

A Case of Prevision

By J. D. Beresford

This extraordinary case of prevision is supported by unusually sound evidence. In the first place we have the testimony of Mr. Galt, whose account of the incidents which preceded the catastrophe is circumstantial, consistent and exceedingly convincing. In the second place we have the valuable corroboration of Mr. Henderson, to whom the incidents above referred to were narrated before the event which gave them such peculiar value. Finally, we have Mr. Jessop's own letters to his friend. No discrepancies have been found during a long and careful examination of these three sources, and yet the precisians in this field of research have refused to admit that the case has been demonstrated beyond any possibility of doubt. This caution appears excessive to the small group of people acquainted with the facts, and it has been decided by those most nearly interested, that it is advisable to give prominence to the whole of the circumstances, since this is a matter which gives us a curious insight into man's relation to eternity, and demonstrates how arbitrary are our conceptions of time and space. . . .

Mr. Mark Jessop was a man of thirty-five. He was tall, slight and had a pronounced stoop. Mr. Galt describes him as having a high, rather narrow forehead, more noticeable inasmuch as he was prematurely bald over the temples; and mentions that he always wore gold-mounted spectacles. Mr. Jessop's name will be known to many as an architect of unusual promise, with a distinctive style which is commonly associated with his treatment of small country houses. He was unmarried, and at the time of the occurrences about to be set out was making a very decent income.

In the early March of last year, after repeated warnings by his medical adviser, Mr. Jessop decided to take a six weeks' rest. He had certainly been overworking and was very run down; but even so, he would probably have deferred his holiday if he had not begun to have doubts as to the failure of his eyesight.

The symptoms were peculiar, and it seems very probable that he was even then experiencing some form of prevision. From Mr. Galt's account, it appears that Jessop occasionally saw on his drawing-paper, lines that had never been drawn, and that he suffered considerable perplexity in consequence. On one such occasion, he told Galt, he went home believing that he had finished a certain detail drawing, and was very vexed the next morning to find the work incomplete; he believed for a few minutes that someone had carefully erased his pencil marks. Unhappily, from our point of view, he was able to convince himself by an examination of the paper that this was not the case, and he did not, therefore, mention the circumstance to anyone in his office. This last instance of the increasing unreliability of his vision was the proximate cause of his leaving town. He accounted for his hallucinations by the fact that he had unusual powers of visualisation, but as he said to Galt, these powers, so valuable to him in his profession, would become an intolerable nuisance if his conceptions were thus to become prematurely objectified.

He decided, therefore, to take a complete rest for six weeks, and persuaded his friend Galt, also an architect, to stay with him for the first fortnight. They elected to go to St. Ives, a place neither of them had visited before.

There can be no doubt that Jessop was in a highly-strung, nervous state. The journey upset him and for the first two days after his arrival in Cornwall, he hardly went outside the house. The weather, it is true, was very inclement, with a north-west wind and a fine driving mist of rain, but this, alone, would not have kept him indoors.

On the third day, however, the wind veered to the east, and a spell of bright, warm days followed. Galt then persuaded his friend to go out for long walks, which he did although still fretful and nervous about himself. Several times during the next few days he asked Galt anxiously, if he could see certain vessels in the bay, and Galt says that on more than one occasion he was unable to see the boats Jessop tried to indicate. But if these hallucinations were veridical or not cannot be proved, as Galt never attempted to verify them. He did not ask for any description of the boats, nor look out later to see if boats subsequently appeared in the places indicated. He was, indeed, chiefly occupied in trying to distract his friend's attention from the subject of his symptoms, and avoided any reference to the question of the hallucinations.

During the first ten days of their stay in St. Ives, the two friends seem to have kept to the two main outlets from the town. They started for their walks either by way of the Penzance road, through Carbis Bay and Lelant, or by the Land's End road through Stennack, going through Zennor or taking the path to Gurnard's Head. On the eleventh day, however, a Thursday, the weather changed again, and in the afternoon they decided not to go too far from home.

They, therefore, made their way by the harbour and the wharf to the "Island," and from there discovered the existence of the Porthmeor beach, which they had not seen before. It was not actually raining at the moment, so they skirted the beach and wandered along the footpath which leads to Clodgy.

This path follows the cliff edge. About a quarter of a mile from the town, there is an open triangle of turf and cliffs run out in a small headland, a favourite place for tourists in the summer, and known as Man's Head Rock, from a resemblance to a face which may be found in a great stone that is poised on the top of the cliff. From here the path turns to the left and four rough steps lead upwards to a small granite quarry. The cliff at this corner is, perhaps, eighty feet high.

