

# The Stepping-Stones

By Elliott O'Donnell

Between Coalbrookdale and the Wrekin, in a charmingly wooded valley, flows a stream crossed by seven stepping-stones, and on one bank of the stream are the ruins of what was once a farmhouse. People shun the spot at night, and tell strange tales of the uncanny things that are seen there.

The following narrative may very possibly afford an explanation of the alleged hauntings.

About noon one stifling hot day in August, rather more than thirty years ago, Robert Redblake Casson, senior partner of the firm of Casson, Hunter & Co., ivory merchants, of Old Queen Street, London, walked into the Fox and Greyhound Inn, Coalbrookdale, and ordered luncheon. While he was eating—there was no one else in the dining-room at the time—his eyes wandered to a large oil-painting hanging on the wall facing him. It represented a stream spanned by seven large stepping-stones. In the background of the picture, and leading to the bank of the stream, was a broad and very white pathway, bordered on either side by a thickly planted row of lofty pines. The artist, Casson thought, had depicted this scene with a more than ordinary touch of realism. The trees were no mere paint-and-canvas duds, but things of life—things that stood out prominently, each with an individuality of its own. He could almost see them move, see the rustling of their foliage and hear the creaking of their gently swaying bodies. Their shadows, too, were no empty, meaningless daubs, such as one too often sees in pictures, but counterparts, living, breathing counterparts, that, while conveying a sense of the physical, conveyed also a suggestion of the inexplicable. As to the water in the stream which rippled and babbled as it flowed, Casson could feel the speed and gauge the shallowness of it everywhere, saving round the centre stepping-stone, where it was green, and seemed to possess the stillness that great depths alone can generate. There was sunlight everywhere on the surface of the water, and here and there it shone and sparkled with all the brilliant lustre of the goldfishes' scales; but despite this animation, a sense of utter loneliness, a feeling of intense isolation, seemed to permeate the whole thing, and Casson, as he gazed, felt both chilled and depressed.

He was still looking at the picture, and wondering what there could be in it to cause such a sensation of chilliness, when something made him glance at the stepping-stones, and, to his utter amazement, he saw the centre one suddenly begin to oscillate.

Thinking it must be some kind of optical illusion, Casson rubbed his eyes and looked again, but the stone was still shaking, and he fancied he could discern the shadowy and indistinct outline of something or someone standing on it, swaying violently to and fro.

The phenomenon lasted some seconds, and then very abruptly ceased.

Casson got up from the table and walked right up to the picture. He examined it closely, and, oddly enough, although he was standing on the floor a foot or so away from the canvas, he yet felt he was absorbed by it, and part and parcel of the surroundings it depicted. The stone was quite motionless now, but despite this fact, the fact that it now lay firmly embedded in its cup-like basin, Casson was acutely conscious that it had moved. Moreover, its present stillness was of the most impressive nature; it was, as it

were, the stillness that only comes after great emotion. Casson looked for the name of the artist, and at last, in one corner of the canvas, painted in sepia to tone with the general colouring, he found the signature. It was "Ralph L. Wotherall."

"Good heavens!" he ejaculated; "this must be my old friend. There cannot be two Ralph L. Wotheralls. Besides, I remember he used to be fond of painting, and, judging from this specimen, he must have taken to it professionally. How I should like to meet him again!

His memory ran back a clear score of years. He and Wotherall had been the staunchest of friends; they had shared a study in Dempster's House at Harley. Wotherall was quite the best boy in the school in drawing; indeed, it was about he only subject he was good in; and he had often remarked to Casson that whatever his father, who was a big timber merchant, might desire to the contrary, he meant to go to the Slade School in London and be an artist. He decorated the walls of the study with sketches and caricatures of the boys and masters—Casson even now laughed as he thought of some of them—and during his last term at the old place he had executed an oil-painting. If Casson remembered correctly, it depicted a river (Wotherall had always evinced a very strong fascination for water scenery), and was hung in a very conspicuous place over the mantelpiece.

