Murder Under the Microscope

by Thomas Waters

IN a straggling, sandy district known as Stape Hill, not far from Poole, Dorsetshire, there dwelt in 1844, a man not more than forty years of age, if so much, but so bowed, withered by care and disappointment that he looked to be sixty at the very least. His name was Joseph Gibson, and he had once carried on business as an oil and colourman, in the High-street, Islington. He failed in 1843, but managed, by effecting a compromise with his chief creditors, to save about four hundred pounds from the wreck. He had been some years separated from his wife, an attractive woman, by whom he had one pretty, delicate girl at the time of the failure. His own life was wrapped up in that of Catherine; and medical authority warned him that only country air, and that for some years to come, could permanently establish her health. Whilst earnestly pondering how their future lives could be shaped so as to secure that primary object, his eye hit upon an advertisement in the *Times,* announcing to agriculturists and others that a farm of one hundred acres, partly arable, partly pasture, with convenient dwelling-house, outbuildings, &c., situate at Stape Hill, within easy distance of the flourishing market town of Poole, was to be let on lease, at the low rental of fifty pounds per annum. The stock, implements, &c., were to be taken at a valuation, which would certainly not exceed three hundred pounds, including the growing crops, the season being late in the year; possession to be given on Michaelmas-day, then ten days distant only. Satisfactory reasons for the throwing-up of so desirable a homestead by the last tenant would be given, and so on, after the manner of such schemes for gulling the unwary. A transparent trap like that could not have imposed upon the least intelligent of practical farmers. He would have known that you might as well have attempted to cultivate seashore sand as arable and pasture land near a populous English market town, inclusive of a convenient dwelling-house and requisite outbuildings, which the proprietor was willing to let at ten shillings annual rent per acre. But to town folk there is a fascination in the prospect of occupying land which blinds them to the most self-evident facts. Application in person only was to be made to Mr. Arthur Blagden, of Finsbury-square. This gentleman was a solicitor retired from business, and a native of Dorsetshire, in which county he possessed large property, especially in Poole and its vicinity. He was a man of somewhat eccentric habits, and very close, almost penurious, in his expenditure. The Dorsetshire rents he always collected twice a year in person.

The Stape Hill Farm appeared to be precisely suited to Gibson; it being, the advertisement stated, one of the healthiest places in the United Kingdom, and apparently requiring no more capital than he possessed for adequate cultivation. As to not being himself a practical agriculturist, that deficiency the diligent study of such books as “Farming for the Million,” &c., would quickly supply. Joseph Gibson having so resolved, betook himself to Finsbury-square without delay, saw Mr. Blagden, who, when informed that the applicant really possessed four hundred pounds in cash, readily accepted him as a tenant for Stape Hill Farm, a coloured drawing of which he placed before Gibson, who was so delighted with the picture of rural felicity which it presented that he carried it away to show his child. A lease for fourteen years was to be immediately prepared at the tenant’s cost, and on the 28th of September Mr. Blagden would go down with him to Dorsetshire to give possession of the estate and stock.

The preceding tenant, Mr. Blagden candidly informed Gibson, had not prospered at the farm—

was, in fact, at that moment a prisoner for debt; but he was an idle, dissolute fellow; encumbered, too, with a large, idle family, and a slatternly wife, who would never do well anywhere. Mr. Blagden had gladly taken the farm and stock off his hands— pleased to be shut of Edward Ridges, even at a considerable sacrifice.

Possession was given—Joseph Gibson installed in his rural domain—monarch of all he surveyed; spavined horses; lean and, for the most part, barren cows; a score of decent pigs; and growing crops, such as they were, inclusive. Three labourers (one of them of the name of Somers) on the farm; and Jane Somers (an elderly maid-of-all-work and dairy-woman) were retained. Somers and his wife slept on the premises.

A very short time sufficed to dissipate the fond illusions which the swindled oil and colourman had indulged in. Stape Hill Farm would have consigned any man to a debtor's prison who could not afford to lose at least one hundred pounds per annum upon it. It was a sad awakening from a pleasant dream. His eyes were suddenly opened to the barefaced fraud practised upon him by Mr. Blagden on the very next market-day, in Poole, after that gentleman, having collected his rents, left for London. The poor victim, who zealously falling in at once with market habits, dropped in at the Roebuck—an inn patronised by the bulk of the farmers, to not one of whom he was personally known—had the pleasure of listening to a very enlightening conversation, carried on in undertone by two or three of the guests. One asked who it was that that cunning devil, Blagden, had let [Stape] Hill Farm to? To which the reply was:—"A Cockney tailor, or something of the sort, who had got a few hundreds, which the avaricious old leech would soon suck him dry of. He had taken handsome hansel already, by making out that the stock on the place was worth three hundred pounds, and had got the rhino, so at least Jem Somers said—the covetous old hawk's factotum, sly as his master, and a sweet nut for the devil to crack some day or other." "Three hundred pounds!" says another; "the unconscionable, thieving skinflint. Why it was all valleyed to Blagden by poor Ridge's creditors for a hundred and forty pounds! and money enough too. Ah, well! the London tailor must soon take to his goose again; though he be goose enough himself, for that matter. Well, if folks will meddle with things they don't understand, they must pay their account with being done uncommon brown, especially if they come in old Blagden's way."