It was at this point that the incident occurred.

Jessop was first up the steps and he paused at the top and then drew back. "Good Lord!" he said. "There has been a landslip here. How terribly dangerous. Anyone might easily walk over these steps." He was inured to looking down from heights, and though momentarily alarmed at coming on the chasm so suddenly, he spoke quite calmly.

"Let me see," said Galt, and Jessop made way for him.

Galt says that when he had climbed the steps and saw a table of flat ground before him, he was far more horrified than he could have been by the sight of any landslip. He hesitated for a moment and then decided to treat the matter as calmly as possible.

"What do you mean, Jessop?" he asked. "It's perfectly flat, safe walking, here."

"Flat, safe walking?" repeated Jessop. "You must be mad."

"Oh! well, I'll soon prove it," returned Galt, and took a step forward.

"God! man, don't be a fool," shouted Jessop, and clutched his friend fiercely by the coat tails, dragging him backwards, so that the two of them nearly fell together down the steps.

It came to Galt at that moment that the only thing to do was to take Jessop firmly in hand, to demonstrate beyond any shadow of doubt that what he saw as a chasm was in fact solid ground.

"Look here, old chap," Galt said. "This is another of your hallucinations, and I'm going to prove it to you. Now, do be quite calm about it and listen to me. There hasn't been any landslip, there's a flat table of land there, and I'm going to walk on it."

Jessop gripped his friend by the arm. "Are you absolutely sure?" he asked. "This is horrible; horrible."

"I'm absolutely sure," returned Galt, "and when you see me walking over this abyss of yours; the fancy will leave you for good and all."

"Wait a bit, wait a bit," said Jessop hurriedly. "Let me have another look first." He went up again to the top step and looked down.

"Well?" asked Galt, close at his elbow.

"To me," said Jessop, "there's a gap between us and the continuation of the path, at least one hundred and fifty feet across, and all the debris is piled in a steep bank"—he pointed to the left—"that runs up there almost to the surface. Just underneath us there is a clear drop of sixty or seventy feet on to a huge, fallen obelisk of rock, a monolith, oh! ten or twelve feet across. It is quite fresh from the cleavage on this side, splintered and shining where the loose earth hasn't covered it. I can't see how long it is because the end runs under the debris."

Galt looked and saw nothing but a flat table of firm ground. "You're wonderfully circumstantial," he said, "but there's nothing of the kind there. Let me show you."

Jessop grabbed him nervously by the arm again. "Oh, I can't, Galt," he said. "I can't. It's too awful."

"Don't be an ass!" replied Galt, in a sturdy, common-sense tone. "You must get rid of these visions of yours, and I'm going to help you." He wrenched himself away from Jessop and stepped on to the path ahead of him.

"Galt! Galt!" shrieked Jessop. "Oh! God, he's gone!" He hid his eyes in his hands, and began to shudder.

"What the devil do you mean?" asked Galt, standing two yards away. "I haven't gone."

At that, Jessop looked up with a very scared face and for a moment peered straight at Galt. "Where are you?" he said, trembling. "Where are you?"

"Why here; within two yards of you," was the answer.

"I can't see you," said Jessop. He was now clutching the top step, and looking down into his imagined chasm.

"Look up!" said Galt. "Here I am! Quite close to you!"

"I can't *see* you," said Jessop again. He sat down on the second step and began to cry.

Galt immediately rejoined him, and laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

At the touch of Galt's hand, Jessop looked up. "I couldn't *see* you," he sobbed. The tears were streaming down his face. . . .

Galt saw that this was no time for further demonstration of his friend's defects of vision, and took him straight back to their lodgings; but after dinner he deliberately reopened the subject. He thought that it was essential for Jessop to realise the nature of his hallucination.

Jessop appeared not unwilling to discuss the topic, and that evening he repeated his description of what he had seen and, also, explained that the instant Galt walked beyond the steps he had disappeared, "like a figure in a trick cinematograph film."

Finally he agreed to Galt's suggestion, that they should return to the same place the next day, and that Jessop, himself, should walk on the ground that he could not see. He was sensible about the affair, that evening: admitted that it was a hallucination, and speculated vaguely on the question of auto-suggestion. "With a power of visualisation like mine," he said, "a strong suggestion would present a wonderfully real picture. Subconsciously I may have been thinking of landslips when we reached that place. . . ."

The next morning, Friday, was a fine, clear day and they set out for Man's Head Rock about half-past ten. Jessop was in rather better spirits that morning, and on the way he discussed hypnotic and post-hypnotic suggestion and asked Galt whether he thought he could make a sufficiently strong counter-suggestion to overcome the hallucination of the landslip.