Wotherall had not been popular at Harley. He was no good at games, and did not take the trouble to conceal his dislike of them. Besides, he had no respect for conventions; he did not have a fag, and inveighed hotly against those who did; he thought nothing of the "caps" and other big-wigs, and was invariably in trouble, either with a master, a House Sixth, or somebody of an equally recognised importance. Still, for all that, he had been a most excellent chum, and he, Casson, had repeatedly felt a longing to see him again, if only to chat about the many escapades they had had together. What had become of him, he wondered? Strange that that stone in the picture should have attracted his attention—should have led him to look for the name of the artist, and to discover in it his old friend! Of course the rocking of the stone was a hallucination. Probably his sight had played him a trick or his brain had suddenly become giddy. How could a stone in a picture—a thing of mere paint and canvas—suddenly start rocking? The thing was too fantastic for words, and he walked back to his seat, laughing. Ringing the bell, he asked to see the landlord, and when the latter appeared, he inquired of him how he had come by the picture, and if he knew the artist.

"I bought that picture, sir," the landlord replied, "of a woman of the name of Griffiths. I happened to be passing her house—Stepping-Stone Farm, they call it—one day, when she was having a sale of some of her live stock, together with a few odds and ends in the way of surplus furniture, books, pictures, etc. I am very fond of a good landscape, sir, particularly with a bit of water in it, and there was something about this one that specially appealed to me. That, sir, is the stream that flows outside the old woman's house, and it was painted, so she informed me, by an artist who used to lodge with her, but had to leave in the end because he was stony-broke, and hadn't the wherewithal to go on paying the rent. A not uncommon happening with artists, sir, so I have always been given to understand. From what I gathered he owed the old woman pounds, and the few things he left behind him—knick-knacks and a couple of pictures—I bought the lot—was all the compensation she could ever get out of him."

"You don't know where he went, I suppose?" Casson said.

“No,” the landlord replied, shaking his head. “Mrs. Griffiths did not volunteer that information, and, as I was not particularly interested in the fellow, I didn’t ask her. She doesn’t live very far from here, however, and if you would like to see her, sir, you could hire a trap and drive over, or even walk—though, maybe, you’d find walking a bit too tiring this weather.”

Casson thanked the landlord, and, feeling particularly fit and well, decided to set off at once on foot to Stepping-Stone Farm. He had little difficulty in finding the way, thanks to the prodigality of the local authorities in their distribution of signposts, and the sun had hardly begun to set, when a sudden swerve of the road showed him an avenue of trees that he instantly identified as that depicted in Wotherall’s picture. Everywhere he encountered the same atmosphere of intense loneliness and isolation, not untinged with a melancholy, that had the most depressing effect, and filled his mind with a hundred and one dismal reflections.

Advancing over the white soil he soon heard the rushing of water, and saw, straight ahead of him and apparently barring his progress, a broad stream, that seemed unusually full of water for the time of year. As he drew near he perceived the stream was spanned by seven stepping-stones, and, drawing nearer still, he saw that, just as in Wotherall’s picture, the water on either side the middle and largest of the stones formed two big pools, one of which was singularly green and suggestive of very great depth.

On the opposite side of the stream, almost on its very bank, a farmyard encircled a long, low building, the walls of which were barely visible beneath a profusion of pink and white roses, clematis and honeysuckle. Casson thought he had never seen anything quite so enchanting, and, being a man who invariably acted upon impulse, decided to ask Mrs. Griffiths, whose house it undoubtedly was, to put him up for the night. To do that, however, he would of course have to cross the stream. Now Casson had often crossed deep rivers in Norway by stepping-stones, and in crossing these rivers he had twice seen a man slip and, with one agonising shriek of despair, plunge headlong into the seething foam, his body, bruised and battered and hardly recognisable, being found many days later, calmly floating in some obscure nook maybe a mile or so away; and compared with these Scandinavian rivers the stream that now faced him was but a brooklet. All the same, he had never experienced such an intense fear and feeling of insecurity as now, when, stepping lightly over the first three stones, he landed on the centre one and gazed into the green, silent depths of the largest and deepest of the two pools that lay on either side of it. There was something curiously unnatural about this pool; he had never seen such a pronounced green in fresh water before, and its depth was in such marked contrast to the shallow, babbling water all around it. As he peered into it, a dark shadow seemed to well up to its surface, but he could trace no likeness in it to himself, and the trees were too far off for it to be produced by any one of them. He was asking himself how it could have come there, when his eyes wandered to the stone on which he was standing.