This was something like the substance of the conversation, as related to me about a twelvemonth after it occurred, by Nicholas Price, one of the interlocutors; my business in Poole being to ascertain if any ill-blood had existed between Gibson and Blagden, how engendered, and how hot—inflamed. "Something turned the talk," Price said, "to other matters; and about two hours passed—the silent stranger, as he and others noticed, drinking hot brandy-and-water as if it were so much water—when, all in a minute, up the said stranger speaks, says he's the Cockney tailor they had had been talking about, and wants to know if it was positive true that Blagden was such a swindling blackguard as they made out. "If so," said the excited stranger, "I am a ruined man! My name is Joseph Gibson. It is I who have taken the Stape Hill Farm; and if what you have said is true, may God do so to me and more also but I will have the villain's heart's-blood before many months have passed!" Genuine fury, earnest passion always impresses, rebukes men for a time to silence, and no one spoke in answer. Price and his companions were not desirous that their confidential chat with each other should be made a town-talk of. Everybody disliked Blagden, but few would have chosen to make him their personal enemy. "What I want to know is," continued Gibson, who did not appear to be exactly drunk, though he had really tossed down

his throat during those two hours nine shilling glasses of brandy-and-water—his speech, his legs being steady, firm (the devil of drink, as frequently happens, was mastered by the far mightier demon of revengeful rage)—"what I want to know, and will know, is, whether or not the stock and growing crops at Stape Hill Farm were valued to Blagden at one hundred and forty pounds?" This fierce query was replied to by Mr. Phillips, a master harness-maker at Poole, who had before spoken upon the subject. "That is Gospel-truth," said he. "I am one of Ridge's creditors, under the assignment which he made for the benefit of all (though some haven't accepted it), and my name is to the receipt for the one hundred and forty pounds paid by Blagden, just three weeks agone, for the stock and crops upon them acres of hungry sand which he calls Stape Hill Farm. A precious farm! It was plenty of money too. Let me advise the gentleman from London," continued Mr. Phillips, in the very words he used, as well as his memory served him, "that if he have given three hundred pounds, as some say he have, for what will not bring in more than a hundred odd, to throw up the place at once, and let first loss be last loss. As for taking Blagden's heart's-blood, that is very wild, foolish talk."

At hearing that, Gibson dropped back into his chair without speaking a word, motioned a person near a bell to ring it, signed to the answering waiter for another glass of brandy-and-water, and sat drinking till he fell, helplessly drunk, upon the floor, and was carried to bed. It was late the next day when he left the Roebuck, and he was never again seen in the house.

Gibson had never been addicted to drink; and in ordinary circumstances, till of late years, when misfortunes gathering thickly about him cankered his temper as it bowed his form, as it blanched his hair—had been a man of generally placid demeanour, though capable, when roused, of rushing into the most violent extremes. This I ascertained from his former neighbours in Islington. It must not be forgotten either, that he had set his life—more than his own, his child's life—upon the desperate cast of success in the farming experiment. To play falsely with such a man, in such a mood of mind, was playing with fire.

Somers and his wife managed to pacify him for a time by confident assertions that the land was very fair land, and the stock, properly tended, would realize a profit upon the three hundred pounds. What he had heard at the Roebuck was mere malicious gossip; nothing more. Thus heartened, Gibson persevered; working, at such labour as he was fit for, like a slave. He had one prime source of consolation, which could be no deception—Catherine's health improved wonderfully at Stape Hill; and could he but manage to make both ends meet, he should be well content with his bargain.

That he soon found to be impossible. Wages, manure, horse-keep, his own domestic expenses—trifling as was the last item—quickly ate up his ridiculously insufficient capital. Stock, half-fattened, was sold at ruinous prices; and two months before Michaelmas, 1845, he, after looking carefully and boldly into the state of his affairs, was fain to recognise the terrible fact, that he must give up the farm; and, with scarcely a sovereign in his pocket, return to dingy, stifling London, with his now blooming daughter; to seek there means of eking out miserable life, and die there; Catherine soon as he, perhaps sooner. The slightest hint of leaving Stape Hill paled the newly-blown roses on her cheeks, one of the reasons why being that she, on most fine evenings, met "William down at the stile," the said William being the blithe-looking, well-respected son of a building carpenter and timber-merchant, whose place of business was less than a mile distant from Stape Hill Farm.

