

## *A Hidden Witness*

“She is positively starving, and this money will be the saving of her.”

These words were spoken in the course of a conversation between my old friend, Mr. John Irwin, retired civil servant and myself; both sitting on a fine September morning in a little summer-house in the garden of our mutual friend, the Rev. Henry Tyson, Rector of Berkshire. The subject of our conversation had been a piece of very righteous behavior on the part of a wealthy retired tradesman, Harding by name, who lived in the neighborhood. A sum of money, amounting to a hundred pounds, was owing by this man to a widow, living also close at hand, for work done by her husband just before he died. The validity of the claim had been denied by Mr. Harding, and payment obstinately refused.

“I have made it all right, however,” said my friend, with something approaching a chuckle. “It happens that this Harding is, to a certain extent, in my power. The particulars of a transaction in which he was engaged some years ago, not of the most creditable nature, and all the facts relating to which came before me in the course of my official career, are not only perfectly well known to me, but he knows that I know of them, and is aware that I could, even at this day, use them against him if I chose. Consequently he is always exceedingly clever to me, and [in the course of a transaction] between us yesterday, I explained to him – assuming as I did so a dangerous look which I could see had its effect, that I should take it exceedingly ill if he did not at once consider this poor woman’s claim, and forthwith pay her what he had owed to her husband, he turned very pale, and informed me that since a person on whose judgment he could so entirely rely as he could on mine was of opinion, after duly considering the claim, that it was a just one, he would at once give up his own view of the case, which had certainly hitherto been opposed to mine, and would, without delay, discharge the liability. He only begged that he might be spared the annoyance of a personal interview with his creditor, and that I would undertake in my own person to see the widow and transact the business part of the arrangement myself.

“You know,” continued Mr. Irwin, “how interested I have been in this poor soul’s cause, and you know how readily I undertook the charge.—This very afternoon the business is to be brought to a conclusion. I have arranged to call on Harding (who as you know, lives close by) at three o’clock to get the money, and I will then convey it with my own hands to the poor woman as a surprise.”

“You have never done a better day’s work,” I said. “How do you mean to go?”

“I shall walk. It is not above a couple of miles. The path across the fields by Gorfield Copse is the nearest way,—isn’t it?”

“Yes, by a good deal,” I answered.—“Would you like a companion?”

“Well, I should like one, certainly,” was my friend’s answer, “but I feel a little delicacy about introducing a stranger in the business,—either with Mr. Harding himself, or with my friend the widow, who is the proudest and most sensitive woman in the world.”

I assented to the justice of this objection, and, having some letters to write, got up to go, leaving my friend sitting in the summer-house. As I quitted it, turning sharply round to go into the house, I came suddenly upon a man who was emerging from among the shrubs which formed the back of the little arbor.

He was an occasional helper about the place, and I noticed him more than once, and not with favor. He was a very peculiar, and, as I thought a very ill-looking man. He was a sly, slouching sort of creature, who always started and got out of the way when you met him. A man with hollow, sunken eyes, a small, mean, pinched sort of nose, and a prominent, savage-looking underjaw, with teeth like tusks, which his beard did not conceal. The beard, by the by, was one of the most remarkable characteristics of the man's appearance; it being – as was his hair also – of that flaming red which is not very often seen – really red, with no pretensions to those auburn or chestnut or golden tints which have become fashionable of late years. The blazing effect of this man's coloring was increased very much by the head-dress he wore, an old cricketing cap of brightest scarlet. He was otherwise dressed in one of those short white canvas shirts or frocks, which are much worn by engineers, stokers, and plasterers, over their ordinary clothes. There was a great brown patch of new material let into the front of the garment, which showed very conspicuously, even at a distance. His lower extremities were clad in common velveteen trousers, old and worn.

Such was the man who appeared suddenly in my path as I left the summer-house, and who disappeared as suddenly out of it in a moment after our encounter, gliding stealthily off in the direction of the kitchen-garden.

I saw my good friend Mr. Irwin once more before he started on his beneficent errand. He was in high spirits, and had got himself up in great style for the occasion with a light colored summer overcoat to keep off the dust, and a white hat. I think he had a flower in his button-hole.