What an odd shape it was, nearly round and slightly convex, like the back of a turtle or some other queer amphibious creature, and it moved; he was positive of that, but it did not move with the rocking, vibrating movement he had witnessed in the picture; it moved with a furtive, sidelong, crawling action, as if it were alive. The sensation was unendurable. He turned to go, and, as he leaped through the air to the fourth stone, something whose attitude towards him he could not exactly define seemed to rise out of the green pool with astonishing celerity and leap with him. Arriving on the seventh and

last stone, he was conscious of a strong restraining influence, an enigmatical something that seemed to be trying to pull him back, and it was only by exerting every atom of his will power that he succeeded in forcing himself forward. However, the moment his feet touched the bank and he was quite clear of the water, he was himself again. He turned and looked at the stone. It was absolutely motionless, while a stray sunbeam, gilding the surface of the silent pool, made it appear quite ridiculously cheerful. Vexed with himself for being such a fool, Casson now crossed the farmyard and, going up to the house, knocked at the door. It was opened by a middle-aged woman, who might once have been the village belle, but who was now thin and worn.

“Yes,” she said, running her eyes carefully over Casson’s face and clothes. “What is it?”

“Are you Mrs. Griffiths?” Casson ejaculated. “I am a friend of Mr. Wotherall. I understand he once boarded with you.”

“That’s right,” the woman replied. “He lived with me more than six months, and left two years ago last May. He didn’t owe you anything, did he?”

“Oh no,” Casson replied quickly; “far from it. He and I were old schoolfellows. I saw a picture of his at the place I lunched at to-day, and, hearing he had been in the neighbourhood, I thought I would like to find out his present whereabouts.”

“If you’ve come to inquire of me, I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed,” Mrs. Griffiths responded, “for I’ve neither seen him nor heard from him since he went away, and he would not leave any address for letters to be forwarded, as he said he had written to all his friends to tell them not to write here any more. A good many bills, but nothing else, came for him after he left, and those I have returned to the Dead Letter Office. He was very hard up, poor gentleman, and it’s my opinion he didn’t want his creditors to know what had become of him.”

“I suppose he must have lost money then,” Casson murmured, “for I always understood that his people were very comfortably fixed, and that he was an only child. Poor old Wotherall, I should so like to have met him again! Do you still let rooms?”

“Yes, sir,” Mrs. Griffiths replied; “a top bedroom and parlour. The same two as Mr. Wotherall had. The last people that occupied them, a commercial traveller and his wife from Leeds, only left last week. Would you like to see them?”

Casson acquiesced, and, liking the look of the rooms immensely, took them for a fortnight, which was all that remained of his seven weeks’ holidays.

“It is a charming spot,” he argued, “and I can easily amuse myself mooching about the fields or lying by the stream reading. Rest and quiet, and a plain, wholesome diet, such as one always gets at a farm, are just the very things I need.”

He had a gorgeous tea that evening—strawberries, freshly gathered from the garden, cream, delicious butter and bread, none of that mysterious substitute that is palmed off on one nowadays in most of the London hotels and restaurants, but real home-made bread, which tasted far nicer than anything he had ever eaten in Bond Street or Piccadilly—and he enjoyed the meal so much, in fact, that he felt in a particularly amiable frame of mind, and thoroughly well satisfied with the world in general.

Presently he got up, intending to go out. He crossed the stone-flagged hall, and, passing the kitchen, the door of which was slightly open, he perceived Mrs. Griffiths busily engaged at a pastry-board rolling away as if for dear life. Wishing to be sociable, he called out, and as soon as she invited him in, opened up a conversation with her, inquiring how many cows she kept, how much land she rented, and had she a good crop

of fruit. Whilst she was answering these questions, expatiating to no small degree on the trials and drawbacks of having to run a farm without a husband to look after it (she had, she remarked, with much emphasis and a dangerous approach to tears, been married twice, her first husband, "the best man as ever breathed," dying of consumption, and her second, a drunkard and a bad lot in every way, deserting her and going off to America, so she had always believed, with some other woman); whilst, I say, she was engaged telling him all this, he suddenly found himself gazing at an object hanging on the wall near the grandfather clock. It was a striped chocolate, white, and blue scarf, with the letters H.C. in white standing out in bold relief. He recognised the colours at once; they were the colours of Dempster's House at Harley. Evidently Wotherall had left the scarf behind as part of the personal effects that he had had to hand over to Mrs. Griffiths, in order to appease her indignation at his failure to produce the rent. Poor beggar, he must indeed have been hard pushed to part with so sacred a memento of his early life. Casson, like every other Harleyn, had the greatest reverence and affection for everything associated with the old School, the mere thought of which even now sent a thrill of genuine emotion through him.

