

A Silent Witness

By Richard Marsh

I. THE LIVING DEATH

I doubt if a more terrible thing ever happened to any man than that which happened to me in the autumn of 1883. The memory of it all is with me now as though it were but yesterday. And sometimes I wake shrieking in my dreams, and lie awake all night, oppressed with a great agony of fear.

I was a clerk in Burton's Bank at Exeter. For some days I had been queer and out of sorts. More than once I had been conscious of what seemed to me a sudden numbness of the limbs. For instance, on two separate occasions I had been incapable of rising from my office-stool. My wife and fellow-clerks noticed that I did not seem to be in my usual health, and my wife in particular had been urgent in entreating me to take my annual holiday without delay. But I had some complicated accounts to balance which I was unwilling to leave undone. And that more especially since they had given me an infinitude of trouble, the sought-for balance being exactly the thing I could not get.

It was the evening of September 14th. It was a Friday. I had decided at the last moment to remain at the bank after the rest had gone, for I had arranged that if I could get the accounts all right I would start for Penzance on the following morning with my wife. God alone knows how I yearned for a sight of the sea!

It had been a hot day, that Friday—a terribly hot day—and all day long I had been conscious not only of a curious unwillingness, but of an absolute incapacity, to move. In some extraordinary way my limbs seemed in a measure to have passed from my control. I suppose it was past six o'clock. I was all alone in the bank; the rest of the establishment had left a good hour ago. I was leaning forward on my desk, racking my brains to think where the error could be, when—shall I ever forget it?—in an instant—in a flash of lightning—I became conscious of a singular sensation which was stealing over me. It was just as though some malevolent spirit had woven a spell and deprived me of the power of motion. I was spell-bound, rooted to my seat, as helpless as though I had been struck by the hand of death.

The strangest part of it was that while in that sudden, awful visitation I had lost the use of my limbs, I had preserved my faculties intact. I could see—straight in front, that is—for not only could I not turn my head a hair's-breadth to either side, not only could I not even close my eyes, but I could not even change the direction of my glance. I could only look straight in front of me with what I felt instinctively must be a fixed, horrible, glassy stare. But what there was in front of me, that I could plainly see. And I could hear. Indeed, my hearing seemed to be unnaturally keen. For instance, Burton's Bank is in the Cathedral Yard. Not only could I hear every footstep which passed even on the other side of the Cathedral—no slight distance for the sound of a foot to travel—but I could hear the traffic that went up and down Fore Street Hill, and over the bridge, right away to St. Thomas' on the other side. And worse—for God knows that in the horror of all that followed it was of a surety the worst of all!—I could think. My brain, like my hearing, seemed to have become phenomenally clear. Instantaneously I knew what had come upon me. It was catalepsy. I was in a cataleptic fit!

I felt no pain—physical pain, at least. In that sense I was like a man whose physical side is dead, but whose mind still lives. And as I sat there hour after hour, dead, my agony of mind rose to such a climax that I cannot but think that it transcended whatever agony of body the most morbid imagination has at any time described.

It became dark—so dark that my eyes became useless for any purposes of sight, and yet they would not shut. It became silent, too—the intense silence of the night. But all at once, when the night was stillest, a sound struck on my ears—a peculiar sound, as of someone who walked with muffled steps. And then—could it be? Yes! A window was being opened close at hand.

I cannot doubt but that the only thing which had kept me from promptly falling on to the floor when the fit had first taken me, was the fact that I was leaning so forward that the greater part of my weight was on the desk. So, leaning forward on the desk, I stayed. Just in front of me was a glass partition, on the other side of which was the inner office, in which the safe was kept. It was the window of this inner office which was being opened now. By what I cannot but suppose was a providential accident, since I could not alter the direction of my glance, the safe was right in my line of sight; and so, although I could not immediately see who it was that entered, directly the mysterious intruder came between myself and the safe I could see him plainly.

At first all was dark. Then a light was struck, and someone, bearing a shaded lantern in his hand, appeared in my line of sight.

It was Philip Morris, our head cashier, and practically the manager of the bank!

