

# Mr. Mortimer's Diary

By Amyas Northcote

The somewhat peculiar circumstances connected with the death of Mr. Roger Mortimer, an antiquary of no little reputation in his day, over twenty-five years ago, although a nine days' wonder at the time, have now been forgotten. Nay, the very name and fame of Mr. Mortimer himself have also passed into oblivion, save perhaps that his writings are still perused for the sake of curiosity by students of certain branches of antiquarian research.

As the last of Mr. Mortimer's relatives has recently died and there remains no one to whom the publications of portions of his diary can give pain, and as those latter portions, conveying as they do certain strong impressions of unusual happenings, possess a certain interest to psychical investigators, it has been decided by the gentleman into whose possession the diary has now come to lay the latter portion of it before the world, eliminating from it as a matter of course any portions which might yet cause embarrassment to anyone. Before touching upon the diary itself, it is necessary to recapitulate as briefly as possible the story of Mr. Mortimer and of his death.

Mr. Roger Mortimer was a gentleman born of well-to-do parents. He was an only child and was educated according to the usual practice of well-to-do folk; Eton and Oxford claimed him and at the latter seat of learning he became imbued with a passion for antiquarian research. After various essays, he finally settled down into specializing on Art in early Italy, and devoted himself to the study of Etruscan remains. He became gradually well known, first as a connoisseur and finally as a leading authority in this subject; he wrote several articles on it, one especially dealing with what he claimed to be a proof of certain close relationships between Etruscan and Egyptian artistic works. This essay provoked a sharp controversy which, besides moving along the lines common to most battles between scientific experts, was marked by a regular attack on Mr. Mortimer by a man named Bradshaw, an assistant master at an obscure Yorkshire school. Mr. Bradshaw, in a letter to the *Times*, claimed to be the real discoverer of the objects on which Mr. Mortimer based his article and roundly asserted that Mr. Mortimer had stolen them from him, and had also purloined from him the genesis of the ideas which he was now presenting to the world as his own. Acting, as he said, under the advice of friends, Mr. Mortimer did not reply to the letter; a dignified silence, he maintained, was unquestionably the best answer to it. Mr. Bradshaw was apparently unable to substantiate his accusation, he was a poor, unknown man, Mr. Mortimer was wealthy and respected, and so the matter dropped. In private conversation Mr. Mortimer readily admitted that he had met Mr. Bradshaw accidentally when abroad, that the gentleman was, he believed, interested in antiquarian research, but that his sole connection with him had been to see that he was properly attended to during a serious attack of illness with which he had been seized during an expedition in the hills, whither he had gone unattended and where he was found lying ill in a miserable inn by Mr. Mortimer. The episode was gradually forgotten and Mr. Bradshaw was heard of no more.

In person, Mr. Mortimer was a tall, thin, dark and rather severe-looking personage. He was a well-informed man on many subjects besides his own speciality; and, while living a somewhat quiet life, he by no means despised society, more especially of the more serious type, and was frequently seen at various social gatherings. He was not a man of many friends, in fact, it would be rash to assert that anyone was admitted to close intimacy with him, but he was popular with a large circle, and discharged his social obligations in punctilious fashion. As already said, he was

a well-to-do man and inheriting a comfortable fortune he did not dissipate it. But he was no miser, he spent freely on his hobby and was liberal enough to all those connected with him. His moral character appeared to be unimpeachable, his temper was equable; he would prefer to speak and act kindly rather than the reverse, and in a general way he may be summed up as a worthy member of the body politic, who whilst inspiring no particular affection equally inspired no dislike, save in the single and unexplained case of Mr. Bradshaw. He had been born of Roman Catholic parents and educated in that faith, but he had long abandoned the practice of any form of religion and was a convinced and almost militant upholder of the extreme materialistic school. Lastly it should be added that Mr. Mortimer possessed no near relatives, had never married, and, at the date of his death, aged fifty-six years, was apparently free from care and in perfect bodily health.