"I see you have got a souvenir of my friend over there," he said, pointing to the scarf. "I suppose he made you a present of it when he left."

"What do you mean?" Mrs. Griffiths demanded, abruptly breaking off from her pastry-making

"A souvenir of your friend? I don't understand."

"I mean that scarf hanging on the wall there," Casson cried, again indicating with his hand its whereabouts. "It's my old School, or rather House, scarf. But what makes it blow about so? There doesn't seem to be any wind."

"House! scarf! colours!" Mrs. Griffiths ejaculated. "I never heard tell of such things. You must be crazy. There's nothing on the wall saving that almanac that was given me by the grocer over in Coalbrookdale for a Christmas present. Have you never seen an almanac before?"

"Not made of wool and behaving like that," Casson remarked. Then, going a few steps nearer, he gave vent to a loud exclamation of surprise. There was no scarf there at all, not the vestige of one, only a picture almanac representing an intensely silly-looking girl holding a lawn-tennis racket.

"My liver must be very wrong and I must be more than ordinarily bilious," Casson said. "I could have sworn it was a scarf."

"You're run down; been working too hard, Mr. Casson," Mrs. Griffiths observed. "What you want is a rest. Go to bed early, and don't try your eyes over books and letter-writing."

Casson thanked her for her advice and, turning on his heels, left the kitchen. For one brief second he paused to look back. Mrs. Griffiths was staring after him, and in the depths of her large china-blue eyes, the pupils of which seemed to have grown to an unusual size, he read an expression of curiosity intermingled with fear.

The next few hours Casson spent lying on the grassy bank of the stream. There was something wonderfully soothing in the constant rustling of the leaves of the big trees in the avenue, and the eternal babble, babble, babble of the water. At times he construed the sounds into real sighings and whisperings, and fancied he could hear his name called, "Casson! Casson! Casson!" very softly and plaintively, but occasionally with such reality

that he started. and had to reassure himself earnestly that it was all imagination. Then the shadows on the white soil of the avenue riveted his attention. That they were only the shadows of the trees he had no doubt, and yet he queried every now and then if he had ever before seen shadows flit about and contort themselves in quite such an incomprehensible manner. The emptiness of the avenue, too, seemed so emphasised. Why was it so deserted? Why weren't there people about—living beings among those dark swaying trees and bushes like there were in the London parks? He did not know if he altogether liked the avenue now, when twilight was coming on. His eyes had tricked him in the kitchen; might they not trick him again out here, and in a rather more alarming manner? He would not look at the avenue again, not till it was broad daylight; he would turn his attention to something else. And then, of course, his eyes rested on the stepping-stones. One, two, three, four, he counted. There was that confounded queer-shaped middle stone again, and that pool! How black and sinister they both looked in the semi-darkness! He would sound the pool in the morning and see if it was really as deep as he fancied. He turned away his eyes and tried to keep his attention concentrated on something else, but it was never any good, and in the end he invariably caught himself gazing at the stones, and particularly at the middle one. At last, tearing himself away with an effort, he went indoors and had supper, and at ten o'clock by his watch wended his way upstairs to bed. Just outside his door he suddenly pulled himself up sharply. Another step, and he felt he would have collided with something or somebody, and yet, when he looked there was nothing—nothing save space. More convinced than ever now that there was something wrong either with the place or himself, Casson entered his room and proceeded to get into bed. The exertions of the day had made him tired, and he was soon asleep. He supposed he slept for about three hours, for he awoke with a start to hear the kitchen clock hurriedly strike two. His heart was beating furiously, and he had the most uncomfortable feeling that there was someone besides himself in the room. He fought against this feeling for some time, until, at last, unable to endure it any longer, he got out of bed, lit the candle, and searched the room thoroughly. The door was locked on the inside—he remembered locking it— and he was quite alone. "It must be nerves, he said, getting back into bed and blowing out the light. "A strong tonic is what I want. I will write to Dr. Joyce for one to-morrow. But I've never been afflicted with nerves before! And in all consciousness I live simply enough; so I don't know why I should suddenly develop biliousness." Then seized with a sudden desire to blow his nose, and recollecting that his handkerchief was on the chair by the bedside, he was putting out his hand to grope for it, when he felt it quietly thrust into his palm.

