

THE UNFAITHFUL FOOTMAN

In 1813, Camden Place was the private home of the wealthy Mr Bonar and his wife who had lived there some eight or nine years. One Sunday evening in the early summer of 1813, Mr Bonar retired to bed at his usual time. His wife did not follow him until two o'clock in the morning, after ordering her servant to call her at seven. True to her instructions, the servant went to the master bedroom sharp at seven to wake her mistress. To her horror, she found the mangled body of Mr Bonar lying on the floor and her mistress, unconscious and dying, still in her bed.

Mr Bonar's head and hands were covered with blood, his skull literally broken into fragments in several places. There was a great laceration across his face and nose as if caused by a heavy rod or bar. His hands were mangled and there was a severe wound to the right knee. From the injuries it was clear that Mr Bonar had put up a great struggle. Despite being in his seventies, he was a strong and fit man and sold his life dearly. His nightcap, lying a few feet from his head, was drenched in blood, with a lock of grey hair still adhering to it. His pillow, which had fallen from the bed, was lying at his feet; this too was drenched in blood.

His wife had had her head broken in the same manner but she seemed to have been knocked unconscious without a struggle, as her face displayed a calm softness, more as if she were asleep rather than dead or dying. Her bed linen was soaked in blood, as was that on Mr Bonar's bed. Although the couple slept in separate small beds, these were placed so close together that there was scarcely room for anyone to walk between them.

A bent poker lying on the floor matched closely the injuries and wounds on the two bodies and was clearly the murder weapon. As there were still some signs of life in Mrs Bonar, Philip Nicholson, the footman, rode into London to fetch a surgeon, taking one of the best horses in the stables to ensure his speedy arrival. It is a measure of the Bonars' wealth and importance that they could afford the services of Mr Astley Cooper, who was the surgeon at Guy's Hospital, Professor at the Royal College of Surgeons and probably the most celebrated and important surgeon of his day. Mr Cooper attended without delay but it was too late: the injuries were too severe and the soul of Mrs Bonar joined that of her late husband at eleven minutes past one, her only utterance being a soft 'Oh dear!'

That evening Mr Bonar junior arrived from Faversham, where he was stationed as a colonel in the Kent Militia and, despite the efforts of friends and others to restrain him, rushed upstairs crying, 'Let me see my father. Indeed, I must see him!' He burst into the bedroom, locking the door behind him. Amid fears for his safety, the door was forced open and Colonel Bonar was found kneeling with clasped hands over the body of his father, apparently in prayer. His friends dragged him away, in a state of near collapse, into an adjoining room.

There appeared to be no explanation for this horrid and violent affair; there had been no attempt at robbery and it was hard to imagine anyone who would wish to commit such a bloody deed on two persons who were universally liked and respected for their inoffensiveness and benevolence. There were no signs of a break-in, although it was reported that the front door was found open in the morning. Only two hours after Mrs Bonar had retired to bed, a washerwoman let herself in to start work. None of the servants appeared to have been disturbed by any noise or cries during the night but their quarters were some distance from the master bedroom.

It was later revealed that once the footman had summoned the surgeon, he rode to the Red Lion, near Bedlam, where he saw a man named Dale, who had recently been discharged from the service of Mr Bonar, to whom it was later alleged he said, 'The deed is done and you are suspected. But you are not in it.'

Nicholson, the footman, then went on to Bow Street to inform the Bow Street Runners about the murders and he related what had passed at the Red Lion between him and Dale. This prompted two officers to go in search of Dale. Nicholson appeared to be slightly tipsy and it is true he had been seen to down three glasses of rum at the public house. The officers told him to follow them but they lost sight of him in the city's streets.

The officers found Dale and brought him before the magistrates at Bow Street for examination. It transpired that Dale had been employed by the Bonars as a butler but was discharged about a fortnight previously on suspicion of 'ill conduct'. It was said that Mrs Bonar wanted him to be prosecuted but her husband was content to dismiss him without references. The magistrates examined him closely but were content with the alibi he put forward, claiming to have been in the Red Lion from eleven on the Sunday evening until six o'clock the following morning, with several witnesses to support his claim (there were no 'licensing hours' in those days). Dale was therefore told to go home to his wife in Chislehurst.

The funeral of the Bonars took place at Chislehurst church and was attended by a large congregation. A mournful cavalcade, including the undertakers, pages, mutes, and so on, moved slowly around the heath to the church, where the coffins were carried side by side to the grave.

