

From The Spectator
A Mysterious Crime

ON Saturday, the 25th of November, 1809, about noon, a carriage with two travellers arrived before the house of the postmaster of Perleberg, a little town close to the frontier of the Prussian dominions, on the highroad from Berlin to Hamburg. The travellers were the Hon. Benjamin Bathurst, Envoy Extraordinary of the British Government, on a secret mission to the court of Vienna, and then on his return to England; and Herr Krause, his German courier. They had no sooner alighted when Mr. Bathurst gave orders for the immediate continuation of the journey, and while the horses were harnessed to the carriage, went into the hostelry adjoining the post-office to take some refreshment. The meal was soon finished, but various arrangements, particularly the local verification of passports in the name of "Merchant Koch" and "Fischer," protracted the departure of the travellers until a late hour. It was not till towards nine in the evening that the news at last arrived of the horses being about to be harnessed to the carriage. On receiving this welcome announcement, Mr. Bathurst left his room and went into the street, as his servant thought, for the purpose of taking his seat in the chaise. The courier followed in a few seconds, but was astonished not to find his master in the place where he thought him to be. He waited and waited, for minutes, for hours, but did not see him make his appearance. The Hon. Benjamin Bathurst has not re-appeared up to the present day.

At Perleberg the mysterious disappearance of the traveller known as Merchant Koch created but little sensation. The country was in such a fearfully disorganized state at the time, overrun by lawless bands of freebooters, French stragglers, Polish adventurers, and German revolutionists, and murders and robberies were so frequent, that the loss of a simple commercial traveller was scarcely noticed. Besides, there were scarcely any constituted authorities in Prussia. The country, just released from the iron grasp of French despotism, and still trembling before imperial prefects and gendarmes, located in all directions, was only nominally governed by the administration of Frederick William III., and still more under the influence of the military than the judicial power. It was, therefore, not until after the lapse of some weeks that the fatal news of Mr. Bathurst's disappearance reached England, conveyed by Herr Krause, the courier, who had succeeded in taking ship at Hamburg. Mr. Bathurst, third son of the Bishop of Norwich, had left behind him at home a young wife—the eldest daughter of Sir John Call, of Whiteford House, Cornwall—and two children, all of whom, together with his own family, deeply lamented his long-continued absence. He had been appointed to the Vienna Mission in the spring of 1809, by his relative, Lord Bathurst, *pro tempore* Secretary for Foreign Affairs, and it was believed that his absence would not be longer than three or four months at the utmost. But Napoleon having invaded Austria, the departure of the young British envoy was protracted from day to day, causing him bitter disappointment, vented in frequent letters to his family. The last of these letters, dated July, 1809, intimated that there was considerable danger in his position, the Austrian court quailing before the continued successes of the French. Then came the decisive battle of Wagram, and with it the complete annihilation of the Austrian monarchy, left in nominal existence only by the grace of Napoleon. It was clear that after these events Mr. Bathurst's sojourn at Vienna was made impossible; and his friends consequently expected him anxiously home every week. So the month of September passed, and October and November, and no tidings arrived. Mr. Bathurst's wife removed into the house of her father-in-law, to be nearer any possible news; and evening after evening the family sat in conclave, every knock at the street-door causing a lively emotion,

arising from the hope that it might be the absent friend. At length, one evening in December, the Bishop of Norwich received an express from Lord Wellesley, requesting his immediate attendance at Apsley house, his lordship having something important to communicate. The anxiety of the family now reached the highest point; and it was almost a relief when the bishop returned, telling his friends that the Government had received information that his son Benjamin had mysteriously disappeared at Perleberg, in Prussia. There was a ray of hope in this news, on which the family, and above all Mr. Bathurst's heroic young wife, immediately set to work.