After that he pulled the bedclothes tightly over his head and kept them there till the morning. With the sunlight all doubts and uneasiness vanished, and Casson got out of bed fully convinced that all his experiences of the previous night were due to mere nervousness.

"I'm a Londoner," he argued, "and, not being used to the quiet and loneliness of these out-of-the-way places, I got the wind up."

Breakfast made him even more confident, and he went out into the yard in the cheeriest mood possible. After amusing himself watching the poultry, pigs, and other animals, he wandered through a wicket-gate into a field, and then through another field down to the stream. While he was threading his way back to the farm, through a mass of gorse and other undergrowth, he came upon a boy bending over a fishing-rod, busily intent on

putting something red and raw—like uncooked meat—on a hook. “Whatever’s that horrid-looking stuff,” Casson said. “You’ll never catch fish with bait like that. Why don’t you use dough?”

“Cos I know they like this best,” was the answer, and the boy looked up at Casson and grinned.

Casson was now so taken up with the boy’s appearance that he forgot all about the bait. He had never seen such an unpleasant, queer, malshapen face before. The cranium was disproportionately large; the forehead and sides of the head immediately above and behind the ears were enormously developed; the chin was small and retreating; the ears, which stood very pronouncedly out from the head, were very big and pointed; the mouth huge; the eyes big, dark, and very heavily lidded; the skin yellow and unhealthy. The face was unprepossessing enough in repose, but when the lips opened and it smiled, the likeness to some ghoulish, froggish, and wholly monstrous kind of animal was increased a hundredfold, and Casson started back in dismay.

“Who are you?” he demanded, “and what right have you to fish here?”

“I like that—I do,” the boy grunted. “Why, I’ve every right. I’m Ephraim Owen Lloyd. My mother, her you’re staying with, was Mrs. Owen Lloyd before she married again and took the name of Griffiths. No right to fish here! You tell my mother that and see what she says.” And, grinning wider than ever, he picked up the baited hook and flung it far into the stream.

Not wishing to have any further conversation with him, and feeling thoroughly disgusted and repelled, Casson walked on towards the stones. “Fancy being under the same roof with a young degenerate like that!” he said to himself. “I wish now I hadn’t decided to stay so long.”

Slashing at the grass and other herbage with his stick—a trick Casson always resorted to when unsettled or annoyed—he reached the stones, and was about to turn into the yard when he received something of a surprise. A man in flannels, with a chocolate, white, and blue striped blazer, passed him by and, crossing the yard, vanished round an angle of the house. Casson did not see his face, but the back of his head, his figure, and walk at once recalled Wotherall. “If that’s not Ralph,” Casson exclaimed, “I’ll eat my hat! I wonder why he’s come back? It will give him a bit of a surprise when he sees me.”

At the front door he ran into Mrs. Griffiths, who, with an apron full of French beans, was making for the kitchen.

“Have you seen him?” Casson inquired.

“Seen who?” Mrs. Griffiths rejoined.

“The man in the blazer, of course,” Casson replied. “Mr. Wotherall, wasn’t it?”

“Mr. Wotherall!” Mrs. Griffiths exclaimed, stopping short and staring hard at Casson. “You seem to have got Mr. Wotherall on the brain. Mr. Wotherall is nowhere near here—leastways, if he is, I’ve seen no signs of him.”

“Why, there he is!” Casson cried excitedly, pointing at a window, through which he saw a figure in the familiar Harleian House blazer saunter slowly by. “That is Wotherall. He hasn’t altered in the least. See, he’s looking straight in here—at me! I’ll go and speak to him!”

He ran to the door and threw it open. To his astonishment, there was no one there but young Ephraim Lloyd, who met his puzzled expression with an impudent leer.

“Where’s Mr. Wotherall?” Casson cried. “What’s become of him?”

The boy's countenance instantly underwent a change. "Mr. Wotherall!" he stammered. "What do you know of Mr. Wotherall?"

"Know of him?" Casson retorted angrily. "That's my business. He was here a few seconds ago, and now I can see no trace of him. Where is he, I say?"

By this time Mrs. Griffiths had deposited the beans on the kitchen table and joined the two at the door. "Take no notice of the gentleman," she said to Ephraim, "it's overwork. Been a-studying too hard. I've told him he must throw aside his books and letter-writing while he is here, and rest."

