

Warning Whispers

By A. M. Burrage

Beach and Dolby were hanged at the County Gaol at eight o'clock on a Thursday morning; and the village, if it made somewhat more than a nine days' wonder of the crime, slowly reassumed its normal air of sleepiness. Indeed, as Beach and Dolby were not natives, but casual labourers who had strayed thither from the teeming port some thirty miles distant, only one or two of the villagers were closely concerned with the tragedy. One of them was Martha Speed, the mother of the poor murdered girl.

John Archelaus Hoskins was probably the person most closely and lastingly affected. For one thing, he was the hero of the hour; and for another, he was one of the very few to whom good had been blown by this particular ill-wind. It was his evidence which had tied the nooses around the necks of Messrs Beach and Dolby, and it was he, or rather his mother, who received the reward of one hundred pounds, which had been, perhaps, a little too hastily offered. At the time he was a very promising boy of eight.

Nothing could shake young Hoskins' testimony. Certainly the two barristers could neither bully him nor cast a doubt upon his word. He was clear, cool, intelligent, and his little piping voice penetrated to the farthest corner of the hushed court. As he was passing Tumbledown Barn he had heard two men coming out, and had hidden behind the opposite hedge until they were gone. He had hidden because he had been poaching trout in Squire Pollard's stream, and he didn't know who was coming. He recognized Beach by the black patch he wore over his left eye, and Dolby by his stoop and slight lameness.

He had seen the two men dabble their hands in a ditch not twenty yards from where he was hiding, and heard one say—he didn't know which—'You'll 'ave to burn that coat o' yourn.'

Small wonder, in the circumstances, that John Archelaus Hoskins, the orphaned son of a butcher's assistant, became the hero of his native village. An older head than his might easily have been turned, for there was not a man, woman or child but made much of him. In a community of thick-wits his precocious intelligence shone like a candle flame in a dark room.

Three days after the trial old Squire Pollard came plodding down the village street on a cob which looked ridiculously small for him. He was elderly—a childless widower, and something of an eccentric. It pleased him to appear in public looking like a small farmer on the verge of bankruptcy, but he was well known to have more money than he could conveniently spend. Narrow and fanatical in his religious views, he was also hard and mean in nine-tenths of his dealings, but indulged now and then in surprising bursts of generosity.

Outside Mrs Hoskins's cottage he dismounted, and was received by the smirking matron, who dusted a chair for him in the front room and fussed around him like a distracted hen.

'Well, Mrs Hoskins,' said he, 'all the excitement over now, eh? Settling down again to ordinary everyday life? Excitement bad for all of us. How's the boy?'

'Oh, he's at school, sir,' said Mrs Hoskins. 'He's still a bit excited-like. But we can't expect old heads on young shoulders, can we, sir?'

The squire nodded. 'He's a smart lad for his age,' he said, thoughtfully.

'Ay, he is that, sir. He's the apple of 'is mother's eye. You wouldn't believe what a good boy 'e is.'

'Hum! I have an idea he'd been poaching in my stream when he saw those two miscreants—'

'Ah, sir, if I'd only known that at the time! But we can't expect old heads on young shoulders, as I said before, can we, sir? And if 'e 'adn't been fishin' that evening—'

Squire Pollard nodded again.

'Just so! Poaching's wrong, though. Wicked. Stealing. Still, we'll say no more about that.'

'Thank you, sir. The pore little man's been punished enough already. He can't get out of 'is 'ead the way them two villains scowled at him while he was givin' evidence against 'em. He 'ad a nightmare about it last night. I'm sure, sir, if they could do him a mischief they would.'

The squire smiled wryly.

'Well, they'll never be able to hurt young John or anybody else. Make him understand that. When do you expect him back from school, Mrs Hoskins?'

'In about half an hour, sir.'

'Very well, I'll wait. Does he know his catechism?'

The woman smiled broadly.

'Why, sir' she said, 'you examined the children yourself and give my Jacky first prize.'