With Dale being cleared of any involvement in the dreadful deed, suspicion fell on the footman, Philip Nicholson, and a warrant was issued by the Lord Mayor for his arrest. One of the Bow Street Runners immediately went in search of him and, on that same Monday, after a diligent search, the officer traced Nicholson to Whitechapel and found him, on horseback, drinking at the door of the Three Nuns alehouse. The officer grabbed the horse's bridle and, after a short scuffle, pulled the wanted man from his horse and took him off to the debtors' prison near Newgate.

The prisoner was drunk and his demeanour was so bizarre that Mr Astley Cooper was called in to examine him. The surgeon was accompanied by Sir Charles Flower, the Lord Mayor of London, and together they asked the footman a number of

questions but could not extract anything like a confession or admission of guilt. In view of his drunken state, Nicholson was remanded until the following day.

The next day, Tuesday, he was taken to the Mansion House, where he was again questioned. From the answers given to the questions put to him, his interrogators gained the impression that he had behaved in a most imprudent and unfeeling manner, which raised more suspicion than any other evidence available.

Nicholson said that, on the night in question, he went to bed about midnight and knew nothing until called by the housemaid about eight o'clock the next morning. He was the only male servant who slept in the house and he had fastened some of the windows himself at the usual time, the remainder being secured by the maid. With the discovery of the murders, all the servants gathered together and he, with others, went to the bedroom where he saw the two bodies, the floor being covered in blood and other matter. He took the bloody sheets off his master's bed and used them to mop up some of the mess on the floor and then took the soiled linen to his own bedroom, where the groom helped him to wrap it in the top sheet from his own bed. He then placed the bundle under his bed. He was questioned closely as to why he had used the sheets to absorb the blood and then fold them inside his own linen when he should have known that the proper thing to do was to leave everything undisturbed.

Nicholson said he was unaware of this and had thought it his duty to tidy the scene as much as possible, as the sight would have been distressing to anyone entering the room. He was then asked about a bloody footprint found on the stairs leading from his room to that in which the murders were committed. He suggested that such a mark might have been made by him when he took the soiled sheets up to his room, but it was pointed out that the footprint was discovered before he first left his room.

In view of the struggle which Mr Bonar had obviously put up, Nicholson was stripped and examined in private but any bruises which were revealed could easily have been suffered in the scuffle with the arresting officer when he fell from his horse.

Nicholson was then asked about his ride to town to seek the surgeon and admitted that he had left the house in Chislehurst shortly after eight o'clock and had stopped for refreshment for himself and the horse three times on the road. He had drunk three glasses of rum and the horse three pints of porter. Despite these stops, the surgeon confirmed that Nicholson had covered the whole distance in around forty minutes.

After notifying Mr Astley Cooper that his services were required at Camden Place to attend to the still-living Mrs Bonar, Nicholson said that he went on to the Red Lion, where he saw Dale and told him that he (Dale) was a suspect. He then continued to Bow Street to ask that an officer be sent down to Chislehurst. Nicholson was reprimanded at this point for having gone to find Dale who, had he been the culprit, would have been forewarned and could have absconded. He was also criticized for not having returned immediately to Camden Place but instead having gone carousing with friends, with whom he was still drinking when he was arrested. The interrogation complete, Nicholson was sent, in the charge of two officers, to Chislehurst

to attend the inquest to be held there that evening.

The inquest opened promptly at six o'clock, the first witness being Mary Clarke, Mrs Bonar's maid. She told the jury that Mrs Bonar was in the habit of retiring late, usually around one or two o'clock in the morning, some two hours after her husband. She last saw Mr Bonar about ten o'clock that Sunday evening when he was reading prayers to his staff in the sitting room:

'About twenty past midnight, I was summoned to Mrs Bonar's dressing room adjacent to the bedroom and I went there in my dressing gown. Mrs Bonar said she had ordered Nicholson, the footman, to secure the lawn door but he had failed to do so. I offered to go and do it but Mrs Bonar said that would not be necessary as she had locked the other door herself. I presumed she was referring to the folding door between the lawn door and the hall. I then undressed Mrs Bonar and warmed her bed, at which time I saw Mr Bonar asleep in his own bed nearby.'

Mary returned to her own room to await the next summons and about twenty minutes past one the bell rang again and Mary went to her mistress's dressing room and folded up her clothes, Mrs Bonar then having retired to the bedroom.

