

# The Red House

By T. G. Jackson

O the edge of a great common, not many miles from London, there still stands an ancient red brick house with many gables, dating from the time of James I. Two wings of a later date have been added, but they do not interfere with the parent block. Standing originally as the principal house of a country village, it is now surrounded by modern villas, from which it courts seclusion within its high walls and gates, and the shady old-fashioned garden, into which, in summer at all events, the prying eyes of neighbours cannot penetrate. It seems to stand aloof from its modern surroundings, as a gentleman of the old school might shrink from the slang and vulgarity of the smart set of to-day. Within are stately rooms, loftier than usual for the date, some with old chimney-pieces and rich fretted plaster ceilings, in one of which appear the arms of the prosperous East Indian merchant who built the house when Shakespeare was still alive and Milton unborn. At the time of our story, however, it was still a country place. Here and there round the village green were a few comfortable houses where well-to-do London merchants sought repose after the turmoil of the City, and within a short mile was the stately home of the Lord of the Manor, with its wide-spread park stretching away towards London, and its great lake in the valley below the garden terraces.

In the reign of George III. this was the home of Sir Richard Hetherington, Baronet and Justice of the Peace, who was connected with the great family at the Manor House, and had considerable property also in Kent near Sevenoaks. He had ridden down in the afternoon from his town house in Queen's Square, Westminster, and was reading a note put into his hands just as he was starting:

Mr. Dawes to S<sup>r</sup> Richard sends comp<sup>ts</sup> begs Pardon for not meeting him at the Bedford according to appointment Did not Dine till Five & in such Company as pushed the Bottle about, marvellously quick that about 7-o'clock His Humble Servant was very unfit for St James's. Sunday Warwick Court.

*To*

S<sup>r</sup> Richard Hetherington  
Queen's Square.

"Dicky Dawes," said he to his wife, laughing, "is a bit too fond of the bottle, but is a good fellow at bottom. You know, my dear, he comes here to-morrow."

"I like Mr. Dawes well enough," said she, "when he is not in his cups."

"A plaguey rich fellow, Dawes, so they say," said William Hetherington, Sir Richard's nephew, who was in the room and listening to the conversation.

"Aye, he is well enough to do," said Sir Richard, who did not like the tone of the remark, "but what is that to you, William?"

"To me, uncle? Why, nothing at all. How do you suppose he will get here?"

"On horseback, I suppose, over the bridge and by the common. I have warned him not to ride late, for there are highwaymen about."

"Jerry Abershaw," said Lady Hetherington. "They say he is here again and has stopped the coach on the High Road."

“Oh! Jerry Abershaw!” said William, rather rudely. “Jerry Abershaw would have to be in a dozen places at once, if we were to believe all people say of him. Mr. Dawes will be safe enough on his ride, and there is no need to frighten him.”

And so saying, William Hetherington swung out of the room.

“A young cub!” said Sir Richard, as the door closed behind him. “He grows more insufferable every day.”

“I wish he would go away and do something for himself,” said his wife.

“So do I, my dear, heartily. But my poor brother has left him in my charge, and as his guardian I must see him through his minority. However, in a few months he will be of age, and then our troubles will be over.”

“But what will he do with himself when he is his own master? I fear he will go from bad to worse.”

“I fear so too, but I see no way to do more for him than I have done,” said Sir Richard. “He will have a decent patrimony if he does not fool it away when he has it, after he comes of age. I have nursed it carefully for him during his minority. But, from hints that have been given me, I fear he has got into bad company. I am glad my poor brother is not here to see it.”

William Hetherington was a likely-looking lad, well-built and not ill-favoured, though there was a shifty glance of his eye, and a weak expression of the mouth, that were not encouraging. Losing his father early in life, he had been brought up by his uncle; but he learned little at school, and profited less by the severe discipline of those days. And when the time came for settling him in life, every attempt to establish him in any useful calling had been unsuccessful.

