

# The Case of Roger Carboyne

By H. Greenhough Smith

The mysterious and extraordinary circumstances surrounding the death of Mr Roger Carboyne have excited so much interest, that it is not surprising that the room in the Three Crows Inn, which had been set apart for inquest was crowded at an early hour. The evidence was expected to be sensational—and most sensational, indeed, it proved to be. But for the even more remarkable denouement of the case it is impossible that any person present could have been prepared.

The jury having returned from viewing the body, and the Coroner having taken his seat, the Court immediately proceeded to call witnesses.

Mr Lewis George Staymer, the dead man's friend and companion, whose name had been in everybody's mouth during the last three days, was of course the first to be examined, and his appearance obviously excited the strongest curiosity. He is a young man of twenty-five, tall, dark, and wearing a slight black moustache. His marked air of self-possession, and his quiet and direct mode of giving his evidence, were manifestly those of a man who had no other motive than to relate the facts exactly as they happened. His testimony, which it will be seen confirmed in every respect the extraordinary rumours with which the public are familiar, was as follows:

'My name is Lewis George Staymer. I am a medical student, studying at London University and at St Bartholomew's Hospital. Mr Carboyne was a fellow student with me; he was two years older than myself, and we were fast friends, attending the same lectures, and generally spending our vacations together. Ten days ago we arranged to spend our Easter holidays on a riding tour on ponies through North Wales. We started on March 15th, and carried out our programme, day by day, until the 21st—last Friday. On the afternoon of that day we mounted our ponies at the door of the inn where we had stopped for lunch, the Golden Harp, at Llanmawr, and rode forward on our way; it was then about half-past two. The weather was fine, but very cold for the time of year, and the ground was whitened by a light fall of snow. It must have been nearly five o'clock when a slight accident to one of my stirrup-leathers forced me to dismount. I called to my companion to ride on, and that I would overtake him immediately, and he did so. The road at that point runs along the mountainside, between a lofty cliff upon the left and a precipitous descent upon the right—but the path is broad and smooth, being, I should say, from ten to fifteen yards wide, and in no way dangerous. About fifty or sixty yards from the spot where I dismounted the path turned at a sharp angle round a point of rock and became lost to sight. I happened to look up, while still engaged upon the stirrup-leather, and I saw my friend disappear round the angle of the road. As soon as I had finished my work, which took me somewhat longer than I had expected, I remounted, and was about to follow him when I was startled to hear his voice cry out for help. It was a shriek—a single ringing scream—uttered as if in extremity of agony or terror. I galloped forward, and on reaching the angle of the road I was surprised to see his pony standing in the roadway, some sixty yards ahead, with the saddle empty. The rider was nowhere to be seen.'

'What time had elapsed since he left you?'

'I should say about four or five minutes—possibly six—but not more than that, I feel sure.'

'What did you do next?'

‘I rode forward, calling his name loudly, and casting my eyes in all directions; but I could see no trace of him, nor of any living creature. The cliff, which at that point formed a deep bay, round which the roadway ran to the corresponding angle at the other extremity of the arc, was as steep and naked as a wall; on the other hand was the precipice. When I reached the spot at which the pony stood, I perceived that it was trembling, as if strongly startled; it made no effort to escape. One of the stirrups was lying across the saddle; the other was hanging in the usual position. I saw nothing else unusual about the pony, but on casting my eyes upon the snowy roadway I perceived marks as if a struggle had taken place there.’

‘What was the position of these marks?’

‘They were in front of the pony, on the forward track, and appeared as if some heavy body had been dragged for a distance of eight or ten yards. Then the marks ceased abruptly; the snow all round was absolutely undisturbed.’

‘There were no footprints?’

‘None whatever, except those of our two ponies on the way by which we had come. The road in front was a white sheet—it was clear that no one could have passed that way since the snow fell.’

‘Did the marks extend to the edge of the precipice?’

‘Oh, no; they did not stretch in that direction at all. The snow between them and the verge of the precipice was absolutely smooth and unbroken.’

‘Did you approach the verge?’

‘Yes; I did. I looked over and saw something white fluttering on the branches of a tree which sprouted from a crevice a few yards below. It was Mr Carboyne’s handkerchief; I knew it by the peculiar coloured border. I had seen him use it that morning. I could not discern the bottom of the chasm, which was hidden by the branches of the trees growing at the base. The fall was almost sheer and quite impossible to descend. I was greatly agitated, and for some moments was at a loss what to do. I believed my friend lay at the foot of the precipice, but could form no conjecture as to how he could have got there.’

‘Describe your course of action.’

‘I returned to the ponies, with the purpose of riding with all speed to find the nearest point of descent, and was in the act of mounting when I saw two men on foot approaching from the angle of the road behind me. They were two working men, and are now in court.’

‘You rushed to meet them and told them what had occurred?’