I shall never forget my unutterable amazement when I perceived that it was he. What could bring him there at such an hour, in such a way? He wore a light dust coat which was unbuttoned down the front, so that I could see his dress-clothes beneath and the diamonds gleaming in his shirt.

He carried a small leather bag in his hand. He took a bunch of keys from his pocket; with these he unlocked the safe. From it he took a quantity of notes—I could hear them rustle—and several bags of gold, which jingled as he dropped them in his bag. Then he turned right round, so that I saw him full in the face.

“If Wheeler could only see me now!”—I should mention that my name is Wheeler—Richard Wheeler. The allusion was to me. “I guess he would soon unriddle the mystery of his accounts. Well, the game is up, I suppose; I have had my fling, even if the result is penal servitude for life. I flatter myself that few men would have had the dexterity to carry it on so long.”

He came a few steps forward, the lantern in his hand, and suddenly stopped short. His eyes were fixed on the glass partition. On his face there was an expression of the most awful ghastly fear. His lips seemed parched; he gasped for breath. For a moment I thought he would be seized with a convulsion, but he had sufficient control over himself to ward off that. He spoke at last, and his voice was like the voice of a strangled man.

“Wheeler! Wheeler! Is it you? For God’s sake, don’t look like that! Your eyes are horrible!”

He covered his own eyes with his hand; I could see him shudder. Then he looked again; his mood was changed. With quick, firm steps he advanced to the partition door, and entered the office in which I was.

“I suppose you think you have caught me?” he cried. “I congratulate you upon your cleverness; but perhaps, my friend, you have caught more than you think.”

Suddenly he seemed struck by my immobility. He came a step nearer.

“Why do you sit there like a wooden block, you hypocritical old fool? Do you hear? Can’t you speak? You think you have trapped me very neatly, eh?”

He paused, he came a step nearer.

“Can’t you speak, you fool? Wheeler! Wheeler!”

He laid his hand upon my shoulder; he shone the lantern in my face. Suddenly he gave the most dreadful shriek that ever yet I heard.

“My God!” he cried, “he’s dead!”

In his sudden fear the lantern fell from his hand with a crash. He gave me a push which sent me flying head-foremost to the floor. And where I fell, there, like a dead man, I lay.

II. THE CONSCIOUS CORPSE

I lay on my own bed in my own room. Oh! what had I ever done to deserve the agony which I endured then? There was my wife on her knees beside the bed; there was a candle which flickered on the chest of drawers, although daylight already streamed into the room; and there was I, wrapped in the garments which enfold the dead. How my wife wept! How she mourned in the sudden anguish of her woe! Now she called on God for mercy and for strength, and now she got upon the bed and pillowed her head upon my breast, or bedewed my face with her kisses and her tears.

“Richard!” she cried. “Richard! After all these years! My own! My dear!”

And then she wept as though her heart would break. Who shall conceive my agony as I lay there?

A little later there was this scene. Five men came into the room. There was Dr. Levenson, my old medical attendant; Wilfind Burton, the banker, whom, man and boy, I had served for thirty years; Mr. Fellowes, the lawyer to the bank; Philip Morris, that accursed thief; and Captain Philipson, the chief of the county police.

It was Mr. Burton who spoke first. His voice was dry and cold—very different to the kindly, pleasant voice I knew so well.

“Before we go any further, I suppose, Dr. Levenson, there is no doubt that this wretched man is dead? That you certify? No autopsy necessary, or anything of that sort?”

Dr. Levenson smiled a superior smile.

“Richard Wheeler is certainly dead. I have the certificate of death in my pocket. The funeral is already arranged. He died from valvular disease of the heart—a disease of whose presence I have long been aware.” My brain reeled as I listened to the glib announcement. “Doubtless his death was accelerated at the last by a sudden shock.”

“God,” said Mr. Burton, with a solemnity the unconscious irony of which was hideous, “saw fit to strike down the criminal at the moment of his crime.”

I wondered what Philip Morris looked like as he heard the words. This time he was out of my line of sight.

