

A Dark Chapter

A SMALL pamphlet was printed at Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, in 1808, which purports to be “A Full and Complete Summary of the Extraordinary Matters brought to light concerning the Bridgman Family and Richard Green, of Lavenham, with many Interesting Particulars never before published.” By this slight brochure—which appears to have had a local circulation only, and that a very confined one—I have corrected and enlarged my own version of the following dark page in the domestic annals of this country.

One Ephraim Bridgman, who died in 1783, had for many years farmed a large quantity of land in the neighborhood of Lavenham, or Lanham (the name is spelt both ways), a small market-town about twelve miles south of Bury St. Edmunds. He was also land-agent as well as tenant to a noble lord possessing much property thereabout, and appears to have been a very fast man for those times, as, although he kept up appearances to the last, his only child and heir, Mark Bridgman, found, on looking closely into his deceased father’s affairs, that were everybody paid, he himself would be left little better than a pauper. Still, if the noble landlord could be induced to give a *very* long day for the heavy balance due to him,—not only for arrears of rent, but moneys received on his lordship’s account, —Mark, who was a prudent, energetic young man, nothing doubted of pulling through without much difficulty,—the farm being low-rented, and the agency lucrative. This desirable object, however, proved exceedingly difficult of attainment, and after a protracted and fruitless negotiation, by letter, with Messrs. Winstanley, of Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields, London, his lordship’s solicitors, the young farmer determined, as a last resource, on a journey to town, in the vague hope that on a personal interview he should find those gentlemen not quite such square, hard, rigid, persons as their written communications indicated them to be. Delusive hope! They were precisely as stiff, formal, accurate, and unvarying as their letters. “The exact balance due to his lordship,” said Winstanley, senior, “is, as previously stated, 2,103£ 14s. 6d., which sum, secured by warrant of attorney, *must* be paid as follows: one half in eight, and the remaining moiety in sixteen months from the present time.” Mark Bridgman was in despair: taking into account other liabilities that would be falling due, compliance with such terms was, he felt, merely deferring the evil day, and he was silently and moodily revolving in his mind whether it might not be better to give up the game at once rather than engage in a prolonged, and almost inevitably disastrous struggle, when another person entered the office and entered into conversation with the solicitor. At first the young man did not appear to heed,—perhaps did not hear what was said,—but after a while one of the clerks noticed that his attention was suddenly and keenly aroused, and that he eagerly devoured every word that passed between the new comer and Mr. Winstanley. At length the lawyer, as if to terminate the interview, said, as he replaced a newspaper—*The Public Advertiser*—an underlined notice in which had formed the subject of his colloquy with the stranger, upon a side table, by which sat Mark Bridgman. “You desire us then, Mr. Evans, to continue this advertisement for some time longer?” Mr. Evans replied, “Certainly, six months longer, if necessary.” He then bade the lawyers “good day,” and left the office.

“Well, what do you say, Mr. Bridgman?” asked Mr. Winstanley, as soon as the door had closed. “Are you ready to accept his lordship’s very lenient proposal?”

“Yes,” was the quick reply. “Let the document be prepared at once, and I will execute it before I leave.” This was done, and Mark Bridgman hurried off, evidently, it was afterwards remembered, in a high state of flurry and excitement. He had also, they found, taken the newspaper with him,—by inadvertence, the solicitor supposed, of course.

