

THE MARBLE

When Mark Beaton was found lying dead early one morning in the lane leading to his farm, suspicions of foul play at once arose and were immediately directed towards Jim Carstairs his nearest neighbour and rival for the hand of Peggy Winter. The two men had quarrelled violently, the previous evening about the girl in the bar room of the village inn and, after a heated argument, Jim had left the hotel saying he would see Mark later.

Beaton stayed on until closing time which was 9.30 P.M, and then had left for home - flushed with wine and the effects of the quarrel. When found, his body bore no marks of violence except a large bruise on the left temple, but the doctor who examined the corpse said that it indicated a blow struck with great force and quite sufficient to cause practically instantaneous death.

The police, who had at once been notified along with the doctor, made a careful examination of the spot and immediate surroundings but found no weapon of any description or anything which might afford a clue to the perpetrator of the crime. Learning of the quarrel, however, between the deceased and Carstairs they now went to see Jim and asked him to give an account of his movements from the time he left the hotel the previous evening until the following day and as to whether he had seen Beaton subsequent to his departure from the inn. When they arrived at Carstairs farm, however, they were informed that he had come home early in the evening and, after busying himself for a short time in his study, he had donned an overcoat and, picking up a walking stick, left the house without saying anything to anyone as to where he was going or when he would return. In the face of this piece of news and, bearing in mind the enmity between the two men, the police felt justified in applying for a warrant for Carstairs' arrest and, this being forthcoming, the search for the wanted man commenced.

Enquiries at the railway station elicited the information that Jim had bought a ticket for the neighbouring town of Denham and had left by the 10.20 on the evening of the quarrel. The Denham police were at once got in touch with by phone, the story of the crime related with a description of the wanted man and the search for Carstairs continued, was to end quite prosaically, for the assumed murderer was found strolling leisurely down the main street of Denham, quite unconcerned and quite unlike a guilty person fleeing from justice. When arrested to his great astonishment and interrogated as to his movements on the night of the murder, he said that after leaving the inn he remembered that he had business to attend to in Denham the following day and, thinking he would be better out of Beaton's way until the air cleared and both had cooled down, he had resolved to go to town that evening and stay the night, so went home and, after putting a few wanted things together, had left the house in time to catch a train at 10.20

When questioned as to why he had not told his servant about his intentions, Jim laughed and replied that she was so accustomed to his frequent comings and goings that it never

occurred to him to mention anything about it. He was then asked to explain what he meant by saying that he would see Beaton later and Carstairs answered by stating that as Mark was very excited and somewhat under the influence of liquor, he deemed it wiser not to prolong the argument but have it out when both were in a calmer frame of mind, so used the words quoted. The police, however, were not satisfied with Jim's explanation and kept him under arrest until they had prosecuted their enquiries further. From the landlord of the inn, they found that Carstairs had left about 8.45 on the night of the crime and Beaton shortly after 9.30. Both men had only a matter of a mile to walk and the road to both the farms was the same for nearly half a mile when it forked, one branch leading to Beaton's place and the other to Carstairs'.

Now an active man such as Jim was could easily walk the mile home in 20 minutes and be back at the fork of the road in, say, another 15 - allowing for a few minutes delay at his house. This would leave ample time for a man to pick out a likely spot on the tree lined road in which to conceal himself from anyone coming from the village just after the hotel had closed at 9.30. Then, assuming that the man from the village reached the fork of the road at 9.50 he would reach the place where the body was found at about 9.55. then the fatal blow being struck the assassin had still 25 minutes in which to cover less than a mile, and ample time in which to walk to the station and get away on the 10.20.

All this the police reasoned out and the case looked black against Jim when fate, in the guise of a young press reporter, stepped in. Johnny Scammel, leading crime reporter on for a large London daily happened to be holidaying in Denham at the time of the murder and, hearing of Jim's arrest, thought it would be worth his while to learn all the facts of the case at first hand, so journeyed along to the scene of the crime and proceeded to take a hand in the game.

After hearing all the local police had to say, Johnny asked no questions beyond enquiring the way to the spot where the body was found and, the direction being pointed out, he strolled along to the place but after a good look round discovered nothing fresh in the way of evidence so continued his walk towards Beaton's farm. Arriving at the house, he introduced himself to the house keeper who answered his knock at the door and was asked in for a rest and a drink, Over a cup of tea Johnny learned that Beaton was a man of strange moods and subject to fits of uncontrollable rage, turning him for the time being, into a veritable wild animal.

In the day previous to his death, he had lost control of his temper and savagely attacked a poor imbecile who was the son of one of his workmen, and after giving the poor fellow a fearful thrashing told him that if ever he found him near his farm again he would shoot him. After a few more questions Johnny thanked the housekeeper for her kindness and, bidding her goodbye, sauntered down the lane towards the village. Passing along by the farm workers cottages, he saw what he took to be a boy playing with a dog in the yard of one of the houses. On nearer approach however he perceived that what he took to be a boy was in

reality a man but so stunted in growth to be practically a dwarf though of extremely powerful build. Also it was at once apparent that the man was of weak intellect or what was known in country parlance as a "dafty". He stared vacantly at Jonny and continued his play with his dog, the game being played with a catapult and pieces of bread. The dafty would fire a piece of bread from his sling as far as he could and the dog would retrieve the missile, receiving the projectile as a reward for his work. Watching the two, a sudden train of thought entered Johnny's mind and caused him to stop and then approach the playmates. Producing then a few coppers he gave them to the dwarf and, after praising his prowess and his dog's intelligence, asked to see his catapult. It proved to be an exceptionally powerful instrument capable of propelling a missile a great distance with astonishing force. Handing it back, Johnny casually mentioned Beaton's name and at once the dafty's face became convulsed with rage and diving into his pocket, he produced a marble and, fitting it to the sling of his catapult, pulled the elastic back to its utmost length. Then muttering savagely "Beaton bad man. Kick Willie, kick Trixie" he let drive at the bole of a tree some distance away. The marble sped true to the mark and brought up against the tree with terrific force, imbedding itself into the bark.

Johnny looked thoughtful as he walked over and picked out the marble and saw the indentation it had made in the tree trunk. Placing it in his pocket he gave the dafty another copper or two and told him to get himself some more marbles and then continued his stroll along the lane. Arriving at the scene of the murder, he stopped and began a systematic search all around the spot where the body was found. After a considerable time, he found the object of his search which he carefully put in another pocket and then made his way to village police station. There he saw the sergeant in charge and, producing the marble which he had picked from the tree, told the astonished officer that it was a similar object. which had killed Beaton. The sergeant was indignant at Johnnie's presumption and declared that it was impossible for a man to be murdered with such a weapon and asked the reporter how he arrived at such an improbable conclusion. When Johnny recounted the story of his walk however, he was not so sceptical and, when the reporter reconstructed the actual scene at the spot where the crime was committed and finally produced the one link which was needed to complete the truth of Johnnie's story, he was convinced that the reporter had correctly solved the mystery.

The object Johnny retrieved from the dust and gravel in the lane was a marble the very twin of the one he had extracted from the bole of the tree. Patient questioning elicited the fact that it was the dafty who had killed Beaton in revenge for his treatment of himself and his dog, though possibly he did not mean to commit murder. The poor fellow was never brought to justice for as Johnny said if it pleased the Creator to fashion one of his creatures without brain and without the sense of right or wrong what call had mere man to interfere with the providence.

Barrowsgate