

THE CHRONICLES OF MARTIN HEWITT BY ARTHUR MORRISON THE CASE OF THE MISSING AND

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CHAPTER VI

Then my uncle and Mr. Hardwick turned on Martin Hewitt with doubts and many questions. "Why do you call it suicide?" Mr. Hardwick asked. "It is plain the Fosters were with him at the time, from the tracks. Do you mean to say that they stood there and watched Sneathy hang himself without interfering?"

"No, I don't," Hewitt replied, lighting a cigar. "I think I told you that they never saw Sneathy."

"Yes, you did; and, of course, that's what they said themselves when they were arrested. But the thing's impossible. Look at the tracks!"

"The tracks are exactly what revealed to me that it was not impossible," Hewitt returned. "I'll tell you how the case unfolded itself to me, from the beginning. As to the information you gathered from the Hawthorn coachman, to begin with, the



"No, I don't," Hewitt replied.

conversation between the Fosters which he overheard might well mean something less serious than murder. What did they say? They had been sent for in a hurry and had just had a short consultation with their mother and sister. Henry said that the thing must be done, and at once; also, that as there were two of them it would be easy. Robert said that Henry, as a doctor, would know best what to do. Now you, Colonel Brett, had been saying--before we learned these things from Mr. Hardwick--that Sneathy's behavior of late had become so bad as to seem that of a madman. Then there was the story of his sudden attack on a tradesman in the village and equally sudden running away--exactly the sort of impulsive, wild thing that madmen do. Why, then, might it not be reasonable to suppose that Sneathy had become mad--more especially considering all the circumstances of the case, his commercial ruin and disgrace and his horrible life with his wife and her family? Had become suddenly much worse and quite uncontrollable, so that the two wretched women, left alone with him were driven to send in haste for Henry and Robert to help them. That would account for all. The brothers arrive just after Sneathy had gone out. They are told in a hurried interview how affairs stand, and it is decided that Sneathy must be at once secured and confined in an asylum before something serious happens. He has just gone out--something terrible may be happening at that moment. The brothers determine to follow together at once and secure him wherever he may be. Then the meaning of their conversation is plain. The thing that must be done, and done at once, is the capture of Sneathy and his confinement in an asylum. Henry, as a doctor, would know what to do in regard to the necessary formalities. And they took a halter in case a struggle should ensue, and it was found necessary to blind him. Very likely, wasn't it?"

"Well, yes," Mr. Hardwick replied, "it certainly is. It never struck me in that light at all."

"That was because you believed to begin with that a murder had been committed, and looked at the preliminary circumstances, which you observed in the light of your conviction. But now to come to my actual observations. I saw the footmarks across the fields and agreed with you (it was indeed obvious) that Sneathy had gone that way first, and that the brothers had followed, walking over his tracks. This state of the tracks continued until well into the wood, when suddenly the tracks of the brothers opened out and proceeded on each side of Sneathy's. The simple inference would seem to be, of course, the one you made--that the Fosters had here overtaken Sneathy and walked on to each side of him, but of this I felt by no means certain. Another very simple explanation was available, which might chance to be the true one. It was just at the spot where the brothers' tracks separated that the path became suddenly much muddier, because of the close overhanging of the trees at the spot. The path was, as was to be expected, wettest in the middle. It would be the most natural thing in the world for two well-dressed young men on arriving here to separate so as to walk one on each side of the mud in the middle. On the other hand, a man in Sneathy's state (assuming him, for the moment, to be mad and contemplating suicide) would walk straight along the center of the path, taking no note of mud or anything else. I examined all the tracks very carefully, and my theory was confirmed. The feet of the brothers had everywhere alighted in the driest spots, and the steps were of irregular lengths--which meant, of course, that they were picking their way; while Sneathy's footmarks had never turned aside, even for the dirtiest puddle. Here, then, were the rudiments of a theory.