Within a week of this time, the good folk of Lavenham,—especially its womankind,—were thrown into a ferment of wonder, indignation, and bewilderment! Rachel Merton, the orphan dressmaking girl, who had been engaged to, and about to marry Richard Green, the farrier and blacksmith—and that a match far beyond what she had any right to expect, for all her pretty face and pert airs—was positively being courted by Bridgman, young, handsome, rich, Mark Bridgman of Red Lodge (the embarrassed state of the gentleman-farmer’s affairs was entirely unsuspected in Lavenham); ay, and by way of marriage, too,—openly,—respectfully,—deferentially,—as if *he*, not Rachel Merton, were the favoured and honoured party! What on earth, everybody asked, was the world coming to?—a question most difficult of solution. But all doubt with respect to the *bonâ fide* nature of Mark Bridgman’s intentions towards the fortunate dressmaker was soon at an end; he and Rachel being duly pronounced man and wife at the parish church within little more than a fortnight of the commencement of his strange and hasty wooing! All Lavenham agreed that Rachel Merton had shamefully jilted poor Green, and yet it may be doubted if there were many of them that, similarly tempted, would not have done the same. A pretty orphan girl, hitherto barely earning a subsistence by her needle, and about to throw herself away upon a coarse, repulsive person, but one degree higher than herself in the social scale—entreated by the handsomest young man about Lavenham to be his wife, and the mistress of Red Lodge, with nobody knows how many servants, dependents, labourers!—the offer was irresistible! It was also quite natural that the jilted blacksmith should fiercely resent—as he did—his sweetheart’s faithless conduct; and the assault which his angry excitement induced him to commit upon his successful rival a few days previous to the wedding, was far too severely punished, everybody admitted, by the chastisement inflicted by Mark Bridgman upon his comparatively weak and powerless assailant.

The morning after the return of the newly-married couple to Red Lodge from a brief wedding-trip, a newspaper which the bridegroom had recently ordered to be regularly supplied was placed upon the table. He himself was busy with breakfast, and his wife, after a while, opened it, and ran her eye carelessly over its columns. Suddenly an exclamation of extreme surprise escaped her, followed by—“Goodness gracious, my dear Mark, do look here!” Mark did look, and read an advertisement aloud, to the effect that “If Rachel Edwards, formerly of Bath, who, in 1762, married John Merton, bandmaster of the 29th Regiment of Infantry, and afterwards kept a school in Manchester, or any lineal descendant of hers, would apply to Messrs. Winstanley, solicitors, Lincoln’s-Inn-Fields, they would hear of something greatly to their advantage.” “Why, dear Mark,” said the pretty bride, as her husband ceased reading, “my mother’s maiden name was Rachel Edwards, and I am, as you know, her only surviving child!” “God bless me, to be sure! I remember now hearing your father speak of it. What can this great advantage be, I wonder? I tell you what we’ll do, love,” the husband added, “you would like to see London I know. We’ll start by coach tonight, and I’ll call upon these lawyers, and find out what it all means.” This proposition was, of course, gladly acceded to. They were gone about a fortnight, and on their return it became known that Mark Bridgman had come into possession of 12,000£ in right of his wife, who was entitled to that sum by the will of her mother’s maiden sister, Mary Edwards, of

Bath. The bride appears not to have had the slightest suspicion that her husband had been influenced by any other motive than her personal charms in marrying her—a pleasant illusion which, to do him justice, his unvarying tenderness towards her through life confirmed and strengthened; but others, unblinded by vanity, naturally surmised the truth. Richard Green, especially, as fully believed that he had been deliberately, and with *malice prepense*, tricked out of 12,000£ as of the girl herself; and this conviction, there can be no doubt, greatly increased and inflamed his rage against Mark Bridgman,— so much so that it became at last the sole thought and purpose of his life, as to how he might safely and effectually avenge himself of the man who was flaunting it so bravely in the world, whilst he—poor duped and despised castaway—was falling lower and lower in the world every day he lived. This was the natural consequence of his increasingly dissolute and idle habits. It was not long before an execution for rent swept away his scanty stock in trade, and he thenceforth became a ragged vagabond hanger-on about the place,—seldom at work, and as often as possible drunk; during which fits of intemperance his constant theme was the bitter hatred he nourished towards Bridgman, and his determination, even if he swung for it, of being one day signally avenged. Mark Bridgman was often warned to be on his guard against the venomous malignity of Green; but this counsel he seems to have spurned, or treated with contempt.