There was one part of Mr. Irwin's equipment a little out of the common way, and this was a butterfly net fixed to the end of his stick. My friend was a most enthusiastic entomologist, carrying with him this means of securing his favorite specimens. I joked him a little on the introduction of this unusual element into business transaction, suggesting that Mr. Harding would think that he had brought it as a receptacle for the widow's money. "I must have it with me," said the gentleman, "for if ever I venture to go out without it I invariably meet with some invaluable specimen which escapes me in heart-rending manner. But," he added, "I'm not going to let Harding discover my weakness, you may be sure. I'll leave it outside among the bushes, and recover it when the interview is over."

"Well, good luck attend you any way!" I called after him; "a successful end to your negotiations, and plenty butterflies."

The good-hearted old fellow gave me a nod and a smile, and flourishing his net, was presently off on his mission.

I had what we familiarly call, "the fidgets" that afternoon. I could not settle down to anything. Having tried wandering about the garden, I now took, in turn, to wandering about the house,

going first into one room and then into another, looking at the pictures, taking up different objects which lay about, and examining them in an entirely purposeless way.

At the top of my friend's house there was a little room in a tower, which was used as a smoking-room, and also as a kind of observatory; my host being in the habit of observing the heavenly bodies through his telescope when favorable occasion offered. I remembered the existence of the apartment now, and that feeling a small dose of tobacco would suit my present condition very well, determined to climb the turret staircase, and enjoy a quiet smoke in the observatory.

The room was charming. There were large windows in it, and the view was most extensive, taking in scenery of a very varied kind,—hill and dale, wood, river and plain. The signs of habitations were not numerous, the country being but thinly populated; still, there were cottages and farm-houses scattered here and there, and even one or two villages in the distance. I lighted my cigar and gave myself up to the tranquil enjoyment of the scene before me.

As I sat there the clock of my host's church struck three. Remembering that to be the hour of Mr. Irwin's interview with Harding, my thoughts reverted to the subject of the widow's debt, and to the good nature which my old friend had displayed in giving himself so much trouble and undertaking such a thankless office. My mind did not dwell long on these things, however. I happened to catch sight of the telescope, which was put away in a corner of the room; and being restless, and not in a mood in which total inaction was agreeable to me, I determined to have it out and examine the details of the landscape which I had just been studying on a large scale.

The day was very favorable for my purpose. The sun was shining, and there was an east wind,—a combination which often produced a remarkable clearness in the atmosphere. Circumstances could not possibly be more suitable for telescopic operations, so, placing the instrument on its stand before one of the open windows, I sat down and commenced my survey.

It was a superb telescope, and although I knew it well, and had often used it, I found myself astonished at its power and range. I set myself to trying experiments as to the extent of its capacity, taking the time by the church-clock at a village two miles off, trying to make out what people were doing in extreme distance, and in other ways putting the capabilities of the instrument to the test. That done, with results of the most satisfactory kind, I went to work in a more leisurely fashion, shifting the glass from point to point of the landscape, as the fancy took me, and enjoying the delicious little circular pictures, which, in endless variety, seemed to fit themselves one to another, into the end of the instrument. The little round pictures were some of them very pretty. Here was one,—the first the telescope showed me—in the front of which was a small patch of purple earth just brought under the plough. A little copse bounded one side of this arable land; there was a very bright green field in the distance, and in the foreground the plough itself was crawling slowly along, drawn by a couple of ponderous and sturdy horses, a bay and a white, whose course was directed by an old man with a blue neckerchief, the ends hanging loose, a boy being in attendance to turn the horses at the end of each furrow, and generally to keep them up to their work.

A turn of the glass, and another picture takes its place. A roadside alehouse now. One of the upper windows has a muslin half-blind betokening the guest-chamber, another on the ground-

floor is ornamented with a red curtain,—the tap-room, where convivial spirits congregate on Saturday night. The inn has a painted sign; somebody in a scarlet coat and something on his head which I can't quite make out; perhaps it is a three-cornered hat, and perhaps the inn is dedicated to the inevitable Marquis of Granby. Stay! I recollect now seeing such an inn in one of my walks in the neighborhood. It is the Marquis of Granby, as I well remember. An empty cart is standing in front of the house, the driver watering his horse, and beering himself, just before the house-door, where I can see him plainly.