Mr. Mortimer had lived for a number of years in rooms in——Street, kept by a couple of retired domestic servants. These rooms consisted of the first floor of a good-sized house and comprised a front room, used by Mr. Mortimer as his sitting-room and study, looking out on to the quiet and eminently respectable——Street, and a back room of lesser size, which formed the bedroom. The two rooms were connected by a short, private lobby, out of which opened a small cubicle, which had been fitted up as a private bath-room. Of course, in addition to this private passage the two rooms both opened on to the public staircase. Mr. Mortimer had fitted up his apartments with a view to both taste and comfort; he spent much of his time at work on his researches in his sitting-room, which contained his private desk and papers and the walls of which were lined with book-shelves laden with many rare and precious volumes.

Objects of ancient and especially of Etruscan art were scattered about and several good water colours of Italian scenes decorated the spaces on the walls not occupied by book-shelves. The bedroom was more sparsely furnished, but still every reasonable article of comfort was to be found therein. The remainder of the house was like the first floor, let as apartments for single gentlemen. At the time of the events which are now being recorded, the ground floor was under lease to a Mr. Andrew Scoones, an official in the Government service, the second floor, the one above Mr. Mortimer, was temporarily empty, while the landlord and his wife, persons of the name of White, and the little maidservant occupied the top floor.

Mr. Mortimer's life was one of great regularity. He was in the habit of being called precisely at eight in the morning by White, and then immediately repaired to his bathroom. In his absence White set out his clothes, and brought up to the bedroom a tray with the materials for Mr. Mortimer's rather slender breakfast, which he partook of in his bedroom. While he was thus breakfasting and completing his toilet, the sitting-room was tidied up and made ready for the day and thither he would repair to attend to his correspondence and to read his newspaper. If he were occupied in any special research or writing he would then devote himself for a time to that, otherwise he usually proceeded to his Club, the Megatherium, where he spent a large part of his waking hours. Here he lunched, if not engaged elsewhere for that meal, and then passed the afternoon in various ways, returning to his rooms at about seven, to array himself for the evening, which was passed either in some social function or at the Club. Normally he returned to his rooms shortly after eleven and proceeded forthwith to bed. This programme was maintained on Sundays and weekdays, winter and summer, varied only by an annual excursion from London, either on a round of visits or quietly to some watering-place. No life more calm or open can be imagined; there appeared to be no room in it for secrets and certainly if Mr. Mortimer possessed any they were closely guarded.

Such was the man, and such was the existence that was cut short by a mysterious tragedy on the night of July 16-17 in the year 18—. The story of this tragedy so far as it was revealed at the time now requires to be told.

The first sign of any unusual disturbance in Mr. Mortimer's regular form of life was noted by a waiter at the Megatherium—one George Robbins. This man was the regular attendant on the little table in the cosy corner of the dining-room at which Mr. Mortimer always sat. He appeared in the box at the Coroner's inquest and testified that on the evening of July 10th Mr. Mortimer was dining alone; he appeared to be out of spirits and ate but little. Opposite to his seat at the little table was another chair, but this was unoccupied and no place was set in front of it. Towards the end of dinner, Robbins was astonished to see Mr. Mortimer rise from his chair and move in what the witness described as, "a threatening kind of way," round the table towards the empty chair. Suddenly he stopped, leaned heavily against the table and appeared to be about to faint. Robbins came quickly to him and asked if he was ill. "Only a turn, Robbins," answered Mr. Mortimer. "Get me a glass of brandy," Robbins brought it, and found Mr. Mortimer already looking better: he drank the brandy and then said, "Take that chair away," pointing to the vacant one, "and never put it there again unless I have some one to dine with me."

Robbins obeyed and the incident was closed, but the man could not help observing that from this time on till the end Mr. Mortimer appeared always ill at ease and largely to have lost his appetite.

The next persons who were struck forcibly by a strange change in Mr. Mortimer were Professor Rich, the well-known historian, and a certain Belgian scientist, M. Émile V. The latter had left England at the time of the inquest and did not testify, but Professor Rich, who was, perhaps, the most intimate of all Mr. Mortimer's friends, stated that on the night of the 16th July Mr. Mortimer had dined with himself and M. Émile V. at the Megatherium. The Professor had been out of town for some days, and found himself pained to observe how ill and nervous Mr. Mortimer had become: he was in high but apparently forced spirits, drank more than was usual and kept announcing his intention of staying up all night.