'Bless me! So I did. Knows his catechism, eh? Well, I've been thinking! He seems a very bright boy indeed. Ought to have a real chance in life. I don't want to take him away from you, Mrs Hoskins—only to go away to school. And I'll see you don't lose by it. I haven't a son of my own—'

He broke off abruptly and hitched his cloth gaiters. Mrs Hoskins flinched and coloured as if the hand of prosperity had struck a sudden blow at her.

'He's a good boy,' was all she could say.

When Master Hoskins arrived home half an hour later, kicking another boy's cap down the garden path, he was surprised to find an august presence in the front room.

'Come here,' the squire greeted him. 'Come here and tell me what happened in 1815.'

'Battle o' Waterloo, sir,' said Master Hoskins, promptly.

The year before a very much older boy had received a shilling from Squire Pollard for answering the self-same question. Since then not a boy in the village but knew the date, for other shillings might be forthcoming. But the squire had forgotten, and the triumph of John Archelaus Hoskins was complete.

Next day, when the new favourite of fortune met Anne Peters, a damsel of his own years, he haughtily declined to play with her.

'I shan't be able to play with you no more, Anne,' he said. 'Haven't 'ee heard as Squire Pollard be goin' to make a gentleman of me?'

Miss Peters put out her tongue at him and made a remark which would have staggered her Sunday School mistress..

'Mother says,' she added, 'that your luck come to you by an evil road and you'll get no good of it.'

'Sour grapes!' retorted young Hoskins.

The first step towards raising young Hoskins from the level of the peasantry was taken at once. He was provided with stiff clothes and made to wear every day the hard, wide collars he had hitherto worn only on Sundays. He was then sent to a distant vicarage, where a large family of children bullied him and derided him until his nouns agreed with his verbs and, bit by bit, he lost most of his broad country accent.

At the age of ten he was sent to an establishment where boys were prepared for the Navy and the Public Schools. There he gave out that his parents were both dead and that he was the nephew of Squire Pollard, a most important man, from whom one day he would inherit several millions of pounds. That kind of braggadocio was, however, kicked out of him before he was ready to take another step.

Squire Pollard had entered the boy at Charterhouse, but, when he was fourteen, and ready to sit for the entrance examination, the old man had a sudden fit of economy, and young Hoskins was despatched to King Edward the Sixth School, Somewhere-or-Other.

It was a good school, although inexpensive and its endowment provided for half a dozen scholarships at Oxford and Cambridge. Young Hoskins, at the age of eighteen, took one to the value of one hundred pounds per annum, and duly went up to one of the smaller colleges at Cambridge.

The scholarship was his crowning triumph in the sight of the squire, who was now turned seventy and beginning to feel his years. He regarded the young man more than ever as a son, and sent him up to the University with an allowance which he regarded as princely, and which really was quite reasonable.

Meanwhile young Hoskins had spent half his school holidays with his mother and half at the Hall. Old Mrs Hoskins, who had a gift for attracting charitable notice, now occupied a very superior cottage, and imitated the dress and manners of the vicar's wife. Squire Pollard had duly seen that she lost nothing by the partial surrender of her son. She was painstaking, if not always correct, in the use of her aspirates, and inclined to patronise her less fortunate neighbours.

The village had not forgotten the murder, but it had grown used to the distinction conferred by it. Tumbledown Barn was still pointed out to strangers, and, of course, it achieved a reputation for being haunted.

One night, in the long vacation at the end of his first year at Cambridge, young Hoskins was standing at the door of the superior cottage, talking to his mother. He was then just twenty, and had grown into a tall, slim youngster with nothing of the stolid heaviness of his labouring forebears apparent in his build. Dark-haired, dark-eyed, and rather pale, he had his full share of good looks, and these were of a softer and more feminine type than one would have expected after seeing the photographs of the bright boy about whom all England had talked for a day.

'Who is she, mother?' he asked, with a careless nod towards the back of a girl who had just passed the gate.

'She? You used to know her once. You used to play with her when you was both children. But you've forgotten her now. And very right you should, I'm sure.'

'That's not her name, mother,' he said, laughing.

'To be sure. Her name's Anne Peters, and a nice, fast piece of goods she is too, I've heard.'

'Anne Peters!' He was stroking his chin as old men stroke their beards. 'I remember, of course. I'm afraid we quarrelled after—that. She's grown up rather pretty.'