Another and a more extensive turn, and the little railway station comes within the limits of the magic circle.—Not much of interest here: a small white-washed, slate-roofed, formal lot of sacks piled up against the wall, waiting to be sent off by the luggage train, a great signal-post rising into the air, a row of telegraphic poles stretching away in perspective.

Now a prosperous farmstead, with a big [thatched] house, where the farmer and his family reside, with well-preserved sheds and out-houses; there is a straw-yard, too, with cattle standing knee-deep, and eating out of rocks well found in the hay, and there are pigs wallowing in the mire, and there are cocks and hens jerking themselves hither and thither, and pecking and generally fussing, as their manner is. This picture in its circular frame pleases me well, and so does the next. A gentleman's seat of the entirely comfortable, not the showy and ostentatious sort. The grounds are large enough to be called a park, and the house lying rather low, as it was the fashion to build a century or two ago, with a trim and pleasantly formal flower-garden round about it. It is the redbrick house of the Hanoverian time, with a rather high slate (green slate) roof, with dormer windows in it. The other windows have white sashes which are flush with the wall, and not, as in these days, sunk in a recess.

I look long on this scene, and then, not without reluctance, shift my glass, and turning away from human habitations, begin to examine the more retired and unfrequented parts of the landscape. The magic circle now encloses nothing but trees and meadows, and little quiet nooks and corners, where the lazy cows stand about in shady places, too idle even to feed, or where the crows blacken the very ground by their numbers, unmolested by shouting boys, unscared by even the old traditional hat and coat upon a stick. I come presently to a little bright green paddock, with a pony feeding upon it,—a refreshing little round picture pleasant to dwell on. There is a pond in one corner of the paddock, surrounded with pollard willows; the water reflecting them upon its surface, as, also, a little patch of sky, which it gets sight of somehow between the branches.

It is a comfortable and innocent little place, this, with a small wood close by, with a hay-stack near the gate, and stay—what is this? There are figures here—two men—how plainly I see them! But, what are they doing? They are in violent movement. Are they fighting, wrestling, struggling? It is so. A struggle is going on between them, and one of the two—he wears a bright red cap—has the best of it. He has his antagonist, who seems to be weak and makes but faint resistance, by the throat; he strikes fiercely at the wretched man's head with a thick stick or club he holds, and, pressing on him sorely, beats him fiercely to the ground. The man who has the best of it—there is something more of red about him besides the cap; it is his beard!—does not spare the fallen man, but beats him still about the head—a gray head surely—with his club. Horrible sight to look on! I would give anything to tear myself away from the telescope, or at

least to close my eyes and shut out the sickening spectacle. But the butchery is nearly over. The gray-haired man continues yet to struggle and resist, but only for a little while. In a very short time the contest, as I plainly see, will be over. The conquered man, making one more supreme effort, rises nearly to his feet, receives another crushing blow, falls suddenly to the ground, and is still! Merciful Heavens! what is this? Who are these two men? Do I know them? It cannot be that this is my dear old friend lying helpless on the ground, and the other is the man whom I took note of just now in the rectory garden. It cannot be that this deed of which I have been a witness—inactive, powerless to help or save—is a MURDER!

I felt for a moment as if all presence of mind and power of action had deserted me. What was I to do? That was all that I could say, over and over again, as I sat still gazing through the telescope with an instinctive feeling that I must not lose one single ingredient of the scene before me. All that happened I must see. I recalled my senses by a mighty effort and reasoned as men do in a crisis. What was to be done? The place where this horrible deed was being committed was so far off—about three quarters of a mile as the crow flies—more than a mile by any road that I knew of—that there could be no possibility of my getting there in time to be of the slightest service. The end, if it had not come already—and I felt certain that it had—must most surely have come before I could traverse that distance. There was but one way now in which I could be of the slightest service, and that was in securing the detection of the murderer. I must remain at my post and watch his every movement, besides endeavoring to render myself certain, so far as the glass would enable me to be so, concerning his appearance and dress. So there I sat, helpless and spellbound, but watching with devouring eyes. There was a sudden stillness where there [had] been before so much of struggle and movement. The blows had ceased to fall now. The deed was accomplished, and there was no more need for them. The man himself, the murderer, was still, and I made sure of his identity. There was the red hair, there was the red beard, there was the scarlet cap lying on the ground, there was the canvas frock with the patch in front. There was no doubt. Alas! was there any doubt either about the other figure lying on the grass beside him? The light-colored summer-coat which he had worn when I last saw him,—the white hairs.