Mr. Richard Dawes, the expected visitor, was a middle-aged gentleman of moderate fortune, and a small estate in Kent near Sir Richard’s property in that county. He was a jovial, easy going man, fond of good living and good company, and very popular among his friends and acquaintances. If he sometimes overdid it, as on the occasion mentioned in his letter to Sir Richard, he generally managed to carry his liquor as well as any man living in that hard-drinking age, and seldom fuddled his wits with the fumes of his potations. He had a strong vein of native shrewdness in his composition, and a dry caustic humour that never failed him in an emergency; and nobody ever tried to score off him without coming out of the encounter badly.

But when Mr. Dawes arrived, in the evening of the day following that when the discussion we have reported between Sir Richard and his lady took place, his usual quiet humour was sadly upset. As he dismounted at the door, and gave his nag to the stableman, he was full of grunts and muttered growls, and when he shook hands with his host and hostess, his flushed face and perturbed expression made them both ask what was the matter.

“The matter!” quoth Mr. Dawes. “The matter is this, Sir Richard, that two rogues have waylaid me on your confounded common, and damme if they haven’t robbed me of my purse, my watch, and whatever else they took a fancy to in my valise. What do you think of that my lady?”

They both exclaimed together that it was abominable, and that information should be sent at once to the magistrates, and men be set on the offenders’ track.

“Much good will that do me,” growled poor Mr. Dawes. “They may catch the thieves and hang them, but that won’t give me my property back.”

“And should you know the men again if you saw them?” asked my lady, while Sir Richard was gone to send messengers off at once to give the alarm.

“They were masked,” replied he; “both were young men, the slighter of the two a mere lad, I fancy. I think I might know their voices if I heard them, for they were talking to one another while they rifled my unhappy valise.”

“And whereabouts did it happen?”

“About a mile from this house,” said Mr. Dawes, “just where a cart-track turns off from the bridle-path to go to a windmill that stands in the waste. And when they had done they galloped off that way. The younger man guarded me with a pistol at my head, while the other plundered the valise that was strapped on to the saddle.”

“How dreadful,” said Lady Hetherington. “But it is well you came off with your life.”

“I suppose, after all,” said Mr. Dawes, “it is as well I was unarmed, for otherwise I could not have helped giving the rascals a shot, and then getting two back myself, for they were two to one, though one of them seemed only a lad.”

“I suppose they knew you had no arms, said Lady Hetherington.

“I am not sure of that,” said he, “for the younger man, as they galloped up and stopped me, cried, ‘Hands up,’ and with his confounded pistol at my head, I had to obey.”

“They say Jerry Abershaw is at work here again,” said my lady. “I doubt he was one of the two, but who could the other one be; a mere lad, you say?”

“Ay, ay, Jerry may have been the elder man very likely,” said Mr. Dawes, “for they managed it cleverly enough, and he is a practised hand. As for the youngster, the sooner he comes to the gallows the better, for he has taken to the trade betimes, and should be scotched before he does more mischief.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said my lady, “and yet it is sad to think of one so young coming to such an end.”

They were at supper when William, Sir Richard’s nephew came in. He had been riding, and said he had been over to the town to get his whip mended, and that made him late home.

Mr. Dawes had seen him before and did not like him, for he thought him ill-mannered and empty-headed, and wondered how Sir Richard and his lady could put up with his idle ways.

They supped in the hall, and then adjourned to the great chamber above, with its fine plaster ceiling and walls hung with tapestry, for it was Sir Richard’s fancy to keep the old place unaltered as it had come to him, in the mode of the preceding century, before the invasion of continental fashions from France and Holland.

The sun shone brightly the next morning, and after breakfast they sauntered about the garden. Like the house itself, the garden, which lay behind it, was kept in the style in which it had been laid out by Robert Bell, the founder in the days of James I. There were the straight paths and formal parterres where Mrs. Alice Bell used to grow her gilliflowers and roses, divided by miniature hedges of box or privet; there was the sun-dial with its motto:

AS THESE HOURS DOTTH PASSE AWAY  
SO DOTTH THE LIFE OF MEN DECAY,

and beyond the spacious grass-plot was the raised terrace walk with seats overlooking the meadows, where were the cows.

