

A Gipsy Gang's Plot

In 1824 Thomas Hayman kept a draper's shop at Lutterworth, in Lincolnshire, England. It stood on the outskirts of the town, and was part of an old-fashioned dwelling which had formerly belonged to a female member of the Curzon family, but had fallen into decay and been sold. Hayman's father bought it when it was a little better than a ruin, repaired several of the rooms, and converted it into a comfortable dwelling. Here in a large room on the lower floor he started in he drapery and haber-dashery line, and was also engaged in a little crooked business with the Lincolnshire smugglers. He made money and when he died left a good estate to his son Thomas. To the left of the dwelling a ruined wing of the of the old mansion had been converted into a stable, the original wall being still used for the purpose. Between the inhabited part of the building and the stable was a space of 50 yards occupied by trees and a side roadway.

Thomas Hayman was sent, when very young, to the Friends' school near Pontefret, and when he grew up became a Quaker. He was unmarried and reputed wealthy. He had latterly gone into the banking business, and many well-to-do people in the neighborhood deposited with him.

In the year named there called upon the draper and banker a man about 30. He was very dark, clean-shaved and well-dressed.

"Your father," he said to Mr. Hayman, "had a brother Charles, who went to the West Indies 50 years ago. Is that not so?"

"Yes, it is," was the reply. "I can remember him well, for I was about ten years old at that time."

"Is he still alive?" asked the stranger.

"I believe that he is dead," the Quaker answered; "my father died 23 years ago, and for fifteen years before his death we heard nothing of my uncle."

"Do you recognize this writing?" the stranger asked, as he exhibited a faded sheet of paper with writing on it almost illegible.

"Yes, that's my father's,["] was the reply; "where did you get it?"

"All in good time," answered the stranger, "Your father went to Barbadoes, did he not?"

"He did."

"And was in the mahogany business there?"

"That is correct."

"And subsequently quitted Barbadoes and went to Jamaica?"

"That I was ignorant of."

“Well, such was the case. There he married and had children, and I am the only survivor of them,” the stranger said. “You are my cousin.”

“You astonish me,” exclaimed the draper, “we had no knowledge of his removal to Jamaica or of his marriage, but supposed he had been unsuccessful in the business and died. The very last time he wrote he complained of sickness and poverty and my father sent him money.”

“Probably he used it to pay his passage to Jamaica,” was the response, “and when he got there he married a quadroon who had some property. That accounts for my being so dark.”

The Quaker was satisfied that the stranger was his cousin, and gave him a cordial reception. He found the newly discovered relative bright and active, and particularly skilled in the knowledge of horseflesh; of general business, however, he knew nothing. He was willing, however, and seemed anxious to learn, and the Quaker proposed that he should stay with him and gain all the information he could so that he might become useful to him. The cousin was most diligent. He went early to rest, and was always up and around by daylight. He was handy at cooking, and knew a great many things of which the Quaker was entirely ignorant. He was familiar with the names of trees and wild flowers and herbs, and when Mr. Hayman asked him whether the vegetation of the West Indies was similar to that of England he replied that it was, although many things grew there that did not grow in England.

Before long, Cousin John, as he was so called, became of great service to Mr. Hayman, and the latter congratulated himself in having found in his old age a relative so sedate and industrious, and so willing to assist him in every way in his power. When the Quaker spoke of remuneration, Cousin John said:

“Not at present, cousin; you give me food and shelter and clothes, and with these for the present I am satisfied. When I have acquired a fair knowledge of your business and can be of better service to you, then we will speak of the further remuneration.”

The Quaker kept three horses, and Cousin John was particularly fond of attending to them. The last thing every night he bedded the horses and foddered them, and at his suggestion the groom was discharged. One morning John said to his cousin:

“This is a very fine old house, and just the sort of a place that people would say is haunted. The old wainscoted room where you sleep, the shop below it, and the halls and passages seem almost in the same condition in which they must have been over 100 years ago.”

“My father,” was the answer, “did not meddle with the rooms that were habitable, except to have them cleaned. He put up a kitchen and parlor, and leveled ruins between here and the stable. Otherwise he did little to the place. But I never heard it was haunted. What put such a thing into your head?”

“Oh! nothing much?” replied Cousin John.

But this answer only served to rouse the old man’s curiosity, for in reality he was very superstitious.

“Have you ever heard or seen anything?” he asked.

“Well, to tell the truth,” was the answer, “I have seen and heard. For several nights I have heard footsteps in the passage after we have retired, and last night I arose to discover whence they came. Gently opening my door, I glanced along the passage and distinctly saw some persons standing at the top of the stairs. The next moment the figures disappeared.”

“This is very singular,” the Quaker said, “for with the exception of Margaret, the cook, we are the only persons in the house.”

After further remarks the conversation was dropped. Later on in the day the draper informed his cousin, with a very serious air, that a box of old family silver, left with him as collateral on a loan, was missing from his counting-room, a small recess in the rear of the shop. Cousin John expressed unbounded astonishment, and instituted a search.

The only window in the room was grated outside, and there was no sign of the bars or the strong padlock on the shop-door having been tampered with. That night extra care was taken to make everything fast, and the next morning was disturbed.

The morning after that however, the draper’s strong box was found forced open and several hundred pounds in gold and silver were gone.