[CONCLUDED TO-MORROW]

It was nearly too much to bear, but a savage craving for vengeance came to my aid and braced up my energies. I dispelled, by an effort of will, a dimness which came before my eyes, and, straining them more intensely than ever, saw the man with the red cap start up, as if suddenly conscious that he was losing time, and set himself to work to rifle the body of his victim. As far as I could see, he was engaged in emptying the old man's pockets, and once I thought I saw the gleam of something golden; but this might have been fancy. At all events, he continued for some time to turn the body over and over, and then, having, I suppose, satisfied himself with what he had secured, he got up, and dragging the corpse after him, made his way to the little wood close by, and, entering it, disappeared from sight.—And now, indeed, a crisis had arrived when it was difficult in the extreme to know how to act. What if that disappearance were final? What if he should get out of the wood at the further extremity, and I should see him no more?

It was a breathless moment. I continued to watch, and hardly breathed. At last, and when I was becoming desperate with uncertainty, I saw something move again. The trees were parted and at the same place where bearing with him the body of my old friend, he now reappeared alone. He

stood a moment, as if undecided, and then arranged the disturbed boughs as though to make the place look as if no one had passed that way. That done, he stood still for a moment, looking about him as if in search of something, and then he moved across—how unconscious of the pursuer on his track, the telescope following his every step, unseen and unsuspected!—to where at the corner of the meadow, there was, as I have mentioned, a little pond with pollard willows round about its margin. He stopped and took up some object lying beside the pond. What was it? There was something green about it.—Was it old Mr. Irwin's butterfly net? I could not see with certainty, but no doubt it was; and no doubt the poor old gentleman had wandered away from the footpath, which was near at hand, in pursuit of some entomological specimen.

The man with the red cap threw this object in the water. Then, taking off his canvas frock, he began to wash the front of it, stained, no doubt, with blood. Then he washed his hands and face, and putting on the frock, wet as it was in part, stood up, and looked once more suspiciously about. All this took time, but I dared not remove my eyes from the glass for a single instant. Once I had tried to reach the bell-handle, but I could not. Something would, however, have to be done presently, and done on the instant.

For he was going. He turned his back upon the pond; looked about, as if to see whether there were any traces of his crime visible; then crossed the field, got over the gate by the hay-stack, was lost to sight for a moment, appeared again, disappeared again, and finally, after being out of sight for some time, showed at last, walking along the high road, until he came to a roadside inn, that very Marquis of Granby spoken of above, into which he entered.

And now, indeed, I felt that the time had come when some decisive step must be taken. If he were not secured now, while he was in the public house,—if he got out of it without being taken,—the might get off by ways which were hidden from my range of vision, and so escape. I still dared not to move my eye from the telescope or the telescope from the inn door. It was absolutely indispensable that he should not be able to leave the house without my knowing it. I must not stir then; but as something was required to be done instantly, somebody else must stir for me. In a moment I decided my course. Remaining motionless at my post, I lifted my voice, and gave utterance to such a succession of shouts that I confidently expected that the whole establishment would rush up stairs to the observatory, thinking that I myself was being murdered. It was not so, however; and, considering the noise I made, it seemed astonishing how long I called in vain. At last it did appear that I was heard. The head gardener was in the grounds close by, and the sound of my voice reached him at length though the open window. Even when he heard, however, it was evident he could not make out whence the cries which reached him came. "Who calls?" he cried. "Here," I shouted. "In the tower. Help, help, at once! There is not a moment to lose." And very soon I heard the welcome footsteps hurrying up to the turret stairs. Almost before the door was opened, or the gardener in the room, I issued my order. "Jump upon the pony," I cried, still with my eye fixed on the door of the old inn, "and gallop at full speed to the Marquis of Granby. There has been a murder committed, and the murderer is in that house. He has on a scarlet cap, has red hair and full beard, and a canvas frock with a dark patch in front."

"What! My helper here?" cried the gardener.

“The same. Seize him, or, if he has left when you get there, raise the hue and cry, and follow him. He has murdered poor Mr. Irwin. Don’t stop to answer,” I added, as the man uttered an exclamation of surprise and horror, “but go at once. I dare not leave my post. Go, and if you meet any one on the way send him—her—or any one to me.”

