

# The Watcher in the Mill

By W. J. Wintle, F.Z.S.

Edward Sinclair was a man of eminent common sense. He prided himself on having no nonsense about him; but what exactly he meant by this was not easy to say. If he was asked why he did not go to church, why he did not marry, why he preferred the *Telegraph* to the *Times*, why he had come to live in a lonely place like Marshtown-in-the-Hole, or anything else; it was ten to one that he would tell you it was because there was no nonsense about him.

Unkind people said there was no sense as well as no nonsense about it; but these were generally people who had got a horse to sell or a lot of doubtful oats to get rid of: so nobody took much notice of them. The opinion of most of the people in the neighbourhood was that Edward Sinclair was not born yesterday—which was obvious seeing that he was not far off forty—or that there were no flies on him, the meaning of which nobody seemed to know.

He had not lived in the district very long. He had spent his youth and young manhood in a distant part of England; and it was the death of a rather remote relative that had brought him to Marshtown-in-the-Hole—which was not a town at all, but a large straggling parish of scattered houses. But it was certainly in the Hole, for it lay at the bottom of a kind of basin surrounded by rising country. When this relative died, he left all his property to Edward Sinclair, who had never heard of him before; but now found himself the possessor of an old house surrounded by a good garden and some fields, including a small wood. He was now also master of a sufficient income to enable him to live in decent comfort without following any occupation.

How he had earned his livelihood before inheriting this little fortune, the neighbours often wondered but had not yet managed to find out. Evidently he had been in decent circumstances, for his manners were good and he was clearly accustomed to live amid the surroundings that are usual in respectable society. Being thus a bit of a mystery, his doings were naturally a favourite theme of discussion, especially with the ladies of the place, who were all convinced that he had been disappointed in love. But they could never find out anything, except that there was no nonsense about him—and they had only his own word for this.

But whatever he had been or had done, he was pleased when he came into his little fortune and was able to live as he liked and amuse himself just how he thought fit. He had only been at Marshtown-in-the-Hole for about five months; and so far he had amused himself by having the garden put in order, exploring the district, and reading the books that he had found in his relative's library. Thus he had done nothing yet to gratify the curiosity of the local gossips, though the fact that he did not go to church caused plenty of head-shaking and indignant comment. He was in fact studying the place and people, and getting his bearings before making up his mind quite how to occupy the leisure that he could now enjoy.

On the evening when this story begins, he was sitting on his lawn, with his pipe gone out, thinking hard. As he sat there he faced the little wood that came up to the side of the house and extended to the southern extremity of his property. He was looking at a gap in the trees, through which he could see an old building which had formerly been a mill. It stood beside a stream which had turned the wheel; but it had been disused for many years and had been allowed to fall into disrepair. The roof was still sound enough, for it dated from a time when mills were built to last; but the door and windows had fallen away, or perhaps had been removed by passing tramps in search of firewood. The building now served no useful purpose, but formed a picturesque

feature of the view from the house. It was an odd fact that Sinclair's distant relative, in the will by which he had left the place to him, had expressed a strong wish that the mill should not be pulled down. Sinclair had often wondered why this had been mentioned but could never get any light on the subject.

As we have said, he was sitting and looking at this mill; and the fact that he had let his pipe go out suggests that his mind was fully occupied with his thoughts. Although there was no nonsense about him—a fact that we may have mentioned before—he was letting his thoughts wander into paths of which he entirely disapproved. Indeed he was not acting with that common sense upon which he prided himself so much. But he was very much puzzled and bewildered.

Something had happened which was quite new to his experience. During the afternoon he had strolled through the little wood, and had stopped to examine the old mill once more. He had two or three times wondered if it could not be turned to some useful purpose instead of being a mere ornament to the landscape. So he went into the building, and once more carefully considered its possibilities. And while he was there he had a vague sense of discomfort and of danger. As there was no nonsense about him, he had of course taken the sensible course and had tried to brush the foolish idea away. But it stuck to him all the same.

He at first wondered if the idea was due to some half-conscious doubt about the safety of the roof under which he was standing; and he had again very carefully examined it, with the result that he felt more sure than ever that it was perfectly sound. The more he thought it over, the less reason could he see for anything like a sense of danger; but still he could not shake it off.