"Few of us," he cried, "realize the beauty of dawn in the London streets. I shall stay here till the Club closes, and then I shall walk the streets till daylight comes. I'll have the police for company: perhaps you will hear of me as helping to catch a burglar. But I won't go home till morning." And he began to sing fragments of the well-known old song.

The Professor was deeply shocked and the Belgian gentleman astonished; fortunately they were alone in the small smoking-room, or Mr. Mortimer's conduct would have caused a scandal. Professor Rich began to expostulate with him, but with little success till Mr. Mortimer's glance fell upon the door. He suddenly became silent and very pale, then, turning to the other gentlemen, he muttered something unintelligible and walked straight out of the room. It was then about a quarter-past eleven and he must have returned direct to his rooms without even claiming his coat and hat. The Professor could not in the least account for this sudden departure; no one had entered the little smoking-room nor had the door been opened.

The last person to see Mr. Mortimer alive was Mr. Andrew Scoones who, it will be remembered, occupied the apartments beneath those of Mr. Mortimer. Mr. Scoones had resided in the house for some little time, but he had only a passing acquaintance with Mr. Mortimer, born of casual meetings on the stairs and similar accidental foregatherings. At this time, Mr. Scoones was busy with a literary article and as his day was absorbed by his official duties he was in the habit of working at night. For a long time he had been undisturbed by Mr. Mortimer, but for the past five or six days he had frequently heard that gentleman moving about his rooms at very late

hours. He had not paid much attention to his neighbour's restlessness, however, until this night of July 16th, when he heard Mr. Mortimer enter his apartment at about half-past eleven and forthwith begin to move about uneasily. As he listened a curious sense of there being something very wrong began to pervade him; and gradually it began to become known to his subconscious mind that something serious was amiss in Mr. Mortimer's rooms. The impression grew stronger, and at last it overcame his natural shrinking from intruding on the privacy of an almost total stranger, and rising from his writing-table he proceeded upstairs. On reaching Mr. Mortimer's door he paused; inside he could hear Mr. Mortimer pacing to and fro and occasionally uttering an ejaculation, the nature of which he could not hear. Finally he knocked at the door. There was a brief pause, then it was flung wide open with such violence that it crashed back against the wall behind it and Mr. Mortimer appeared on the threshold. He was dressed in his evening clothes, and was very pale, but there were no signs of disorder either on his person or in the room, which was brilliantly illuminated. For a moment the two men looked at each other in silence, then Mr. Scoones, plucking up his courage, began:

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Mortimer, if I have disturbed you, but I fear you are ill."

"Ill," said the other, "what makes you think that?"

"I must renew my apology," answered Mr. Scoones, "but I heard you tramping so restlessly overhead, and it is so late, that I feared there must be something the matter and I came up to see if I could be of any assistance."

There was a longish pause, during which Mr. Scoones grew more and more embarrassed, then Mr. Mortimer slowly said:

"I thank you, Mr. Scoones, but I am not ill; I only trust I have not disturbed your rest and I promise you I will give you no cause for further complaint."

These words were uttered deliberately in a somewhat peculiar voice and Mr. Scoones, abusing himself for having placed himself in a foolish position, was about to say good night and turn away, when Mr. Mortimer suddenly burst out:

"Don't go, don't go, I am in trouble, grievous trouble."

He stopped abruptly and, turning round, stared into the brightly lighted, empty room behind him. To Mr. Scoones's imagination, it appeared as if he was confronting some foe, invisible and inaudible to others.

"I will gladly help you, Mr. Mortimer," said Mr. Scoones, "to the best of my ability, if you will give me an idea as to what I can do."

Mr. Mortimer turned towards him again.

"If you would save my soul," he cried, "you will—"

As he spoke he staggered backwards one or two paces as if he were in the grip of a powerful enemy; he turned sharply again and stepping forward closed the door suddenly, swiftly and silently, and Mr. Scoones heard the key turned in the lock. He stood amazed. What had happened to Mr. Mortimer, and why had he closed the door so abruptly? He waited a moment; all was silence within, then bending towards the door, he called:

"Mr. Mortimer, Mr. Mortimer."

There was no reply, and he tried the door: as he had supposed, it was locked. Again he called:

"Mr. Mortimer. Can I help you? What is the matter?"

