

Old Stones at Twilight

by
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The abbey of the Red Cloister lies in dense woodland on the southern edge of Brussels. It's a brooding sort of place. Though the present buildings date from the early eighteenth century, their soul is medieval, and still alive, wandering the ponds and forgotten alleyways of this mossy hollow, unable to rest.

Paul suggested that we meet at dusk, in the woods behind the abbey. It seemed a strange request, somehow. But then, Paul is no ordinary journalist. His specialty is enigmas, particularly when they involve ancient sites and the unseen things stirring in the air there. He has spent years studying the Red Cloister. He knows just about everything there is to know about it, from its founding as an Augustinian priory in 1372, to its dissolution four centuries later. A rumour of lost treasure still drifts over the yew trees and gardens, and Paul can talk for hours about it. He can even show you the place, high up on the ramparts, where, if you look closely, a cross of blackened bricks appears among the red bricks of the wall: a sure clue, he says, that treasure lies buried somewhere nearby.

But I had asked Paul here on another matter: I wanted him to help me find the abbey ghost. A figure dressed in the white robes of the Augustinian order is said to frequent the path bordering the fish pond. It was first seen by the innkeeper one winter evening, over three centuries ago, when he was gathering ice from the pond. The monks used to brew some powerful ale back then, and to be honest, no one could ever say if what the innkeeper had seen that night was actually a ghost, a swirl of moonlit snow, or maybe just the frothy vision of his next beer.

Even nowadays, visitors don't linger in the abbey park after sundown. The last of them were heading for their cars as I hurried along the pond towards the forest. My instinct was to join them. *What on earth am I doing here?* I thought. I had never met Paul. It was only my own, unruly curiosity that had led me to contact him in the first place. I thought it would make a good story, that's all. Little did I know just *how* good.

He had asked me to join him at the Emperor's Spring – a watering hole off the main trail where Charles V stopped to quench his thirst one hot afternoon in the 1500's. Some say that the abbey ghost is in fact the monk who led the emperor to the spring. I smiled to myself: Paul clearly has a flair for drama, courting the ghost on its own turf like that!

I stopped to look back. The cloister had already vanished behind the trees. These woods are only a remnant of the great charcoal forests that once covered ancient Gaul, but you can still

get lost here, if you're not careful. Storm clouds darkened overhead, windlessly, as if gathered by some other force. Rushes in the pond scraped like a hand turning parchment. On the water's obsidian surface, another forest glittered in its alien, liquid dimension. I suddenly felt that I was brushing against another world: a little pocket universe that history had left behind. I knew that ghosts wandered the narrow corridors of these time zones. Was the path under my feet such a spectral channel? Maybe other pedestrians were even then passing invisibly at my shoulder. Nuns, abbots, archers, lords...their energies burdened the air.

There was no sign indicating the spring. In the half-light, the trunks of immense beeches gleamed in my way like prehistoric hide. At last I came across a track veering down into a gully. The earth gave off a humid, pungent heat, as if it were alive. Something reeked of age.

'Paul?' I called weakly.

There was no answer.

Then I saw a flash of white at the bottom of the gully. 'Paul, is that you?' I crept forward.

Something stirred in the obscurity. Beyond, I could just make out a black opening in the embankment. Water glistened and sang: I had found the spring.

A figure approached wearing a pale shirt. His face was lost in shadow. He drew closer and I caught my breath: I could see now that it was not a shirt, but a voluminous garment that reached to the ground. Then he spoke my name and I smiled, relieved. This must be Paul's idea of good theater, no doubt! I stepped forward to greet him. His name froze on my lips. For as he extended his hand, a heavy silver cross swung out from the folds of his robe. And where a shadow had masked a face...

...there was no face at all.