

A Mystery Revealed by Leopold Davis

SOME thirty years ago, before the railroad had penetrated every section of the country; when the birds could sing their songs without being interrupted by the shrill sound of the steam-whistle; when the cattle could enjoy their frugal meal without being frightened by puffing and panting locomotives and jingling bells,—I was traveling in Germany and on horseback. I was young, strong, and courageous. My horse, a noble creature, was as black as coal; and so was my traveling companion, not a negro, but a large Newfoundland dog, whom I called Caesar. At the time of which I am speaking, the highways were still infested by all sorts of vagabonds and desperadoes; and it was by no means advisable to travel without weapons, for which reason I secretly carried two large pistols. I had been traveling about a month, without being molested or annoyed by anybody or any thing: from which fact I had become indifferent to danger; and, being in good health and full of vigor, I felt as if I could even welcome any obstacle which might relieve the monotony of my tedious journey. I think that our kind Father in heaven, or perhaps the Devil, if such a gentleman really exists, must have read my heart and granted my wish, as you will presently see.

Imagine a stormy October night. The wind is howling like a wild beast; the rain, occasionally changing into hail, is pouring down in torrents, turning the roads into lakes; and then fancy your humble servant, with drenching-wet clothes, at eleven o'clock at night, alone in a forest, endeavoring to find a path leading to the nearest village.

You will perceive that my situation, for the time-being, was by no means comfortable or enviable: but thanks to my good luck, I at last found my way out of the woods; and when I rapped with the butt end of my riding-whip at the door of the old and dingy-looking inn, it was nearly midnight, and everybody had gone to bed. German landlords, as a general rule, sleep very soundly; and I had waited nearly twenty minutes, when I caught the sound of heavy wooden shoes on the rickety stairway leading to the entrance. This interval of time afforded an opportunity to ascertain the name of the tavern, as by the glimmer of a dim light issuing from a lantern in the adjoining stable I could read the sign, which announced to the world that this was "The Inn of the White Swan." The miserable painting intended to represent the emblem looked more like a goose than a swan: hence the explanation, in large white letters on a black board, was very justifiable. At last a man carrying a lantern, opened the door, and in a hoarse voice and sulky tone asked me what I wanted. I looked at the fellow for a moment. Had I the gift and talent of a Walter Scott, I could now fill several of these pages with a description of the ugly creature; but not being so gifted, I can only tell you, dear reader, that if among the number of your acquaintances there is a farmer in search of a scarecrow, I will endeavor to procure for him a photograph of the landlord of "The White Swan."

And a nice question it was, to ask me what I wanted, on such a night, fatigued, cold, wet, and hungry as I was. What could I want but shelter and food for myself and my companions?

The ugly, hateful fellow looked at me with a wicked expression of the face, and then told me, in an abrupt manner, that he could accommodate my horse, but doubted that he could accommodate me, as he had only one empty room up stairs, to occupy which strangers frequently objected.

This remark was sufficient to arouse my curiosity; and with a suspicious glance at the miserable creature, I told him in a very decided tone that this was the very room I desired for the night, and that he should find me an affable and liberal guest, which later remark made him change his tune in my favor.

After going to the stable to see my horse properly cared for, I entered the spacious bar-room in which a wood fire was still comfortably burning. While my host had gone to the kitchen, I had ample time to meditate on my critical position. Why did my heart beat quicker than usual at that moment? Could it be fear of anticipated danger? Shame on me, if such could be the case! But no: the emotion had ceased, and I am myself again, calm and composed.

