



# WOULD YOU CONVICT ON CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE? *The* MISSING HAND A TRUE STORY

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**T**HROUGH the broken shadows on the verge of the meadow ran the white faced figure of a man, distinct one moment in the moonlight, obscured the next where black masses of foliage thrust athwart the rays. There was something subtly furtive in this headlong flight, alternately blotted and revealed. The man ran loose jointed, as if some strange fear, hanging close upon his heels, weakened him.

He was headed for a gate in the fence beyond which lay a winding path through the patch of woods. As he drew near to the spot his breath was drawn in painful gasps. To another man, who had been watching his approach, the agitation of the runner became apparent as he made the last few feet to the bars. This second man, who had stood unseen beneath the trees, stepped out and hailed the first.

"Ho, Mr. Manners, what's wrong w' ye, running as if the devil himself was behind?"

The person thus addressed staggered at the sudden encounter, leaned against the gate for support, breathing heavily, one hand pressed to his side. He answered brokenly.

"Is it you, Crosby? There's been evil work here. Mr. Lascelles has been murdered."

"Murdered! Where? Who by?"

"I found him in the ditch, half a mile back across the meadow. It's too horrible. I started to get help, but I fear there's little use."

Crosby had climbed the fence and now stood at the side of Manners.

"Did ye see what went with them as did it?" he asked.

"No, there was no one in sight when I came upon the body."

Crosby started at a run back over the course that had been followed by Manners, who also turned and retraced his steps more slowly. Crosby struck the ditch and made his way along its side. He was far ahead of the other, about the centre of the extensive field, when he stopped with a cry. Manners rejoined him presently.

The body of Edmund Lascelles, one of the most considerable landowners in that section, lay fully clothed and squarely in the tiny stream. His head had been cruelly beaten, apparently with a heavy hedge stake, bearing many stains, which had been thrown carelessly to one side. The clothing was somewhat disarranged, and the grass for a circle of ten feet about the right bank was trampled and twisted as by the feet of powerful antagonists in deadly combat. Crosby stooped and laid a hand over the heart, but felt no responsive beat. As he bent close he noticed something that caused him to shift his fingers from the breast to the sleeve of the coat. He lifted the arm and dropped it with an exclamation of horror, turning to his companion.

"His right hand has been cut off at the wrist!" he cried.

Manners was standing at some few paces distance, staring at the body. He nodded at these words, caught suddenly at his throat, swayed a moment and fell heavily in a dead faint.

## The Scotland Yard Man.

On the day of the inquest there came from London a short, round faced, nondescript bundle of a man, with a pugy face and guileless eyes of a small but fairly successful tradesman. He had an interview with the authorities at which he presented credentials establishing his identity with Inspector Blake, of Scotland Yard. He needed the credentials.

Inspector Blake was present at the inquest and heard the story told by Farmer Crosby and George Manners of the finding of the body of Lascelles. At its close he slipped away and took the road to the Lascelles mansion and estate.

Edmund Lascelles had been taken off in his thirty-third year. Member of an old county family, he had been educated at Oxford, and had since lived the life of the country gentleman, drawing a good income from his lands and content to occupy himself with the management of these and other financial interests, his books and his household. He had never married. His one relative was his sister, twelve years his junior, a young woman of high spirit and many attractions. This sister apparently was the only person for whom Lascelles cared to the extent of a civil word, for to her alone he was used to abate a severity of manner that grew from a quarrelsome and selfish nature.

This man had been the architect of his own unpopularity, of which he had erected an imposing structure. He was disliked by all who were forced to have dealings with him, and his position in the social life of the section was no more prominent than the importance of his name actually dictated. He had never courted attention, and when slighted for his sullen and backward behavior retired the more deeply into his own affairs.

These facts concerning the victim of the murder were easily collected by the round faced man who now began his examination into the circumstances surrounding the deed. His informants were chiefly the servants in neighboring houses, whom he quickly brought to the proper mood for his purpose. So pleasant was his conversation, so engaging and affable his manner of making acquaintance that there was none to resist his inquiries, and the first threads of the story were soon in his hands.