A curious thing about it was that he felt this queer sense of something wrong each time that he went into an upstairs room, the window of which faced his house. It was a room of modest size, and had probably been used as a living-room by the miller in the days when the mill-wheel turned and the great millstones ground the corn for the neighbourhood. Strangely enough, a few odds and ends of furniture still remained in the room, probably as being too old to be worth removing. Besides a chair and table, an old wreck of a bureau stood against the wall, and looked as if it would fall to pieces if moved. There was also a large cupboard by the fireplace; and its door seemed to be nailed up, for Sinclair had been unable to open it. And it was chiefly when trying to get this cupboard open that he had felt the queer sense of impending danger.

He was still puzzling about the incident, when he realised that his pipe had gone out. He felt in his pocket for the silver match-box that he always carried, but could not find it. Then he remembered having laid it down on the table in the old mill after lighting his pipe there during the afternoon. This was annoying; but it would never do to leave it there. Some tramp might possibly take shelter there for the night; in which case he might say farewell to that silver match-box. So he reluctantly got up from his chair, went indoors to light his pipe, and then strolled down to the old mill.

Here he met with a surprise. On mounting the rickety stairs leading to the upper room, he found his match-box lying on the floor just outside the door of the room, and beside it lay a handful of wild flowers that he had gathered during his walk and had also forgotten when he left the place. But he was quite certain that he had left these things on the table in the room. How then did they get outside?

When he went into the room, he at once noticed that the table and chair, which he had pushed aside when trying to open the cupboard, had been replaced exactly in their old positions. Evidently someone had been tidying up after him. But who could this be? No one lived in the place, and no one had charge of it. So far as he knew, no one took any interest in it, and it was

rarely entered. Any casual visitor would have either pocketed the silver match-box or have left it alone. He would not have taken the trouble to remove it and the flowers outside the door.

He could not make it out. And then once more came that odd sense of danger, which now took the form of a feeling that he was being watched by someone who was not friendly. He tried to call common sense to the rescue; but common sense thought better of it and declined to come. He tried to put the idea out of his head; but it refused to go. He felt quite upset: and then again came that sense of danger, but this time with a force that seemed to paralyse him.

For quite a minute he stood and shuddered: then, by a supreme effort, he summoned his forces and fled from the place. Once outside the building, the horror left him and he recovered his self-control. Then he remembered that his walking-stick had been left behind. Should he go back and get it? All his common sense told him to go back and take it: but all his fears came back to forbid him. He hesitated: and then something came whizzing by his head and reached the ground a few feet in front of him. It was the walking-stick!

This brought him to himself with a jerk. Somebody must have thrown that stick: and somebody was asking for trouble. He was not the man to evade a challenge like this. So he rushed back into the mill, and up to the room where he had left the stick. But the place stood empty: nobody was there! But no one could have escaped. There had been no time for it: and there was no way out except through the door by which he had just come or by the windows which he had in full view at the time. He hastily searched all the corners of the place, but found no one.

And then once more came that horrifying sense of being watched by something evil and malicious; and he almost fancied that he heard a sneering laugh somewhere near at hand. He simply fled, and did not stop till he was once more in his own house.

But this was not to be the last of the puzzling incidents of the day. When Sinclair went up to bed, he happened to look out of his window in the direction of the disused mill, and was at once struck by the fact that there was a light in the window of the upstairs room. It seemed from this pretty clear that someone was passing the night in the place; and his thoughts at once went in the direction of tramps. He was more than half inclined to go there at once and investigate; but somehow the experiences of the day did not make him welcome the idea of going there after dark; and he contented himself with resolving to have a door fixed in the now open doorway of the mill, and to keep it locked. The place at present might easily become a resort for bad characters—if it was not so already.

In the morning he went to the mill again, to see if he could find any trace of the intruder with the light, who had presumably made use of the place for free lodging. But there was not the smallest trace of anyone having been in the place since he left it on the previous day. But he again fancied he heard that sneering laugh as he turned to go away.

He took one precaution. As he went out of the room, he laid a straw across the doorway, and placed a couple of dead leaves in exact contact with it, so that any person entering the room must disturb the arrangement; while at the same time the thing looked merely like an accidental straw that the wind had blown there, and so would not be noticed.