Lady Hetherington observed with some surprise the pleasure Mr. Dawes seemed to take in her nephew William’s company. Putting his arm through that of the seemingly unwilling lad, Mr. Dawes tried to get him to talk, William, awkward and embarrassed, tried to escape, and only answered in monosyllables or short sentences to Mr Dawes’s flow of conversation. He was giving William a full account of the disaster of the day before, and describing the persons of the two robbers as minutely as he could. But the story, far from interesting William, seemed to cause

him much uneasiness. At last he was released, and, when he was out of earshot, Mr. Dawes, smiling to himself, muttered, "Very like. Very like. I think it will do."

From the flower garden they wandered into the kitchen gardens, where the fruit was ripening on the walls of mellow red brick. There were some tempting plums just out of reach of Lady Hetherington, and she called William to get them for her. He had both his arms stretched above his head when a loud voice behind exclaimed, "Hands up! as that young villain said yesterday." William spun round, as pale as ashes, and faced Mr. Dawes, who was looking at him with a sarcastic smile.

"Why, William," said his aunt, "what's the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"Perhaps he has, my lady," said Dawes, with a short laugh, as he turned away, and followed Sir Richard to another part of the garden. "I think he was pretty nigh making one yesterday," he continued to himself, "What is to be done now? Poor Sir Richard! He ought to know; but how am I ever to tell him?"

"What did Mr. Dawes mean, William?" asked his aunt, when Mr. Dawes was out of hearing.

"Some of his nonsense," said William. "He is always saying disagreeable things to me. I hate him."

But William was sadly discomposed, and had a scared look that Lady Hetherington could not help noticing.

They dined at the fashionable hour of five, and both Sir Richard and his lady could not help wondering at the unaccountable predilection Mr. Dawes showed for William's society and conversation. He placed himself by his side and plied him with questions, to which he only got short and sulky answers.

"We have spread the news of the robbery far and near," said Sir Richard, "but have as yet no clue to the culprits. We were right, I think, in saying they were young men, and one of them almost a lad."

"Yes, quite so," said Mr. Dawes. "The youngster was about the height and build of my friend William here, the other a little older." This directed all eyes on William, who looked sheepish and uncomfortable.

"And you said it was near by the turning up to the mill?"

"Yes, just by there; you know the place, William, I dare say," said Mr. Dawes.

"No, I don't," said William. "Why should I know it?"

"Oh!" said Mr. Dawes, "I thought I had once met you just there; but perhaps I am mistaken."

"You never were more mistaken in your life," said William sullenly, and he got up from the table and without further ceremony left the room.

"Whatever are you up to with William?" said Sir Richard, with some amusement. "He can't stand banter. But your questions were innocent enough."

"Well, I can't tell you now," said Dawes. "I hope I shall not have to tell you by-and-by."

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Leaving the house the hopeful youth was striding across the wildest part of the common, through woods and bracken to the valley beyond. At the end of a lane that joined the high road leading to the county town five miles away, stood a humble hostelry, where, under the sign of the "Bald-faced Stag," good accommodation was promised for man and beast. It was a solitary house in a lonely part of the road, and bore a dubious reputation for the company it kept.

The bar was full of men, drinking and smoking, and exchanging banter with the bouncing red-cheeked barmaid, who received William as he entered with a smile and a nod of recognition.

Sitting rather alone in a corner, with a jorum of ale before him, was a man, well-dressed in a riding suit, with top boots and spurs, a lace cravat not over-clean, and a hat drawn rather over his brows so as partly to obscure his features. With his coarse affectation of fashion, this gentleman, like Gil Blas' acquaintance, Captain Rolando, *ne laissait pas d'avoir l'air d'un franc fripon*.

"Well, my buck," said he, as William made his way through the crowd and sat beside him, "and what brings you here to-day? Hi! Betsy, a tankard for this gentleman, and fill mine up again."

"Nay, nay," said William, "I dare not stay, I shall be missed and must get back. But, hark ye," and he whispered something in his companion's ear.