John Miles, the gardener of the Lascelles estate, met this extraordinary, ordinary man inspecting the hedge rows at the back of the house and fell an easy prey to a few well placed remarks concerning the horticultural aspects of the grounds that indicated a most discerning and appreciative eye and a kindred soul. Nor was John wholly proof against the suggestion of a mug of ale and a quiet hour in the road tavern with such a sensible and friendly stranger.

The gardener was not a constitutionally suspicious



THERE THEY STOOD FOR A TIME IN THE GARDEN.

person, and found nothing strange in the gradual turn of the discussion from the aggravating ways of hollyhocks and the perversity of crocuses to the all engrossing topic of the day and neighborhood. In matters concerning the death of his master John took upon himself, however, a pardonable attitude of importance not unmingled with a tendency to dark mystery. The affable stranger was not alarmed by the appearance of these symptoms, but contented himself with ordering two more mugs of ale and the remark that the murder of Mr. Lascelles must have been a sad blow to his sister.

"Ay, that it has been," said John. "And the more so that when she saw him last alive she was feeling none too friendly with him. 'Tis that weighs most upon her, I'll venture."

"Ah," said the round faced man smoothly, "it has been said that they were tenderly devoted to each other."

"So they were, so they were. But it was a matter had come between them of late, and come sharp that same evening, as I have plenty good reason to know."

This was the proper moment, as the round faced man understood it, for the listener to assume an awestruck look of amazement, tinged with distinct admiration for the superior wisdom and weighty information hidden under the thickly thatched head of John Miles. Nor was his judgment at fault, for presently the gardener came out with his tale, told in a whisper, with many looks to right and left and the manner of one who has large matters to impart. As indeed the stranger soon had reason to think he had.

## Telling the Story.

"It was this way," began Miles. "The young mistress, than whom there is none kinder nor better in England, was promised to George Manners full a year ago. He is a fine, upstanding young man, her equal in things of life, with family, health and fortune, though born in another township, which is not his fault. Now, Squire Lascelles, while a well meaning man enough, had a hot head and a bitter tongue, and he did love Miss Margaret beyond all else. When they came to him with their match in their hands he turned upon them and ordered Mr. Manners from his door and told him he should never have the girl nor see her either. There was none of reason in it, and a hard heart it bespoke, though I say naught against the master."

"Miss Margaret was dull enough for many a day after that, but we down stairs saw her pluck up somewhat of heart as weeks went on, and Mary, the chambermaid, said it was because of the letters, which is like enough."

"I saw George Manners never again until three nights ago, and a black night it was and was to be for the house. He came up the path and Miss Margaret ran to meet him, and there they stood for a time in the garden, the master being away to the town. And then I, who was tending the gardenias or something, heard him raise his voice and say that no man should stand between the parties to an honest love. Miss Margaret hung her head at this, but was not too backward, and finally spoke low to him a bit, and after a time he yielded her some promise, as I judged, and they went back to the house."

"Presently along come the master, and he was in one of his dark moods, as I could see by the light in the windows. He stamped up the steps, and there stood Mr. Manners, that he had ordered off, with Miss Margaret on his arm. And Mr. Manners spoke him fair. He said they were set upon wedding, and were resolved that none should stop them and asked his friendship to the union. The master flew in a towering rage and raved against them both so foully that his sister ran within the house."

"Thinking she was gone, though indeed she stood inside the door and listened as I was listening from the bushes, young Manners turned boldly upon Mr.

Lascelles and lashed him and his stubborn will. Nor he didn't stop at sharp words. Once he raised his fists, but dropped them of a sudden when I thought to see him fall on. He stood a minute saying naught, while Mr. Lascelles, his answer choking in his throat, I thought, only waved him off toward the gate. Then Mr. Manners brought his voice to a smooth edge and offered to shake hands with the master before he left. Mr. Lascelles spat at him.

"I want none of you nor your handclaspings." "Mr. Manners laughed, a queer laugh it was, and this is what he said as he went down the steps:— "Very well, then, Mr. Lascelles. When I see you again I will not ask for your hand. I will take it!" "And when they found him dead an hour later his right hand was gone."