Nothing more occurred for three days, and then once more he saw the light in the window as he retired to rest at night. In the morning he visited the mill, and found that the straw and leaves had not been disturbed. On the next day, the door was fixed in position and was locked by Sinclair himself—who also had wooden bars fixed across the downstairs windows—and that very night the light shone forth again from the mill!

But this time there was a difference. While Sinclair watched the light, he saw it interrupted by something that came to the window for a moment. This happened three times; and the third time he was almost sure that it was the shadow of a man that he saw.

Oddly enough, this development reassured Sinclair. Mysterious and unaccountable lights and the like were disturbing, even to a man with no nonsense about him; but the shadow of a man meant that there must be a man to cast the shadow—and Sinclair was not afraid of any man living. Whether he might be afraid of any man dead was a question that he did not put to himself. So he decided to go at once and interview the man who had cast the shadow.

He took a lantern with him and made his way at once to the mill. There he found the door locked and the windows undisturbed; and on entering he found everything as usual and no trace of anyone having been there. He searched in every corner, and made quite sure that the place was entirely deserted. But, on his return home, he happened to look back as he was going in; and there was the light once more in the window of the old mill!

Next morning he made another investigation; and this time he took his dog with him. The animal was a pedigree bloodhound; and he had the idea that if anybody had been there the dog might get on the track and lead to a discovery. But the animal absolutely refused to enter the building. No amount of coaxing or threatening had the smallest effect. The dog was usually the most ready and obedient of animals; but now it seemed overwhelmed with sheer terror. Each time that it was brought to the door of the mill, it ran back whining piteously; and when ordered to go in it simply lay down and whimpered. Finally it suddenly started up, seemed to look up at the window for a moment, and then ran off at full speed with its tail between its legs.

Clearly nothing was to be done with the dog; so Sinclair entered the building alone. The door was locked as he had left it the night before, and the windows had not been in any way tampered with. He went upstairs to the room where the light had shone; and there he met with something new. The cupboard door which he had so often tried in vain to open, stood ajar! He pulled it open without difficulty. There was no lock; and there was no trace of nails or screws that might have fastened it before.

The cupboard proved to be quite a roomy place, in which four men could easily have stood upright. There were shelves at the back of it; but they were quite bare and the place was entirely empty. And yet at the same time it did not feel empty. Sinclair had that odd feeling that he was not alone. Had it been too dark to see anything, he would have felt sure that someone was close to him. And he again had the uncomfortable sense that it was someone unfriendly.

He examined the cupboard very closely, to see if by any chance it might afford a means of access to the room. But the walls were sound and solid: there was no trace of any concealed entrance through the back wall or anywhere else. Nor could he find anything to account for the difficulty in opening the door on previous occasions. It really seemed as if someone inside had been holding the door. But that was nonsense—and we have remarked at least once before that there was no nonsense about Edward Sinclair.

He finally gave up the problem for the present, locked the door of the mill, and went back home. During the day business occupied his attention, and he gave no more thought to the puzzling affair. But when he went to bed he noticed that there was no light showing at the mill. However, about two in the morning, he happened to wake up and looked out. There was the light again; and at the window could be clearly seen the figure of a man! At that distance no details could be made out; but it looked like a small man, and seemed somehow to suggest an aged one.

In the morning Sinclair went once more to the mill, and at once saw that the door was standing open. But the extraordinary thing about it was that it had not been unlocked! The bolt was shot,

just as when it was locked—but the door stood open. Normally this could only happen if the socket into which the bolt worked had been taken off the doorpost. But it was in place and bore no sign of having been touched. How in the world could the door have been opened? And—more awkward question still—who opened it?

He examined it closely but could suggest no solution of the mystery. Then he went in and up to the room above. As he entered, he could have sworn that the door of the cupboard had just been closed. He was just in time to see it close; but only just in time. He saw it close perhaps the last half-inch. He was not lacking in courage, and he instantly rushed across the room and tried to pull the door open again. But it resisted all his efforts. He could not open it even a fraction of an inch; and yet there was the feeling that it was not fastened. It seemed to yield very slightly to his pulling; as if someone stronger than he was holding it closed from the other side. And then once more came that compelling sense of danger; and again he thought he heard that sneering laugh.