The man was a sharp fellow and disappeared instantly. Very soon I had the satisfaction of hearing the sound of the horse’s hoofs galloping out of the stable at the back. Meanwhile, half the household, alarmed by what the man had told them, had rushed up to the observatory, and were now gathered about me as I sat at the telescope. They were silent for a time, and I could see, though my eyes were engaged, that they were watching me intently.

“What is his name?” I asked after a while.

“His name is Mason,” somebody replied; “William Mason.” Then there was silence again, as I went on watching.

“For God’s sake, what is it sir?” cried the old housekeeper, suddenly, in answer, I suppose, to an involuntary exclamation of mine.

“The door has opened,” I answered. “Is he coming out?”

No one appeared for a moment; at once some one passed out. It was not Mason, however; it was an old woman carrying a bundle.

There were several false alarms of this kind, as different people who had been taking refreshment at the tap came out, one after another, in pretty succession. At last, after a longer interval than usual, the door opened [lost word] once again.

“It is he,” I said, hardly knowing—I heard the confused murmur of an exclamation from the group behind me. Then I spoke. “He has come out.—looking first one way and then another, now he is gone, and the gardener will be too late!”

I could still see him and could make out in which direction he was going.

“Is any one belonging to the stable here?”

“Yes, sir,” replied a voice I knew.

“Get a horse saddled at once, Matthew, and bring him round. The swiftest you have in.”

In a moment I heard the man’s footsteps clattering down the stairs.

“Can you see him still?” asked the old housekeeper.

“At present I can, but I shall not be able to do so long. The part of the road he is approaching is hidden from my view.”

Very soon my prediction came true. There was a turn in the road. Trees and buildings and rising ground intervened and hid the figure. It did not show again for a long space; when it did it came out by the railway station.

I sat and thought the situation over, and the conviction forced itself upon me that this railway station would be the ultimate destination of the murderer, and that the only chance now was to keep a steady watch upon its approaches. But my eyes, especially the left eye, which I had to keep closed, were now so tired that I could hardly use them. I found it, however, by no means easy to get a substitute.

There were only present at this time the women servants and a boy. The boy could not be trusted, of course; and the women, one and all, proclaimed, as they seated themselves by turns before the glass, that they could only see “something dark bobbing up and down at the end of it.” At last it was suggested that Martin, the vicar’s factotum, who had been out, must be at home by this time, and a servant [lost line – was sent. Soon he] appeared and took my place at the glass, through which he could see perfectly.

“He lives just there, sir, between the part of the road where you say he disappeared and the station,” said Martin, when he had heard all the foregoing particulars; “just behind that row of poplars you see down yonder.”

This opened a new view of the matter. Martin suggested that perhaps he had gone home, and that the right course might be to send there to capture him. The propriety of this, however, I doubted.

“Keep your attention fixed upon the station,” I said, “and let me be informed of all that goes on there. He will find his way there at last.”

Martin kept his glass fixed on the little building in silence. Everything appeared to be at a standstill for a moment.

“An old woman carrying a basket is making her way slowly to the station,” said Martin; “one or two other people are beginning to arrive.”

“What sort of people?”

“O, not our man. One is a lad, looks like a gentleman’s groom, come to fetch some parcel. The other is a miller with a pack of meal. There are signs of some stir about the place, and I can make out the porters moving about.—“What time is it, sir?” asked the man, suddenly.

“Twenty minutes past four,” I answered.

“The down train is due at 4:28,” said Martin.

“That accounts for the bustle.”



“Where does it go to?” I asked.

“It’s the Bristol train, sir,” was the answer.

Just the place I thought the murderer would want to go.

“There’s a cart driven by an old man with a great many parcels, which the porters are removing, and taking into the station; there’s a man with a couple. The train is coming, sir, I can see the smoke, and they’re working the signals as hard as they can go. Here’s a carriage driving up with a pair of white horses. It’s the Westbrook carriage—I can see the liveries. There’s Squire Westbrook getting out, and there are the two young ladies. Here’s the postman with his leather bag.—Here’s a woman with a little boy; the train’s in now, and they’re just going to shut the doors. Here comes somebody running. He’s a volunteer, one of our own corps. He’ll be too late. No, the porter sees him, and beckons him to make haste. The volunteer runs harder than ever, the porter drags him into the station, and the door is shut.