## On Sure Ground.

Inspector Blake, with a decided conviction that he had not wasted his afternoon, made off over the fields that evening to visit Crosby the farmer, who was one of the many tenants of the Lascelles estate. He introduced himself and stated his errand bluntly, feeling himself on surer ground with a man who could conceal nothing of his connection with the case from the authorities without grave danger to himself. Crosby was willing enough and answered with great care each question put to him.

He told of having left a neighbor's house but a few minutes before, from the edge of the wood he had seen Manners running toward him. He described the agitation of the young man and his fainting when his attention was called to the fact that a hand had been severed from the body.

"Where do you suppose Mr. Manners was going for help?" asked Blake.

"That's what has troubled me," said Crosby. "It was not town way he was headed, that's sure."

He told of a search he had made for the missing hand immediately after finding that it was gone. He had seen no trace of it, and, as Blake knew, all subsequent efforts to discover it had failed.

"Mr. Manners is well built," suggested Blake. "So I said when first we come to it—the body. 'Twould take a strong man to better Mr. Lascelles,' I says. 'Yes,' said he, 'Mr. Lascelles was a strong man himself.' 'Nearly as strong as you, Mr. Manners,' I says. 'Not quite,' he answers."

Blake was noted in his department for the suspicion with which he scrutinized every timber in the construction of his theories. His first step next day was to examine from every possible side the character and actions of Farmer Crosby, who took such a commanding position in the case. He found that the man was sober, steady and prosperous, regular with his rents, slow to wrath and bearing such a reputation for an even mind in all things that his neighbors were wont to bring their little differences to his arbitration, content to take his untutored justice as their law. He also satisfactorily accounted for every one of Crosby's movements on the night in question and established beyond all doubt that, as the farmer had said, he was at a neighbor's a quarter of a mile away at the moment of the murder.

Having put by these facts with methodical care Blake hastened to the scene of the attack, anxious to go over the ground before such evidence as might be found at the spot should have been removed or effaced. He found it under guard of a constable, who was meantime pursuing the search for the missing hand.

With eyes alert the inspector moved about the place, noting each indentation of the soil, each uprooted tuft of grass, gradually moving inward as he detached foot after foot of the circle from the purpose of his investigation. About two feet from the verge of the ditch, where the soil was damp, he found what he sought. It was the faint but imperfect imprint of

a shoe, not, as he could easily determine, the mark of the low pumps or slippers that had been worn by Lascelles when he left the house, but that of a shoe of substantial lines. With a pocket rule he made careful measurements of the impression and set them down.

He whittled to the value of this discovery without loss of time. The mark had not been caused by Crosby, as he easily determined. The constable on guard had allowed no one to confuse the tracks by walking across the spot. And according to Crosby, Manners had not approached within ten feet of the ditch when they returned there together. Then whose shoe had made the imprint?

And herein lay the significance of the answer. A faint outline print of one of the slippers worn by Lascelles lay over the firmer mark made by the shoe. A careful examination of the soil made this point clear, for the ridge of soil raised at the edge of the sole had been pressed down by the slipper. Whoever had worn the shoe had stepped upon the place while Lascelles was still alive, presumably during the struggle.

## Weaving His Net.

The inspector had a faculty of acquiring and retaining a vast number of seemingly trivial and irrelevant facts. This practice frequently did duty as some strange gift of divination in the minds of those who followed his work, but was nothing more wonderful than a mental filing system. The proper details now being brought from their pigeonholes informed him that George Manners, detained in the village as a witness at the inquest, had kept the same room in the inn that he had taken the evening of his recent visit to the Lascelles mansion, when the murder had been committed. He also knew that this room was next to his own, and he had a remembrance of a packed and strapped portmanteau, glimpsed through a partly open doorway, that sent him back toward the town in a hurry. In passing up the stairs of the inn he made sure that Manners was at luncheon.

Then this easy going, round faced, slow moving person became possessed suddenly of an agility that would have surprised any but one of his associates. He was up the stairs in a flash, slipping into his room and locking the door behind him. In another breath he had a leg over the window sill and was feeling for the support below. It was a long reach, but he made it with sure grip, swung to the adjoining sill, pulled himself up and crawled into the room of Manners.