He could do nothing but give it up; but at any rate he could make it difficult to open the door again. So he went out and cut three wedges of wood, which he forced under the door as tightly as possible. Then he pushed the rickety table and chair against the door as an additional precaution, and went home; not forgetting to once more lock the door of the mill.

This, however, proved as ineffectual as the other measures; for next day he found the outer door and the door of the cupboard standing open as before, but without the smallest trace of any person who could have opened them. The chair and table were back in their place again. But this time he noticed some marks in the dust that covered the top of the table so thickly. They looked like very shaky writing, traced with a finger. The more Sinclair looked at them, the more he felt convinced of this; and he thought he could make out the word “Beware,” but of this he was not quite sure.

But of one thing he was quite sure: he had had enough of this! He was not disposed to have his peace of mind disturbed by nonsense of this sort. Either it was mere imagination, and therefore a waste of time: or there was something in it, in which case the sooner it was stopped the better. So he decided to have the mill pulled down. It was of no use; and the view from the house would look just as well without it. He would be going to London on the next day for business purposes, and he would then make some inquiry about having it removed.

But Edward Sinclair never went to London; and the old mill is standing to-day. It was in the morning that he decided about having the mill destroyed; and the rest of the forenoon was occupied with business correspondence. He had just finished a letter, and was thinking there was time for a cigarette before lunch, when suddenly he felt that strange sense of impending danger that he had so many times experienced at the mill. He was at the time sitting in a chair at his writing-table; and he thought he heard a sneering laugh close behind him. He sprang out of the chair, and was just in time to see something vanish into thin air!

He did not actually see it, in the sense of seeing what it was; but he saw that the view of the opposite side of the room was obscured for the moment by something. Then the something was no longer there, and the other side of the room could be seen again. But he was sure that something had been there the moment before, and he had a strong impression that it was not merely something but someone.

After a moment's hesitation, he turned and went out of the room, intending to take a short walk and try to shake off the unpleasant impression. As he went through the hall on the way out, he happened to glance back to the room he had just left. Someone was standing there! Sinclair started in astonishment; but when he looked again the intruder had vanished. He went back to the

room; but everything was as usual. No one was there: and no one could have got away. What did this mean?

He had hardly time to ask himself this question when lunch was announced. He went to the dining-room and took his seat. As he sat at table, he could see the old mill through the open window; and, when half-way through the meal, he distinctly saw an old man go into the mill through the door that he had left safely locked.

Here then was the solution to the mystery. Someone by some means got into the building, and was doubtless responsible for the pranks that had been played on him. And now he would be caught! Sinclair did not lose an instant, but sprang up and ran out of the house, to the surprise of the servant who was in the act of handing him a dish. He kept the door of the old mill in sight as he ran to it, so that no one might escape without his observation. When he arrived, he saw that, as before, the door had been opened without unlocking it. The bolt was still shot. But he did not pause to think about this. He rushed into the building, and up the rickety stairs.

There was no one in the room; but he was in time to see the door of the cupboard being closed. He dashed at it and tried to pull it open. But all in vain: it resisted as before, though he tried his hardest. Then the door suddenly flew open; and knocked him violently backwards.

The cupboard was empty: and yet—there was something strange and unnatural about it. Sinclair could see no one; but it seemed as if something was there after all, for he could not see a part of the back of the cupboard. It was as if an invisible person was there who could not be seen through. And then Sinclair experienced a horror that few men have ever known. He knew, though he could not have said how or why he knew, that the occupant of that cupboard was coming out. And for the first time in his life, he was fainting with sheer terror.

A moment later, he was caught in an unseen grip and flung down. Strong arms had hold of him; sinewy fingers clasped him by the throat; a lithe and vigorous body seemed to entwine itself around him; and a hatred that was not human was working its fearful will on him. He tried to struggle: but who can struggle against attacks that he can neither anticipate nor see. It was a losing battle from the first. Sinclair's doom was sealed from the moment that the unseen watcher in the mill had him in his grip.

Later in the day he was missed, and after much seeking his body was found horribly mangled and crushed in the old mill. The place had to be broken open, for the door was closed and locked as he had left it in the morning.

The whole affair was a mystery that was never solved. No one ever found out how he came by his shocking end: and to this day no man knows who the watcher in the mill was, or why he watched to wreak his vengeance on Edward Sinclair.