'About fifteen minutes later, the bell rang again. Mrs Bonar was then in bed and I handed her the string which was attached to the door to enable it to be opened more or less.'

Having been instructed to call her mistress at seven-thirty that morning, Mary lit the rush light in the ante-room and went to bed, leaving the doors of the bedroom and the ante-room both wide open, as was the custom.

'At seven-thirty I was awakened by the Susannah the housemaid as I had asked. The housemaid told me there was a bad smell in the ante-room, coming from the bedroom and asked whether I had lit the rush light as this was missing, and whether I had locked the door to the ante room from the outside. She also said there were foot marks in the ante-room. I was much alarmed as these unusual circumstances led me to believe something dreadful had happened.'

The pair went up to the ante-room to examine the marks, which they thought could be blood. Mary then went to fetch the laundry maid (who started her work at four o'clock) and they went together to the bedroom. The laundry maid went to the window and opened the shutters to let some light into the room. When she turned round her eyes fell on the terrible scene and she screamed. Mary fled the room and ran downstairs in a state of shock.

'The coachman made me sit down as I was near to fainting and, whilst I was recovering, I saw the footman come into the servants' hall with a bundle of bloodied sheets. Philip Nicholson said to me, "Mrs Clarke, go to your mistress, she is still alive and perhaps may be recovered."'

Susannah Curnick was the next witness. She had been the housemaid for only three weeks and said that, on the night in question, she had put the rush light in its usual place in the ante-room around ten o'clock and then went to bed.

'I remember Mrs Clarke coming to bed and asking to be called at half-past seven. I myself rose at six-thirty and, on going through the hall, noticed that the house door was half open – something I had never seen before. I closed the door and went

into the drawing room where all the windows were closed apart from the one in the centre which was wide open. On going upstairs I was surprised to find the door to the ante-room locked, with the key outside. I opened the door and noticed foot marks on the floor and that the rush light was missing from its stand.'

Much perturbed by what she had seen, Susannah went back to the room she shared with Mary Clarke and told her what had occurred and together they went back to the ante-room. The rest of her story tallied with that told by Mary Clarke. On being questioned, Susannah said she had never heard the footman express any anger or disappointment towards her master. She had never noticed anything particular about his conduct.

Penelope Folds, the laundry maid, was the next to take the stand::

'I rose a little after four o'clock and was soon joined by Williams, the washerwoman, who let herself in by the laundry door. About seven-thirty, Mary Clarke approached me and asked me to accompany her upstairs as she was afraid something was amiss. I did so and went into the bedroom and opened part of one of the shutters. When I turned round I saw the master's body lying on the floor and blood on the mistress's pillow.'

Penelope went downstairs but returned later and saw the footman covering Mr Bonar's body with a blanket and then meddling with the clothes on his bed and afterwards she saw the footman taking a bundle of soiled sheets downstairs. She found her mistress was still breathing and remarked that the footman was the first to say that Mrs Bonar was still alive. He said he must go to town for help although she asked him not to leave the house without a man in it.

William Evans, the groom, said::

'I was in the house till after twelve o'clock on Sunday evening, sitting with the footman and I never saw him in a better humour. I never heard him say anything disrespectful of his master or mistress, except now and then an angry expression at being overworked, such as 'the old woman, she wears me out!'

He added that he saw the footman dabbing the sheets in the blood at the foot of the bed. On being pressed on this point, he said that the housemaid, who was in the room at the time, could tell more about it.

Susannah Curnick was recalled and testified that she was never in the room at the same time as the footman, contrary to what the groom had deposed. She also said that the groom had exclaimed, at the foot of his mistress's bed, with a dreadful expression, 'This is what comes of keeping company with the Jews.'

William Randall the coachman slept over the stables:

'I came to the house about half-past seven and went to call Nicholson and found him sitting on his bed-side. Almost immediately I heard the cry of murder from the female servants. Not long afterwards I saw Nicholson come downstairs with bloody linen and wrap it up in a sheet in the servants' hall. The footman was a very quiet, good fellow-servant but, when he had money, he used to get drunk. The rest of the servants observed that they could not have handled the sheets as Nicholson did. He was very anxious to go to London and would have a horse. I thought Nicholson was wild looking when he went away and it appeared as if he could not ride, although he had been in the dragoons.'

