

Was it an Illusion?

A Parson's Story

By Amelia B. Edwards

The facts which I am about to relate happened to myself some sixteen or eighteen years ago, at which time I served Her Majesty as an Inspector of Schools. Now, the Provincial Inspector is perpetually on the move; and I was still young enough to enjoy a life of constant travelling. There are, indeed, many less agreeable ways in which an unbeneficed parson may contrive to scorn delights and live laborious days. In remote places where strangers are scarce, his annual visit is an important event; and though at the close of a long day's work he would sometimes prefer the quiet of a country inn, he generally finds himself the destined guest of the rector or the squire. It rests with himself to turn these opportunities to account. If he makes himself pleasant, he forms agreeable friendships and sees English home-life under one of its most attractive aspects; and sometimes, even in these days of universal common-placeness, he may have the luck to meet with an adventure.

My first appointment was to a West of England district largely peopled with my personal friends and connections. It was, therefore, much to my annoyance that I found myself, after a couple of years of very pleasant work, transferred to what a policeman would call 'a new beat,' up in the North. Unfortunately for me, my new beat—a rambling, thinly populated area of something under 1,800 square miles—was three times as large as the old one, and more than proportionately unmanageable. Intersected at right angles by two ranges of barren hills and cut off to a large extent from the main lines of railway, it united about every inconvenience that a district could possess. The villages lay wide apart, often separated by long tracts of moorland; and in place of the well-warmed railway compartment and the frequent manor-house, I now spent half my time in hired vehicles and lonely country inns.

I had been in possession of this district for some three months or so, and winter was near at hand, when I paid my first visit of inspection to Pit End, an outlying hamlet in the most northerly corner of my county, just twenty-two miles from the nearest station. Having slept overnight at a place called Drumley, and inspected Drumley schools in the morning, I started for Pit End, with fourteen miles of railway and twenty-two of hilly cross-roads between myself and my journey's end. I made, of course, all the enquiries I could think of before leaving; but neither the Drumley schoolmaster nor the landlord of the Drumley 'Feathers' knew much more of Pit End than its name. My predecessor, it seemed, had been in the habit of taking Pit End 'from the other side', the roads, though longer, being less hilly that way. That the place boasted some kind of inn was certain; but it was an inn unknown to fame, and to mine host of the 'Feathers'. Be it good or bad, however, I should have to put up at it.

Upon this scant information I started. My fourteen miles of railway journey soon ended at a place called Bramsford Road, whence an omnibus conveyed passengers to a dull little town called Bramsford Market. Here I found a horse and 'trap' to carry me on to my destination; the horse being a rawboned grey with a profile like a camel, and the trap a rickety high gig which had probably done commercial travelling in the days of its youth. From Bramsford Market the way lay over a succession of long hills, rising to a barren, high-level plateau. It was a dull, raw afternoon of mid-November, growing duller and more raw as the day waned and the east wind blew keener.

‘How much further now, driver?’ I asked, as we alighted at the foot of a longer and a stiffer hill than any we had yet passed over.

He turned a straw in his mouth, and grunted something about ‘fewer or foive mile by the rooad’.

And then I learned that by turning off at a point which he described as ‘t’owld tollus’, and taking a certain footpath across the fields, this distance might be considerably shortened. I decided, therefore, to walk the rest of the way; and, setting off at a good pace, I soon left driver and trap behind. At the top of the hill I lost sight of them, and coming presently to a little road-side ruin which I at once recognized as the old toll-house, I found the footpath without difficulty. It led me across a barren slope divided by stone fences, with here and there a group of shattered sheds, a tall chimney, and a blackened cinder-mound, marking the site of a deserted mine. A light fog, meanwhile, was creeping up from the east, and the dusk was gathering fast.

Now, to lose one’s way in such a place and at such an hour would be disagreeable enough, and the footpath—a trodden track already half obliterated—would be indistinguishable in the course of another ten minutes. Looking anxiously ahead, therefore, in the hope of seeing some sign of habitation, I hastened on, scaling one stone stile after another, till I all at once found myself skirting a line of park-palings. following these, with bare boughs branching out overhead and dead leaves rustling underfoot, I came presently to a point where the path divided; here continuing to skirt the enclosure, and striking off yonder across a space of open meadow.

Which should I take?

By following the fence, I should be sure to arrive at a lodge where I could enquire my way to Pit End; but then the park might be of any extent, and I might have a long distance to go before I came to the nearest lodge. Again, the meadow-path, instead of leading to Pit End, might take me in a totally opposite direction. But there was no time to be lost in hesitation; so I chose the meadow, the further end of which was lost to sight in a fleecy bank of fog.