‘I did. They informed me that I should find a descent about a mile further on, and offered to guide me to the spot. I gladly accepted; we set forward in the direction in which we had been travelling, and had nearly reached the other angle of the bay round which the path again turned, when some heavy object fell from the cliff upon the road, a few yards from us. We darted forward to the spot, and I took it up. It was Mr Carboyne’s field-glass.’ (Sensation in court.)

‘Proceed, Mr Staymer.’

‘We all three then looked up and saw, on the top of a young sapling which shot out almost at right angles to the cliff, a cap hanging. It was about half-way up the cliff—some thirty feet or so.’

‘You recognized the cap.’

‘Yes; it was Mr Carboyne’s.’

‘You formed no idea as to how it got there?’

‘None. I was completely bewildered, and am still.’

‘Did you attempt to reach the cap?’

‘No—it was impossible to do so. The cliff was sheer wall—a goat could not have found a foothold.’

‘What happened next?’

‘I endeavoured, with the aid of my own glasses, to discover any other trace or clue, but failed to do so. At the top the cliff overhung a little, and then appeared to form a plateau, of which, of course, I could not see the surface. I resolved to ascend to it, and to look down; I hardly know what I expected to gain by this. My companions informed me that by making a detour of half-a-mile the summit could be reached. I set off with one instantly, while his comrade stayed below to indicate the spot. After nearly half-an-hour’s hard climbing we reached the plateau.’

‘What did you discover?’

‘We discovered the body of Mr Carboyne.’ (Renewed sensation.)

‘What was its position?’

‘It was lying face downwards in the snow, about three feet from the edge of the cliff. It was clear from the marks in the snow that the deceased had originally lain in a position nearly twenty feet further in—that is, further from the edge—and had crawled from thence towards the verge. There was no indication of any other person having been upon the plateau—none whatever.’

‘The snow was absolutely undisturbed?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Was the deceased quite dead when found?’

‘Yes, quite. He must have died about half-an-hour before.’

‘You examined him for injuries?’

‘I did. I found bruises and abrasions, but no wound sufficient to account for death. The fatal result, as has since been proved, was due, primarily, to shock acting on a weak heart.’

‘Did you observe any damage to the clothing?’

‘Yes. The coat was ripped half-way up the back—that is to say, there was a wide and roughly torn rent from the middle of the back to just below the collar.’

‘Did you form any opinion as to how the rent was made?’

‘No; but it was done by a somewhat blunt instrument; the edges of the rent were ripped—not cut.’

‘Was anything missing from the body?’

‘Yes; the knapsack which the deceased wore by a strap across his shoulder had disappeared.’

‘Anything else?’

‘I believe nothing else. His money, which he carried in his breast-pocket, was untouched. His watch and chain were also left, as well as a valuable ring which he always wore, and which was, as I have heard him say, a keepsake.’

‘You remained with the body while the workman, John Rhys, went to give information to the police?’

‘Yes.’

‘What space of time elapsed before they came?’

‘I do not know—I should guess about two hours.’

‘During that time did you observe any circumstance which would help to explain how the deceased could possibly have got there?’

‘Absolutely none.’

‘You can form no theory or conjecture on the subject?’

‘None whatever. I am completely bewildered, and can only speak to what I saw, without being able to offer any shadow of explanation.’

A Juryman: 'Do you suggest that the deceased threw the glasses over the cliff in order to attract attention?'

'That is the only explanation that occurs to me. It is almost certain that he was alive at the time they fell; probably he found himself too weak to reach the edge, and therefore threw down the glasses as the first article that came to hand. He carried them in his side pocket, ready for use.'

'Could you identify the missing knapsack if you saw it?'

'Certainly. It was a brown leather knapsack, having the corners bound with brass—a very unusual thing. The strap had been broken and mended with twine.'

'You have stated that the snow on the road and also on the plateau showed no footprints of a second person; you are absolutely sure of this?'

'I am absolutely sure.'

The witness then stood down.

John Rhys and William Evans, quarrymen, the two men who had come to the assistance of Mr Staymer, were then called, and confirmed his evidence in every particular, but were unable to throw any new light upon the subject.

Sergeant Wallis, who had been summoned to the scene of the tragedy, was the next witness. He deposed as follows:

'On receiving notice of the case, I and an assistant rode with all speed to the plateau, where the body of the deceased had been found and where it was still lying. I made a most careful investigation both of the body and of the plateau, and afterwards descended to the roadway, which I also thoroughly examined. I found the marks of a struggle in the snow, as described by the previous witnesses. This is, in my opinion, clearly a case of foul play—of robbery and murder. I infer this from the absence of the knapsack. I am aware, of course, that the money, the watch, and the ring were left. I cannot entirely account for this at present, but I have no doubt of doing so shortly.'

'Can you account for the absence of footprints?'

'No.'

'Nor for the extraordinary situation in which the body was found?'

'No.'

'In short, the police are entirely at fault?'

'Not at all. On the contrary, we have every prospect of arresting the criminal within a very few days.'