At the watercourse, of course, the footmarks ceased, because of the hard gravel. The body lay on a knoll at the left--a knoll covered with grass. On this the signs of footmarks were almost undetectable, although I am often able to discover tracks in grass that are invisible to others. Here, however, it was almost useless to spend much time in examination, for you and your man had been there, and what slight marks there might be would be indistinguishable one from another. Under the branch from which the man had hung there was an old tree stump, with a flat top, where the tree had been sawn off. I examined this, and it became fairly apparent that Sneathy had stood on it when

the rope was about his neck--his muddy footprint being plain to see, as it probably would have been if he had been stood there forcibly and pushed off. It was a simple clear footprint--another hint at suicide.

"But then arose the objection that you mentioned yourself. Plainly the brothers Foster were following Sneathy and came this way. Therefore, if he hanged himself before they arrived, it would seem that they must have come across the body. But you I examined the body itself. There was mud on the knees, and clinging to one knee was a small leaf. It was a leaf corresponding to those on the bush behind the tree, and it was not a dead leaf, so must have been just detached. After my examination of the body I went to the bush, and there, in the thick of it, were, for me, sufficiently distinct knee marks, in one of which the knee had crushed a spray of the bush against the ground--and from that spray a leaf was missing. Behind the knee marks were the indentations of boot toes in the soft, bare earth under the bush, and thus the thing was plain. The poor lunatic had come in sight of the dangling rope, and the temptation to suicide was irresistible. But at that moment he must have heard the steps--probably the voices--of the brothers behind him, of the winding path. He immediately hid in the bush till they had passed. It is probable that seeing who the men were and conjecturing that they were following him--thinking also, perhaps, of things that had occurred between them and himself--his inclination to self-destruction became completely unworkable, with the result that you saw."

"But before I inspected the bush I noticed one or two more things about the body. You remember I inquired if either of the brothers Foster were left-handed, and was assured that neither was. But clearly the hand had been cut off by a left-handed man with a large, sharply pointed knife. For well away to the right of where the wrist had hung the knife-point had made a tiny triangular rent in the coat. So that the hand must have been held in the murderer's right hand while he used the knife with his left--clearly a left-handed man."

"But most important of all about the body was the jagged hair over the right ear. Everywhere else the hair was well cut and orderly--here it all seemed as though a good piece had been, so to speak, sawn off. What could anybody want with a dead man's right hand and certain locks of his hair? Then it struck me suddenly--the man was hanged; it was the Hand of Glory!"

"Then you will remember, I went at your request to see the footprints of the Fosters on the part of the path past the watercourse. Here, again, it was muddy in the middle, and the two brothers had walked as far apart as before, although nobody had walked between them. A final proof, if one were needed, of my theory as to the three lines of footprints."

"Now I want to consider how to get at the man who had taken the hand. He should be punished for the mutilation, but beyond that he would be required as a witness. Now all the foot-tracks in the vicinity had been accounted for. There were those of the brothers and of Sneathy, which we have been speaking of; those of the rustics looking on, which, however, stopped a little way off, and did not interfere with our sphere of observation; those of your man who had cut straight through the wood when he first saw the body and had come back the same way with you and our own, which we had been careful to keep away from the others. Consequently there was no track of the man who had cut off the hand; therefore it was certain that he must have come along the hard gravel by the watercourse, for that was the only possible path which would not tell the tale. Indeed, it seems quite a likely path through the wood for a passer-by to take, coming from the high ground by the Shepperton road

times it is a heap of dead leaves, sometimes a few stones, sometimes a mark on the ground, but more usually a couple of twigs crossed, with the longer twig pointing the road. Guided by these patterns we came in the end on the gypsy camp just as it was setting down for the night. We made ourselves agreeable (as Brett will probably describe to you better than I can), we left them, and after they had got to sleep we came back and watched for the gentleman who is now in the lock-up. He would, of course, seize the first opportunity of treating his ghastly trophy in the prescribed way, and I guessed he would choose midnight, for that is the time superstition teaches that the hands should be prepared. We made a few small preparations, collared him and now you've got him. And I should think the sooner you let the brothers Foster go the better."

"But why didn't you tell me all the conclusions you had arrived at, at the time?" asked Mr. Hardwick.

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