“Is there anybody else?” I asked in a violent excitement.

“Not a soul, sir, and now the train is off.”

“And are you sure you have not missed any one?”

“Quite sure, sir.”

I was profoundly disappointed, and for a moment puzzled how to act.—Watching the station was, for the present, useless, There would not be another train until eight o’clock that night. The only chance under these circumstances seemed to be the chance of finding the man at his own house.—Thither I determined to go, thinking that if he were not there I might obtain some information from the neighbors which might prove of use.—I got a description of the house and its situation from Martin, and leaving him with directions still to keep a watch on the station, ran down stairs, and finding the horse I had ordered, waiting for me at the door, went off at full speed.

The horse carried me so well that in a very short time I had reached the little clump of cottages to which I had been directed, and one of which was the dwelling place of the murderer. I dismounted, and throwing my horse’s bridle on the palings in front of the cottage, passed along the little path which led to the door, and proceeded to try the latch. The door was locked.— Looking up at the windows—there were but two—I saw that they were also secured, and that the blinds were down. The small abode had a deserted look, and I felt that it was empty; but I knocked loudly, nevertheless, and shook the door.

The noise of my arrival and my knocking, at length disturbed some of the neighbors, and one or two of them appeared.

“Is this William Mason’s house?” I asked, addressing one of them, an old man who looked tolerably intelligent, but wasn’t.

“Yes, sir. But he’s not there now.—He’s gone out,” the man replied, after a minute or two devoted to thought.

The old man took more time than ever to consider this question, driving me almost wild with his delay. Then, after looking first one way and then the other, he pointed in the direction of the station. I was already on horseback again, and just about to move off, when another of the neighbors interposed.

“I do think,” said the one speaking, if possible, more deliberately than the other, “that he went to his drill.”

“Drill!” I cried. “What drill?”

“Why, volunteer drill, to be sure.”

“What!” I screamed. “Was he a volunteer?”

“Yes, sir. The parson he requires everybody in his employment —”

I did not wait for more, but galloped off, as fast as my horse could go, to the railway station. I saw it all now. In the interval during which we had lost sight of the man he had been home, and, thinking that a change of costume might baffle pursuit, had assumed the volunteer dress as the best disguise at his disposal.

“Does any one here remember a man in a volunteer uniform, who went off just now by the down train?”

This was my inquiry, addressed to the first person I met at the station, a porter, who referred me to the station clerk, to whom I put the same question. The man answered in the affirmative at once. His attention had been particularly directed to this volunteer by his having requested change for a five-pound note at the last moment, as the train was going to start.

“For what place did he take his ticket?”

“Bristol.”

“That man is a murderer,” I said, “and must be arrested. If you telegraph at once to Bath, the message will be there long before the train and he can be stopped.”

And to this terrible experience—the particulars of which I have related just as they occurred—came to an end. The murderer was arrested at Bath, and on his being searched, the hundred pounds—except the small sum which he had expended on his railway ticket—were found upon him. The evidence against him was in all points overwhelming.—The body of poor Mr. Irwin was discovered in the little wood. I myself directed the search. When it was concluded I

wandered away to the willow pond to look for the butterfly net. One end of the stick was visible above the water, the other end sunk by the weight of the metal ring which was attached to it.

There was no link wanting in the mass of proof. The evidence which it was my part to give on the trial was irresistible. Great attempts were made to shake it, to prove that I might easily have made a mistake of identity, and that such details as I had described could not have been visible through the telescope at such a distance. Opticians were consulted; experiments were made. It was distinctly proved that it was [unreadable] possible [unreadable] to have seen all that I stated I had seen; and though there was much discussion raised about the case, and some of the newspapers took it up, and urged that men's lives were not to be sacrificed to the whims of "an idle gentleman who chose to spend his afternoons in looking out of a window through a spyglass," the jury returned a verdict against the prisoner, and William Mason was convicted and hanged.

The reader may, perhaps, be sufficiently interested in the facts of this case to be glad to hear that the poor woman who was the innocent cause of the commission of this ghastly crime did get her hundred pounds after all, though not from the hands of Mr. John Irwin.

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