After enjoying a hasty meal, which I shared with Caesar, I ask the landlord to show me up stairs. The dog followed us. The room assigned to me was rather large. It had a low ceiling, and three windows, the rattling of which could have aroused the dead. There were two old-fashioned chairs, a small table, a washstand, and a broken looking-glass; all of which did not interest me. But the bedstead was the attraction of the room. I had never seen one like it before. Such a marvel of antiquity! What could be its age? Was it fifty, a hundred, or five hundred years old? I was not able to say. A large family could have slept in it, with room left for new arrivals. Four twisted posts or pillars, one at each corner, supported a heavy headpiece, on which a defaced and withered painting, representing some grotesque figures from the heathen mythology, was still discernable. A heavy curtain of the richest texture, but of doubtful hue, was hanging clumsily from the top of the bedstead, and together with a heavy bed-valance, of a similar pattern, gave the whole affair a gorgeous and almost royal appearance. The quilt was a wonder of patchwork; comprising perhaps over a thousand small pieces of silk, sewed together regardless of harmony of color or symmetry of design, yet it might have taken a year to complete it. I could hardly believe my eyes, when I moved a chair in front of the wonderful piece of furniture; and while gazing at it with intense interest, I felt as if I had been enchanted. I was aroused from my reverie by the unexpected slamming of a shutter; and, looking at my watch, I found that it was nearly one o'clock, so I concluded to retire.

Will you think strange of me, dear reader, if I confess to you, that, before going to bed that night, I made a careful and thorough examination of the premises. I tested the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and the windows; and after satisfying myself that there was no trap-door or loop-hole, through which danger or treachery could approach me, I commenced to think of sleep in good earnest.

An old proverb says, "Precaution is the mother of wisdom!" and I strongly believe in it. I therefore locked and bolted the door, fastened the windows, examined my pistols, satisfying myself that each was loaded with a good-sized bullet, and then, placing them on the table in front of my bed, I put the weapons in such a position, that, should any one intrude on me during the night, I would be enabled to grasp them in the dark, and fire them off in the direction of the door. The next thing was to arouse my faithful dog; and leading him to the bedside, I caused him to lie down near the table. Then fastening back the heavy bed-curtains, so as to afford me a full view of the room, I at last retired, leaving the lamp dimly burning on the table. Being very fatigued, I soon fell asleep; and while in the midst of a frightful dream, I was suddenly awakened by a

crash, which was seemingly caused by an axe or hatchet bursting open the door of my room. At the same moment a strong and cold current of air passed through the apartment, extinguishing the lamp. The dog barked furiously. Instinctively I grasped my pistols; and with a fearful report, that shook the frail old building, and seemed to re-echo in the woods, I fired in the direction of the door; and then with a cold sweat on my brow and a palpitating heart, I awaited the coming events, which apparently had thrown their shadows before them. Five minutes passed, and nothing more than stated happened. Ten minutes had passed, and neither man nor ghost had made his appearance. Fifteen minutes had passed, and I began to feel awfully ashamed of myself, when my attentive ear caught the sound of a low moan. Silently but cautiously I arose from my bed, found my match-box, lighted the lamp, and, looking around the room, I found to my great astonishment, that I was alone, and that the door was not broken in, but remained in the same condition as I had left it before retiring, and that the windows also were secure.

Could the whole occurrence have been an illusion, caused by a vivid dream? Impossible!...But no! Let me reason. Let me reflect on the matter! A strong gale of wind passing through the windows might have extinguished the lamp; the dog, in consequence of being so suddenly left in the dark, might have been frightened and barked, and the crash which I heard, or imagined I heard, might have been a dream; and the low moan might have been the wind. Surely it could not have been otherwise!

I was now perfectly calm and composed, and laughed at my timidity. Curiosity prompted me to look for the spot where the bullet lodged. I looked high and low; I examined the ceiling, the floor, the door and the windows; but I was unable to discover the spot by the dim light of the lamp. I therefore discontinued my search for the night, went to bed once more, and soon fell asleep again.