Up to this moment I had not met a living soul of whom to ask my way; it was, therefore, with no little sense of relief that I saw a man emerging from the fog and coming along the path. As we neared each other—I advancing rapidly; he slowly—I observed that he dragged the left foot, limping as he walked. It was, however, so dark and so misty, thatt not till we were within half a dozen yards of each other could I see hat he wore a dark suit and an Anglican felt hat, and looked something like a dissenting minister. As soon as we were within speaking distance, I addressed him.

‘Can you tell me’, I said, ‘if I am right for Pit End, and how far I have to go?’

He came on, looking straight before him; taking no notice of my question; apparently not hearing it.

‘I beg your pardon,’ I said, raising my voice; ‘but will this path take me to Pit End, and if so’—

He had passed on without pausing; without looking at me; I could almost have believed, without seeing me!

I stopped, with the words on my lips; then turned to look after—perhaps, to follow—him.

But instead of following, I stood bewildered.

What had become of him? And what lad was that going up the path by which I had just come—that tall lad, half-running, half-walking, with a fishing-rod over his shoulder? I could have taken my oath that I had neither met nor passed him. Where then had he come from? And where was the man to whom I had spoken not three seconds ago, and who, at his limping pace, could not have made more than a couple of yards in the time?

My stupefaction was such that I stood quite still, looking after the lad with the fishing-rod till he disappeared in the gloom under the park-palings.

Was I dreaming?

Darkness, meanwhile, had closed in apace, and, dreaming or not dreaming, I must push on, or find myself benighted. So I hurried forward, turning my back on the last gleam of daylight, and plunging deeper into the fog at every step. I was, however, close upon my journey's end. The path ended at a turnstile; the turnstile opened upon a steep lane; and at the bottom of the lane, down which I stumbled among stones and ruts, I came in sight of the welcome glare of a blacksmith's forge.

Here, then, was Pit End. I found my trap standing at the door of the village inn; the rawboned grey stabled for the night; the landlord watching for my arrival.

The 'Greyhound' was a hostelry of modest pretensions, and I shared its little parlour with a couple of small farmers and a young man who informed me that he 'travelled in' Thorley's Food for Cattle. Here I dined, wrote my letters, chatted awhile with the landlord, and picked up such scraps of local news as fell in my way.

There was, it seemed, no resident parson at Pit End; the incumbent being a pluralist with three small livings, the duties of which, by the help of a rotatory curate, he discharged in a somewhat easy fashion. Pit End, as the smallest and furthest off, came in for but one service each Sunday, and was almost wholly relegated to the curate. The squire was a more confirmed absentee than even the vicar. He lived chiefly in Paris, spending abroad the wealth of his Pit End coal-fields. He happened to be at home just now, the landlord said, after five years' absence; but he would be off again next week, and another five years might probably elapse before they should again see him at Blackwater Chase.

Blackwater Chase!—the name was not new to me; yet I could not remember where I had heard it. When, however, mine host went on to say that, despite his absenteeism, Mr Wolstenholme was 'a pleasant gentleman and a good landlord', and that, after all, Blackwater Chase was 'a lonesome sort of world-end place for a young man to bury himself in', then I at once remembered Phil Wolstenholme of Balliol, who, in his grand way, had once upon a time given me a general invitation to the shooting at Blackwater Chase. That was twelve years ago, when I was reading hard at Wadham, and Wolstenholme—the idol of a clique to which I did not belong—was boating, betting, writing poetry, and giving wine parties at Balliol.

Yes; I remembered all about him—his handsome face, his luxurious rooms, his boyish prodigality, his utter indolence, and the blind faith of his worshippers, who believed that he had only 'to pull himself together' in order to carry off every honour which the University had to bestow. He did take the Newdigate; but it was his first and last achievement, and he left college with the reputation of having narrowly escaped a plucking. How vividly it all came back upon my memory—the old college life, the college friendships, the pleasant time that could never come again! It was but twelve years ago; yet it seemed like half a century. And now, after these twelve years, here were Wolstenholme and I as near neighbours as in our Oxford days! I wondered if he was much changed, and whether, if changed, it were for the better or the worse. Had his generous impulses developed into sterling virtues, or had his follies hardened into vices? Should I let him know where I was, and so judge for myself? Nothing would be easier than to pencil a line upon a card tomorrow morning, and send it up to the big house. Yet, merely to satisfy a purposeless curiosity, was it worthwhile to reopen the acquaintanceship?