Mrs Hoskins sniffed.

'I hope,' she said, 'my Jacky won't have any truck with the likes of her. The squire wouldn't like you to mix with village people.'

He laughed, and bent to kiss her.

'You needn't worry, mother,' he said. 'I wouldn't offend the old boy for worlds. Besides, I prefer the society of ladies.'

'You're not going out now?'

‘Yes. I promised I’d look the old boy up before he went to bed, and he goes pretty early now. I shan’t be long.’

He disappeared into the dusk, and his way happened to be up the hill whither Anne Peters had gone.

‘Anne!’ he called to her, softly. ‘Anne!’

She turned and saw him abreast of her, his hat lifted.

‘Don’t you remember me, Anne?’ he asked, with a little laugh.

‘It’s Mr Hoskins,’ she said.

‘I thought you’d forgotten.’

‘I thought *you’d* forgotten, Mr Hoskins. What do you want with me?’ She did not speak at a cultured pitch, but her accent was almost pure. Like many village girls of this generation, she had striven after that mysterious thing which she called refinement.

‘Nothing,’ he said, in answer to her question. ‘But we’re going the same way, and we’re old friends. Won’t you let me walk with you?’

He saw her profile cut clear in the faint light which pierced the ragged foliage overhead. Almost Greek it was, to an eye already critical of women, save that the chin was a thought too prominent and the lips were pouting.

‘I can’t stop you, can I?’ she asked. ‘But you’re a gentleman now. Why do you want to walk with me?’

‘Where are you going?’ he asked, ignoring her question.

‘Never you mind.’

‘Is it to meet somebody?’

‘Perhaps. Why?’

‘Only because I’m jealous, Anne.’

She laughed quite prettily. She could take a hand in this game as well as he.

‘You’re at Cambridge College, aren’t you?’ she asked. ‘Do they learn you to flirt there?’

‘It’s a natural gift. I’ve been taught, however, to recognize beauty when I see it. You’re a lovely kid, Anne. I expect a dozen of these louts have told you that a hundred times.’

‘It doesn’t follow as I believe them.’

‘But you believe me. I’m an expert.’ He laughed, and linked his arm in hers. ‘You’re not going out with any of these ticks tonight. You’re coming for a walk with me.’

Her quick little brain busied itself in an instant with a hundred possibilities. Nowadays the village despised young Hoskins for a gentleman who was not a real gentleman. But there was glamour about him—a nice surface polish—and one day he was going to be very rich. If a girl were only clever enough—

‘What would squire say,’ she inquired, archly, ‘if he knew you were taking me out?’

‘What the eye doesn’t see—you know, Anne.’

She made a half-hearted attempt to rid herself of his arm ‘There you are!’ she said. ‘He wouldn’t like you to be flirting with a girl like me.’

‘I don’t see eye to eye with him in everything. He ought at least to admit my good taste, Anne. You are a dear, you know.’

He disengaged his arm from hers, and this time slipped it around her waist. She, on her part, let her head fall back against his shoulder, as she would have done with any other rustic swain with whom she walked on a dark evening. Thus they descended the hill to where a five-barred gate gave entrance to a farmyard, and, close to one of the granite posts a black barn thrust one of its corners through the ragged hedge.

Anne halted, and brought him to a halt.

‘You remember?’ she asked.

‘God! Yes!’ He drew and expelled an audible breath. ‘There’s the spot over there where I hid that night.’

‘Have you been inside?’ she whispered.

‘Never since. Come on.’

She uttered a little provoking laugh.

‘You’re as nervous as a thoroughbred!’ she exclaimed, and he affected to ignore the double meaning. ‘They say the place is haunted. You don’t believe that, do you?’

‘It ought to be!’

‘What? You at Cambridge College and believe in ghosts?’

‘Why not? There are a lot of men up at Cambridge who do. There’s a little society of us who investigate such things, and I can tell you there is a lot in it. There’s a Scotsman up at Trinity who is what they call a clairvoyant. Do you know what he told me, Anne?’

She shook her head. She was smiling, and her eyes were full of amusement and unbelief—tenderly contemptuous they looked in the dusk.