Hope, as I have somewhere read, springs eternal in the human breast. That supreme elixir, at all events, welled up rapidly in the fast-failing springs of Joseph Gibson's life from a very simple fact, daily becoming more certain, plain—namely, that about forty acres of carrots, which had looked unpromising, would yield a most abundant crop; and carrots were carrots that year. I was told, indeed, when I went down, that carrots, mangold, and such deep striking roots, could alone be grown with a chance of profit in the loose, sandy soil about there.

This success induced Gibson to again go minutely over his accounts, and the result this time was, that if Mr. Blagden could be persuaded to let the rent—the whole twelvemonth's rent—stand over to the following year, he might rub on, and eventually, by growing only root crops, pull through. But if the retired attorney would insist upon being paid the fifty pounds, the amateur agriculturist did not see how it would be possible to get through the year whilst the crops were growing; hardly then. Still, it might be barely possible to do so.

On the 30th of September, 1845, Blagden (arrived from London on the previous day) called at Stape Hill for the year's rent. He came in a one-horse gig, which, as he was in the habit of doing, he had hired at the Roebuck, Poole. It was growing dusk when he reached the place; he stayed about two hours, and it was quite dark, except for a faint starlight, when he left in high dudgeon.

There had been a stormy scene between him and Joseph Gibson, at which were present Catherine Gibson and James Somers, who had cleverly, or cunningly, managed to keep well both with the tenant and proprietor.

Blagden flatly refused to wait one day longer for his rent. The terrified tenant's beseeching remonstrances; the daughter's tears; even the pretty positive opinion of Somers that were the time asked for granted, Mr. Gibson might come round—had no effect upon the retired lawyer. To end the matter, he took his pocket-book, which being stuffed with Bank of England notes, he ostentatiously spread open, selected a ready-drawn, stamped receipt for fifty pounds from a number of others, placed it upon the table, drew forth his watch, and said he would wait just half an hour for the money; if it were not then forthcoming, he should leave, and on the morrow an execution for the amount and costs would be put in. Furious, maddened with rage and disappointment, Gibson leapt at his landlord, and inflicted a severe blow upon his face, at the same time howling forth threats of direst vengeance.

The misguided man was forcibly separated from Blagden by his daughter and James Somers. The landlord (Catherine afterwards told me) remained quite cool; and but for the quiver of his ashen lips, the calm, deadly ferocity which gleamed in his grey eyes, anyone might have believed that the assault was a trifling matter, of no importance whatever.

There was a slight lull after the storm, and Catherine, taking advantage of it, said:—"I will go and ask Mr. Finch to advance my father forty pounds upon the piece of carrots he has bought.

They will be digged next week. We have quite ten pounds in the house, and shall then be able to pay the rent in full."

"You have just twenty minutes, Miss Gibson," said the imperturbable lawyer. "Just twenty minutes—not one more or less. The cowardly assault committed upon me," he added, with a flash of hell-fire at his tenants, "a court of law shall pronounce upon! Somers, see the horse is put

into the trap."

Somers said that should be done, and left the room to do it. Miss Gibson left at the same time. She was gone but a quarter of an hour. Mr. Finch was out, and Mrs. Finch said he never paid money till he was in possession of the goods purchased. Mr. Blagden took no apparent notice of what Catherine Gibson said, waited till the half-hour was exactly expired, took up his watch, wrapped his long fur-collar cloak about him, and left.

Soon after it was light the next morning, two sailors on their way to join a vessel in the harbour of Poole came upon the dead body of Mr. Blagden, lying across the narrow but high road. A little distance off was the horse and gig; the animal, one of his forelegs broken, was suffering great torture; and both shafts of the gig were broken. Immediate alarm was given, and before long a number of people came up, by whom it was at first supposed that Mr. Blagden had met his death by accident. The horse, a high-spirited animal, had perhaps bolted, and the gig coming in contact with one of the trees, which dotted each side of the road, had been turned over with great violence, and Mr. Blagden, hurled upon the hard road, had probably been killed instantaneously. A very cursory examination sufficed to show the fallacy of that surmise. There was a deep wound in the back of the dead man's neck—apparently delivered by a sharp axe, which had cut through the stand-up fur collar of the cloak he wore. No question that he had been struck from behind. Robbery had had been added to murder; the deceased gentleman's pocket-book, purse, and gold watch were gone. There was another wound in the crown scalp, sufficient in itself to cause death, and which must have been inflicted when the head was bare, as there was not the slightest cut visible in the texture of the hat, which was found some yards off. The murdered man's clenched hands were filled with the gravel of the road, grasped no doubt in his agony, and suggestive that he must have been either forced upon the ground or kneeling when the mortal blow was dealt. But how had the gig been stopped—the horse flung down, and reduced to so pitiable state? A question that not very readily answered. Two or three days subsequently a clothes-line, almost new, one end of which had been recently cut, was found by a woman, buried under the hedge of a cottage, situate between the spot where the murder was committed and Stape Hill Farm. One of the woman's hens, in scratching under the hedge, had brought it to the surface. The circumstance was spoken of, but no importance was attached to it. The murdered man had not been strangled. The buried cord could not therefore have been the instrument, or one of the instruments, of death! Still, it was odd that the full half of a long, new clothes-line should have been carefully buried near the scene of the awful crime!

