uncle Hector was still alive."

Freddie had always been vaguely aware of the long-standing quarrel over the family home. In the 1850s, his grandfather's right to inherit Abbot House had been hotly disputed, leading to a number of lawsuits. The original claimants were long dead and their children elderly; most had no interest in the house, but memories of that bitter quarrel still lingered. The last to carry on had been Hilliard's and Dorothea's cousin Hector Babington-Loewes. At the time of Grandfather's death, Hector disputed the will, claiming that the late Mr. Babington had no right to bequeath Abbot House to his children. This suit had

been resolved without going to court before Hector's death in 1915.

"It *was* settled as far as Hector was concerned, but his widow has other ideas. She's been devilling your poor aunt, and Dodo wants me to do something about it. Well, I won't set foot in Abbotshill if I can help it." Hilliard couldn't abide most of his relatives and had done his best to avoid them for fifty years. Although he shared ownership of Abbot House with his sister, he had no interest in living there and left it in Dorothea's possession. "What about you, Freddie?" He set the letter down on his knee and regarded his nephew. "Are you feeling up to a visit? This might be settled by someone with common sense. Dodo's never had any, and Lydia certainly doesn't. Your aunt will take comfort in your being there to stand by her and look after her interests. It's in *your* interests as well, my boy. Abbot House will be yours one day. You've a share in the property through your father, and the only thing my sister and I have ever agreed upon is that all we both possess in this world will go to you when we leave it."

Billy had entered the room to retrieve the tea tray during this last part of the conversation and looked alarmed at Sir Hilliard's suggestion. "Freddie can't go," he protested. "He just got out of bed. It'll do him no good to be running half-way to Ipswich his first day up."

Sir Hilliard was used to servants expressing contrary opinions prefaced with generous amounts of apology and deference, but he made allowances for Billy; he understood that the two young men had been friends from boyhood. "What an old mother-hen you've become, Bill!"

"You was the one who told me to keep an eye

on him, sir,” Billy reminded the old gentleman. “When you sent us off to France. ‘Mind he comes to no harm,’ you said to me just before we went off. I did my best then, and I’ve done my best ever since.”

“So you have,” Sir Hilliard conceded. “Well, there’s no reason for him to dash off today. Lydia won’t throw my sister out of her only home immediately. What about tomorrow? You can go with him, Bill. Your father’s already down at Abbotshill. I gave him the week. I’ll stay on here at the flat while you two lads are gone. I can manage quite well by myself.”

At the prospect of seeing his family, Billy showed signs of relenting. Freddie knew that his fate was sealed.

He left London that morning bundled carefully up in a traveling rug with a first-class carriage to himself. Billy forbade him to smoke more than two cigarettes on the journey—but that was where Freddie felt he had to put his foot down.

“I’m not an invalid, Billy. I’m not recovering from influenza nor even a bad head-cold. I nearly drowned and suffered something of a nervous collapse. That’s all.”

“That was scarce two weeks ago,” Billy responded. “You’re still a bit hoarse from all that nasty river-water you swallowed. So mind how much you smoke. I ain’t forgot about that ‘nervous collapse’ of yours either. If it looks like you’re not up to this, I’m seeing you straight back to London and tucking you into bed no matter what Sir Hilliard says.”

“Nothing particularly exciting will happen. Aunt Lydia and Wilfrid will make a fuss and Aunt Dodo will keep her home—that’s all. It’s not as if we’re facing a murder.”

“I noticed you stopped reading those mystery stories,” said Billy.

“Yes,” Freddie admitted. He hadn’t even finished the last one he’d been reading. “They aren’t so entertaining now that I’ve had my own try at it. I’ve learned *that* lesson, at least. If I’m unlucky enough to be involved in another murder, I won’t try to play Sherlock Holmes. The police inspector chappies like that Deffords fellow can have it all to themselves.”

They were the only passengers to alight at Abbotshill Halt. While Billy took their baggage to the Mill Wheel Inn, Freddie went directly to Abbot House. He didn’t want to arrive at Aunt Dodo’s door as a guest until he was certain she was expecting him.

He headed up the path known as Abbots Lane. Hedgerows grew tall on either side. To the left rose the ruined tower of Hallows Abbey. On the right, the roof of his aunt’s house was visible through the trees. He heard the familiar creak of the garden gate, and then Wilfrid Babington-Loewes appeared in the lane ahead of him.

Wilfrid was eight years older than Freddie, but he was a small, hunched-up man with a perpetually scowling expression that made him appear nearer 40 than 34. His scowl deepened when he saw Freddie blocking his path.

“So you’ve come,” said Wilfrid. “Your aunt’s been telling everyone you’re dangerously ill.”