The Coroner expressed a hope that this would be the case, but hardly seemed to share the sergeant's confidence. He then proceeded to address the jury.

'Gentlemen, I have no hesitation in saying that this is the most remarkable case which I have ever been engaged in investigating. There are three or four points in it which seem to be absolutely unaccountable: the absence of footprints in the snow, the sudden transference of the victim by some mysterious means from the roadway to the plateau sixty feet above, the handkerchief found in the ravine, and the absence of the knapsack, coupled with the safety of the money, watch, and rings. These circumstances are beyond the scope of my experience, which has been a tolerably long one—a tolerably long one, gentlemen. There can, however, be no doubt that a foul crime has been committed.'

At this stage the Coroner's remarks were interrupted by a commotion in the crowd, occasioned by the sudden and violent entrance of a person into the room. The newcomer, a short, middle-aged, grizzled man, who carried a brown-paper parcel under his arm, thrust the spectators excitedly aside, and darted into the midst of the apartment.

The Coroner (angrily): 'What do you want, sir? This conduct is most unseemly.'

The man took the parcel from under his arm, stripped off the paper covering, and displayed before the eyes of the spectators a brown leather knapsack, brass bound at the corners, and having the strap mended with a piece of twine. At this unexpected sight there was a movement in the crowd, which was as much of horror as of wonder. Sergeant Wallis and Mr Lewis Staymer took a step forward, while both exclaimed at the same instant—'The missing knapsack!'

'I desire,' said the man, quietly, 'to give evidence in the case of Mr Carboyne.'

The Coroner: 'What do you know of the matter?'

'I know everything.'

'As an eyewitness?'

'As an eyewitness.'

'You were present when Mr Carboyne met his death?'

'I was present; nay, more—I was the cause of it.' (Sensation.)

'You wish to make a statement?'

'Yes.'

'On oath?'

'Yes.'

The witness then took the oath, and at once proceeded to address the Court. His speech was uttered slowly, clearly, and distinctly, and is given here verbatim:

'My name is James Milford; I am by profession an aeronaut—it is just possible that you may have heard of me. Last Friday—the day on which this sad occurrence happened—I made a private ascent from Chester. I intended to make a journey of a mile or two at most, but when I attempted to descend I found that the escape-valve had stuck fast, and all my efforts to open it were without avail. I must have spent an hour or more in the attempt, during which time I had been driving in a rising wind across North Wales. At last I desisted, and determined to extemporize a valve, as I had done once before, by cutting a small opening in the balloon and thrusting through it the neck of a beer-bottle, broken off, and with the cork still in it. By taking the cork in or out I was enabled to emit or check the flow of gas, and it was not long before I was near enough to the ground to throw out my grapnel. It dragged for some distance along the level summit of a cliff without finding anything to catch on, and finally dropped from the summit into a small bay formed by an indentation in the cliff. I could see the road which ran along the cliff, and a man on horseback riding on it. Almost at the same moment I was menaced by a sudden danger; I saw that I must rise at once at least a hundred feet in order to avoid a pinnacle which lay directly in my path. I thrust the cork into the bottle-neck and threw out every ounce of ballast I possessed, which was about two hundredweight. As I finished I heard a sudden and loud cry beneath me, and, looking downward, was horrified to see that my grapnel in its swing had struck the rider in the back, and had caught firmly in his coat. The sudden rise of the balloon had taken place at the same instant, and had lifted the rider from the saddle, and then, his weight bringing the slant of the rope to the perpendicular, had dragged him several yards along the ground. Then, as the balloon rose, it lifted him clear off it, and it was at this moment that he uttered the cry which attracted my attention. I rushed to the cork and withdrew it; but the escape of gas was no compensation for the tremendous loss of ballast. In a few seconds the grapnel with its burden were above the cliff, which they had hardly cleared when the cloth in which the grapnel held suddenly gave way, and Mr Carboyne fell upon the level summit. The hook of the grapnel had, however, passed under the strap of his knapsack, which it lifted from his shoulders as he fell. I afterwards drew it up into the car, and now produce it. The balloon, released from his weight,

shot upwards like an arrow, and in a few minutes he was lost to sight. Before this I could, however, distinctly see his friend searching for him in the roadway, and going towards the verge of the precipice, into which the handkerchief of the deceased had fluttered; it having fallen from him, as did his hat, before the coat gave way. As for me, it was many hours before I could descend, and when I did so I was taken by some peasants swooning from the car. They tended me with every care, but until last night I was too ill to make any attempt to travel. Now, I have come here with all speed, having heard of this inquiry, and knowing that I, and I only, can prevent suspicion from falling on the innocent.'

The Coroner (turning to the jury): 'Gentlemen, I said just now that this case was the most extraordinary that has ever occurred in my experience, and though Mr Milford's statement has explained by perfectly natural causes every detail of the mystery, I am bound to say so still.'