The reply came instantly:

"There is nothing the matter. All is as it should be, but come again to-morrow."

The voice sounded choked and constrained; it differed in some fashion from Mr. Mortimer's. Again Mr. Scoones tried.

“I fear you are ill, Mr. Mortimer; for Heaven’s sake open your door and let me in. I am sure you need help and comfort.” Mr. Scoones hardly knew why he spoke the last two words, but as in a glass darkly he seemed to see a vision of a poor human soul fighting a lonely and a losing battle against the Powers of Darkness.

There was another short pause, then Mr. Mortimer’s voice rang out clear and unmistakable on the horrified ears of his listener:

“In the name of the Devil, whose servant I am, cease to annoy me. To-morrow you shall know all.”

Mr. Scoones, filled with horror and amazement, turned away and descended to his rooms, where he sat up awhile listening, but no further sounds were heard from Mr. Mortimer’s floor; and at last, tired out, he retired to bed to be awakened next morning by White with the ghastly news of Mr. Mortimer’s death.

As usual White proceeded to Mr. Mortimer’s room at eight o’clock on the morning of July 17th. He knocked at the bedroom door, entered, and was surprised to find the bed empty and evidently unused, and to observe that all the lights in the room were fully turned on. Otherwise there was no sign of anything unusual except that the door into the little private lobby was open. Turning in that direction, White perceived that the light in the lobby was also burning, as well as that in the bathroom. He passed through into the sitting-room. Here at first all appeared to be in its usual condition, save that the room was brightly illuminated, but glancing towards the door White perceived Mr. Mortimer lying on the floor closely huddled up against it. He hurried over to him, and looking at him saw that his own hands were closely clenched about his throat and that he was dead. White endeavoured to raise him and to unclasp the gripping fingers, but found his clutch too firm to be relaxed. He at once rushed out to give the alarm, but even in his agitation noticed that the sitting-room door was locked, an unheard of thing, and that the key was on the inside. A doctor was summoned, and messengers to call the police and Dr. Bessford, Mr. Mortimer’s usual medical attendant, were also despatched. By the time the latter arrived Mr. Mortimer’s body had been raised from the floor and laid upon a sofa, but the doctor first summoned had not yet succeeded in removing the hands from the throat. In the presence of the police Dr. Bessford and his brother practitioner ultimately succeeded in releasing the deadly grip, and a hasty examination was made which disclosed the undoubted cause of death as self strangulation; the post-mortem later on showed that there was no bodily infirmity, nor any cause of death save this one alone. Both medical men testified to their amazement at so singular and so determined a form of suicide, and both, but especially Dr. Bessford, as well as White, commented on the peculiar look of abject terror on the dead face. There was no evidence found of any struggle or disturbance in the room, and Mr. Mortimer’s clothing was quite in order. The coroner’s jury brought in a verdict of Suicide in the usual form; Mr. Mortimer’s body was in due course buried; and the whole affair gradually passed into the limbo of forgetfulness.

Mr. Mortimer left no will or any instructions, and as his next of kin and heir, a distant sailor cousin, was then absent with his ship on the China station, Mr. Mortimer’s solicitor took charge his of effects and affairs. The rooms in—Street were given up, the furniture sold, and the books and manuscripts packed up and stored. On returning home, Lieutenant Mortimer did not trouble himself with unpacking the latter, and it is only since his death that they have again seen the light, and that the diary has become accessible.

It was apparently Mr. Mortimer’s practice to keep a diary, but seemingly only spasmodically—at any rate, only fragments have been found. Unluckily there are no existing volumes of the date at which he was brought into touch with Mr. Bradshaw, so there is no clue to the real relations

between the two men. The diary after a long interval had been recommenced about six months before Mr. Mortimer's death, but it is only of interest for the present purpose during the last eight days of his life. With this preamble the diary may now be quoted in full.