After a first keen survey of the apartment his interest centred upon the portmanteau near the door. He unstrapped and opened it, running through it in haste, but with due attention to the appearance of each garment. The result was unsatisfactory and he opened the closet door. A suit of clothes was hanging in a corner. He snatched this out to the light of the window. Here was accusatory circumstance to satisfy the trailing sense of any detective. Although a rough attempt evidently had been made to sponge out or wash away the stains, there were plentiful traces of blood on both trousers and coat.

Blake afterward took himself to task for failing to act immediately on having acquired this bit of evidence. The fact that he was making a mistake in delaying became plain about an hour later when he returned to the inn with a constable, expecting to place Manners under arrest. The suspect had gone. It was learned that he had left his meal soon after Blake went up stairs, from which the inspector judged that he had suspected an investigation of his room, had followed, heard the sounds of the search within and had fled.

Blake's swift retrieval of his error proved the truth of this view. Manners had taken a train to a junction, where trace of him was lost. The inspector put his nose to the trail and overtook the fugitive just as he was about to embark for the Continent. He was brought back and committed for trial.

Two more links in the chain of evidence remained to be fashioned and finished by the expert hand of the round faced man from Scotland Yard. Besides the hedge stake with which Lascelles had been killed the only object found near the body was a large pocket knife, with the blade open and stained. It was evidently with this implement that the murderer had severed the right hand. Blake carried this knife into the adjoining township and spent three days in the vicinity of Manners' home. He returned with a complete identification of the knife as the property of the prisoner, established by affidavits from the dealer who had sold it and two men who had seen it in the possession of the prisoner.

## Measuring the Footprints.

Remarkable weight was laid upon the close similarity between the outline of the footprint found by Blake and drawn from his measurements and the form of the shoes worn by the prisoner. Owing to the fact that Blake had not taken a cast of the impression some discussion developed over this point, but the value of the evidence to the prosecution was very great and was not lessened by the attacks directed against it by the defence. Both Blake and the constable could swear that the imprint of the slipper of Mr. Lascelles had been made after the shoe had been pressed into the soil, thus preventing the assertion that Manners had left the mark when he first discovered the body, according to his story.

The case for the prosecution was complete, apparently without a chink that offered a weakness. All doubt of the guilt of the accused was removed from the public mind when the chain of evidence was presented. The parts fitted perfectly. The hypothesis was logical and convincing. The two men had parted in anger after a significant remark by Manners that "next time he would take the hand of Lascelles, not ask for it." Lascelles had gone out almost immediately for an evening walk, not even removing his house coat or slippers. An hour later Manners had been seen running from the body of Lascelles, which lacked a hand. The intermediate occurrences had been solidly built

upon circumstances. It was regarded as a most satisfactory instance of the construction of a perfect case from wholly circumstantial evidence.

Miss Lascelles collapsed during the first day of the trial and did not reappear in court after testifying to the conversation between her brother and her lover, which she and the gardener had overheard. Her belief in Manners was dictated by faith, constant only because she was able to close her mind to the overwhelming accumulation of evidence. She remained true to her conception of him, blind to all else.

The jury was out scarcely five minutes, returning with a verdict of guilty. Manners was sentenced, his execution being set for a day about a month later. At the close of the trial Blake returned to London, accompanied by the compliments of the authorities and the consciousness of work well done.

## The Epilogue has to do with Farmer Crosby.

Through his connection with the case as a witness, as well as by his avocation of rustic philosopher, the matter of the death of Edmund Lascelles reached him closely. It aroused in him the keenest interest and awoke all his really remarkable powers of concentration and analysis. He had followed the development of the convicting evidence with what the Judge himself might have envied, a mind quite free from bias, calm, accurate in deduction and lacking in animus toward any man. When the verdict was announced he heard no questioning voice within and was content that justice had been done. And the approbation of this even tempered, uneducated farmer was a higher compliment than any juror would have been willing to believe.