Next came Charles King who had worked for the family as a labourer for seven years and lived in Green Lane, Chislehurst:

'I came to work at between five and six on Monday morning. I came to the house about twenty minutes after six. The washerwomen were up and so I got into the house by the laundry and went into the hall and found the front door open. Philip was then in bed and I said to him, "How is it you sleep with the door and window shutters open?" He answered, "I did not know that they were open." I am sure he was in bed with his shirt on.'

Mrs Williams, a washerwoman, testified that when she came to the house about four in the morning she noted that the hall windows were all open. Philip Shillington, the gardener, got up between three and four o'clock and he too noticed the middle drawing room window open.

It was then Philip Nicholson's turn to take the stand. When asked what he had to state he replied, 'Nothing other than what I told the Lord Mayor. The windows of my bedroom were shut when I went to bed.' No further questions were put to him and he was released into the custody of a Bow Street officer called Lavender.

A Mr Smith stated that he came over on the morning of the murder and saw the bodies and the bent poker [modern police officers would be horrified at the failure to make any efforts to secure the crime scene]:

'I then went into the servants' hall and found a bundle which I opened. It consisted of two bloody sheets, one fine and the other coarse – which was the most bloody of the two. They were wrapped in a third. I gave the two bloody sheets to a servant to take to Mr Bonar's room. A candlestick in Mr B's room was bent and broken. There was a small spot of white paint on the poker.'

Lavender, the Bow Street officer, stated that he arrived on the Monday about one o'clock:

'I found a pair of shoes by the side of the footman's bed which I compared with the traces in the ante-room. As I thought, the impressions corresponded with the shoes which are not fellows. I found a night cap on the footman's bed, apparently bloody.'

Another witness, by the name of Foy, compared the shoes which he had found on Tuesday morning in a closet in the servants' hall with the footprints and found that they tallied:

'The shoes were odd; one common heeled and worn at the toe, the other with a spring heel, as was the case with the shoes which Lavender found. There was blood on both the soles and on the uppers. I showed them to Nicholson who agreed that they were his. He said he believed one of them had slipped off in the room from which he fetched the sheets, but I found them together in the cupboard. Nicholson also told me that the stains on his night cap probably came from the blood on the sheets.'

The poker was then produced. It was a common kitchen poker, bent in the upper part.

The inquest closed at one o'clock the next morning, with the jury returning a verdict of wilful murder against Philip Nicholson, the footman. It seemed clear, from the blood on it, that he had disguised himself in one of the sheets from his own bed when he went to murder his employers but, fortunately for the prosecution, he left the sheet in the room, which accounted for his anxiety to get the bloody sheets out of his master's room – one (the fine one) from the victim's bed and the other (the coarse one) the one he used to cover himself when he went to perform the terrible deed.

The accused was confined to the butler's pantry, in the care of two Bow Street officers, awaiting escort to London but, at noon that day, the court was informed that the assassin had cut his own throat with a razor he had concealed about his person. He had been permitted to use the lavatory in the passage leading to the servants' hall, where he had used the implement to try to take his own life. However, although the wound was deep and bled profusely, there happened to be two surgeons nearby who had attended the inquest, and one of them, Mr Holt, immediately rushed forward and seized the gushing arteries with both hands and contrived to stop the flow with manual pressure until more regular means could be applied and the wound sewn up. By that evening Nicholson was out of immediate danger and was able to speak but he said very little and made no confession or explanation, merely protesting his innocence. To prevent any further attempts to take his own life, Nicholson was put in a straitjacket and his arms were held by two persons, one on each side of him. His head was also held steady to prevent him from opening up the wound. A Bow Street officer and servants were always in the room to watch him.

On 7 June 1813 he received numerous visitors, mostly highly placed friends of the murdered couple, including Lord Castlereagh the foreign secretary, Lord Camden and Lord Robert Seymour, and was showing repeated signs of annoyance and agitation. Eventually, that evening, the wound opened up again and Nicholson bled profusely. All this time he had persisted in asserting his innocence, but early the following morning he asked that Mr Bonar junior be brought to his bedside. When the heir to the Bonar fortune arrived, Nicholson broke down and confessed to the crime and made a full signed confession to a local magistrate. At last the true story came out.

On that fateful Sunday night, after the groom had left him, Nicholson fell asleep on a bench in the servants' hall. Around three o'clock, he fell off the bench and awoke and was instantly seized with the idea of murdering his employers. He was already half-undressed and so he wrapped himself in a sheet from his bed and took the poker from the grate in the servants' hall and a lighted candle and made his way upstairs.