*July 8th.* "I was the subject to-day of a singular hallucination: I believe the spiritualist jargon describes it as clair-audience. I was in my rooms dressing to dine out with Lady L. when I distinctly heard the voice of James Bradshaw saying, "The day of reckoning will come soon." The impression was so strong that for a moment I supposed the man to have obtained admittance to my rooms, and to be speaking to me, but on looking round I perceived I was alone. There was no one in the sitting-room, and White, for whom I rang, assured me that he had admitted no one to see me. I am of the opinion that my subconscious memory has played me a trick and has recalled to my conscious self the last words that Bradshaw spoke as he flung himself out of the room at York, after refusing my offer of £1000. It is curious that this memory should have been revived after so many years, and even more curious that it should have been revived wrongly, for I am certain that the actual words Bradshaw used were, "The day of reckoning will come some time." However, it is useless to speculate on these tricks of the memory.

*July 9th.* I have been feeling uneasy and depressed to-day. I cannot describe myself as ill, but I suppose I have been working too hard at my article for Robertson, and that the heat has helped to affect me; I will get away for a breath of sea air as soon as possible. It must be my physical condition acting on my mind, but I cannot get Bradshaw out of my head. I know that he considers that I did him a great wrong, but after all £1000 to a man of his means is certainly more valuable than a little notoriety or, as he would call it, fame. Besides, I greatly question if he, a totally unknown man, could ever have got his, shall I call it, discovery recognized by people of standing; it was far too revolutionary, and needed some one recognized as an authority to bring it forward. At the time of the York interview he failed to notice this point, any more than he would agree that, if I had not come to his help in Fialo and seen him through his illness, he would probably have died and his secret have died with him and been lost to the world. He is a most unreasonable fellow, and a mischief maker; I think I came well out of my encounter with him.

*July 10th.* On picking up *Times* this morning, I noticed in the obituary column the death of James Bradshaw, assistant master at — School in Yorkshire. He died on the eighth, so there goes Bradshaw into nothingness. For a moment I confess to a slight feeling of regret for the man, but it passed quickly; he was an enemy of mine, though an impotent one, and it is better that he should have gone. While I fail to see how he could have done me harm while alive, yet it is certain he can do me none now that he is dead.

A most extraordinary and rather perturbing hallucination occurred this evening. I was dining alone at my usual table at the Club, and had nearly finished dinner, when, looking up, I saw James Bradshaw sitting in the chair directly opposite to my seat. He was plainly discernible as he sat quite motionless gazing at me with a diabolical grin and, save that he looked several years older, he was exactly as when I last saw him at York. I looked at him for a minute, then impelled by a sudden emotion and forgetful of the *Times* notice I rose from my chair, and moved round towards him. He did not stir until I was close upon him, and then—he simply was not there. I leaned against the table feeling sick and faint and when the waiter came to my side I sent for some brandy. This revived me, but I have told the man never to leave an empty chair opposite me again. The vision was so clear, and the appearance of the figure so menacing that I feel unnerved. I know it is hallucination, imagination, nonsense; and yet—

*July 11th.* My mind must be seriously affected. I slept badly last night, and woke unrefreshed; I have had dreams but I cannot recall them, but all this is nothing to the trouble that has begun to pursue me in my waking hours. James Bradshaw is here in my rooms, he follows me to my Club, he goes with me wherever I go, whether alone or with others. I cannot see him, but I know that he is here, and I constantly hear his voice. He taunts me with what happened at Fialo years ago, something that none but he and I know, he threatens me, he laughs at me. I know that it must be hallucination, but it is horribly vivid. I know that Bradshaw's body is rotting in the earth, and his spirit dissolved into nothingness, what is it then that tortures me in his form? I have been so maddened that I have answered him back, or is it answering myself back? I do not know; I can only cling to the belief that it is some bodily derangement. Dr. Bessford returns from his holiday to-morrow, and I will seek help from him. I can go to no stranger. It is now past one o'clock in the morning, and I have been walking to and fro, and wrestling with James Bradshaw for hours. I must rest, I must rest, but sleep, oh, my dreams will murder sleep!

*July 12th.* After a hideous night, I went early to see Dr. Bessford. He tells me after careful examination that physically he can find nothing wrong with me, but that mentally I appear to be over stimulated. I must rest. What farcical nonsense! While he was actually saying the words, Bradshaw was whispering in my ear: "Your soul is given to me." What shall I do? What can I do? Bessford has given me a sleeping draught; I will try and see if this will not give me at least one night of immunity from my persecutor.