Thus musing, I sat late over the fire, and by the time I went to bed, I had well nigh forgotten my adventure with the man who vanished so mysteriously and the boy who seemed to come from nowhere.

Next morning, finding I had abundant time at my disposal, I did pencil that line upon my card—a mere line, saving that I believed we had known each other at Oxford, and that I should be inspecting the National Schools from nine till about eleven. And then, having dispatched it by one of my landlord's sons, I went off to my work. The day was brilliantly fine. The wind had shifted round to the north, the sun shone clear and cold, and the smoke-grimed hamlet, and the gaunt buildings clustered at the mouths of the coalpits round about, looked as bright as they could look at any time of the year. The village was built up a long hill-side; the church and schools being at the top, and the 'Greyhound' at the bottom. Looking vainly for the lane by which I had come the night before, I climbed the one rambling street, followed a path that skirted the churchyard, and found myself at the schools. These, with the teachers' dwellings, formed three sides of a quadrangle; the fourth side consisting of an iron railing and a gate. An inscribed tablet over the main entrance-door recorded how 'These school-houses were re-built by Philip Wolstenholme, Esquire: AD 18—.'

Mr Wolstenholme, sir, is the Lord of the Manor,' said a soft, obsequious voice.

I turned, and found the speaker at my elbow, a square-built, sallow man, all in black, with a bundle of copy-books under his arm.

'You are the—the schoolmaster?' I said; unable to remember his name, and puzzled by a vague recollection of his face.

'Just so, sir. I conclude I have the honour of addressing Mr Frazer?'

It was a singular face, very pallid and anxious-looking. The eyes, too, had a watchful, almost a startled, look in them, which struck me as peculiarly unpleasant.

'Yes,' I replied, still wondering where and when I had seen him. 'My name is Frazer. Yours, I believe, is—is—,' and I put my hand into my pocket for my examination papers.

'Skelton—Ebenezer Skelton. Will you please to take the boys first, sir?'

The words were commonplace enough, but the man's manner was studiously, disagreeably deferential; his very name being given, as it were, under protest, as if too insignificant to be mentioned.

I said I would begin with the boys; and so moved on. Then, for we had stood still till now, I saw that the schoolmaster was lame. In that moment I remembered him. He was the man I met in the fog.

'I met you yesterday afternoon, Mr Skelton,' I said, as we went into the school-mom.

'Yesterday afternoon, sir?' he repeated.

'You did not seem to observe me,' I said, carelessly. 'I spoke to you, in fact; but you did not reply to me.'

'But—indeed, I beg your pardon, sir—it must have been someone else,' said the schoolmaster, 'I did not go out yesterday afternoon.'

How could this be anything but a falsehood? I might have been mistaken as to the man's face; though it was such a singular face, and I had seen it quite plainly. But how could I be mistaken as to his lameness? Besides, that curious trailing of the right foot, as if the ankle was broken, was not an ordinary lameness.

I suppose I looked incredulous, for he added, hastily:

‘Even if I had not been preparing the boys for inspection, sir, I should not have gone out yesterday afternoon. It was too damp and foggy. I am obliged to be careful—I have a very delicate chest.’

My dislike to the man increased with every word he uttered. I did not ask myself with what motive he went on heaping lie upon lie; it was enough that, to serve his own ends, whatever those ends might be, he did lie with unparalleled audacity.

‘We will proceed to the examination, Mr Skelton,’ I said, contemptuously.

He turned, if possible, a shade paler than before, bent his head silently, and called up the scholars in their order.

I soon found that, whatever his shortcomings as to veracity, Mr Ebenezer Skelton was a capital schoolmaster. His boys were uncommonly well taught, and as regarded attendance, good conduct, and the like, left nothing to be desired. When, therefore, at the end of the examination, he said he hoped I would recommend the Pit End Boys’ School for the Government grant, I at once assented. And now I thought I had done with Mr Skelton for, at all events, the space of one year. Not so, however. When I came out from the Girls’ School, I found him waiting at the door.

Profusely apologizing, he begged leave to occupy five minutes of my valuable time. He wished, under correction, to suggest a little improvement. The boys, he said, were allowed to play in the quadrangle, which was too small, and in various ways inconvenient; but round at the back there was a piece of waste land, half an acre of which, if enclosed, would admirably answer the purpose. So saying, he led the way to the back of the building, and I followed him.