Galt played up to this idea, and did his best by making such remarks as "It was all pure imagination on your part," or "When we get to the place, you will see firm, flat ground ahead of you." And Jessop replied, "Yes, yes, of course I shall. No doubt of it."

When they reached the steps, he stopped and said, "Let me go first." Galt agreed and watched him attentively as he walked up the four steps. At the top he halted abruptly and then turned back, looking very white and scared. "It's still there," he said.

Galt at once decided to take the thing in hand. "Look here, old chap," he said. "You must have faith in me! You agree that this is only a hallucination. Now, trust me and walk over. The moment you touch the ground on the other side, the vision will vanish."

"All right," returned Jessop nervously. But when he reached the top step he sat down. "I can't," he said, "I simply can't."

"You must," replied Galt.

Jessop merely shook his head.

"I say you must," insisted Galt, and, as Jessop made no reply, he began to bully him, saying finally, "Look here, if you won't go, I shall make you."

Then Jessop began to cry in the same pitiful way he had cried the day before. "I can't," he blubbered, "I simply can't. For God's sake don't make me."

Galt desisted. He could not stand the sight of Jessop's tears. . . .

They did not return to the steps on Saturday or Sunday, but they discussed the problem at great length. "I think I could go, if I were by myself,"

Jessop said once or twice, and, also, "I will go back when I've recovered my strength a bit."

Galt did not insist again, and on the Monday he returned to town. Jessop's last words at the station were, "I shall go back to that place when I'm stronger. I know it's all imagination. . . ."

Galt received three letters in all, from Jessop, during the following fortnight. The first, unhappily, was destroyed, but Galt remembers that Jessop wrote that he was going to the steps in a few days' time to make another essay, and added that he always felt better in the early morning and would walk over to the place before breakfast.

The second letter is cheerful in tone, and the beginning describes the writer's doings, especially a long drive he had taken to Land's End. On the fifth sheet he writes: "I am feeling much better now and am beginning to look forward to a return to work. I am very tired of doing nothing down here. Touching that hallucination of mine, I feel quite certain it will not recur and mean to go over to Man's Head Rock one morning early next week. I am determined that if the hallucination still persists, I will walk boldly over my imagined landslip."

It was a couple of days after he had received this letter that Galt gave Henderson the main facts of the case as here set out. Henderson agreed with Galt, that Jessop had been under the influence of some curious auto-suggestion which he could not afterwards throw off.

In the third letter, there is one further reference to the vision. Jessop wrote: "By the way, I have not been to the steps again, and I expect you will think me a procrastinator, but I mean to lay this bogey before I return. It is light at five o'clock, now, and as I don't sleep well in the morning, I think I shall go early one day. I don't quite know why, but I do shrink a little from the place still, and at sunrise my head is always perfectly clear. I am sanest at cockcrow. You know, I have always been a little mad."

Galt received this letter on the fourth of April. He did not answer it at once, as he judged from the general tone of it that his friend was practically cured.

Four days later his eye was caught by a small paragraph in the morning paper, headed "Cliff accident in Cornwall," which ran as follows: "On Tuesday morning the body of a man was discovered at the foot of a cliff near St. Ives in Cornwall. The man was quite dead when found, having fallen head down on to a large boulder, his skull being completely smashed by the blow. The body has not yet been identified, but is believed to be that of a visitor who has been staying in the town for some weeks. It is thought that the unfortunate man was walking along the cliff in the dark, as the body was first seen by a labourer going to work at six o'clock in the morning. The inquest is to be held to-morrow."

Galt was so alarmed by this paragraph that he at once sent off a prepaid telegram to Jessop, asking for news of him. He received an answer in an hour's time from the landlady of the rooms they had occupied. The telegram ran: "Mr. Jessop fallen over cliff. Please come at once."

Galt had just time to catch the 10.30 from Paddington.

On his arrival he learned at once from the landlady that there had been a great landslip by Man's Head Rock. Many people had heard it in the night, and she was not at all surprised when she heard Mr. Jessop getting up at daybreak, as she supposed he was going out to discover the origin of the noise—"like thunder it was," said the landlady.

Early the next morning Galt went out to Man's Head Rock. He found that the steps were still in place, but trembling on the verge of an abyss.

At the bottom of the chasm, he saw one huge monolith of granite; its face, where not covered with loose earth, was bright and glittering. The end of it was buried in the debris of the landslip. . . .