No sooner was the murder, and the circumstances connected with it, known at Poole, than every finger pointed to Joseph Gibson, the tenant of the Stape Hill Farm, as the murderer. His savage threat at the Roebuck was remembered; and it was known to several persons that his sole chance, admitted to be so by himself, was that Blagden should let the year's rent then due stand over till the following Michaelmas! One person, of the name of Frost, who had done some smith's-work for Gibson, having told him he was trusting to a broken-reed in relying upon lawyer Blagden's generosity, received for reply, that "Blagden would be very unwise to provoke him too far!" This expression was held to indicate a settled determination in Gibson's mind to kill his landlord, should the required favour be refused. A skilled detective would have drawn an inference just the reverse of that. No man, unless he be delirious with drink or rage, hints of his intention, under certain contingencies, to commit murder!

Joseph Gibson, unprovided with professional aid, was taken before the coroner's inquest, and the cumulative evidence brought against him was certainly staggering. The scene at Stape Hill, already given,—the assault by Gibson upon the attorney, and his ferocious menaces,—Blagden's threat to distrain early in the next day,—the vain attempt by Catherine Gibson to borrow money of Mr. Finch to make up the rent—were capped by the discovery, in Gibson's bureau in his bed-room, Stape Hill, by the Poole police, of the genuine stamped receipt for the money, which Blagden had placed tauntingly upon the table, and taken away with him. Unceremonious verdict of wilful murder against Joseph Gibson, who was forthwith committed on the coroner's warrant to Dorchester jail!

This narrative I heard from the daughter, with exception of the conversation at the Roebuck, of which she herself had heard but a vague, indistinct report from her father. It has been stated that Mr. Joseph Gibson was and had been long separated from his wife, a person of remarkable personal attractions. Neither her maiden name nor that which she has since the separation passed under need be printed in these pages. It is sufficient to say that she was an orphan girl and a milliner's assistant when Gibson foolishly fell in love with and married her. As often happens in such cases, the disappointment was mutual. Gibson at the time had quite a splendid shop, was in the first flush of a year's promising business, kept two servants; which items summed up meant, of course, nothing to do, a well-furnished table, silk and satin dresses, cabs to theatres, &c. In short, the life of a ladyship, *minus* only the title. And the bridegroom, no doubt, expected to be imparadised in the smiles and endearments of the entrancing milliner's assistant to the full end and term of his natural life. Well, the business did not answer so well as might have been reasonably expected—one servant was first lopped off, omnibus must serve for a cab, with the rest of such disagreeable declines in life. The husband (time and familiarity are such disenchanters) discovered that his wife was not quite the angel he had supposed, and—and the young lady was frail. A separation took place, and the guilty wife had since continued to live in splendid sin. Twenty years ago only a rich man could obtain a divorce—the matrimonial chain yielded only to a golden file—and Mr. and Mrs. Gibson were still, of course, in legal parlance, man and wife. The woman, however, was not all bad; few are—neither man nor woman, none that I have known; and having read the report, copied into the London papers from the *Poole Herald,* of the proceedings at the inquest on Blagden's death, she forwarded to her daughter Catherine, a draft, in a feigned name, for one hundred pounds; and at the same time, so influenced—not directly, of course—influential persons, that I was commanded to proceed to Poole and Stape Hill, and minutely investigate the case. A letter from "the friend" who had forwarded the one hundred pound draft, addressed to Miss Gibson, preceded me; and I was welcomed with tears of trembling hope. I think Catherine Gibson guessed that "the friend" was her fallen mother; but she hinted nothing of the kind, and indeed it was not till all was over that I myself had any notion—a matter after all of supreme indifference—as to who pulled the strings by which I was set in motion.

It was a very, very ugly affair. Before going into the business with Miss Gibson, I, in accordance with my invariable tactics, made myself thoroughly acquainted with the case against us—in this instance the case for the Crown. A sight of your adversary's cards is a good step towards winning the game. The sight, however, of the formidable cards held by the Crown in "Regina v. Gibson" did not at all reassure me.