“And now,” continued Mr. Burton, “to proceed to the business which has brought us here. I need not point out to you, Dr. Levenson, that all that passes here is in the strictest confidence.” I presume that the doctor bowed his head. “The bank has been the victim of”—the speaker’s voice trembled, and I felt that my wife covered her face with her hands—“of the most terrible dishonesty. To what extent the affair has gone I have not yet had time to ascertain, but I fear that we have been robbed to the extent of at least a hundred thousand pounds.”

A hundred thousand pounds! My God! No wonder I could not get the accounts to balance! That villain had robbed us of a hundred thousand pounds at least, and I lay speechless there.

“Mr. Morris will repeat the statement which he has already made to me. You, Mr. Fellowes, will kindly take it down, and we will have it attested in the presence of Captain Philipson. Mrs.

Wheeler, you need not stop; it will only be painful to your feelings. Indeed, I think you had better go away.

“Sir,” said my dear wife—oh, how her dear voice rang through my brain!—“whatever Mr. Morris may have to say, I never shall believe that my dear husband was a thief. I have known him to be a true husband and a God-fearing man for nearly thirty years.

“Ah, Mrs. Wheeler, how appearances may deceive. I had to the full as much confidence in him as you. Before you think that I misjudge him, hear what Mr. Morris has to say.”

Philip Morris began his tale. It flashed upon me in an instant that he had availed himself of my supposed decease to fasten his guilt upon my head. But I had never imagined that anyone in his circumstances could have carried the matter through with so easy an air. There was even an affectation of pathos in his tones as he filled in the details of his horrid lie.

“I had been spending the evening at Mr. Fisher’s”—Mr. Fisher was one of the minor canons, a bachelor, who was reputed to have a taste for whist and for hours which were, perhaps, a little uncanonical. “I was returning home, when, on passing the bank, I noticed that there seemed to be a light in the office in which the safe is kept. The window, as you know, is but a few feet from the ground. I have often pointed out how easy it would be for a thief to get in that way.”

“I know you have! I know you have!” said Mr. Burton.

The hypocrite went on—

“To my surprise I found it was unlatched. I opened it. Whoever was within was too much absorbed in his occupation to notice what I did. I looked through the open window and saw that someone was in the inner office, but who it was I could not at first perceive. I climbed through the window and went in. Directly I entered the man looked up; it was Richard Wheeler. When he saw me he gave the most awful scream I think I ever heard, and fell down—dead.

So soon as I had recovered from my bewilderment, I went to the window and called for help. A constable who heard me came to my assistance. Together we examined the room. That is all I have to say. I only wish that I had not to say so much.”

“But there is more that must be said,” Mr. Burton took up the strain. “In the grate were found the half-consumed fragments of the accounts, which, if they had been suffered to continue in existence, would inevitably have betrayed the dead man’s crime. The safe was found wide open—it is still a mystery how he contrived to open it—ransacked of all the chief valuables it contained. On his desk was found a bag containing five hundred pounds in gold, and in his pockets notes for a thousand pounds. But notes and gold to the value of ten thousand pounds, and securities to a very large amount, are gone. We have still to find out where. I am sorry to tell you, Mrs. Wheeler, that to search this house is one of the purposes which has brought us here.”

“Sir,” said my dear wife, “you need make no apology. You are welcome to search the house from attic to basement. You will find nothing that was not righteously my dear husband’s own.”

III. THE COFFIN BREAKS

For five days I lay there—dead. Words cannot describe the agony I endured. Conceive it if you can. Picture yourself in my position; conceive what you would suffer then. Far better had I indeed been dead.

On the second day they came and measured me for my coffin. Think of it—a living man! On the fourth day they brought it home, and I was placed within. There were two of them that brought it, and as they placed me in that narrow box they cracked their little jest.

“A tight fit, isn’t he?” said one.

“Ah,” replied his fellow, “they’d have given him as tight a fit if he had lived; four good strong walls for life.”

“Who’d ever have thought old Dick Wheeler would have done a bit upon the cross?”

“Well,” again replied his fellow—how I loathed that man!—“I would for one. I never knew a psalm-singer yet that wasn’t a robber and a thief.”