The other nodded, and going outside the house the two conferred together a few minutes in a low tone.

"I tell you he has found us out," said William.

"Us! you mean you," said the other sharply. "Why, you're not meaning to go back on me?" said William. "Remember it was I that put you up to this job; and you got most of the swag—"

"And earned it too," said the other. "What could you have done without me? You were in a funk all the while."

"Well, but Jerry, what am I to do? Dawes means to blow on me, and I'm not going to be hanged alone, you may be sure of that."

"Oh, that's the game, is it," said the other. "Why don't you knock him on the head before he peaches?"

"What, murder him?" said William uneasily.

"Your life or his," said Abershaw. "If he peaches, you'll shake hands with the hangman. I know how to take care of myself. So you can do as you please. And now I shall clear off for the scent grows too hot for me here."

He made his way to the stable, and as William started homewards he saw his confederate gallop away towards London.

Left to himself he began to feel very uncomfortable. That Mr. Dawes suspected him he felt sure. Though he had been inspired to deeds of daring by Abershaw, into whose company he had got by frequenting the Bald-faced Stag, and whose reputation as the most notorious highwayman of the day had made him a hero in his ill-regulated mind, William was at heart a coward. He feared detection and its consequences, and would prevent it at all costs. And then Jerry Abershaw's evil counsel recurred to him. To murder Mr. Dawes before he peached. That was horrible: though he hated the man, he could not go as far as that. And yet, if it would save his neck—why then! But there was hitherto only suspicion, and no proof. He need not decide yet, and would wait till Mr. Dawes made another move. At all events he would be safer away from home, and would make an excuse for going away for a while.

At supper, therefore, he announced his intention of going on a visit to some cousins he had in Essex.

"And when do you start'?" asked his aunt. "And how long shall you be away?"

"I go to-morrow," said William, "and I dare say I shall be away some weeks."

"Do you ride there?" asked Sir Richard.

"Yes, uncle—I will ride Daisy, and take my valise with me on her back. There will be some hunting down there and she will carry me well."

Mr. Dawes was looking at William steadily all the while. "Do you ride alone," he asked, "or shall you have a companion with you?"

"No. I have no companion," said William sullenly.

"Why, that's a pity," said Mr. Dawes, "two is better than one on the highway nowadays."

"What do you mean by that?" asked William.

"Oh! nothing," said Mr. Dawes, while Sir Richard and my lady looked with some surprise from one speaker to the other.

"By the way, Sir Richard," said Mr. Dawes, "I have a clue to the scoundrels who robbed me, and I hope it will lead to their discovery."

"Indeed: that is good news," said his host. "Yes. I can't tell you just yet, but the day after tomorrow I trust I shall have proof positive of one of the two at all events to lay before you."

William listened with growing terror. The net seemed closing round him. He had a day, however. Mr. Dawes was not going to tell Sir Richard till the day after his departure. Why was he waiting for that?

He had only to wait till the next morning for the explanation. He was in the stable yard seeing to the equipment of his mare, when Mr. Dawes found him, and putting his arm through William's led him, all reluctant, into the garden.

"So you are going into Essex, William," said he.

"Yes," said William, "I am. What is that to you?"

"Why, nothing at all to me," said Mr. Dawes. "But it may be convenient for you. Shall you be near Harwich?"

Not very far from it," said William.

"Well, William, at Harwich you will find a packet two or three times a week for Antwerp or Rotterdam. Why not take a trip abroad for a few months, or perhaps longer?"

"Why should I?" said William.

"Why should you? Why, because this air does not suit your constitution. It is not wholesome for you."

William was silent for a few minutes. At last in a low voice he said, "What do you say that for?"

"Come, come, William," said Mr. Dawes, "you know that very well. I'm an old friend of your uncle and aunt, and do not wish to see them brought to shame. I shall not tell them what I know till I learn that you are safe out of the way; I'll give you a week's start, but then I must tell them what I know of their nephew. They ought to know whom they are harbouring under their roof. I have connections abroad in Holland who might befriend you and I will write to them on hearing you are landed safely. This will enable you to break with your old associates and reform your life. You will want some money; here are twenty guineas, and these with the ten or twelve I believe you already have of mine will give you a start. So now, farewell; think of what I have said, and resolve to lead a new life."