"Do you mean to tell me," Casson said "that neither of you saw a man in a blazer pass here just now?"

"Naw!" Ephraim drawled. "I ain't seen no one. There's no man in a blazer or in any other kind of thing anywhere about here. There's no man at all except yourself."

"That's right!" Mrs. Griffiths chipped in. "I told the gentleman so, only he won't believe me."

"I must have been dreaming, then," Casson replied reluctantly; "but, at all events, I am awake now, and should like my dinner, Mrs. Griffiths, as soon as you can get it."

That ended the incident. Casson retreated to his parlour, and the other two, after mumbling for awhile in the hall, retired together to the kitchen. The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and, once again, Casson found himself, candle in hand, wending his way upstairs to bed.

Just outside his door the same thing happened as on the previous night. He thought he saw someone standing there, and pulled himself up sharply to avoid a collision.

Once inside his room he locked the door, and then looked everywhere to make sure no one was hiding. That preliminary over, he stood for a while by the window smoking, then undressed, and got into bed. Leaning on his elbow, he was about to blow out the candle, which was on the chair by his side, when there was a big puff and it was blown out for him. No thought of investigating this time entered Casson's mind; he dived deep under the bedclothes, and did not emerge till Mrs. Griffiths, almost thumping his door down, announced that his breakfast was on the table getting cold. After breakfast he went for a ramble in the fields, and as he had no desire to come in contact with Ephraim, towards whom he had taken a most violent dislike, he headed in a direction away from the stream. He had not gone many yards, however, when he heard a cat screaming as if in fearful pain. Thinking some dog had got hold of it and was worrying it to death, and being very fond of cats, Casson at once made for the sounds, and in an open space, within a few yards of the stream, came upon a spectacle that he felt he could never forget, even if he lived a thousand years.

Tied down securely with cord to the top of a big wooden box was a black and white cat. Ephraim had hooked out one of its eyes, which was on the ground near his fishing-line, and was now about to hook out the other. The mystery of the bait Casson had seen him using the day before was thus explained.

With something like a howl of fury Casson rushed at Ephraim, and, seizing him by the scruff of his neck, thrashed him until his arms ached. Then flinging him on the ground with the remark, "You little devil, I hope I've killed you," he untied the cat. Weak with pain and loss of blood, the wretched animal had not the strength to move, and Casson, lifting it tenderly up, carried it to the house. Going straight into the kitchen, he showed it to Mrs. Griffiths.

“This is your son’s work,” he said. “I’m going to show it to the police at once, and I only hope he’ll get a thorough good birching.”

Mrs. Griffiths ceased what she was doing and looked at Casson defiantly.

“What do you want to interfere with Ephraim for?” she remarked. “He ain’t done nothing to you, has he?”

“He’s done nothing to me, perhaps,” Casson retorted, “but he’s done something to this cat. You can see for yourself.”

“Well, he’s only a boy,” Mrs. Griffiths responded; “and if he has ill-treated the cat, there’s not much harm done. I expect it’s the same cat that has been after the chickens. The cats about here are a perfect pest.”

“That’s no excuse for hooking their eyes out,” Casson said hotly. “I intend leaving at once. Here’s a week’s rent,” and, taking some money from his pocket, he deposited it on the table.

At that moment there were sounds of steps on the gravel outside, loud hullabalooings, and Ephraim burst into the kitchen.

“The gentleman’s been hitting me,” he bellowed. “He struck me on the head and boxed my ears.”

“You struck him!” Mrs. Griffiths screamed, her cheeks white with fury. “You dared to strike him! I’ll have the law on you, see if I don’t. There, there, Ephraim, cease crying, and you shall have what is left of that custard pudding you liked so much yesterday.”

This bribe apparently taking effect, Mrs. Griffiths gave her offspring a final cuddle, and then veered round with the intention of renewing an attack upon Casson. Before she could open her mouth to speak, however, there was another howling on the part of Ephraim, and Casson, under cover of it hurried off to his bedroom to collect his things. As he went upstairs, both the boy and his mother showered abuses on him, and he thought he heard Ephraim say something to the effect that he wished they could serve him as they had served someone else—the name of the someone else being drowned in a loud hush from Mrs. Griffiths, who afterwards began to speak very excitedly in Welsh.