*July 13th.* How have I lived through the night, how can I live through the day, how can I continue to exist? Last night, I took my sleeping draught and forthwith my body was steeped in sleep, but my spirit, released from its earthly casing, became the sport of the powers of evil. For what seemed ages I fled through vast, grey, misty spaces, hounded ever by James Bradshaw. Wildly I endeavoured to hide, for I knew whither he was driving me. At last he seized me and dragged me onwards and now I know there is a Hell, for I have seen it, mine own eyes have seen it; for an instant, for an eternity, James Bradshaw swung me suspended over the Pit, and then with a yell of laughter he freed me, and I woke. I woke in the pale light of early morning to see Bradshaw's form by my bed-side. I stared at the figure, which stood distinct in the early light, motionless, but with threatening arm upraised, and then I heard its voice, clear but sounding as if from far, far away: "In four days you shall be mine for ever." It vanished, and I have lived through another day, too crushed and hopeless to think.

*July 14th.* Last night I passed free of disturbance, and I have felt less sensible of the hideous presence. Perhaps I can yet escape; perhaps there is yet mercy for me. For have I been so evil a man that I deserve such a doom as Bradshaw threatens? I know I have my faults, I know I have done things that cause me shame, but is there no repentance? Is there really a God of mercy to appeal to? Surely there must be, surely that Hell, which I have myself seen, is not the doom of all mankind. What shall I do? I will make amends to any I have wronged in the past; I will try and lead a better life in the future. First, I will write openly and fully and make public the whole truth of my dealings with James Bradshaw, and if he has a family I will seek them out, and make what reparation is possible and humble myself before them. Then there is that affair of Campion; he at any rate is alive, and I can straighten out matters there; and there is Ellen; she, poor, loving soul shall have justice. But I must have time to do these things, although I will not delay in commencing them; for I must not die till my tasks are all accomplished. To begin with I must sleep; Bessford's draught gave me an experience I dare not repeat, so I will get a small bottle of opium—that will give me sound sleep.

*July 15th.* The opium worked well enough and I slept soundly, but I woke in an agony of fear with the voice of Bradshaw resounding through my room: "You have two days left." I sprang out of bed and called out something, I cannot say what, some prayer, some appeal. My answer was a mocking laugh dying away in the distance. I shall go mad. I must have time to repent in, I cannot, I will not, I dare not die yet. But how can I help myself? I have forgotten how to pray. I have denied and forsaken my God for so long that now He has forsaken me. Can no one help me? Yes, there is Father Bertram to whom my dear dead mother used to go in trouble. Can he and will he help me? I can but try.

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The powers of Hell have prevailed, I am a lost soul with none but myself to help me. In accordance with my resolve I set forth to visit Father Bertram, and was fortunate enough to find him at home. He greeted me civilly but coldly—no wonder, renegade that I am. But when I began to try and tell my story my tongue was tied, I *could* not tell my tale, for incessantly James Bradshaw was whispering in my ear, whispering words of blasphemy and despair. I stammered out some inanities and fled the house. Bradshaw walking by me laughing gleefully.

*July 16th.* I woke once more from a drugged sleep to hear the voice of doom proclaiming: "To-morrow I will claim you." But he *shall* not do so, I will not die, I dare God or Devil to take my life till I have accomplished my purpose. Let me think calmly; I am under a spell now, a spell which tells me I must die to-morrow. Let me break that spell; let me but survive over to-morrow, and the power of evil will be defeated. I have but to preserve my will power for one day, and I am safe. I will seek outside help, the help of man, it is the night I dread. Well, I will keep in the company of my kind all night, they will preserve me from self-destruction. I will remain at the Club as late as possible, dining with Rich and that Belgian friend of his, as he has asked me to do, then I will go out into the streets and find some friendly constable, who will let me be his companion through the night watches: but nothing shall induce me to spend the night in my rooms. In the morning I shall be safe.

The day so far has been quiet and undisturbed, if I can get through the night as I propose, I feel I shall have conquered in the fight. Alone I shall have done it: God has deserted me, the Devil assails me, but I defy them both; I will not die to-night."

These are the closing words of the diary. It will be remembered that the unfortunate man returned from the Club to his apartments at about half-past eleven that evening.