‘To whom does this ground belong?’ I asked.

‘To Mr Wolstenholme, sir.’

‘Then why not apply to Mr Wolstenholme? He gave the schools, and I dare say he would be equally willing to give the ground.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir. Mr Wolstenholme has not been over here since his return, and it is quite possible that he may leave Pit End without honouring us with a visit. I could not take the liberty of writing to him, sir.’

‘Neither could I in my report suggest that the Government should offer to purchase a portion of Mr Wolstenholme’s land for a playground to schools of Mr Wolstenholme’s own building.’ I replied. ‘Under other circumstances’.

I stopped and looked round.

The schoolmaster repeated my last words.

‘You were saying, sir—under other circumstances?’

I looked round again.

‘It seemed to me that there was someone here,’ I said; ‘some third person, not a moment ago.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir—a third person?’

‘I saw his shadow on the ground, between yours and mine.’

The schools faced due north, and we were standing immediately behind the buildings, with our backs to the sun. The place was bare, and open, and high; and our shadows, sharply defined, lay stretched before our feet.

‘A—a shadow?’ he faltered. ‘Impossible.’

There was not a bush or a tree within half a mile. There was not a cloud in the sky. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, that could have cast a shadow.

I admitted that it was impossible, and that I must have fancied it; and so went back to the matter of the playground.

‘Should you see Mr Wolstenholme,’ I said, ‘you are at liberty to say that I thought it a desirable improvement.’

‘I am much obliged to you, sir. Thank you—thank you very much,’ he said, cringing at every word. ‘But—but I had hoped that you might perhaps use your influence’—‘Look there!’ I interrupted. ‘Is *that* fancy?’

We were now close under the blank wall of the boys’ schoolroom. On this wall, lying to the full sunlight, our shadows—mine and the schoolmaster’s—were projected. And there, too—no longer between his and mine, but a little way apart, as if the intruder were standing back—there, as sharply defined as if cast by lime-light on a prepared background, I again distinctly saw, though but for a moment, that third shadow. As I spoke, as I looked round, it was gone!

‘Did you not see it?’ I asked.

He shook his head.

‘I—I saw nothing,’ he said, faintly. ‘What was it?’

His lips were white. He seemed scarcely able to stand.

‘But you *must* have seen it!’ I exclaimed. ‘It fell just there—where that bit of ivy grows. There must be some boy hiding—it was a boy’s shadow, I am confident.’

‘A boy’s shadow!’ he echoed, looking round in a wild, frightened way. ‘There is no place—for a boy—to hide.’

‘Place or no place,’ I said, angrily, ‘if I catch him, he shall feel the weight of my cane!’

I searched backwards and forwards in event direction, the schoolmaster, with his scared face, limping at my heels; but, rough and irregular as the ground was, there was not a hole in it big enough to shelter a rabbit.

‘But what was it?’ I said, impatiently.

‘An—an illusion. Begging your pardon, sir—an illusion.’

He looked so like a beaten hound, so frightened, so fawning, that I felt I could with lively satisfaction have transferred the threatened caning to his own shoulders.

‘But you saw it?’ I said again.

‘No, sir. Upon my honour, no, sir. I saw nothing—nothing whatever.’

His looks belied his words. I felt positive that he had not only seen the shadow, but that he knew more about it than he chose to tell. I was by this time really angry. To be made the object of a boyish trick, and to be hoodwinked by the connivance of the schoolmaster, was too much. It was an insult to myself and my office.

I scarcely knew what I said; something short and stern at all events. Then, having said it, I turned my back upon Mr Skelton and the schools, and walked rapidly back to the village.

As I neared the bottom of the hill, a dog-cart drawn by a high-stepping chestnut dashed up to the door of the ‘Greyhound’, and the next moment I was shaking hands with Wolstenholme, of Balliol. Wolstenholme, of Balliol, as handsome as ever, dressed with the same careless dandyism, looking not a day older than when I last saw him at Oxford! He gripped me by both hands, vowed that I was his guest for the next three days, and insisted on carrying me off at once to Backwater Chase. In vain I urged that I had two schools to inspect tomorrow ten miles the other side of Drumley; that I had a horse and trap waiting; and that my room was ordered at the ‘Feathers’. Wolstenholme laughed away my objections.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said, ‘you will simply send your horse and trap back with a message to the “Feathers”, and a couple of telegrams to be dispatched to the two schools from Drumley station. Unforeseen circumstances compel you to defer those inspections till next week!’