But there came a day when an uneasy doubt possessed him, sensitive as he was to the part he had played in bringing about the death sentence. He began to feel that something rang false, that something had been overlooked. And in searching for the source of this feeling he became more and more fearful that the blot of a cruel wrong hung above the whole matter, logical and convincing though he was forced to admit the case at each repeated scrutiny. And then, suddenly, he hit upon the trouble.

It was the hand. Persistent and extraordinary efforts by the officers had failed to reveal the hiding place of the missing member. The ditch had been drained dry, every inch of the field had been raked and prodded to no purpose. Not even a trace or hint of its disposition had been found.

Now Crosby argued in this wise. If Manners were the guilty man he must have disposed of his dreadful trophy. Lascelles had left his house at half-past eight. The spot where he was found was about a quarter of a mile from the mansion. The point where Crosby had met Manners was half a mile beyond that and the meeting had taken place about half-past nine. Still supposing the guilt of Manners, he must have killed Lascelles, run to the woods or some other distant place to hide the hand and then turned off toward the gate. All this must have been within half, possibly three-quarters, of an hour. Such a supposition was not impossible, though it would have necessitated the utmost haste. And meanwhile why the anxiety to hide the hand? Why should he travel such a distance if he wished to bury it? Why bury it at all?

## The Missing Hand.

Crosby had reached this point in the debate with himself when he began to see that he had failed to exhaust the possibilities suggested by the immediate facts of the murder. It was within the range of happenings that some one else had waylaid Lascelles before Manners had crossed the meadow, multiple as were the incidents and bits of circumstance that he began an inquiry of his own. Incidentally he was abroad much of the time, watching and listening for the shadow of a fresh clue.

He had occasion one day to visit the farm of John Powers, a small tenant farmer on the Lascelles estate, whose home was at the other side of the patch of woods. As Crosby talked with him he made a matter of produce he walked to the door of the barn and stood with a foot on the threshold, looking within. Casting a casual sidelong glance at the face of his companion in that instant, he caught the twitch of a hidden fear that came and vanished across that sullen countenance. He wondered. Then he took one step within the barn, eyeing Powers keenly. This time what he saw in the face led him to close the conversation without loss of time and take the path homeward. For in the flash he knew not only that Powers was a man with a secret, but that he was also a man who could bear another secret of the same kind without commotion.

Next day he returned with two constables. They searched the barn. Indications leading to a corner of the flooring, they took it up. Beneath lay the missing right hand of Lascelles.

Powers was subdued after a fight and made full confession. He had met his landlord by accident in the meadow. He was behind with his rent and there had been an argument, conducted on the side of Lascelles with his usual bitterness and intemperance of language. The farmer had snatched up a hedge stake and partly stunned Lascelles, finally conquering him after a struggle and completing his work with the stake.

His first thought had been to leave the country, and he had tried to remove the riggs. Failing in this he had taken a knife from the pocket of the dead man and had used it to cut off the hand.

Manners had come upon the body a few minutes later, had tried to raise it, thus staining his clothes, and had noted the loss of the hand. Struck by the significance of this in the light of his remark to Lascelles, by which he had meant no more than that when they met again he hoped to be the other's brother-in-law, he had at first thought of instant flight. Recalling that life might still linger, he had then started for help, but in his excitement had started in a wrong direction, winding up at the gate where Crosby met him.

Too keenly conscious, as many intelligent men have been, of the strength of a possible case against him, he had fainted when Crosby announced the fact that a hand was gone. For the same reason he had made his greatest error, that of attempting to get away when he knew that a detective was in his room. This incident had aroused a certainty of his guilt which even the confession of Powers scarcely sufficed to remove from the public mind.

The pocket knife he had dropped during the discussion with Lascelles, the latter having found and appropriated it a few minutes later. The footprint was that of Powers, who wore a shoe of the same size and similar shape to Manners'. All the circumstances were the outcome either of coincidence or of his own lack of judgment in trying to conceal facts that he feared would incriminate him.

Powers was tried, convicted and executed for the crime. Manners, aware of his obligation to Crosby, was finally pardoned. A few months later he married Margaret Lascelles.