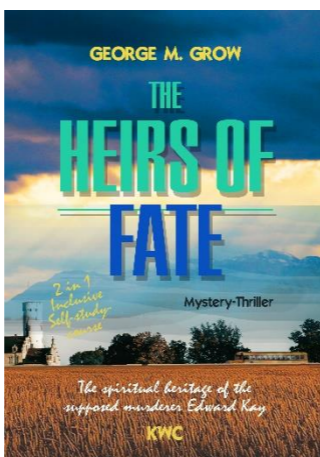


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Reading sample, chapter 1 & 2

The Decree

The chill days of autumn call for a fire in the hearth. Whitside enters the room and offers a sherry from a silver tray with glasses. Then he leaves the room with its pale green wallpaper, panelled walls and the creaky floor and I lie down to sleep. Shutting off the ceiling lamp, pulling the duvet up to my chin and staring out the narrow, broken window into the foggy night sky, I recollect how I came to be here.

My initial joy was great. Who would imagine receiving a letter that informs you that you are suddenly a millionaire? Would that mean a way out of my pathetic existence? At 34, I have carved out a living from occasional work as a journalist and playwright and can afford a simple flat on the edge of town. I have had no long-term success with women. A man's second suit is his home.

It was sent by a certain Elmar Whitside, a notary public from Manchester. He informed me that he had a message for me: a second sealed letter enclosed with the first. This letter informed me that someone wanted to bequeath me a share of his substantial estate. So far so good, but I had no idea who this benefactor was. The name Ken Winehouse meant nothing to me, and he was not listed in any telephone register or on Google.

There was also no mention of the amount of the inheritance. Winehouse had neither wife nor children, and he had already long since made provisions for that

eventuality. So he finally resolved to find a way to offer thanks for his fate. And it seems that I was one of the people who played in role in just that: I might not recall what happened on March 16, 2012, he wrote to me as if from beyond the grave. If I had not yanked him out of the way, he would certainly have been run over. The light was green, but neither he, often lost in his thoughts as he was, nor the bus driver was totally aware of the situation. But for my quick thinking he would have been killed on the spot.

To add to the irony of this situation, I cannot recall this event. But this was the very reason that Winehouse wanted to leave me part of his estate: because it seems I saved his life. He wrote that he had followed me to find out my name and address, because he was already formulating his plan for his “heirs of fate” and that he would be most pleased if I would accept my share of the inheritance. Although I really could not recall the event on the corner of Pepper Street and Long House Road, I decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth, especially when its teeth are packed with gold fillings.

I would have to wait to find out what sort of inheritance he was talking about. I had no idea at the time that it involved the deceased’s spirituality, that the gift horse had more than just gold fillings, and besides the already rather peculiar letter, I was irritated by the last three lines:

*The air cries out like a woman
giving birth, but it is nurtured by*

the Earth.

*This is the source of all
wonderment.*

*Its power is fully received when it
enters the Earth.*

I found another enclosed article, which was all about the Tabula Smaragdina, a work of alchemy, which presented the hermetic concept of the origin of the world as well as a guide to achieving various knowledge and abilities (often known as the “Philosopher’s Stone”) in a highly abridged form. The wisdom it contained was said to be the key to the ancient mysteries, the key to the world, and the wisdom which anyone who reads with open eyes and an open mind would be increased a hundredfold, but all I could think of in this case was the question of why Winehouse had decided to close his letter to me with a quote from a second-century text that has not been deciphered to this day, one that was said to have been composed by the philosopher king Hermes?

“Jesus Christ and General Jackson,” I swear to myself and my hard-won convictions, tumble out of the creaking, too high bed and draw the filthy curtains to block out the moonlight “The inheritance must be quite a tidy sum if the conditions for receiving it have to do with this occult skulduggery!”

Having thought this out loud, my mind meticulously retraces the steps that led me to this place. It was odd that could find absolutely nothing about my benefactor in the

Internet. I try again to find something over my iPhone, but again I receive no signal. This is not unusual in a forsaken, desolate region like the one I find myself in. But the conversation I had with Elmar Whitside after finding his number in the letter head was certainly highly unusual.

The benefactor's notary was brief: I was not the first person he had contacted in this matter. We said that he was also obligated to tell me that although he was the executor of Mr. Winehouse's will, he had never had the pleasure of meeting him in person. He had only spoken with him once on the telephone and received all other instructions and documents in the mail, which is why he was afraid he could not be of any further assistance. Nonetheless, he had been instructed to pass on one more message to the heirs: Should I have a genuine interest in Mr. Winehouse's inheritance, I should be at the car park in front of the Edward Monument at sunrise the following morning. Why and what for I should come to Liverpool he could not say, save that I should pack the basic necessities for a few days.