When I awoke it was nine o'clock in the morning: the storm had ceased and the sun was shining brightly into my room. I had slept longer than I had intended. After hurriedly dressing myself, I went down stairs to the breakfast-table, where I was surrounded by a number of villagers, who had heard the report of the pistol, and were anxious to learn what had happened to me during the night. I related the circumstances, assuring them, however, that I was satisfied that a great portion of the strange affair was but a vivid dream. After breakfast I made some inquiry of the landlord regarding the wonderful bedstead, when he stated to me that that ancient piece of furniture had been handed down from generation to generation for many hundreds of years, and that one of his forefathers had purchased it for a trifling sum at a public sale, where no other bidder could be found, for the reason that a large stain of blood had been discovered on the inside of the bed-curtain, but that his great-grandfather had succeeded in washing it off by some chemical process. Suddenly it occurred to me that I had not found my bullet yet. So I asked the landlord to assist me in my search, which he reluctantly did. The finding of the spot in which the shot had settled was now the only evidence needed to convince me that the suspicions aroused in me during the strange occurrence of the night were totally unfounded, and that my subsequent argument, ascribing the whole affair to a vivid dream, was correct. But the bullet or bullet-hole must be found. Greatly annoyed by the whole affair, and disappointed at not finding the shot, I left the inn and the village on the same morning.

Being confident that the pistol, at the time when I discharged it, contained a large bullet, I was equally sure that somebody, man or spirit, mortal or immortal, had received the shot, and carried it away with him in silence.

Nearly ten years had elapsed, and the strange and mysterious occurrence was gradually fading from my memory, when business called me to a place within a few miles of the village in which I spent that terrible night. Prompted by a feeling of curiosity, I determined to visit the "Inn of the White Swan" once more, in order to ascertain, if possible, from the landlord or his successor, whether the bullet or bullet-hole had ever been discovered. It then being in the month of August, and still very warm, I hired a conveyance, and started for the village at seven o'clock on one of the loveliest of summer mornings. Admiring the picturesque scenery and rich farm land on my way, I soon reached the place of my destination. I had no trouble in finding the main street, on which the inn was formerly located; but on arriving at the spot, I found to my great surprise and disappointment that the house, once so ominous to me, had vanished into oblivion, having been destroyed by fire.

Upon inquiring as to the fate of its former occupant, I ascertained, that for many years subsequent to my visit various depredations and outrages had been perpetrated upon unsuspecting strangers to the inn, until an elderly English traveler, having sought shelter there for the night, had been nearly frightened out of his wits and robbed of a large sum of money, and that said gentleman had applied to the magistrate for assistance to detect the robber, or robbers; that the magistrate thereupon had caused a rigid and careful search to be made of the premises, when discoveries were made, so marvelous in their nature as to surprise and puzzle even the most expert and experienced detectives. I furthermore learned, that during the search the wonderful bedstead had been an object of the greatest interest, as upon close examination, it was found to contain, in a secreted portion under one-half of the bedstead, an ingenious piece of machinery, which, by turning a small wheel, caused strange noises and raps to be produced, and that one part of said partition was large enough to admit and conceal the form of a man, and had communication with a trap-door in the floor, leading to a small dark closet below.

The magistrate, a highly educated gentleman, well versed in ancient history, at once recognized in the wonderful piece of furniture a specimen of the manifold infernal machines of torture used during the reign of the Inquisition, to exact confessions or promises from prisoners belonging to the higher classes of society. I was also told that, at the close of the search, the magistrate caused the arrest of the innkeeper; and on the same day a miserable wretch, his accomplice in crime, while under the influence of liquor, had made important revelations regarding some transactions at the inn, and his connections therewith, to some of the villagers, who, thinking that such a polluted edifice had no right to stand in their peaceful village to disgrace the inhabitants, had taken the law into their own hands, by firing the structure, amidst angry exclamations and curses; and that the villainous innkeeper, after having been properly tried and convicted of robbery, nay, even of foul murder, had ended his blasted career on the scaffold, while his wretched accomplice, having some years past suffered from the effects of a wound in his breast, probably inflicted by my own hand on that eventful night, had died soon afterward in prison. And thus the mystery was revealed.

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