Whilst the vengeful blacksmith was thus falling into utter vagabondism, all was sunshine at Red Lodge. Mark Bridgman really loved his pretty and gentle, if vain-minded wife,—a love deepened by gratitude, that through her means he had been saved from insolvency and ruin; and barely a twelvemonth of wedded life had passed, when the birth of a son completed their happiness. This child (for nearly three years it did not appear likely there would be any other) soon came to be the idol of its parents,—of its father, the pamphlet before me states, even more than of its mother. It was very singularly marked, with two strawberries, exceedingly distinct, on its left arm, and one, less vivid, on its right. There are two fairs held annually at Lavenham, and one of these—when little Mark was between three and four years old—Mr. Bridgman came in from Red Lodge to attend, accompanied by his wife, son, and a woman-servant of the name of Sarah Hollins. Towards evening, Mrs. Bridgman went out shopping, escorted by her husband, leave having been previously given Hollins to take the child through the pleasure—that is the booth and show part of the fair,—but with strict orders not to be absent more than an hour from the inn where her master and mistress were putting up. In little more than the specified time the woman returned, but without the child; she had suddenly missed him, about half an hour before, whilst looking on at some street-tumbling, and had vainly sought him through the town since. The woman's tidings excited great alarm; Mr. Bridgman himself instantly hurried off, and hired messengers were, one after another, dispatched by the mother in quest of the missing child. As hour after hour flew by without result, extravagant rewards, which set hundreds of persons in motion, were offered by the distracted parents; but all to no purpose. Day dawned, and as yet not a gleam of intelligence had been obtained of the lost one. At length some one suggested that inquiry should be made after Richard Green. This was promptly carried into effect, and it was ascertained that he had not been home during the night. Further investigation left no room for doubt that he had suddenly quitted Lavenham; and thus a new and fearful light was thrown upon the boy's disappearance. It was conjectured that the blacksmith must have gone to London; and Mr. Bridgman immediately set off thither, and placed himself in communication with the authorities of Bow Street. Every possible exertion was used during several weeks to discover the child, or Green, without success, and the bereaved father returned to his home a harassed, spirit-

broken man. During his absence his wife had been prematurely confined of another son, and this new gift of God seemed, after a while, to partially fill the aching void in the mother's heart; but the sadness and gloom which had settled upon the mind of husband was not perceptibly lightened thereby. "If I knew Mark was dead," he once remarked to the rector of Lavenham, by whom he was often visited, "I should resign myself to his loss, and soon shake off this heavy grief. But that, my dear sir, which weighs me down—is in fact slowly but surely killing me—is a terrible conviction and presentiment that Green, in order fully to work out his devilish vengeance, will studiously pervert the nature of the child—lead him into evil, abandoned courses—and that I shall one day see him—but I will not tell you my dreams," he added, after stopping abruptly, and painfully shuddering, as if some frightful spectre passed before his eyes. "They are, I trust, mere fancies; and yet—but let us change the subject."

This morbidly-dejected state of mind was aggravated by the morose, grasping disposition—so entirely different from what Mr. Bridgman had fondly prophesied of Mark—manifested in greater strength with every succeeding year by his son Andrew,—a strangely unlovable and gloomy tempered boy, as if the anxiety and trouble of the time during which he had been hurried into the world had been impressed upon his temperament and character. It may be, too, that he felt irritated at, and jealous of, his father's ceaseless repinings for the loss of his eldest son, who, if recovered, would certainly monopolize the lion's share of the now large family property,—but not one whit *too* large in his—Andrew Bridgman's—opinion for himself alone.

The young man had not very long to wait for it. He had just passed his twentieth year when his father died at the early age of forty-seven. The last wandering thoughts of the dying parent reverted to the lost child. "Hither, Mark," he faintly murmured, as the hushed mourners round his bed watched with mute awe the last flutterings of departing life; "hither: hold me tightly by the hand, or you may lose yourself in this dark, dark wood." These were his last words. On the will being opened, it was found that the whole of his estate, real and personal, had been bequeathed to his son Andrew, charged only with an annuity of 500£ to his mother, during life. *But*, should Mark be found, the property was to be *his*, similarly charged with respect to Mrs. Bridgman, and 100£ yearly to his brother Andrew, also for life, in addition.