The Poole police had not only deposed that the prisoner, when surprised in his bed on the

morning of the murder, so late as eleven o'clock—he that usually rose by six at latest—exclaimed when he saw the officers, who had not spoken a syllable respecting the murder of Blagden, not even mentioned that gentleman's name, opening his bureau, he cried out, "Ah! it's all over with me. I shall be hanged, I suppose, for that devil Blagden. Take me away at once." After that betraying avowal, he assumed the mask of sudden silence—not speaking another word except when, as they were going along the road with him, in a chaise cart, towards Poole, one of them, when passing or nearing the spot where the crime had been committed, said, "I can't but think Blagden fought hard for his life, whoever murdered him." "Whoever murdered Blagden!" exclaimed Gibson, with a fearful start, "what are you talking of? Robbed him perhaps?" "Murdered and robbed him," said the officer; "but, mind, no one asks you to let out about it." At hearing which, the prisoner gave a loud cry, and fainted or pretended to faint away.

Since then he had not said a word upon the subject; the attorney who appeared for him when he was examined before the magistrates having "reserved his client's defence." Since then there had been found at Stape Hill, in an outhouse, a sharp billhook, the blade and handle of which were stained with blood. It was such an instrument as might, the surgeon who had examined the body deposed, have inflicted the wound which deprived the deceased Blagden of life; and thrust away amongst old rags and other lumber, in a place which Miss Gibson admitted her father could only have access to, was an old apron, just such a one as the prisoner sometimes wore, covered with blood-stains. These evidences—dumb, yet endowed with miraculous voice—had been carefully sealed up, and remained in possession of the local police. Catherine Gibson endeavoured to account for the blood upon the finely-sharpened bill-hook, by saying that her father had a few days before the death of Mr. Blagden chopped off the head of a gander, which bled very much. Gibson did not, however, she admitted, wear the bloody apron upon that occasion. None of the money belonging to Mr. Blagden, neither notes nor coin—he had a small canvass bag full, or nearly so, of sovereigns—had been found, nor had the gold watch. It had all, no doubt, been cunningly concealed; but he (the officer with whom I was conversing) had little doubt that with patience and perseverance they should discover the hiding-hole.

"Does it not strike you as somewhat remarkable," said I, "that Gibson did not also cunningly conceal the stamped receipt, the most damning piece of evidence against him? It *might* be legally impossible to prove that the notes and gold, even the watch, belonged to Mr. Blagden; *might* be I say—though that, as regards the watch, is a violent supposition. But the receipt, about which there can be no mistake—the man must have lost his head not to have concealed or destroyed that."

"He, no doubt, intended to produce it in bar of the claim for rent which would be made by the deceased's representatives!"

"Although Somers could prove that he had not paid the rent, and Mrs. Finch that she had refused to Catherine Gibson the means of doing so! Queer to my mind that. Still the easily discoverable possession of the receipt is, however looked at, unaccountable. It can only be explained by the axiom that whom God determines to destroy he first deprives of reason. Did I understand you to say that the prisoner had been fully committed for trial by the magistrates as well as by the coroner?"

"Yes; fully committed in reality, not formally. The magistrates, having no doubt whatever of the

prisoner's guilt, declared their intention of fully committing him for wilful murder; but he will be again brought before them the day after tomorrow, for the completion of the depositions. At present he remains in Poole Jail."

"The day after tomorrow! Oh, by-the-bye, is the clothes-line, or half of a clothes-line, scratched out by a hen from under a hedge, handy?"

"Yes, it is here. I will show it you. But I really do not see what possible connection that can have with the murder."

"I do not say it has; still I should like to see it." It was shown me.

"Humph! A new line—one of the best make. A new line spoiled to no purpose. This piece is not above six yards long; sharply severed, too; and there is a slip-noose at one end!" "True enough; but what use could have been made of it in effecting the murder?"

"Well, a very efficient use; but we will speak of that hereafter. Keep it safe if you please. The hedge where it was scratched up was not road-gravel, I suppose; and there are many particles of road-gravel sticking to this line, or I am mistaken. Have you leisure to go with me to the scene of the murder?'

"Yes," replied the officer, "I will go with much pleasure."