And with this, in his masterful way, he shouted to the landlord to send my portmanteau up to the manor-house, pushed me up before him into the dog-cart, gave the chestnut his head, and rattled me off to Backwater Chase.

It was a gloomy old barrack of a place, standing high in the midst of a sombre deer-park some six or seven miles in circumference. An avenue of oaks, now leafless, led up to the house; and a mournful heron-haunted tarn in the loneliest part of the park gave to the estate its name of Blackwater Chase. The place, in fact, was more like a border fastness than an English north-country mansion. Wolstenholme took me through the picture gallery and reception rooms after luncheon, and then for a canter round the park; and in the evening we dined at the upper end of a great oak hall hung with antlers, and armour, and antiquated weapons of warfare and sport.

‘Now, tomorrow,’ said my host, as we sat over our claret in front of a blazing log-fire; ‘tomorrow, if we have decent weather, you shall have a day’s shooting on the moors; and on Friday, if you will but be persuaded to stay a day longer, I will drive you over to Broomhead and give you a run with the Duke’s hounds. Not hunt? My dear fellow, what nonsense! All our parsons hunt in this part of the world. By the way, have you ever been down a coal pit? No? Then a new experience awaits you. I’ll take you down Carshalton shaft, and show you the home of the gnomes and trolls.’

‘Is Carshalton one of your own mines?’ I asked.

‘All these pits are mine,’ he replied. ‘I am king of Hades, and rule the under world as well as the upper. There is coal everywhere underlying these moors. The whole place is honeycombed with shafts and galleries. One of our richest seams runs under this house, and there are upwards of forty men at work in it a quarter of a mile below our feet here every day. Another leads right away under the park, heaven only knows how far! My father began working it five-and-twenty years ago, and we have gone on working it ever since; yet it shows no sign of failing.’

‘You must be as rich as a prince with a fairy godmother!’

He shrugged his shoulders.

‘Well,’ he said, lightly, ‘I am rich enough to commit what follies I please; and that is saying a good deal. But then, to be always squandering money—always rambling about the world—always gratifying the impulse of the moment—is that happiness? I have been trying the experiment for the last ten years; and with what result? Would you like to see?’

He snatched up a lamp and led the way through a long suite of unfurnished rooms, the floors of which were piled high with packing cases of all sizes and shapes, labelled with the names of various foreign ports and the addresses of foreign agents innumerable. What did they contain? Precious marbles from Italy and Greece and Asia Minor; priceless paintings by old and modern masters; antiquities from the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates; enamels from Persia, porcelain from China, bronzes from Japan, strange sculptures from Peru; arms, mosaics, ivories, wood-carvings, skins, tapestries, old Italian cabinets, painted bride-chests, Etruscan terracottas; treasures of all countries, of all ages, never even unpacked since they crossed that threshold which the master’s foot had crossed but twice during the ten years it had taken to buy them! Should he ever open them, ever arrange them, ever enjoy them? Perhaps—if he became weary of wandering—if he married—if he built a gallery to receive them. If not—well, he might found and endow a museum; or leave the things to the nation. What did it matter? Collecting was like fox-hunting; the pleasure was in the pursuit, and ended with it!

We sat up late that first night, I can hardly say conversing, for Wolstenholme did the talking, while I, willing to be amused, led him on to tell me something of his wanderings by land and sea. So the time passed in stories of adventure, of perilous peaks ascended, of deserts traversed, of

unknown ruins explored, of 'hairbreadth 'scapes' from icebergs and earthquakes and storms; and when at last he flung the end of his cigar into the fire and discovered that it was time to go to bed, the clock on the mantel-shelf pointed far on among the small hours of the morning.

Next day, according to the programme made out for my entertainment, we did some seven hours' partridge-shooting on the moors; and the day next following I was to go down Carshalton shaft before breakfast, and after breakfast ride over to a place some fifteen miles distant called Picts' Camp, there to see a stone circle and the ruins of a prehistoric fort.

Unused to field sports, I slept heavily after those seven hours with the guns, and was slow to wake when Wolstenholme's valet came next morning to my bedside with the waterproof suit in which I was to effect my descent into Hades.

'Mr Wolstenholme says, sir, that you had better not take your bath till you come back,' said this gentlemanly vassal, disposing the ungainly garments across the back of a chair as artistically as if he were laying out my best evening suit. 'And you will be pleased to dress warmly underneath the waterproofs, for it is very chilly in the mine.'