On reaching his room Casson sought to revive the cat. He gave it some brandy from his flask, but the animal had been so badly mauled that all his efforts were in vain, and in a very few minutes it succumbed. He was thinking how he should carry it to the police station, when he heard a growl, and, looking round, saw a big black retriever dog, with a bright steel collar, standing on its hind legs, with its back towards him, gazing out of the window. Wondering whose dog it was, and what it was growling at, Casson went to the window, and, looking out, saw Mrs. Griffiths and the boy, each armed with a long pole, making off in the direction of the stream. Once or twice they peeped round, (whereupon Casson quickly hid himself behind the curtain), and then, apparently satisfied that they had not been seen, kept on following the course of the stream till they arrived at the stepping-stones. Crossing the first two, they stood on the third, and, thrusting the tops of their poles under the middle one, began to lever it up. Casson now thought it high time to depart. He felt convinced that they were setting some kind of trap for him, and that the exact nature of it was only known to themselves. Thanking his lucky stars that he had happened to look out of the window in time to see their little game, and determining to escape at once, avoiding the stepping-stones at all costs, he was preparing to leave the room, when he suddenly thought of the dog. It was nowhere to be seen, and the door and

the window were both shut. Where could it be? He looked under the bed, in the cupboard, everywhere; it was useless—the dog had vanished!

“The sooner I am out of this house,” he muttered, as he ran downstairs and out at the kitchen door, “the better.” And taking care, as he crossed the yard, to keep well out of sight of the stepping-stones, he ran in an opposite direction, without stopping for at least a mile.

Eventually he crossed the stream by a bridge, and found his way to a village, from whence he was able to proceed by train to Coalbrookdale. Arriving at the latter place, he went at once to the police, and telling them first of all about the cat, went on to narrate all that had happened to him at the farm. The police were not altogether unsympathetic; they could, however, so they said, do nothing with regard to the cat without corroborative evidence, and, as to the other matter, they were afraid the law did not take cognizance of the superphysical, or suspicion founded on anything so immaterial as ghosts, although they themselves would not like to go as far as to deny their existence altogether. At length, being unable to prevail upon the police to do anything, Casson, by offering a handsome remuneration, persuaded two labourers to accompany him back to the stream. Arriving at the stepping-stones, they cautiously examined the middle one, and found it to be so poised that anyone standing on it would, by its unexpected tilt, suddenly be precipitated into a deep hole directly underneath it.

After considerable difficulty the stone was sufficiently moved on one side to enable the workmen to explore this hole, and at the bottom of it the skeletons of two men and a dog were discovered.

There was nothing on the one skeleton that could in any way help to identify it; but remnants of clothes, ragged and rotten, still adhered to the other, and from the name engraven on a card-case in the pocket of the coat, which tallied with the initials on the undergarments and a signet ring, there was little doubt but that the remains were those of Ralph Wotherall. [From subsequent inquiries it was ascertained that the friends and relatives of Ralph Wotherall had heard from him immediately prior to the time he was supposed to have left Stepping-Stone Farm, but had not heard from him since, a fact to which they had attributed little importance, as Wotherall, on more than one occasion, had suddenly decided to go abroad, where he had stayed for a couple of years or so without letting anyone know where he was or what he was doing. The story, they said, of his being so hard up as to be unable to pay the rent could be discredited by his solicitors, who would testify to the fact that they had but recently invested a large sum of money for him, from which he was deriving a not inconsiderable income.] A steel collar bearing the initials R. L. W. was found round the neck of the third skeleton, and as several people remembered having seen a big black retriever with Wotherall while he was staying at the farm, it was pretty certain that the canine remains were those of his dog. However, Mrs. Griffiths, who appeared to be quite as astonished as anyone at the discovery of the skeletons, still stuck to her original story that Wotherall had left the neighbourhood, taking his dog with him, and against her statements Casson could only reiterate his surmises. He was quite certain that Mrs. Griffiths and her evil-faced son were guilty of murder, that, having done away with Wotherall and some other man by means of the steppingstone, they had deliberately set the same deathtrap for him, and that he had only been saved from falling into it by the apparition of his old friend's dog; but he could not, of course, expect the police to work up a case, which, from their point of view, rested

upon such an unsubstantial foundation, and as on examination the skeleton showed no evidence of foul play, there was no alternative, the usual verdict of "Death from misadventure" had to be returned.