‘He told me, Anne,’ young Hoskins continued, in a strained, hushed voice, ‘that two evil spirits dogged me, seeking to hurt me. One took the shape of a man with a black patch over his eye. Do you remember Beach, or were you too young?’

She nodded, but she was still smiling.

‘The Scotchman knew about you,’ she said, ‘and tried to frighten you.’

‘No. Nobody up there knows that I’m the boy who got those two fellows hanged.’

Anne plucked at his sleeve.

‘Come and peep inside.’

‘No. The dog would bark and rouse people.’

‘They keep him the other side, where the fowls are.’

‘Aren’t there fowls roosting in the barn?’

‘They say fowls won’t roost there. There’s only a couple of old carts and some straw.’

‘Anne,’ he whispered, ‘the place *is* haunted!’

‘Are you afraid to peep inside—even with me with you?’

‘Of course not! Only I—’

‘Come on, then!’

Unwillingly he pushed open the farm gate and led the way on tiptoe to the door of the Tumbledown Barn. He held the door open for her to enter first, and followed, striking a match.

The barn smelt damp within, and was in an advanced stage of disrepair. The faintly luminous sky shone through a dozen gaps in the roof. The match, flaming bravely in the still air, lit up the place and showed the two old farm carts, a litter of old rubbish, a pile of straw.

Hoskins lit another match when the first burned out. His hand was not quite steady.

‘Why don’t they burn the place?’ he demanded, in a harsh whisper. ‘It’s full of evil! I can feel it! Can’t you feel it too? Oh, let’s go!’

‘Why,’ said Anne, ‘you’re afraid.’

‘Only because I understand—and feel! *They’re* here—Beach and Dolby! Don’t you feel that the place is devil-ridden? It’s bad—bad! I could be cruel here—cruel as hell—damnably cruel! I could—’

He broke off suddenly. Before the match went out the girl could see little spots of moisture shining on his brow.

‘Why,’ she whispered, with a little, soft, wheedling laugh, ‘you don’t want to hurt me, do you?’

She stood before him, dimly revealed in the deep gloom. The soft bright in her eyes mocked the light of love. The shadows which hid part of her beauty hinted at an even richer loveliness. Something in him, beyond his control, responded to the silent call of her.

‘Hurt you?’ he heard himself cry. ‘I hurt you? I who love you—love you—love you! Little Anne!’

His arms were around her. His lips found hers and clung to them. In the darkness she gave him kiss for kiss, until she felt his body start like a hooked fish, and he seized her and blundered wildly with her towards the gleaming rectangle of the open door.

‘Didn’t you hear?’ he stammered as he faced her, gasping, in the clean air outside. ‘Oh, God, didn’t you hear? *Somebody laughed!*’

When Hoskins finally came down from Cambridge two years later, he went to stay with Squire Pollard, whose remaining days were not many. The old man had already spoken to Hoskins quite openly about his will.

‘I hope you’ll take the old name when I’m gone,’ he said. ‘You’re fit to bear it. You’re a clever boy, and I think you’ve been a good boy. Only one breath of scandal about you has reached my ears, and that I wouldn’t believe.’

There was a hard light in old Pollard’s eyes, and the younger man coloured uncomfortably.

‘What was that, sir?’ he asked.

‘Oh, never mind! People wag their tongues a deal too much. I’ve already told you I don’t believe ’em. If I did, you wouldn’t set foot across this threshold again. I’d not go to my God—as soon I must—and have to admit that I’d connived at wickedness in others. A hussy like that Anne Peters deserves to be—’

‘Ah!’

‘What do you mean by “Ah!”?’

Young Hoskins knew how to assume the *role* of an injured innocent.

‘Because I’ve spoken to her when I’ve met her out!’ he exclaimed. ‘I suppose that was enough to start a rumour in this scandal-whispering hole. I used to play with her when we were both children. Thanks to you, sir, my position’s changed since then. But one doesn’t like to cut people one used to know. It would seem too foolish and snobbish, since not a soul in the village but knows my history.’

The old man nodded, and the younger one wished his eyes were not so alert and keen.