On the evening of the tenth day after his father's funeral, young Mr. Bridgman sat up till a late hour examining various papers and accounts connected with his inheritance, and after retiring to bed, the exciting nature of his recent occupation hindered him from sleeping. Whilst thus lying awake, his quick ear caught a sound as of some one breaking into the house through one of the lower casements. He rose cautiously, went out on the landing, and soon satisfied himself that his suspicion was a correct one. The object of the burglars was, he surmised, the plate in the house, of which there was an unusually large quantity, both his father and grandfather having expended much money in that article of luxury. Andrew Bridgman was anything but a timid person,—indeed, considering that six men altogether slept in the house, there was but little cause for fear,—and he softly returned to his bedroom, unlocked a mahogany case, took out, loaded and primed, two pistols, and next roused the gardener and groom, whom he bade noiselessly follow him. The burglars—three in number, as it proved—had already reached and opened the plate-closet. One of them was standing within it, and the others just without. "Hallo! rascals," shouted Andrew Bridgman, from the top of a flight of stairs, "what are you doing there?"

The startled and terrified thieves glanced hurriedly round, and the two outermost fled instantly along the passage, pursued by the two servants, one of whom had armed himself with a sharp-pointed kitchen knife. The other was not so fortunate. He had not regained the threshold of the closet when Andrew Bridgman fired. The bullet crashed through the wretched man's brain, and he fell forward, stone dead, upon his face. The two others escaped—one of them after a severe struggle with the knife-armed groom.

It was some time before the uproar in the now thoroughly-alarmed household had subsided; but at length the screaming females were pacified, and those who had got up, persuaded to go to bed again. The corpse of the slain burglar was removed to an outhouse, and Andrew Bridgman returned to his bedroom. Presently there was a tap at the door. It was Sarah Hollins. "I am come to tell you something," said the now aged woman, with a significant look. "The person you have shot is the Richard Green you have so often heard of."

The young man, Hollins afterwards said, seemed much startled by this news, and his countenance flushed and paled in quick succession. "Are you quite sure this is true?" he at last said. "Quite; though he's so altered that, except Missus, I don't know anybody else in the house that is likely to recognise him. Shall I tell her?"

"No, no, not on any account. It would only recall unpleasant events, and that quite uselessly. Be sure not to mention your suspicion,—your belief, to a soul."

"Suspicion! belief!" echoed the woman. "It is a certainty. But of course, as you wish it, I shall hold my tongue."

So audacious an attempt created a considerable stir in the locality, and four days after its occurrence, a message was sent to Red Lodge from Bury St. Edmunds, that two men, supposed to be the escaped burglars, were there in custody, and requesting Mr. Bridgman's and the servants' attendance on the morrow, with a view to their identification. Andrew Bridgman, the gardener, and groom, of course, obeyed the summons, and the prisoners were brought into the justice-room before them. One was a fellow of about forty, a brutal-visaged, low-browed, sinister-looking rascal, with the additional ornament of a but partially-closed hare-lip. He was unhesitatingly sworn to by both men. The other, upon whom, from the instant he entered, Andrew Bridgman had gazed with eager, almost, it seemed, trembling curiosity, was a well-grown young man of, it might be, three or four and twenty, with a quick, mild, almost timid, unquiet, troubled look, and features originally comely and pleasing, there could be no doubt, but now smirched and blotted into ill favour by excess and other evil habits. He gave the name of "Robert Williams."

Andrew Bridgman, recalled to himself by the magistrate's voice, hastily said "that he did not recognise this prisoner as one of the burglars.—Indeed," he added, with a swift but meaning look at the two servants, "I am pretty sure he was not one of them." The groom and gardener, influenced no doubt by their master's manner, also appeared doubtful as to whether Robert Williams was one of the housebreakers. "But if he be," hesitated the groom, hardly knowing

whether he did right or wrong, “there must be some smartish wounds on his arms, for I hit him there sharply with the knife several times.”