Mrs. B. Bathurst at once resolved to proceed to Germany, and, in spite of all difficulties, to ascertain personally, if possible, the fate of her husband. All the persuasions of her family, who could not help seeing the extreme danger and almost hopelessness of the undertaking, were fruitless to prevent her making the necessary preparations for the journey; and it was with difficulty that she could be prevailed on even to accept the assistance of a companion. As such, however, to the great joy of Bishop Bathurst, Professor Röntgen, a friend of the family, and celebrated explorer—who, unfortunately, met with his death a few years after on the road to Timbuctoo, Africa—offered himself; and, under his guidance, Mrs. Bathurst, and another member of the family, set out for Germany at the end of December, 1809. They reached the Prussian dominions without [hinderance,] and on their arrival at Perleberg, found that the authorities had taken up the subject, and were making diligent inquiries respecting the fate of the missing traveller. By an order of the Prussian Home Secretary, the Governor of Perleberg, Captain von Klitzing, had been enjoined to investigate the affair, and a strict search having been instituted in the environs of the town, a pair of breeches, supposed to belong to the missing man, were found in a copse in the neighborhood. The garment being shown, on her arrival, to Mrs. Bathurst, she at once recognized it as that of her husband. It was riddled by several bullets; but on the examination of competent judges, it was established beyond doubt that the bullets had been fired on the empty piece of dress as it was lying on the ground, and not while on the person. The discovery of the garment, which seemed to lead on the trace of the missing one, and clearly pointed to a case of kidnapping, greatly increased the anxiety of Mrs. Bathurst and her companions for further information. Accordingly, a reward of five hundred thalers was offered, at their instigation, to whomsoever would give any news concerning the mysterious event; and they further paid handsome sums to the several members of the local police force to increase their zeal in the search. This, as subsequent facts proved, was rather unwise. The news that a number of rich foreigners had arrived, offering large sums for the discovery of a lost countryman, brought together all the vagabonds and adventurers of the province, and Captain von Klitzing was overwhelmed with offers of information, which, some worthless, and most of them lying, tended to nothing else but to increase the darkness which hung about the whole affair. At the end of a whole month's diligent inquiry and investigation the strange case had become more mysterious than ever.

Meanwhile, however, the English and French press, having become acquainted with the fact of Mr. Bathurst's disappearance, began to discuss the subject. The *Times*, of January 20, 1810, had the following paragraph in large type, which subsequently went the round of the English papers: "There is too much reason to fear that the account of the death of Mr. Bathurst, late British envoy to the Emperor of Austria, inserted in a Paris journal, is correct as to the principal fact. It was stated, as an article of Berlin news, of the date of December 10, that Mr. Bathurst had evinced symptoms of insanity on his journey through that city, and that he had subsequently fallen by his

own hand in the vicinity of Perleberg. Information, however, has been received within these few days, which forcibly tends to fix the guilt of Mr. Bathurst's death, or disappearance, on the French Government. It appears that Mr. Bathurst left Berlin with passports from the Prussian Government, and in excellent health, both of mind and body. He was to proceed to Hamburg, to embark for this country; but Hamburg he never reached. At some town near the French territories he was seized, as is supposed, by a party of French soldiers. What happened afterwards is not accurately known. His pantaloons have been found near the town where he was seized, and a letter in them to his wife; but nothing else. The Prussian Government, upon receiving the intelligence, evinced the deepest regret, and offered a large reward for the discovery of his body. No success, however, has yet attended the offer." From what source the *Times* received this information is not stated; there is, however, reason to believe, from the prominent manner in which the announcement was brought forward, that it was derived from official communication. Such, at least, seemed the opinion entertained of it in Paris; for the French Government, greatly incensed at the accusation of having kidnapped or murdered Mr. Bathurst, launched forth the following reply in the *Moniteur* of January 29th: "England alone, among all civilized nations, has renewed the example of paying assassins and encouraging crimes. It appears by the accounts from Berlin, that Mr. Bathurst was deranged in his mind. This is the custom of the British Cabinet—to give their diplomatic missions to the most foolish and most senseless persons the nation produces. The English diplomatic corps is the only one in which examples of madness are common." This reply, it cannot be denied, was very lame, and tended to foster and strengthen suspicions already extant. Further notices in the *Moniteur* still more confirmed these suppositions. The French official journal, in a threatening tone, laid it down as a positive rule that Mr. Bathurst *must* have committed suicide, and the severe displeasure of the Government was called upon the heads of those who should dare to think or to speak otherwise. Thereupon the German press, who had mildly discussed the subject, became very quiet, greatly sobered down by the remembrance of Palm, the Nüremberg bookseller, shot by order of Napoleon for having published a harmless little pamphlet on the state of the Fatherland.

While the *Times* and *Moniteur* were thus engaged in hot controversy, the police authorities at Perleberg continued their researches into the fate of the missing man, greatly spurred in their endeavors by the freely flowing gold of his relatives. Nevertheless, with the exception of the trowsers already found, containing some scribbling of the owner, with no clue to his fate, nothing whatever of importance was discovered. The work of the magistrates now began to be difficult, for the enterprising Hebrew dealers of all the neighboring towns and villages came swarming into Perleberg, hoping to dispose of some of their old clothes to the long-pursed foreigners. Bodies, too, were brought into town from all directions; and a cunning peasant had a whole cartload full, dugged up from a field where a hasty interment had taken place, after a skirmish between French and Prussians. The authorities got so bewildered at last as to be completely unable to follow any thread of inquiry, whether right or wrong; and the Prussian commander, the most intelligent man in the place, earnestly entreated the strangers to leave Perleberg, as without their presence he would be able to proceed more satisfactorily in his researches, and, perhaps, succeed in lifting the veil of the mystery. The advice, after some hesitation, was accepted; but before quitting the town, Mrs. Bathurst decided to have the whole of the environs, within some miles, once more strictly and systematically searched, leaving not out an inch of ground. This difficult plan was carried out on the 19th and 20th of March, at a vast expense of time and money. Perleberg—a very old city, formerly the capital of a province, but now reduced to a fourth-rate