‘I shouldn’t speak to her any more,’ he said. ‘It is her own fault if she has placed herself beyond the pale.’

The conversation ended there, but a new dread was born in the young man’s heart. Except for an accident, old Pollard’s money was now as good as his own. He told himself that he had been a fool to risk so much for this rustic light-o’-love who, after all, had served no more than to dispel some of the dullness of his vacations.

For a long time past he had contemplated breaking off his association with Anne Peters. Now he saw the necessity for such a step. If rumour grew into a circumstantial story, built up out of evidence, he knew old Pollard’s will would be in the fire and a new one drafted. For a man who firmly believed that he was dogged by two evil spirits which were determined to compass his ruin, he had to admit to himself that he had behaved like a fool. So, on the following night, when he went to meet Anne Peters at Tumbledown Barn, he had decided that it was for the last time.

Of course, he expected trouble. Anne would object to being cast off, and he might have to make her a present in money. This, although he was not famous for being open-handed, troubled him very little, since he had over three hundred pounds in the bank, which he had thriftily put by out of his allowance. All he needed to do was to keep her quiet temporarily until the breath was out of his benefactor's body. He might even make her a vague promise of subsequent marriage which he need not fulfil.

It was as if by some queer process of telepathy Anne Peters was aware of his intention that night, and had determined to profit herself by striking the first blow. He saw that something was amiss with her while he stood in the entrance to the barn, a lighted match between his hollowed hands. She did not trip towards him and offer to kiss him, as was her wont, but sat aloof on the dropped pole of an old wagon.

'You're late, as usual,' she greeted him. 'You're late every time. It's no way to treat a lady. I suppose you're afraid to be here a minute by yourself. Afraid the ghost with a patch over his eye will get you!'

He grimaced at this loose reference to one of his personal devils in that of all places. Then he smiled, and, as he struck another match, managed to answer lightly:

'What's the matter with you, old thing? You've got a grouch on you tonight.'

'I'm sick of it all,' she answered. 'Sick and tired.'

So was he, but he could not say so. His voice mocked the accents of a lover as he crossed the barn towards her.

'Poor little old Anne! Never mind, poor little girl. Very soon now She stood up and faced him purposely. He could see that she had been lashing herself into a fury by the mental repetition of her real or assumed grievances.

'For God's sake, don't give me any more promises!' she cried. 'I've been listening to 'em, off and on, for two years, till I'm sick. Promises aren't solid things to live on—yours especially! I've had enough of it.'

'Anne!' he exclaimed.

'Yes, Anne!' she mocked.

'What do you want?'

'What I'm going to get. You're going to marry me.'

'Of course,' he murmured. 'Some day.'

'Not some day. At once.'

Fear began to tingle in his blood. He leaned against one of the wheels of the wagon and avoided meeting her eyes in the gloom.

'Is there any reason,' he asked, 'why we should be married soon?'

A moment elapsed before she answered: 'Yes'.

'That's a lie,' he said; and he knew suddenly in his heart that she was lying. A sudden fury shook him, for that she should try to deceive him—a man of the world, as he accounted himself—by this threadbare trick.

'Lie or not,' she answered, 'you'll marry me within three days, or you'll regret it.'

It was strange how suddenly he hated her, how hard he found it to school his tongue in replying.

'Then you'll marry a pauper. He'll disinherit me.'

'Because I'm not good enough for you?' she sneered. 'Because I'm a common girl and you're a gentleman?'

She had stung him again. In cold fury he answered:

‘Don’t hold me responsible for his views. Why can’t you wait until he’s dead? It won’t be long.’

She broke out into ironic laughter.

‘You think I’m a fine fool, don’t you? I don’t want your promises. You’ll marry me in three days, Jack Hoskins.’

‘He—’

‘He needn’t know. We can be married by licence over at Towcester.’

‘That couldn’t be done in three days.’

‘Haven’t you heard of a special licence?’

He turned at bay then, openly savage.

‘Why can’t you wait until he’s dead?’

‘Because a dead man can’t alter his will. A lot you’d care then! Do you think I don’t know you? You’ll marry me within three days or I’ll go to him and tell him everything.’