I surveyed the garments with reluctance. The morning was frosty, and the prospect of being lowered into the bowels of the earth, cold, tasting, and unwashed, was anything but attractive. Should I send word that I would rather not go? I hesitated; but while I was hesitating, the gentlemanly valet vanished, and my opportunity was lost. Grumbling and shivering, I got up, donned the cold and shiny suit, and went downstairs.

A murmur of voices met my ear as I drew near the breakfast-room. Going in, I found some ten or a dozen stalwart colliers grouped near the door, and Wolstenholme, looking somewhat serious, standing with his back to the fire.

'Look here, Frazer,' he said, with a short laugh, 'here's a pleasant piece of news. A fissure has opened in the bed of Blackwater tarn; the lake has disappeared in the night; and the mine is flooded! No Carshalton shaft for you today!'

'Seven foot o' wayter in Jukes's seam, an' eight in th' owd north and south galleries,' growled a huge red-headed fellow, who seemed to be the spokesman.

'An' it's the Lord's own marcy a' happened o' noight-time, or we'd be dead men all,' added another.

'That's true, my man,' said Wolstenholme, answering the last speaker. 'It might have drowned you like rats in a trap; so we may thank our stars it's no worse. And now, to work with the pumps! Lucky for us that we know what to do, and how to do it.'

So saying, he dismissed the men with a good-humoured nod, and an order for unlimited ale.

I listened in blank amazement. The tarn vanished! I could not believe it. Wolstenholme assured me, however, that it was by no means a solitary phenomenon. Rivers had been known to disappear before now, in mining districts; and sometimes, instead of merely cracking, the ground would cave in, burying not merely houses, but whole hamlets in one common ruin. The foundations of such houses were, however, generally known to be insecure long enough before the crash came; and these accidents were not therefore often followed by loss of life.

'And now,' he said, lightly, 'you may doff your fancy costume; for I shall have time this morning for nothing but business. It is not every day that one loses a lake, and has to pump it up again!'

Breakfast over, we went round to the mouth of the pit, and saw the men fixing the pumps. Later on, when the work was fairly in train, we started off across the park to view the scene of the catastrophe. Our way lay far from the house across a wooded upland, beyond which we followed a broad glade leading to the tarn. Just as we entered this glade—Wolstenholme rattling

on and turning the whole affair into jest—a tall, slender lad, with a fishing-rod across his shoulder, came out from one of the side paths to the right, crossed the open at a long slant, and disappeared among the tree-trunks on the opposite side. I recognized him instantly. It was the boy whom I saw the other day, just after meeting the schoolmaster in the meadow.

‘If that boy thinks he is going to fish in your tarn,’ I said, ‘he will find out his mistake.’

‘What boy?’ asked Wolstenholme, looking back.

‘That boy who crossed over yonder, a minute ago.’

‘Yonder!—in front of us?’

‘Certainly. You must have seen him?’

‘Not I.’

‘You did not see him?—a tall, thin boy, in a grey suit, with a fishing-rod over his shoulder. He disappeared behind those Scotch firs.’

Wolstenholme looked at me with surprise.

‘You are dreaming!’ he said. ‘No living thing—not even a rabbit—has crossed our path since we entered the park gates.’

‘I am not in the habit of dreaming with my eyes open,’ I replied, quickly.

He laughed, and put his arm through mine.

‘Eyes or no eyes,’ he said, ‘you are under an illusion this time!’

An illusion—the very word made use of by the schoolmaster! What did it mean? Could I, in truth, no longer rely upon the testimony of my senses? A thousand half-formed apprehensions flashed across me in a moment. I remembered the illusions of Nicolini, the bookseller, and other similar cases of visual hallucination, and I asked myself if I had suddenly become afflicted in like manner.

‘By Jove! this *is* a queer sight!’ exclaimed Wolstenholme. And then I found that we had emerged from the glade, and were looking down upon the bed of what yesterday was Blackwater Tarn.

It was indeed a queer sight—an oblong, irregular basin of blackest slime, with here and there a sullen pool, and round the margin an irregular fringe of bulrushes. At some little distance along the bank—less than a quarter of a mile from where we were standing—a gaping crowd had gathered. All Pit End, except the men at the pumps, seemed to have turned out to stare at the bed of the vanished tarn.

Hats were pulled off and curtsies dropped at Wolstenholme’s approach. He, meanwhile, came up smiling, with a pleasant word for everyone.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘are you looking for the lake, my friends? You’ll have to go down Carshalton shaft to find it! It’s an ugly sight you’ve come to see, anyhow!’