The Journey into the Unknown

This recollection also does not offer any details that might serve to illuminate the case. And so my mind wanders back to the place where the journey that brought me to this room began. And while the fire in the hearth dies down and the room starts to darken, while everything before my eyes takes on

a reddish glow and I close my eyes and think back to Liverpool, I see myself hurrying to the meeting point: but the time and place that the benefactor had instructed Elmar Whiteside to give me was not just for me alone. There was an entire group standing in front of the coach, staring quietly off into the milky early morning mist. This was the first time that the heirs of fate had met and expressed their dissatisfaction: "If all this bother is only worth a few bob, I will be quite annoyed", moaned a young, energetic man, who looked vaguely familiar to me. A woman joined in with him and the others seemed to be displeased and had better things to do than to stand about freezing off their tender bits.

Then the executor of the will climbed out of the bus, greeted us and counted heads. All nine heirs of fate had arrived punctually, he stated comfortably, read off the names and checked our ID. "Those who wish to claim their inheritance", he said, "should get on the bus." This was what the benefactor had instructed. To the question of why, he said he had no idea, but the destination was indicated in a sealed envelope that the bus driver was allowed to open only when the bus was already en route. With excuses like "The dead will not strike us down with a bolt from the blue!" we convinced him to open the envelope before we got on board. And so, against the express instructions of the benefactor, we learned our destination before the bus set off with our without us, a location that was not given as an address but as coordinates on a

map: some 200 miles to the north. Everything else, Mr. Whiteside explained, would be explained when we arrived.

Nothing was explained when we arrived. It was not until the early morning hours that we found out what was to in store for us. Still time and opportunity to blow this joint, I am still the captain of my fate. And to remain at the helm, and to ward off any possible injuries, I recall the bus ride taking us by way of Preston, Kendal and Carlisle, The Sellafield nuclear plant and the Kilmarnock maximum security prison into southern Scotland. Towards the end of the four-hour trip we were accompanied by a helicopter and innumerable cows who were about to be rounded up from their open pastures and put into stalls for the cold season.

The trip also afforded the heirs of fate the opportunity to get to know each other. The lady with the pinned-up hair and old-fashioned horn-rimmed glasses was Christine Butler. I knew her from the press; I always avoided her shallow reporting. Always seeking to make an intellectual impression on herself and on others, she has adopted the habit of answering questions with "What do you think?"

The older gentlemen with the goa-tee and corduroy cap that seemed to have taken root on his head, was not very talkative. Although he shared a seat with me, I never got more than a hmm or a so out of him. The other passengers were unfamiliar to me. It would later turn out that we had something else in common outside of the inheritance.

After the coach had turned off the main road, Alf Wegener, the bus driver with chauffeur's cap, took the microphone and announced a rest stop. But even there on the broad terrace of the roadside cafe, conversation remained sparse and fleeting. The heirs of fate looked upon each other as adversaries, revealing as little as possible to their competitors in order not to tip them off somehow.

But once the bus was back underway, people started to jointly assess the situation we all found ourselves in. Jeff Halington kicked it off, speaking into the microphone: It was about time to have a good look at one another; after all, we were about to spend several days together and all had the same purpose. As for himself, he was most interested in whether any of us knew the benefactor Ken Winehouse or whether we were also totally in the dark as to why and wherefore. And once these questions finally broke the ice, one thing came out: that everyone had received a personal letter from the deceased and that each of these ended with a three seemingly unintelligible sentences. The older gentlemen in the bowler hat and the pocket kerchief read the lines from his letter, and the lady with the milkmaid braids read hers. Unlike mine, neither was taken from the *Hermeticum*, but from similar works with authors I was unfamiliar with. But that was the end of it, and after Jeff put the microphone down, the travellers sank into a contemplative silence. They stared out at the passing landscape or closed their eyes for a

nap.

The glow in the hearth has almost died out. I find it unnerving to hold my arms out in the pale moonlight. The entire estate and its guests seem uncanny to me. A shiver ran down my spine as soon as the trip along the narrow country lane was coming to its end and I saw the manor on the rocky outcrop beyond rolling pastures. But secretly, I was looking forward to getting out there, as I had been feeling rather desolate in recent weeks: life consists of equal parts order and work. Any sort of excitement is welcome, even if it is not of the most pleasant nature.