When that choice pair had gone, my wife came in and looked at me as I lay in my last bed. She had a wreath in her hand, which she placed upon my breast, and a white rose, which betokened innocence, which she placed within the wreath. She stooped and kissed me on the brow; and as she did so she burst into a flood of tears.

“Oh, God!” she cried, “show that my dear husband was not a thief!”

The next day, the fifth, they came and screwed me down. Imagine that! I learnt from what they said that they feared that if, in that hot weather, I was left for a longer time exposed, decomposition would set in. When they had already placed the lid upon my coffin, my wife came running in. I learnt that they had come in her absence to shut me for ever from her sight. They imagined that if she were there she might object to what they did. Her appearance disconcerted them. She made them immediately remove the lid, and bade them withdraw from the room, so that she might have final solitary communion with her dead.

She knelt down by the side of my coffin and prayed. She expressed the most profound belief in the innocence of the man who had been her husband for nearly thirty years, and she besought the Most High that He would expound that innocence, and make it clear to man. Then she stood up and kissed me on the lips—kissed me a last good-bye!

Then she left me, to the full as brokenhearted as she herself, and the undertaker’s men returned and screwed me down. They put the lid upon my coffin, and shut from me the blessed light; for no one had closed my eyes. They had tried to, but the lids would not come down. I could hear the traffickers in death laughing and jesting as they drove the screws well home. When they had done their work, and gone, I was a prisoner indeed.

How long I remained in that box screwed down I never knew. It seemed to me a hundred years. A dreadful thought came to me, not once but again and again, with recurring force. Suppose that I indeed was dead? Who knows the mysteries of death? Is it not conceivable that when the body dies, the mind, which has such a mysterious affinity with the soul, may live? If I were dead, and my shame should live! Was it possible that through the long cycle of the years, the æons, which were still to come, my mind should be alive and I be dead? . . . It is not strange that my pen should tremble as I recall the thoughts which racked me then.

Racked me with such intensity that, even in my state of death, I feared I should go mad. And then? What then? Mad through the æons in the womb of time! Even dead, I thought my brain would burst. I tried to scream. I struggled as with the issues of life and death for the power to give expression to the great agony of my fear and pain.

And then? What happened then? To this hour I cannot precisely say. I know that while, mentally, I struggled with inconceivable eagerness to cry out, I suddenly awoke. I know no other word to use. I knew I was alive. Alive, and prisoned in that box! And I do believe that for the first few moments of my resurrection—what was it else?—I actually was mad. I had a madman’s strength, at any rate. I struggled like a madman, too—struggled to be free—and with such strength that I burst the box, forced the coffin’s sides, and was a prisoner no more.

I stood upon my feet. As I did so I discovered that my display of strength must have been a sort of frenzy, for indeed I was so weak that at first I could not stand. I sank back upon the bed. But only for a moment. There was that within me which gave me strength. I was filled with an

overmastering desire to proclaim my innocence and bring home to the criminal his crime. Wholly regardless of the clothes I wore, forgetful of them even, I went down the stairs into the street, and ran to Mr. Burton's as certainly I never ran before.

I must have cut a pretty figure as I ran, but Mr. Burton's great house was within a couple of hundred yards of my more modest residence, the hour was late, and I never met a creature on the way. I was well acquainted both with the banker's habits and his house. I knew that often, when the rest of his household was fast asleep, Mr. Burton would sit for hours writing in the study which opened on to the lawn at the back. To this room I hastened. It was as I supposed. There was a bright light within. I turned the handle of the French window; it yielded to my touch. Without pausing for an instant to reflect on what the consequences of my act might be, I burst into the room.

As I entered, Mr. Burton was sitting writing at a table. He looked up. When he saw me he rose from his seat. He clutched the edge of the table. He gazed at me, speechless, unable to believe that what he saw was real.

"Wheeler!" he gasped at last; "Richard Wheeler!"

"Yes, sir, 'tis I! Not dead, but living! This is no ghost you gaze upon, but a creature of flesh and blood, to whom God has given strength to declare his innocence and expose another's crime."