‘‘Tis an ugly sight, squire,’ replied a stalwart blacksmith in a leathern apron; ‘but thar’s summat uglier, mebbe, than the mud, ow’r yonder.’

‘Something uglier than the mud?’ Wolstenholme repeated.

‘Wull yo be pleased to stan’ this way, squire, an’ look strite across at yon little tump o’ bulrushes—doan’t yo see nothin’?’

‘I see a log of rotten timber sticking half in and half out of the mud,’ said Wolstenholme; ‘and something—a long reed, apparently. . . by love! I believe it’s a fishing rod!’

‘It *is* a fishin’ rod, squire,’ said the blacksmith with rough carnesmess; ‘an’ if yon rotten timber bayn’t an unburied corpse, mun I never stroike hammer on anvil agin!’

There was a buzz of acquiescence from the bystanders. ’Twas an unburied corpse, sure enough. Nobody doubted it.

Wolstenholme made a funnel with his hands, and looked through it long and steadfastly.

‘It must come out, whatever it is,’ he said presently. ‘Five feet of mud, do you say? Then here’s a sovereign apiece for the first two fellows who wade through it and bring that object to land!’

The blacksmith and another pulled off their shoes and stockings, turned up their trousers, and went in at once.

They were over their ankles at the first plunge, and, sounding their way with sticks, went deeper at every tread. As they sank, our excitement rose. Presently they were visible from only the waist upwards. We could see their chests heaving, and the muscular efforts by which each step was gained. They were yet full twenty yards from the goal when the mud mounted to their armpits. . . a few *feet* more, and only their heads would remain above the surface!

An uneasy movement ran through the crowd.

‘Call ’em back, for God’s sake!’ cried a woman’s voice.

But at this moment—having reached a point where the ground gradually sloped upwards—they began to rise above the mud as rapidly as they had sunk into it. And now, black with clotted slime, they emerge waist-high . . . now they are within three or four yards of the spot. . . and now. . . now they are there!

They part the reeds—they stoop low above the shapeless object on which all eyes are turned—they half-lift it from its bed of mud—they hesitate—lay it down again—decide, apparently, to leave it there; and turn their faces shorewards. Having come a few paces, the blacksmith remembers the fishing-rod; turns back; disengages the tangled line with some difficulty, and brings it over his shoulder.

They had not much to tell—standing, all mud from head to heel, on dry land again—but that little was conclusive. It was, in truth, an unburied corpse; part of the trunk only above the surface. They tried to lift it; but it had been so long under water, and was in so advanced a stage of decomposition, that to bring it to shore without a shutter was impossible. Being cross-questioned, they thought, from the slenderness of the form, that it must be the body of a boy.

‘Thar’s the poor chap’s rod, anyhow,’ said the blacksmith, laying it gently down upon the turf.

I have thus far related events as I witnessed them. Here, however, my responsibility ceases. I give the rest of my story at second-hand, briefly, as I received it some weeks later, in the following letter from Philip Wolstenholme:

‘Blackwater Chase, Dec. 20th, 18—.

Dear Frazer, My promised letter has been a long time on the road, but I did not see the use of writing till I had something definite to tell you. I think, however, we have now found out all that we are ever likely to know about the tragedy in the tarn; and it seems that—but, no; I will begin at the beginning. That is to say, with the day you left the Chase, which was the day following the discovery of the body.

You were but just gone when a police inspector arrived from Drumley (you will remember that I had immediately sent a man over to the sitting magistrate); but neither the inspector nor anyone else could do anything till the remains were brought to shore, and it took us the best part of a week to accomplish this difficult operation. We had to sink no end of big stones in order to make a rough and ready causeway across the mud. This done, the body was brought over decently upon a shutter. It proved to be the corpse of a boy of perhaps fourteen or fifteen years of age. There was a fracture three inches long at the back of the skull, evidently fatal. This might, of

course, have been an accidental injury; but when the body came to be raised from where it lay, it was found to be pinned down by a pitchfork, the handle of which had been afterwards whittled off, so as not to show above the water, a discovery tantamount to evidence of murder. The features of the victim were decomposed beyond recognition; but enough of the hair remained to show that it had been short and sandy. As for the clothing, it was a mere mass of rotten shreds; but on being subjected to some chemical process, proved to have once been a suit of lightish grey cloth.