country town with about three thousand inhabitants—is stragglingly situated along the bank of the river Stepenitz, about eight miles before it enters the Elbe. The country around is covered to a great extent with forest and underwood, and, at the beginning of the year 1810, was full of ruins of cottages, farmhouses, and mansions of the resident land-owners. It required a force of several hundred people to thoroughly search such intricate territory, so as to leave no possibility of any object of considerable size passing unnoticed. This difficult enterprise, however, was accomplished by the anxious wife of the missing traveller, who personally headed the undertaking. She had purchased a large number of dogs trained for tracking hidden objects—dogs talked of to this day at Perleberg—and with them, nearly the whole male population of the town, mostly voluntaries, she set out on her expedition. While all the fishermen of the Stepenitz were dredging the river with the minutest carefulness, the party on land examined every inch of ground, every bush and tree and hollow in the hills. But all with no result. The search was entirely fruitless in showing the faintest trace of aught belonging to the missing man; and being now fully convinced of the inutility of further researches in this quarter, the young wife at last reluctantly departed. Despairing what to do next, she went to Berlin, and from thence, in a fit of frenzy, to Paris, to see the Emperor Napoleon himself, and obtain from him, if possible, the account of the fate of her husband. The emperor received Mrs. Bathurst with the greatest affability; but solemnly declared his ignorance of the whole affair, and in proof of it offered his assistance for any further inquiry on the subject. Whether this offer was accepted or declined is not known, but certain it is that it led to no result of any kind. It seemed as if the dark crime of Perleberg would remain a mystery forever.

Not many months ago, however, an unexpected light was thrown upon the affair. It having become necessary to execute some repairs in the citadel of Magdeburg, a wall was pulled down, and behind it, in a small recess, was found the skeleton of a man in upright posture, the hands fastened to the back. Many were the speculations arising out of this discovery, and various the surmises set afloat, until at last the suggestion was started that the body might be that of Mr. Benjamin Bathurst, long supposed to have died somewhere near Magdeburg. This conjecture seems to be generally admitted at present among those who have been discussing the matter in Germany as the most probable. At the time of Mr. Bathurst's disappearance, the fortress of Magdeburg, as is well known, was in the hands of the French, and became the prison of many unfortunate Germans, and other political offenders opposing the sway of the great Napoleon. It cannot be denied that the thick walls of the old feudal stronghold, gained with French gold in 1806, and held as a sort of Bastille by the conqueror of the country, were uncommonly fitted for holding a British ambassador, and pressing from him, by slow torture, whatever tongue will tell in the agony of death. It seems a very probable conclusion, therefore, to submit that Mr. Bathurst's death was the consequence of a crime planned by French brains and executed by French hands. In fact, an attentive consideration of the whole mysterious affair and all the accompanying circumstances scarcely leaves room for any other explanation than the one now suggested. The French Government alone had an interest in the possession, as well as the necessary power for obtaining the person and despatches of the British envoy; and that the Emperor Napoleon was unscrupulous enough to resort to any means to obtain his own ends there are thousand of examples to prove. Not far from the very town of Perleberg, where Mr. Bathurst disappeared, Mr. Wagstaffe, a king's messenger, was seized and robbed of his despatches a few years before; and another British subject, Sir George Rumbold, was openly kidnapped at Hamburg by the same imperial police, in defiance of all international law and justice. The

seizure of Mr. Bathurst, being of far greater importance, was very likely effected also with much more circumspection. There was no particular difficulty in laying hold of Mr. Bathurst as soon as, in the dark November night, he had quitted the door of the Perleberg Inn; and after having him gagged, thrusting him into a ready carriage, to be conveyed forthwith to the not very distant fortress. Whether Mr. Bathurst died in his prison a natural death, or whether he was actually murdered by his gaolers, is a question, however, which would be difficult, if not impossible, to decide, even if it were proved to a certainty that the recently discovered body was that of the lost envoy. As far as it appears from the newspaper reports on the subject, the skeleton found in the wall underwent no particular examination, but was put into a box and carried off to some cemetery. The discovery of a corpse in a place like Magdeburg is, it seems, an occurrence to which the people are rather accustomed than otherwise, and of which consequently no distinct notice is taken. If, as the proverb goes, there is a skeleton in every house, it cannot perhaps be wondered at that there should be a hundred in a Prussian fortress.

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