The notion which had struck me about the clothes-line was derived from a former police experience near Hereford. How the horse had been thrown down with such violence as to break one of its legs—a singularly sure-footed animal too—had puzzled the natives. Now, it had come out in the Hereford business—which ended in nothing, the person robbed having refused to prosecute—that the robbers had, in that case, thrown the gentleman's horse (he also drove a gig) down by a very simple expedient. A line was dropped in the dark across the road, attached by a running noose at one end to the stump of a tree, at about two feet from the ground, which, suddenly tightened as the horse came swiftly up, would bring down the surest-footed beast in the world, with terrible violence. The same trick might have been played upon this occasion. I was pretty sure it had been; and the other portion of the clothes-line might suffice to hang whoever could be proved to have had it in his possession on the night of the murder.

The place where the horse must have fallen was just the spot where such a device might be resorted to with success. The road was narrow, level; the horse would be going at its swiftest pace; and there was an oak-sapling on one side, round which the running noose could be slipped, and fixed at any height. One man, having the other end in his hand, and *seizing the exact moment* for raising it, could throw any swift horse down. Yes; but to do so was scarcely to be expected of a Cockney oil and colourman—one too prematurely feeble, aged. No, no; if that trick had been played, it was by someone whose eyes could see in the dark as well as by daylight; one possessed of nerve, quickness, decision, which would bring down a partridge before it had fluttered its wings thrice.

"Clever poachers about here?" I carelessly remarked, speaking to my brother-officer.

"I should think so. Rum fellows to meet with of a dark night too!"

"Mr. Gibson, the prisoner, can hardly be one of that sort, I should think?"

"God bless you! no. I should hardly think he knows a snipe from a partridge, except when they are cooked; nor how to so much as load a gun."

"Have you any first-rate moonlight fellows about here?"

"Yes; but the cleverest, by a long chalk, is gone out of that line—Jem Somers, as lives at Stape Hill. He used to be an out-and-outer. He's not exactly such a bad sort," continued the officer, "as everybody, or almost everybody (Mr. Blagden liked him very much), says he is. He's very sorry, seems almost heart-broken about this horrible affair—Mr. Gibson and his daughter having been, he says, so kind to him. He thinks, if he can't get a tolerable situation, which he can hardly expect now Mr. Blagden is dead, of going to America."

"America! Well, he'll have plenty of sport there. I suppose such a tender-hearted gentleman would be most grieved for the fate of his oldest friend, Mr. Blagden."

"No, really, no. He is most distressed about Gibson and his daughter. Tears come into his eyes every time he speaks about them. Why," continued the greenly-guileless officer, "Why, to get out of him, before the coroner and magistrates, about what passed at Stape Hill between Gibson and Blagden, when there was such a row because Gibson could not pay his rent, was like pulling the very teeth out of his head."

"But it came out, as the teeth would, at last. He's a 'cute chap, too, I am pretty sure, as well as soft-hearted?"

"'Cute, I should think so! Catch a weasel asleep, and you may chance to drop upon Jim Somers when he's got one eye shut."

"He lives, you say, in the same house with the Gibsons?"

"Yes; but not exactly. They have a place to themselves that joins on like to the farmhouse, but yet separated from it."

"I understand. They have their own castle. Every Englishman—the humblest—likes that, if the castle is a wooden one, the roof thatched with furze. Their own poultry, pig, and washing-yard also, I suppose?"

"Yes; quite distinct from the farmhouse. Jim's wife showed me over it the other day." I was pleased at that; for it had occurred to me that I should like *to see Jim Somers' last new clothes-line, or what remained of it*.

I had a long conference with Catherine Gibson; but it was far from a heartening one. When she had done, I said:

"There is one circumstance I should be glad to hear from your own lips, if you choose to honour me with your confidence. I mean, of course, if you can throw any light upon the seeming mystery. It is this: how came the receipt for the rent due (fifty pounds) in your father's

possession?”

The young woman’s face flushed—the flush, I was sure, of shame. She cast down her eyes, and remained silent.

“If I am to be of any service, I must know *all,”* said I, gently, but firmly.

“I understand that,” said Catherine Gibson, not uplifting her eyes. “I will tell you. Mr. Blagden, in his hurry and passion, did not observe that it had dropped on the floor; and left, supposing, no doubt, that he had replaced it in his pocketbook. After he was some time gone, my father saw the piece of paper, picked it up, and—and—”

“Appropriated it, you mean to say; or had some indistinct notion—a very foolish notion—that it might be a bar to the execution to be put in on the morrow. And when the police called on the morrow, the still wilder notion arose in his mind, that an intention, if he had really intended such a crime, of *stealing* the receipt, was equivalent, under the circumstances, of having really done so. Absurd! but I can readily understand such a feeling. Your father, perhaps, drank more than usual that night, after Mr. Blagden’s departure?”

“Oh! more, much more. My father is a very abstemious man.”

“So I have been told. The receipt stumbling-block, as far as I am concerned, is removed. The man Somers and his wife are, I am told, very kind and serviceable to you in this sad crisis?”