'I went directly to my mistress's bed and struck her two blows on the head. She neither spoke nor moved. I then went round to my master and struck him once across the face. Mr Bonar was roused and, from the confusion produced by the violence of the blow, imagined that Mrs Bonar was then coming to bed and said, "Come to bed, my love." I immediately repeated the blows and he sprang out of bed and grappled with me for fifteen minutes and at one time nearly got the better of me but,

being exhausted by the loss of blood, I at length overpowered him.'

Nicholson then left his victim groaning on the floor and went downstairs, where he stripped naked and washed himself all over in the butler's pantry. He then opened the drawing room windows to make it look as if there had been an intruder. He disposed of his bloodied shirt and stockings in a bush outside the front door, covering them with leaves. He then returned, leaving the front door open and went back to bed. He did not sleep but pretended to be asleep when King came to wake him at six-thirty.

Nicholson completed his deposition by emphasizing that he was alone in this deed and had no associates. 'How could I, when never in my life, before the moment of jumping up from the bench, had I entertained the thought of murder?'

A search by the police officer, Lavender, quickly revealed the soiled garments Nicholson had concealed and he was sent for trial at the Maidstone Assizes before Mr Justice Heath on a charge of petty treason. This indictment differed from a common indictment for murder in that the victim was the offender's master and he therefore traitorously as well as feloniously murdered his master. [This distinction was removed in 1861]. Nicholson pleaded not guilty to the charge. His confession was read out and, when asked what his motive was, he replied,

'I had no bad intention. I did not know what provoked me to do it, more than you do.'

'You were heard to complain about going so much behind the carriage.'

'Yes, but I never thought of doing it from that.'

'Had you thought or talked of this murder when you were drinking with the groom the night before in the hall?'

'No. I never thought of it myself, or had any idea of it myself.'

'How long was it after you awoke that you went upstairs?'

'I jumped up. I was half undressed when sleeping on the form. I undressed and put the sheet about me.'

'Why did you put the sheet about you?'

'That they might not know me.'

'When did you drop the sheet?'

'In the struggle. I had it on when I gave the first blow.'

'Did Dale the butler or any of the maid servants know anything about it?'

'Not a word.'

'What was your intention?'

'Nothing particular, but when I went into the room I saw my master and mistress asleep and I gave her two blows.'

'Were you drunk when you went to bed?'

'No Sir. I had drunk nothing but beer. I had not had a

drop of spirits all day.’

After examination and the evidence provided by witnesses for the prosecution, a Mr Frederick Tyrrell appeared as a character witness. He told the court that Nicholson had been employed by his father but had been ultimately dismissed for drunkenness, although the witness said he was never violent.

The judge summed up the evidence, saying he had never known a case more clearly proved. The jury immediately returned a verdict of guilty and the judge, after a protracted homily, continued,

‘I shall therefore proceed to discharge my duty in passing upon you the sentence of the law, which is that you be taken hence to a place from whence you came, and on Monday next be drawn on a sledge to the place of execution, and there hanged till you are dead, and then your body shall be given to be dissected and anatomized.’

Nicholson was therefore taken to the condemned cell at the old Maidstone Gaol (this was well before the present prison was erected) which was underground and approached by a dark and dreary staircase.

Around midday the following Monday, the hurdle or sledge, in the shape of a shallow box about 6 feet by 3 feet, drew up at the door to the gaol. It had a seat at each end, just capable of holding two persons and Nicholson was placed in it with his back to the horses with the executioner seated beside him. Facing them were the priest and a gaoler with a loaded blunderbuss on his lap.

The contraption made its way slowly the mile and a half to Penenden Heath, on the outskirts of Maidstone, where a platform about 7 feet high had been erected with the gallows on top. Mr Bonar junior was already there in a post-chaise, facing the place of execution, determined to witness the dispatch of his parents’ murderer. He did not have long to wait, for very soon the trap was sprung and Nicholson was launched into eternity. As was not uncommon in those days, the execution was carried out without any semblance of scientific or biological finesse and, according to contemporary records, ‘he died unusually hard, being greatly convulsed’.

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This article is an edited version of a chapter in Roy Ingleton’s book: “Kent Murders & Mayhem



PICTURES FROM THE PAST



FARNBOROUGH HAMPSHIRE



UNKNOWN POSSIBLY METS AT THE EPSOM DERBY MEETING



HUDDERSFIELD POLICE