Urshardt Manor

After the bumpy ride over the broken tarmac we reached our destination: the wooded estate with a clearing and a stately neo-gothic villa. The building seemed to have been uninhabited for years with only minimal upkeep. Why was it built here in the midst of this broad expanse of fields? It was probably once the manor house, from which the woods and fields were tended. The rusty bell under the eaves would have regulated the daily comings and goings of the field hands, the only half-roofed long fountain would have served to water the cows and sheep. Looking into the distance, one saw only field after field. Only the nuclear plant, which looked tiny from here, glowed in the fading daylight, and the long, low structure far off to the south would have been the prison, which we had passed by in

uncertain, dampened expectation.

Once the travellers had unloaded their baggage, the bus driver gave us his mobile number: We should call him when we were ready to be picked up. Charlene Hamilton protested: He could not simply abandon us here. The bus driver tried to mollify her: "I will be here within two hours whenever you call."

This assurance certainly made little or no sense; had we not already seen that insignificant events could have great consequences? Additionally, the notary public told us that we would find everything we needed in the house; he had taken care of everything. The bus disappeared irrevocably.

Elmar Whiteside led us into the spacious, stately building, a product of the individual, wild but refined taste of its builder, who, it seemed to me, was fully taken with the romantic style. Charlene called the estate with the round tower "a bit of a Snow-White castle" that had fallen under a spell for a hundred years, slumbering on beneath a finely woven roof of dust, while the glory of ages past shimmers through and tries to defend it against the ravages of time. The man with the goatee, impressed by its high, narrow Gothic windows, the purple red cladding and embellishments, the blood-red panes that made the faces of the guests entering the house look so gruesome that Janet White hesitated to step right over the threshold without hesitating, call it "the House of Fran-kenstein" and Jeff Halington, on smelling the dank odour rising

into our noses, dubbed it “the crypt”.

The grand salon, reached by way of a small vestibule, was totally appointed in green, and a magical green light poured over it through its window. The long table in the middle, the enormous clock with its immobile pendulum, the chairs upholstered in green velvet and the massive credenzas along the walls are black in colour to resemble ebony.

As we entered the salon, we saw a large, leather-bound guest book lying on the table. It had been opened to page from the year 1815, not long after the house was built.

It recorded the visit of a John and Frances Allan from Richmond, Virginia, friends of the owner who were visiting on their way to enrol their adopted son, Edgar Allan Poe, in a grammar school in Irvine, Scotland.

They remarked that the young Edgar was totally fascinated by the house and especially the guest rooms, and that he once disappeared all night and was not discovered until the next morning, having climbed inside the clock cabinet and fallen asleep with the massive pendulum grazing his belly.

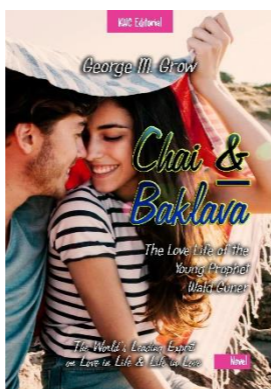
Three sets of double doors open on each side onto a corridor. After twenty or thirty paces one comes to a sharp bend opening onto a Gothic window. On both sides there are two doors opening to the sleeping chambers, which have been done in differing colours. The room at the easternmost end, for example, in blue, with corresponding blue window panes. The second

window was clad in yellow ochre panels, and the windowpanes shimmer in ochre. The third, along the western corridor, was done entirely in burgundy red, with red light streaming through its windows. The fourth contains orange furnishings and lighting, and the sixth entirely in violet. A heavy wooden stairway twisting twice at 45 degrees leads to two further corridors with the remaining rooms. And these awaited after another bend and a high, coloured window, and the light falling on them also corresponds to the furnishings of the landings – a pattern that continues into the very last rooms. This meant that the chamber assigned to Jeff Halington was done in turquoise velvet, turquoise carpets and turquoise glass, that of my immediate neighbour to the south in brown and mine in white. In any case, it was certainly not typical of the average taste 200 years ago. I would not have been surprised to learn that he was considered a bit of an eccentric, and perhaps it was much the same for his successor, Ken Winehouse, and perhaps that is the reason I took the room in white. But even this flashback does not offer any clue of what awaited me here, if I should stay or not, or something that is hard to imagine, but wants to be discovered. And since I had made the effort to find a threat in my situation that I would have the opportunity to react to, but could not find any such thing, I dozed off. The real reason connected with this place I will not find out until the following morning.

Provisions of the Will

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