“Very kind and attentive; more so than ever they were.”

“I should much like to see Somers. Perhaps I could glean something from him or his wife which, though deemed unimportant by you and them, might in my eyes be of significance. Is he within?”

“His wife is not, but he is—in the next building which adjoins this. Shall I say who you are?”

“Not that I am a detective-officer, if you please. It would not, perhaps, so much matter that Somers should know my vocation; but if I am to serve your father, I must work, like a mole, in the dark. Say simply, and which is the truth, that I am a friend from London, anxious to assist your father in his, I trust, passing trouble.”

“I will do so. He will be here in three minutes.”

“Not of the least use, James Somers, to fence with me with that smoothly-loose tongue of yours; to look modestly, sorrowfully upon the floor with those catlike eyes. *I know you, and that you are the murderer of Mr. Blagden!*

“A moment after Miss Gibson passed out at the front, I left by the back door, making a trivial excuse to the servant, and saying I would return in a moment. You came out of your house with Miss Gibson, and I took the liberty of walking in. Had I been seen by either of you, it would have been easy to say that I went to tell you I would prefer seeing you and Mrs. Somers (she not being then in the way) on the morrow. Neither of you did see me. But *I* saw in a large table

drawer, which I took the liberty of inspecting, the longest half of a clothes-line, sharply cut, of the newness, colour, and, I think, rather peculiar twist of that found under the hedge. It's not likely you'll miss it before it has answered the present purpose I shall put it to; and if you do, the last thought that will enter that cunning—but, as I can see plainly enough through the flat-crowned, animally-shaped skull—uneasy, palpitating brain of yours, that it is now in the coat-pocket of a London detective officer. Though of itself hardly strong enough to make a halter for that bull-neck of yours, it will perhaps enable me to find something that will. Oh! you have nothing more to say, except to repeat how 'mortal sorry' you be for the young missus, and for Mr. Gibson too! I have no doubt, Somers, you are a feeling man, and especially just now you must feel very strongly. I am sure you do. I have nothing more to ask. Miss Gibson is positive that her father is innocent, and we must trust to Providence to make the truth manifest. Tomorrow I may, or may not, call to see your wife. Good-day, Miss Gibson. I have promised to dine with an acquaintance in Poole, and must be gone."

The end of clothes-line which I had brought away from Somers' place precisely matched with that in possession of the Poole police: colour, size, twist were identical, and both pieces made up in length that of an ordinary clothes-line. If the county magistrate—to whom the officer I had previously spoken with, whose name I forget, volunteered to introduce me—had any brains in his head, he would, in a case involving such issues, grant a warrant to search Somers' premises. The magistrate fortunately had brains in his head. I mentioned the Hereford affair, showed him the sundered clothes-cord, and declared my willingness to make oath that I had sufficient grounds for suspecting James Somers of having murdered and robbed Mr. Arthur Blagden, to justify the issuing of a search-warrant. I had brought written testimony as to my detective acumen, signed "Richard Mayne"; and it is probable that that as much, if not more than the evidence of the clothes-line, decided him to grant the warrant, which was placed at once in the hands of the police officer, whose name I have forgotten, and off we both set without delay for Stape Hill.

Somers and his wife were greatly scared by our visit, the man especially so, upon finding that Miss Gibson's friend was a London detective. Our search was ineffectual, so far as that no property of the murdered man could be found; neither notes, gold, or watch; but a very sharply-ground hand-axe, put away in a corner-cupboard, attracted my attention. "This is your husband's axe?" "O yes; our axe!" I examined it minutely. First with the naked eye, then with a strong magnifier, which I was seldom or never without. The axe had been washed, not so very long ago; and, though nothing was visible to the naked eye, my magnifier discovered upon the blade, not only spots of red rust, which might or might not be stains of blood, but a number of what looked to be minute fibres of fur sticking to the stains. On removing the wooden handle, we saw distinct marks of blood, which I concluded had been washed, as it were, into the socket. The man saw those marks, and turning cadaverously white, exclaimed that he had killed a snared rabbit with it not long before.

"A rabbit?"

"Yes, a snared rabbit."

"You have killed nothing else with it?"

"Oh no!"

"You had better take this axe with you, at all events," said I to the local officer. "It may be of no consequence; still you had better take possession of the instrument."

Once when I attended a lecture by a celebrated man, he had stated that every animal had in its blood globules differing in size from those of any other kind. This knowledge had been arrived at by very slow steps. There was no doubt, however, of its scientific accuracy, or that with the aid of a powerful microscope a professional man of skill and experience could decide, without chance of committing a mistake, from the slightest stain whether the blood, if blood, had flowed in the veins of a human being or other animal. It was the same with minute fibres of fur, hair, &c. This he had said was a most valuable discovery, and he instanced the fact that in France an innocent man might have been convicted of murder owing to a knife having been found in his possession stained with what had every appearance of blood, which stains examined by a skilled gentleman through the microscope was proved to be lime juice.