William, as he rode away, did indeed think of what he had just heard. "After all," he said to himself, "old Dawes had behaved handsomely to him." That he could not deny. But on the other hand he was sending him into exile, perhaps for life. What was twenty guineas to that? And he could not bear the thought that his uncle and aunt, for whom he felt as much affection as lay in his nature, should be made acquainted with his real character. And the old home too; was he never to see that again? In spite of the twenty guineas that jingled in his breeches pocket, he felt Mr. Dawes had done him an injury, and his old hatred revived with double force.

His good mare, Daisy, carried him briskly to London, and when there he repaired to a hostelry in the Borough with which he had been made acquainted by his evil genius, Abershaw, who, he supposed, would by this time be far away pursuing his trade in a new district. However, on entering the bar parlour the first person he saw was that worthy with a pot of ale before him. William did not want to meet him, and would have shirked away, but the other beckoned to him.

“And what evil wind blows you here,” said he. “Why do you follow me?”

“I didn’t know you were here,” said William. “I am going away for a bit till I can go safely back.”

“Has the old man peached?” asked the other.

“No, but he will in a few days’ time,” said William. “He told me so himself.”

“And are you going to let him, you young fool?” said Abershaw. “I’m ashamed of you. Here, come, listen to me,” and their further conversation was carried on in whispers. It was evening before William remounted his mare, Daisy, to continue his journey.

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About a week later, when the family were at supper in the hall, Mr. Dawes being still with them, a figure approached through the darkness, and entered the house by a back way, with which it was evidently familiar. The servants were all engaged in the kitchen or in attendance in the hall, and no one saw the intruder creep silently up the fine old carved oak staircase to the top storey. On reaching the room occupied by Mr. Dawes, which looked backward into the garden, he struck a light, and opening a door entered a short dark passage. A narrow winding stair led thence to a turret on the roof of the house, but half-way up, a carefully concealed door admitted him to a small chamber artfully hidden in the hollow of the roof. It had been a hiding place in former days, such as were frequent in old houses during the times of civil commotions, and its existence had almost been forgotten.

An hour or two later Richard Dawes came to bed. He had been anxiously expecting a letter from Holland to report William’s arrival, but in vain.

“I suppose the young fool has had sense enough to go. I have given him a week’s law. He ought to be safe now,” thought he. “So I will tell Sir Richard to-morrow what I know of his hopeful nephew. It will grieve him and my lady sadly, but it may save them future grief by and by, and may prevent that young rascal from continuing his career towards the gallows.” With these reflections the worthy Richard Dawes went to bed and was soon snoring comfortably.

The door of the secret passage was silently opened, and a figure cautiously entered. Taking something from the dressing table, the intruder approached the bed. There was a slight struggle, a sickening sound, a gush of something, and then silence. The figure noiselessly crept downstairs the way it had come, and left the house. No one heard the sound of horse’s hoofs as he rode away in the dead of night.

Next morning Sir Richard and Lady Hetherington were roused by shrieks, and servants bursting into their room told the dreadful news. Mr. Dawes had been found in his bed with his throat cut from ear to ear, and the room was deluged with blood. By the bedside was found one of Mr. Dawes’s own razors, with which the deed had evidently been done, for it was covered with blood. The murderer had left no trace. A little later, however, it was observed that the back door was found unfastened. The door leading to the turret stair was ajar, and some one had evidently been in the secret chamber. Later still a groom reported that the gate of the stable yard

stood open when he came to his work in the morning, so that the criminal had probably escaped that way.

“A rummy thing too,” said the man to himself, “I see the marks of horse’s hoofs in the yard, and if I didn’t know Master William was away with Daisy, I could have sworn it was her footmarks, for her off hind foot is shod peculiar.”

“Probably an old mark before she went away,” said Sir Richard, when this was pointed out to him. But the old stableman did not seem convinced.