The downcast head of the youthful burglar was suddenly raised at these words, and he said, quickly, whilst a red flush passed over his pallid features, “Not me, not me,—look, my arm-sleeves have no holes—no—”

“You may have obtained another jacket,” interrupted the magistrate. “We must see your arms.”

An expression of hopeless despair settled upon the prisoner’s face; he again hung down his head in shame, and allowed the constables to quietly strip off his jacket. Andrew Bridgman, who had gone to some distance, returned whilst this was going on, and watched for what might next disclose itself, with tenfold curiosity and eagerness. “There are stabs enough here, sure enough,” exclaimed a constable, as he turned up the shirt-sleeve on the prisoner’s left arm. There were indeed; and in addition to them, *natural, marks of two strawberries* were distinctly visible. The countenance of Andrew Bridgman grew ashy pale, as his straining eyes glared upon the prisoner’s naked arm. The next moment he wrenched himself away, as with an effort, from the sight, and staggered to an open window,—sick, dizzy, fainting, it was at the time believed from the closeness of the atmosphere in the crowded room. Was it not rather that he had recognised his long-lost brother, *the true heir to the bulk of his deceased father’s wealth*, against whom, he might have thought, an indictment would scarcely lie for feloniously entering his own house! He said nothing, however, and the two prisoners were fully committed for trial.

Mr. Prince went down “special” to Bury, at the next assize, to defend a gentleman accused of a grave offence, but the grand jury having ignored the bill, he would probably have returned at once, had not an attorney brought him a brief, very heavily marked, in defence of “Robert Williams.” “Strangely enough, too,” remarked the attorney, as he was about to go away, “the funds for the defence have been supplied by Mr. Andrew Bridgman, whose house the prisoner is accused of hawing burglariously entered. But this is confidential, as he is very solicitous that his oddly-generous action should not be known.” There was, however, no valid defence. The ill-favoured accomplice, why, I know not, had been admitted king’s evidence by the counsel for the crown, and there was no resisting the accumulated evidence. The prisoner was found guilty, and sentenced to be hanged. “I never intended,” he said, after the verdict was returned (and there was a tone of dejected patience in his voice that affected one strangely), “I never intended to commit violence against anyone in the house, and but that my uncle—he that was shot—said repeatedly that he knew a secret concerning Mr. Bridgman (he didn’t know, I am sure, that he was dead) which would prevent us from being prosecuted if we were caught, I should not have been persuaded to go with him. It was my first offence—in—in housebreaking, I mean.”

I had, and indeed have, some relatives in Mildenhall, in the same county, whom, at the termination of the Bury assize, I got leave to visit for a few days. Whilst there, it came to my knowledge that Mr. Andrew Bridgman, whom I had seen in court, was moving heaven and earth to procure a commutation of the convict’s sentence to transportation for life. His zealous efforts were unsuccessful; and the Saturday County Journal announced that Robert Williams, the burglar, would suffer, with four others, on the following Tuesday morning. I reached Bury on the Monday evening, with the intention of proceeding by the London night-coach, but there was no