A crowd of witnesses came forward at this stage of the inquiry—for I am now giving you the main facts as they came out at the coroner's inquest—to prove that about a year or thirteen months ago, Skelton the schoolmaster had staying with him a lad whom he called his nephew, and to whom it was supposed that he was not particularly kind. This lad was described as tall, thin, mud sandy-haired. He habitually wore a suit corresponding in colour and texture to the shreds of clothing discovered on the body in the tarn; and he was much addicted to angling about the pools and streams, wherever he might have the chance of a nibble.

And now one thing led quickly on to another. Our Pit End shoemaker identified the boy's boots as being a pair of his own making and selling. Other witnesses testified to angry scenes between the uncle and nephew. Finally, Skelton gave himself up to justice, confessed the deed, and was duly committed to Drumley gaol for wilful murder.

And the motive? Well, the motive is the strangest part of my story. The wretched lad was, after all, not Skelton's nephew, but Skelton's own illegitimate son. The mother was dead, and the boy lived with his maternal grandmother in a remote part of Cumberland. The old woman was poor, and the schoolmaster made her an annual allowance for his son's keep and clothing. He had not seen the boy for some years, when he sent for him to come over on a visit to Pit End. Perhaps he was weary of the tax upon his purse. Perhaps, as he himself puts it in his confession, he was disappointed to find the boy, if not actually half-witted, stupid, wilful, and ill brought-up. He at all events took a dislike to the poor brute, which dislike by and by developed into positive hatred. Some amount of provocation there would seem to have been. The boy was as backward as a child of five years old. That Skelton put him into the Boys' School, and could do nothing with him; that he defied discipline, had a passion for fishing, and was continually wandering about the country with his rod and line, are facts borne out by the independent testimony of various witnesses. Having hidden his fishing-tackle, he was in the habit of slipping away at school-hours, and showed himself the more cunning and obstinate the more he was punished.

At last there came a day when Skelton tracked him to the place where his rod was concealed, and thence across the meadows into the park, and as far as the tarn. His (Skelton's) account of what followed is wandering and confused. He owns to having beaten the miserable lad about the head and arms with a heavy stick that he had brought with him for the purpose; but denies that he intended to murder him. When his son fell insensible and ceased to breathe, he for the first time realized the force of the blows he had dealt. He admits that his first impulse was one, not of remorse for the deed, but of fear for his own safety. He dragged the body in among the bulrushes by the water's edge, and there concealed it as well as he could. At night, when the neighbours were in bed and asleep, he stole out by starlight, taking with him a pitchfork, a coil of rope, a couple of old iron-bars, and a knife. Thus laden, he struck out across the moor, and entered the park by a stile and footpath on the Stoneleigh side; so making a circuit of between three and four miles. A rotten old punt used at that time to be kept on the tarn. He loosed this punt from its moorings, brought it round, hauled in the body, and paddled his ghastly burden out into the middle of the lake as far as a certain clump of reeds which he had noted as a likely spot for his

purpose. Here he weighted and sunk the corpse, and pinned it down by the neck with his pitchfork. He then cut away the handle of the fork; hid the fishing-rod among the reeds; and believed, as murderers always believe, that discovery was impossible. As regarded the Pit End folk, he simply gave out that his nephew had gone back to Cumberland; and no one doubted it. Now, however, he says that accident has only anticipated him; and that he was on the point of voluntarily confessing his crime. His dreadful secret had of late become intolerable. He was haunted by an invisible Presence. That Presence sat with him at table, followed him in his walks stood behind him in the school-room, and watched by his bedside. He never saw it; but he felt that it was always there. Sometimes he raves of a shadow on the wall of his cell. The gaol authorities are of opinion that he is of unsound mind.

I have now told you all that there is at present to tell. The trial will not take place till the spring assizes. In the meanwhile I am off tomorrow to Paris, and thence, in about ten days, on to Nice, where letters will find me at the Hotel des Empereurs.

Always, dear Frazer,
Yours, &c., &c.,
P. W.

P.S.—Since writing the above, I have received a telegram from Drumley to say that Skelton has committed suicide. No particulars given. So ends this strange eventful history.

By the way, that was a curious illusion of yours the other day when we were crossing the park; and I have thought of it many times. Was it an illusion?—that is the question.’

Ay, indeed! that *is* the question; and it is a question which I have never yet been able to answer. Certain things I undoubtedly saw—with my mind’s eye, perhaps—and as I saw them, I have described them; withholding nothing, adding nothing, explaining nothing. Let those solve the mystery who can. For myself, I but echo Wolstenholme’s question: Was it an illusion?