The Quaker was greatly alarmed, but declined to ask the interference of the authorities, as he thought a knowledge of the fact might induce those who had deposits with him to withdraw them. Hitherto the money belonging to the depositors was untouched, as it was placed in a vault under the shop, the entrance to which was known to the Quaker and his cousin alone. The Quaker, however, after the second robbery would have called the constables to his aid, but it so happened that the very day a mortgage was taken up, held by one of the Quaker’s chief depositors, and £8,000 was placed in his hands. It was placed in the vault, and the old man and his cousin expressed little fear of its being reached by thieves.

On their entering of the shop next morning, however, they found the counter torn aside and the trap-door to the vault, which it had covered, open. The £5,000 and over £4,000 additional was gone. After this, for the first time, it was discovered by Cousin John that the window of a pantry had been left open. Through this, evidently the thieves had entered, and no doubt the noise heard by the cousin while coolly reconnoitering the premises, and the person seen on the top of the stairs, was doubtless one of the marauders.

Two Bow street runners were sent down from London and made a thorough investigation. The theory that the thieves had entered the pantry was exploded, for it was only two feet square, and right across the aperture was stretched a spider’s web, which evidently had been there for months. Furthermore the pantry had no connection with the counting-room.

It was discovered that over £1,000 worth of goods had also been removed from the store, but at what time could not be decided.

When the Quaker had made good the losses sustained by his clients he was still comfortably off. He was far from satisfied, however, with the result of the investigation. Soon after, the cook’s

daughter, a strong country wench, was permitted by the Quaker to spend a few months with her mother. She was very shy, and kept pretty much of the time in the kitchen. At night, however, she was very lively and wide awake, and often stood with the door of her bedroom ajar and listened. On more than one occasion she saw that Cousin John was evidently doing the same thing.

After about a month of patient watching the cook's daughter saw the cousin come out of his room with a dark lantern, and go down stairs. She followed and looked over the railings. The cousin went up to one of the large panels in the wainscoted hall-way and, reaching up to the top of it, pressed it. It slowly turned on a pivot and disclosed a passage, into which the cousin passed. Then the panel as again closed; The country wench—or detective, for such she was—drew a dark lantern from beneath her garments and went down stairs. The panel yielded to her touch as it had done to Cousin John's, and she found herself in a narrow passage, along which she went. She came to two flights of steps, one upward and the other downward. She took the upward one, and in a few seconds heard a slight noise. The next moment a panel turned as in the wainscot below, and Cousin John appeared. The detective covered the light and retreated silently and unobserved. Resuming her place at the head of the stairs, she waited Cousin John's return, but it was fully a quarter of an hour before he again entered the hallway by the concealed door.

The next day the Quaker and his cousin were busy, and the detective, still attired as the country wench, passed through the panel in the hall, and instead of turning up the flight of stairs which led to the floor above, he turned down the flight which led he knew not whither.

Soon he reached a subterranean passage, and pursuing it for about 60 yards came to another flight of stairs which he ascended, and at the top his head came against a flagstone. This he easily moved and found himself at the top of a buttress to one of the walls of the stable. Close by it was a window into which he could easily step. He did so and found himself over the stable, in what was used as a loft for hay. He hunted around to see whether any goods were stowed away or secreted, but was soon satisfied that there was nothing there of value. Descending from the loft by a ladder placed for the purpose, he returned to the house. When he reached it he found the Quaker greatly disturbed, as he had discovered that his pocket had been picked of £300, which he had placed there the night before on going to bed for security.

A week passed, then six men came down to Lutterworth from London. They were experienced thief-takers, but they appeared to be ordinary working-men, and went to work unobserved to mend the road near the Quaker's house. When night came they trudged away. An hour later they were ensconced in the neighborhood of the Quaker's stable.

The Quaker and his cousin retired to rest at an early hour as usual. About the same time three men, dressed like gypsies and talking their lingo, approached the stables and waited where they could see the buttress. Presently the stone at the top was raised, and Cousin John emerged. The next moment he stepped in at the window of the loft, and a minute later joined the three gypsies. They spoke together for half an hour, and separated at the door of the stable. Before they could utter a cry the six men were upon them. Marching them up to the house, they found the Quaker waiting in expectancy.

As his eye lit upon his cousin he exclaimed: "As I thought!"

They were a stubborn and hardened lot. But the London officers had a dozen more of the gang into custody before daybreak in the morning, and among them was one renegade from civilized life who turned king's evidence.

The secret of the old mansion had been known to this gang for years, and had been communicated from father to son. For a murder committed in the neighborhood, however, the gang had to quit it for many years. Then one of the most daring of them resolved to explore the secret ways of the old mansion, and by that means entered an old apartment in which were papers belonging to the father of the occupant.

Among these were letters which disclosed the fact that he had a brother who had gone to the West Indies, and with the assistance of the renegade already mentioned, who was a man of education and moved in good society, it was arranged that one of the gang should pass off as the son of the dead uncle, and thus aid the gang in a scheme of robbery. How it worked the reader knows. The money and stolen property were all recovered after some very clever detective work. Cousin John, under the name of Philip Haason, and half of the gang were sent over the seas. The rest of them were whipped at the cat's tail and driven out of the country.

The Quaker after this understood John's taste for horses and knowledge of birds and flowers. The talk about ghosts puzzled him for a time, but afterwards he came to the conclusion, as he said on the trial, that Cousin John wished to prepare beforehand an explanation of any noises which he or his confederates might make at night, or of a chance glimpse which the cook or her master might get an unfamiliar figure about the corridors.

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