place vacant. The next morning I could only have ridden outside, and as, besides being intensely cold, it was snowing furiously, I determined on postponing my departure till the evening, and secured an inside place for that purpose. I greatly abhor spectacles of the kind, and yet, from mere idleness and curiosity, I suffered myself to be drawn into the human stream flowing towards "Hang Fair," and once jammed in with the crowd in front of the place of execution, egress was, I found impossible. After waiting a considerable time, the death-bell suddenly tolled, and the terrible procession appeared,—five human beings about to be suffocated by human hands, for offences against property!—the dreadful and deliberate sacrifice precluded and accompanied by sonorous sentences from the Gospel of mercy and compassion! Hardly daring to look up, I saw little of what passed on the scaffold, yet one furtive, quickly-withdrawn glance, showed me the sufferer in whom I took most interest. He was white as if already coffined, and the unquiet glare of his eyes was, I noticed, terribly anxious! I did not again look up—I could not; and the surging murmur of the crowd, as it swayed to and fro, the near whisperings of ribald tongues, and the measured, mocking tones of the minister, promising eternal life through the mercy of the most high God, to wretches whom the *justice* of man denied a few more days or years of mortal existence—were becoming momentarily more and more oppressive, when a dull, heavy sound *boomed* through the air; the crowd swayed violently from side to side, and the simultaneous expiration of many pent-up breaths testified that all was over, and to the relief experienced by the coarsest natures at the consummation of a deed too frightful for humanity to contemplate. It was some time before the mass of spectators began to thoroughly separate, and they were still standing in large clusters, spite of the bitter, falling weather, when a carriage, furiously driven, with the body of a female, who was screaming vehemently and waiving a white handkerchief, projected half out of one of the windows, was seen approaching by the London Road. The thought appeared to strike everyone that a respite or reprieve had come for one or more of the prisoners, and hundreds of eyes were instantly turned towards the scaffold, only to see that if so it had arrived too late. The carriage stopped at the gate of the building. A lady, dressed in deep mourning, was hastily assisted out by a young man with her, similarly attired, and they both disappeared within the gaol. After some parleying, I ascertained that I had sufficient influence to obtain admission, and a few moments afterwards I found myself in the press-room. The young man—Mr. Andrew Bridgman,—was there, and the lady, who had fallen fainting upon one of the benches, was his mother. The attendants were administering restoratives to her, without effect, till an inner door opened, and the under-sheriff, by whom she was personally known, entered; when she started up and interrogated, with the mute agony of her wet, yet gleaming eyes, the dismayed and distressed official. "Let me entreat you, my dear madam," he faltered, "to retire. This is a most painful—fright—"

"No—no, the truth!—the truth!" shrieked the unfortunate lady, wildly clasping her hands, "I shall bear that best!"

"Then I grieve to say," replied the under-sheriff, "that the marks you describe—two on the left, and one on the right arm, are distinctly visible."

A piercing scream, broken by the words, "My son!—oh God!—my son!" burst from the wretched mother's lips, and she fell heavily, and without sense or motion, upon the stone floor. Whilst the under-sheriff and others raised and ministered to her, I glanced at Mr. Andrew Bridgman. He was as white as the lime-washed wall against which he stood, and the fire that

burned in his dark eyes was kindled—it was plain to me—by remorse and horror, not by grief alone.

The cause of the sudden appearance of the mother and son at the closing scene of this sad drama was afterwards thus explained:—Andrew Bridgman, from the moment that all hope of procuring a commutation of the sentence on the so-called Robert Williams had ceased, became exceedingly nervous and agitated, and his discomposure seemed to but augment as the time yet to elapse before the execution of the sentence passed away. At length, unable longer to endure the goadings of a tortured conscience, he suddenly burst into the room where his mother sat at breakfast, on the very morning his brother was to die, with an open letter in his hand, by which he pretended to have just heard that Robert Williams was the long lost Mark Bridgman! The sequel has been already told.

The conviction rapidly spread that Andrew Bridgman had been from the first aware that the youthful burglar was his own brother; and he found it necessary to leave the country. He turned his inheritance into money, and embarked for Charleston, America, in the barque “Cleopatra,” from Liverpool. When off the Scilly Islands, the “Cleopatra” was chased by a French privateer. She escaped; but one of the few shots fired at her from the privateer was fatal to the life of Andrew Bridgman. He was almost literally cut in two, and expired instantaneously. Some friends to whom I have related this story deem his death an accident; others, a judgment: I incline, I must confess, to the last opinion. The wealth with which he embarked was restored to Mrs. Bridgman, who soon afterwards removed to London, where she lived many years,—sad ones, no doubt, but mitigated and rendered endurable by the soothing balm of a clear conscience. At her decease, not very many years ago, the whole of her property was found to be bequeathed to various charitable institutions of the metropolis.

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