The lecture had made a great impression on me at the time, and it occurred to me that here was a case in which such a discovery, such a power, would prove invaluable? The fur cloak collar of the murdered man, it will be remembered, had been cut through; the skull had also been split by the assassin. Were those minute fibres of fur sticking on the blade of the axe, fibres of rabbit fur, or of that, whatever it might be, of which the cloak collar was made? and were there any, the slightest shreds of human hair mingled with those particles of fur? Then as to the blood upon Gibson's billhook, and upon the old rag of an apron; was that human blood ?

In the scientific replies to these questions lay the issue of life and death as regarded the prisoner Gibson; and as, although not knowing *who* "the friend" was that sent Miss Gibson the one hundred pound draft, I knew how to communicate with him or her, I determined to do so without delay, and I started in a gig for Dorchester ten minutes after I had so decided, there not being a moment to spare—reached London by train, and with the potent agency of "A Friend's" purse, engaged the services of the most eminent professor of that especial branch of anatomical science in the metropolis, with whom I returned to Poole.

The court was crowded on the day when it had been expected that Joseph Gibson would be finally committed for trial—a rumour having got afloat, that owing to the Detective who had been sent down from London, strange discoveries had been made. Poor Gibson looked more like a ghost than a man. He believed himself to be the doomed victim of a relentless fate—that nothing, no accident could—that God would not reveal the truth.

The billhook, the apron, the axe were placed upon the table, and Professor Ansted (by whom they had been carefully examined) gave his evidence: it was clear, decisive. The blood upon the billhook was *not* human blood; of that he said there could be no possible doubt. The stains upon the apron were red paint, containing peroxide of iron. (Gibson, when oil and colourman, no doubt, had to grind his own paints, and when so occupied used the apron.) The stains upon the axe, found in the house of Somers, were human blood (there were human hairs sticking on them); and the particles of fur were not rabbit but squirrel fur—the fur of which the murdered man's cloak collar was made!

Seldom has evidence—almost supernatural it seemed to the astounded audience—produced a deeper impression than did Professor Ansted's. The finger of God appeared to be visible in it! "William," who had proved himself a true lover throughout, burst into tears, as he pressed forward and shook the prisoner, and his daughter, standing close to her father, warmly by the hands.

The magistrates, who appeared to be somewhat mystified, bewildered, retired to consult with each other. Returned into court, the chairman announced, that relying upon the evidence of so distinguished a gentleman as Professor Ansted, a warrant for the apprehension of James Somers would be immediately issued; but that for the present it was not thought prudent to discharge the prisoner Joseph Gibson. The case would be adjourned for three days.

The magistrates were saved any further trouble in the matter by the murderer himself. An acquaintance in court, specially employed for that purpose, had ridden off to Stape Hill directly the decision of the magistrates was declared; who, of course, apprised Somers that a warrant was out against him for wilful murder, and that the officers would be there almost immediately to arrest him. The despairing felon heard the news with a savage growl, and a moment or so afterwards desired to be left alone.

The door of the room, in which his wife (weeping, sobbing, wringing her hands the while) said we should find him, was fastened on the inside. We burst it open; and a shocking spectacle presented itself. Somers was lying dead on the floor, in a pool of blood, self-murdered; he had cut his throat with a razor. On a small table we found a scrap of writing in his hand:—"It was I, not Gibson, that killed Blagden. I had owed him a bitter grudge a long time, though he didn't think it. D—n him, he ruined me body and soul when he sold me up eight years ago. What I wish particularly to say is, that my wife is as innocent as a babe in the business. She don't even know where the money and watch is, or that I have such things. They are hidden away in a box under the flagstones of one of my pig-styes—the right hand one going out. That is all I have to say. I thought of going to America; and now I'm going to ——, if there is such a place, which I don't believe. The Peeler was right about the clothes-line; that was just how it was done.—J. S."

The money, watch, &c., we found as indicated. All doubt respecting the terrible business being at an end, Joseph Gibson was forthwith discharged from prison. His case excited much sympathy. The executors of Arthur Blagden allowed him to throw up his farm, forgiving him the arrears of rent; and he, with the help, I believe anonymously conveyed through the daughter, of "A Friend," took a smaller and culturable one not very far off from Stape Hill; and has since, I have been told, prospered tolerably. His daughter, I saw by the local paper which some of them sent me now and then, married "William."

Waters, Thomas. [Pseud.] [Attrib. William Russell.] *Autobiography of a London Detective*. New York: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1864