At the inquest a suggestion was made that it was a case of suicide. The razor, it was pointed out, was Mr. Dawes’s own. But both Sir Richard and Lady Hetherington testified that Mr. Dawes had gone to bed in his usual spirits, after passing the evening agreeably in their company, and that he had no troubles of any kind to worry him. Besides which, there were obvious signs that some one had been hidden in the secret chamber and afterwards escaped by the back door. Mr. Dawes was not known to have any enemies, and yet, as nothing had been taken from his room, the motive of the crime did not seem to be robbery. The only verdict the coroner’s jury could return was that of “Wilful murder by some person or persons unknown.”

It was past midnight on the fatal evening of the murder when William rode into the yard of the hostelry in Southwark where we have seen him before. His mare had been ridden hard, and was covered with foam and sweat as he gave her to the stableman, but that was no unusual thing in that establishment, and it was the rule there to ask no questions about the going and coming of the customers.

Mounting hurriedly to his bedroom, William threw himself in his clothes on the bed. He thought with horror of what he had done. “It was all Abershaw’s doing,” he said to himself. Left alone he could never have brought himself to such a deed. He thought of Mr. Dawes’s proposal that he should go abroad for a time and start a new and a better life, and he would have given worlds, now it was too late, to have listened to it. All the events of that horrible night recurred to his memory. He enacted the whole scene again. His ride to the house, his secret entry and climb to the fatal room, and then—oh, God! what had he done? He could not sleep, but got up, paced the room for hours and then sat desolately at the window till the morning light came and showed him some dark stains on his clothes, that made him shrink with horror. With soap and water he tried to wash them out, but in vain. There they were, evidences for his conviction. What was to be done? He changed his dress from his valise: the clothes with the tell-tale stains should be burned, and meanwhile he hid them carefully under the mattress.

And then, what was to be his course now? To return home, to that house on which he had brought the stain of guilt, where he had spent a childhood of innocency, where lived the uncle and aunt who had brought him up and been as parents to him, and which was the scene of that night’s atrocity, was abhorrent to him. He felt he could never go back but must fly the country as he wished he had done when his victim had proposed it. Yes, he would get to Harwich again and hide himself from his family for ever in a strange land.

However, unstable and irresolute as ever, William put off his departure from day to day, and hung about London till his purse was nearly empty, and he found there was not enough left to do more than pay his passage. To land penniless in a foreign country, of which he did not even know the language, seemed impracticable. He began to think that after all he would have to face the return home which he still could not contemplate without terror. But some weeks had passed, his feelings were less alive than at first to recollection of the past, and he had almost resolved to write to his uncle and announce his intended return, when, on coming down one morning, he met Abershaw.

His immediate impulse was to avoid him. Abershaw was the cause of all his crimes and all his misery. He would have no more to do with him. But Abershaw was not so easily got rid of, and, taking William by the arm, he led him to a quiet corner of the yard, where they were alone.

“Well,” said he.

“Let me go,” said William. “I’ll have no more to do with you.”

“Nay,” said Abershaw with a sneer; “old friends don’t part like that.”

“You’ve brought a curse upon me,” said the other. “I wish I had never seen you. I tell you again I have done with you.”

“Aye, aye,” said Abershaw, “but I’ve not done with you, my buck. Remember, I know your secret.”

“Why, what do you mean? Do you mean to betray me?”

“That depends,” said Abershaw, “on whether you do what I tell you or not.”

“But who would believe you? You dare not appear, for you are in danger of arrest yourself, and the gallows if you are caught.”

“That’s well pleaded, Master William,” said the other, “and true enough. But what is there to prevent my writing a letter to the magistrates without my name to it? I could tell them certain things about you that would put the halter round your neck. Eh? What do you say to that?”

William could find nothing to say to it, and stood aghast at the prospect before him. He felt himself in the power of this ruffian, and unable to escape.