I poured out my tale. He was too bewildered at first to grasp the meaning of my words. It was all so unexpected and so strange that he was unable to realise that he was not the victim of some dreadful dream. But it became plain to him at last. It was painful to see his agitation as he began to grasp the purport of my revelation.

"You had a cataleptic fit!"

"If it was not catalepsy, I know not what it was. I am no doctor, sir."

"And you were within an ace of being buried alive! The thought is terrible."

"It was terrible to me."

"And you saw—you actually saw—Philip Morris rob the safe?"

"I was a silent witness of his crime. It was only when he supposed that I was dead that it occurred to him to place the guilt upon my shoulders."

"What a villain the man must be! It seems incredible! But the whole story seems incredible for the matter of that, and the most incredible part of it is your presence here. But even supposing what you say is true—and God forbid, after what you have told me, that I should deny it—how are you going to prove his villainy?"

"Mr. Burton, I am but newly come from the chambers of death."

"For heaven's sake don't talk like that! You make my blood run cold."

"But the fact is so; and things are revealed to me which to you are hidden." I rose up, still in my grave-clothes, trembling like a leaf. "At this instant the thief is at his work again, and tampers with the safe. Mr. Burton, I entreat you to come with me to the bank; his villainy shall be proved to-night."

"Come with you—to the bank—at this hour of the night!"

But I had my way. The banker lent me some of his own clothes, and a cloak was thrown over my shoulders. The coachman was roused; a carriage was ordered out. Within a very few minutes we were seated in it, and were being driven swiftly towards the bank, through the silent streets, to catch the criminal in the very moment of his crime.

The carriage was drawn up some little distance from the bank. We got out. Mr. Burton had the key of the private door. We approached swiftly, yet silently as well. Our chief object was not to give the slightest alarm.

On the very threshold Mr. Burton paused.

“I am afraid that this is a wild-goose chase that you have brought me on. Some folks would even call it by a stronger name.”

“Can you not hear him? Hark! He rustles a bundle of notes! They are those notes which were missing, and which you searched my house to find.”

“Hear him, Wheeler? Are you mad? When he is in the private office—if he is anywhere at all—and we are out in the street!”

“I can hear him, if you can’t. Give me the key, or open the door. Every moment which we waste increases his chances of escape.”

Hesitatingly—I believe he doubted my sanity even then—Mr. Burton put the key into the lock. Noiselessly it turned. With out a sound the door swung open on its well-oiled hinges. We stood inside. It was pitch dark.

“Hadn’t we better have a light? I cannot see my hand before my face. We shall be falling over something if we don’t take care.”

“I need no light. Remember my eyes have grown accustomed to the dark. You, sir, have only to keep close to me.”

I led the way. He followed close upon my heels. Suddenly I paused.

“See! There is a light!”

Sure enough there was, in the inner room—in that inner room in which the safe was kept. I caught Mr. Burton by the arm. “Sir, come a little farther, and you shall see it all. You shall see the criminal detected in his crime.”

I did not tremble then; I had become quite cool and calm.

I knew my hour was at hand. With unfaltering fingers I unloosed the cloak from about my shoulders and stood revealed in my cerements, as though I had new-risen from the grave. And then—

Then I stole by the outer door into the office in which I had been overtaken by that strange mockery of death. Through the glass partition, sure enough, I saw at a glance that Philip Morris, lantern in hand, was at his old work, busied with the contents of the safe. I leaned right forward on the desk, and tapped with my fingers against the glass. He caught the sound at once, but for a moment did not perceive from whence it rose. He approached the partition; I saw him trembling as he came. I saw his face was ghastly white.

When he was quite close, in my grave-clothes I rose straight up, and, looking him straight in the face—his pallid, panic-stricken face—I raised my arm above my head, and in a loud voice cried out— “Thou thief!”

* * *

A wild shriek rang through the night; and sometimes in my ears I seem to hear it still

When Mr. Burton and I ran in we found him, stricken by a sudden agony of conscience-stricken fear, a bundle of bank notes in the frenzied grip of his right hand, lying in a fit upon the floor.