Vaguely he was aware that his control had slipped from him. He was like a ridden horse mastered by strange hands. Feebly he strove against something that he knew to be evil. When he answered it was as if he listened to a strange voice which spoke for him.

‘Of course, he’d take your word against mine!’

‘He’d have to, with the letters I’ve got to show—the letters posted from Trumpington, in case anybody in the village should see the Cambridge postmark.’

‘Anne! Anne!’ He heard the name slide out of his mouth all oily and wheedling. ‘You wouldn’t ruin me, would you, Anne?’

She mocked him, mincing her accent in imitation of his. Strange, he thought, that she did not realise her peril; strange that she did not see the change in him. He felt himself moving in a black cloud which should have been visible to her. It seemed to him that the darkness around him was riven continually by small, swift flashes of light, so that he saw eyes watching him, grinning lips, twisted, malevolent features which he remembered across the years. For one immeasurable fraction of time he was back in the witness-box; his little, piping voice filled the great room; and these same eyes which gloated over him now shot hatred at him across the well of the court.

Anne was speaking again. He could hardly hear her. There were voices whispering to him that if she were dead she couldn’t speak at all—couldn’t even tell old Pollard the story of this liaison. Her words blent with these whisperings into a murmurous babble.

‘You never meant to marry me!’ he heard her say.

‘Marry you!’ Was it his own voice—that sneering snarl? ‘You, a village slut with a kiss for every Tom, Dick, and Harry! Marry you!’

She would have answered him in kind, but he had drawn near to her; and in the gloom she saw his face, all wrung and devilish.

‘Jack!’ she cried. And in that, the last coherent word she ever uttered, there was a wail of terror and dismay.

Presently it was all so still and silent that the rats came out of their refuge in the heap of straw.

Next morning the village was electrified.

All previous excitement was surpassed a thousandfold when it became known that Tumbledown Barn had claimed a second victim; that Anne Peters had been strangled there, and that ‘Mr Hoskins’ had been arrested in connection with the crime.

A hundred rumours were current during the day. Among them, the most persistent and—as subsequent events proved—the best founded, was to the effect that Hoskins had already

confessed. At six o'clock the tap-room of the inn was filled by an eager crowd of yokels, most of whom remembered the previous crime, all eagerly discussing the new sensation.

Old Gaudy, the badger, voiced the sentiments of most of the others.

'I mind them other two very well,' he said. 'Beach with his one eye, and Dolby with his stoop and shamblin' limp. Bad men they was both, as most of us knowed from the moment they set foot in the village. But who'd ha' thought it o' young Hoskins? Why, not a man or woman here that thought him worse nor a stuck-up calf! Truly the ways of men be past understanding.'

The entry of the village policeman created a hubbub in the crowded bar. Police Constable Clarke had been absent all day at the county town, whither he had taken his prisoner. He was new to the neighbourhood, and therefore able to be more impressive than a native. With promotion already within his grasp, he entered the house with a swagger which was almost pardonable. He was the man of the hour.

'I can't tell none o' you nothing,' he said, as he accepted a pint of beer, and made his voice carry above the clamour of a score of questioners. 'It ain't accordin' to regulations. You'll hear all about it in good time.'

For five minutes he was adamant, until Seeley, the grocer, spoke to him.

'But Mr Clarke,' he said, 'if it be true that you went into the barn and found him in the act of burying the body in the straw—that's what we've heard tell—what made you go to the barn at all?'

The constable coughed and expanded his chest.

'I don't mind tellin' you that,' he said, 'as there's two missin' witnesses I've got to make inquiries for, and p'raps some o' you can put me on the right road. Not as these 'ere witnesses are necessary in view of what's happened, but it's regulations. Two men came round to my cottage yesterday evenin' and told me there was trouble up at the barn. Two tramps, I think they was. Leastways, I haven't seen them hereabouts. They'd gone by the time I'd got my boots laced, and I didn't see em very clearly through the window.'

'Wot was they like, these two?' questioned Seeley.

The constable considered.

'Well,' he said at last, 'it seemed to me that one wore a black patch over his left eye, and the other 'ad stoopin shoulders and seemed to limp.'