“Come, come,” said Abershaw, “don’t be downhearted about what you did. Remember, it was your life or his. By this time he would have given information to your uncle, and you would have been in quod. Now you have made yourself safe like a brave fellow. Come, cheer up. I’ll not be hard upon you.”

“My uncle would never have prosecuted me,” said William, “nor do I now believe Mr. Dawes would. He even offered to befriend me if I went abroad.”

“Well, then,” said Abershaw lightly, “I daresay they would not. But now you’ve cut his throat, and I know it, and if I am to hold my peace you’ll have to do what I tell you.”

“What do you want me to do?” said William sullenly.

“I’ll tell you, then,” said the other. “I’ve been unlucky of late, and the locker is empty and must be refilled. The high-roads are watched and there is little to be done there just now. I must crack a crib. Now they say your uncle has a fine lot of silver plate which he could very well spare to me, and you must help me to get it.”

“I’ll do nothing of the kind,” said William indignantly.

“Oh, yes you will,” said the scoundrel. “All I want you to do is to see that the back-door is open on the night I tell you, and I will see to the rest.”

“I’ll not do it. They have always been good to me, and I would not hurt them to save my life.”

“Not even to save your life?” asked Jerry, with an ugly leer. “Just think,” and with a significant motion of his hand to his neck and his cravat he suggested the fatal noose.

William turned pale. He was, as has been said, at heart a coward. His companion let the idea work, and watched the change in his countenance with attention. At last he said:

“There shall be no harm done to the old people, nor to anybody, nor do I want you to help. All I will have you do is to see that when the household is asleep the back-door shall be left open. I and my pals will do the rest. Come, that’s little enough. And your uncle is rich, and can afford to let me have a share of his silver plate and be none the worse for it.”

“Will you swear not to hurt anyone in the house?” asked William.

“I’ll swear by all the gods,” said Abershaw; “nobody shall come to harm. I only want the silver.”

“And if I do this will you leave me alone in future?” asked William.

“Aye, that I will. I shall have done with you then, and you’ll be no further use to me.”

The wretched youth felt himself powerless, and in the end promised to do what was demanded of him. It was arranged that William should return home within three or four days, and that the robbery should be made on that day week.

As they parted a figure moved out from a corner close by, and walked slowly away. They only saw its back, the back of a well-dressed gentleman of middle age. Jerry laid his hand on his pistol, and William changed colour.

“Who’s that?” whispered Abershaw. But William did not answer. The figure bore a dreadful likeness to one he dared not face.

“ ’Tis he!” whispered he after a minute or two, while the figure slowly retired up the yard. When it reached the house it turned and looked steadfastly at the pair, who stood spellbound. The face was that of Richard Dawes. In another moment it was gone.

For the rest of the day William had an uneasy feeling that he was watched. That some one was near him following his movements, whom he could not see. He dreaded the night, and feared to be alone. Even Abershaw’s company would be better than none, but that worthy had gone off on business of his own, leaving William with final instructions, and an assurance that he would be as good as his word if William failed to obey him in the least particular. At night he was haunted by dreams of Richard Dawes, of his crime, and of the gallows. As the days passed he grew pale and thin, and trembled on the least suspicion that anyone looked at him with more than usual attention. He had written home to say he was returning from his visit to Essex, and Sir Richard and his aunt were expecting to see him ride in any day.

It was within three days of the time appointed by Abershaw for the robbery that William decided to go home. The feeling that all his movements were watched, and that some unseen presence was ever near him, had never left him, and it inspired him with a growing terror. As the fatal day drew closer this sensation grew stronger, and William constantly felt that at any moment the influence that haunted him might put on a visible form.