“I *was* ill. This is the first day I’ve been out in over a week,” Freddie confirmed, but he could see that Wilfrid doubted it. “What brings you this way, Wilfrid? Have you been calling on Aunt Dodo?”

“Yes, on Mother’s behalf,” said Wilfrid. “She’s always desired to live at Abbot House, you know, though Father failed to obtain it. I’ve taken up the

cause. There don't seem to be any legal means that haven't already been tried, so I thought I'd make a fair offer for the place. An elderly maiden lady doesn't need a house that size. She'd be much happier in some smaller abode. We'd be willing to give her Babblebrook. It's quite cozy. Aunt Dodo could take her belongings there and Mother could move in here."

"And you with her?"

"I'd come down for weekends. My work in London keeps me too busy to live in the country. It's extremely important work." His tone implied that Freddie was a mere idler with nothing important to do. Wilfrid had had a job in a government office since the war. He'd been a clerk in those days, but family news informed Freddie that he'd since risen to some more prominent position under Under-Secretary Sir Grenville Wrioths.

"What did Aunt Dodo say to your offer?" asked Freddie.

"She wasn't interested. She's spent the whole of her life at Abbot House and she means to die there." Wilfrid regarded his second cousin. "What about you, Freddie? You'll probably outlive her, even if you're as ill as you claim. Would you consider selling the place when it comes to you?"

"I'm afraid I'm not interested either, thank you," Freddie answered pleasantly.

"You're just being stubborn and contrary," Wilfrid persisted. "What could you possibly want with a house of that size? You aren't going to marry, are you? You'd rattle around alone in it, with only Old Harry Watkins' boy who's so devoted to you as a sort of nurse."

The insult was unmistakable, but Freddie was determined not to lose his temper. That was what

Wilfrid wanted.

To anyone else, he might've agreed that Abbot House was too large for him. He had little desire to live in it and felt less sentimental attachment for it than he did for his uncle's house near Cambridge, which he also expected to inherit. *That* smaller house would suit very nicely for a solitary gentleman with one manservant, as it had done for Sir Hilliard and Harry Watkins for many years. When Abbot House came into his possession, Freddie intended to lease it at a generous rate to one of his Babington cousins. But whoever might eventually live there, Freddie was determined that it would never be Wilfrid. In any case, it was unspeakably vulgar to discuss his expectations regarding the house while his aunt was still alive and in residence.

"I like Abbot House and I intend to make it my country home one day," he said to Wilfrid. "I'm not entirely resolved to being a bachelor for the rest of my life, any more than I daresay you are. My health isn't good, I admit it, but chaps who've suffered worse wounds in the war have managed to marry, support wives, and bring up children. Why shouldn't I? I've no wish to sell Abbot House," he repeated firmly. "You've made your offer, Wilfrid, and it's been refused by both Aunt Dodo and me. You can be on your way and tell your mother what we've had to say."

Freddie was tempted to address his cousin as "Warts," a nickname bestowed upon Wilfrid by his school-fellows and still used by those who didn't like him, but this would be petty and childish. The reference to his war wounds was a blow Freddie felt he could more effectively deliver. His cousin had spent the entire war behind a desk in London. Wilfrid affected to look down on those who had faced battle

and come home injured or dead, but Freddie knew he was sensitive about accusations of cowardice. He was gratified to see that the blow had struck home.

“You think you’re so high-and-mighty, don’t you, Freddie Babington?” Wilfrid spat. “You’ve always been smug and superior, with your year at Cambridge and your aristocratic manners picked up from your Marsh relatives. You boast about your adventurer uncle with his important friends. Well, we’ll see who’s really the important one. I’ve got powerful friends too. I’ve my own fortune—I don’t mean Mother’s money, but what I’ve done for myself. What have you ever done? I’ll win out in the end. I’ll have Abbot House and more besides! You’ll be sorry you ever crossed me.”

Freddie had no response to this strange, grandiose outburst, but there was no need for one. Having had the last word, Wilfrid turned to go. He nearly ran into Billy, who was coming up from the village. After a startled moment faced with this unexpected obstacle, Wilfrid pushed past Billy and darted away.

“You’re all right?” Billy asked as he watched Wilfrid retreat down the lane in the direction of Abbotshill. “I heard raised voices and thought a fight was getting started.”

“We had some words, that’s all,” Freddie reassured him. “He has no rights where Abbot House is concerned and he knows it. Let’s hope that’s the end of Wilfrid’s troubling Aunt Dodo. I’ll be thoroughly delighted if I never have to deal with him or his mother again.”

By this time, Wilfrid had gone around the green curve of the hill and disappeared from sight.

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