As he mounted his mare Daisy in the evening, when night was already closing in, the sky was lurid and threatening, and thunder was growling in the distance. There had been a sultry feeling in the air all day, and everything portended a storm of unusual violence. Before he had passed the last houses of the London suburbs a few large drops of rain began to fall, and the thunder grew louder and more frequent. He cared not; his mind was reduced to such a state of passive misery that external trouble did not affect it; there was even something in the turmoil of the elements congenial to his disordered temperament. The storm burst on him in full fury when he reached the outskirts of the wild common, across which the last few miles of his journey lay. His horse was fidgetty and frightened by the lightning, which now became incessant, and it was then that William first became aware that he was no longer alone. By his side and within a yard of him rode another horseman, keeping exact pace with him as if he had been his shadow. His face was hidden and his movements were silent. But although they were on turf and heather and the footfall was soft, and, moreover, the storm was enough to deaden other sounds, still the noiseless riding of his companion was unnatural. A dread fell upon him of something unearthly. The figure kept exactly even with him, riding faster or slower as he quickened or slackened his own pace. Each flash of lightning showed him still by his side, silent and mysterious, not to be shaken off. William realised in this ghostly companion the hitherto unseen presence that had haunted him for

days. Horror seized him; he dared not take his eyes off from that ghostly figure. A more vivid flash than usual showed him his companion with his face now turned to him, the face he dreaded of all, others, and oh, horror! across the throat a gory line. William shrieked with terror. The horse, frightened to death by the flash and the crash of thunder that followed instantaneously, bolted like a mad thing across the common towards its well-known stable; the stable-yard gates were shut, the horse, checked in its career, slipped, fell, and threw the rider violently against the wall, where he lay insensible, and as one dead.

The tempest gradually abated, the thunder rolled farther and farther away, morning broke, and the men coming to work found William still insensible lying in the road, and the mare Daisy standing trembling by him. They lifted him up and alarmed the household; he was put to bed in his own old room and messengers were sent for the doctor.

After a time William was restored to consciousness, but his mind wandered. He talked as if in his sleep; the watchers by his bedside caught incoherent scraps of sentences. They heard the name of Dawes frequently, with cries of "take him away, take him away." His rambling about Jerry and a back-door puzzled them. "Keep it locked," he would repeat over and over again, until at last he sank into a troubled sleep.

He had been terribly injured in his fall, and the doctor held out no hope of saving his life. A few days at the longest must end it and his sufferings. As the end approached, his mind became more calm, and he was able to think and talk rationally. He still repeated, however, his warnings to keep the back-door locked, which they thought was a relic of his former delirium, but he never rested till he was assured that his warning had been attended to.

On the last day, when he knew he was near his end, he asked to see Sir Richard and his aunt alone. They remained with him some time, and when they came out the tears were in their eyes.

"Poor William!" said Lady Hetherington. "What a story! To think of all this going on while we knew nothing."

"He will die easier, now he has made a confession," said Sir Richard. "I see now what puzzled us in Richard Dawes's behaviour to him. He recognised his voice, and led him to betray himself by his ingenious way of questioning."

"Poor Mr. Dawes!" said she. "He would have been a good friend to William, had not the other man got him into his power and persuaded him to his ruin."

"Yes—the scoundrel! I shall never rest till I hear he has come to the gallows that as sure as death awaits him."

The tragic events of the past few weeks gave Sir Richard a distaste for the old house of which he had been so fond, and before long he sold it. Since then it has passed through many hands; it has been occupied and visited by statesmen and heroes of victories by land and sea. Afterwards it was a school for eighty years before once more becoming a private residence. The tradition of a murder was kept alive; boys who slept near the fatal room felt a not disagreeable shudder when they remembered the legend, and former pupils who often come to see again the scene of their school-days, invariably ask for the "murder chamber," and beg to be allowed to revisit it.

Jerry Abershaw, it may be mentioned in conclusion, was hanged on Kennington Common on August 3rd, 1795. He was arrested at the "Three Brewers" in Southwark—the inn he frequented, and he shot one of his captors dead, at the same time accidentally wounding the landlord in the head. He died a hardened ruffian at the age of twenty-two.

His mother, foreseeing in his youth the end to which he was bound to come, had prophesied he would, as the saying went, die in his shoes. To prove she was mistaken he kicked them off at the last moment. His body was gibbeted on the Portsmouth Road at the foot of Wimbledon Common, the scene of his most famous exploits, and Jerry Abershaw's gibbet lasted long enough to be mentioned in one of Captain Marryat's novels.