

A STAKE AT FOUR CORNERS

It is natural that the inn or wayside tavern, which welcomed a multitude of people to its yard and beneath its roof lodged every rank of society from king to beggar, should bear its taint of crime over many centuries. But its association with everything from murder to smuggling could not have had such a queer sequel as did a murder near the old Gold Nugget tavern, at Four Corners, in the gold-mining days.

Superstition entered into the story told about a mine worker, which proves that not only are murderers haunted by their crimes, but that witnesses to the crimes can be haunted also.

John Copley, a laborer at the many mines in the vicinity, was accepted by fellow tipplers as a good fellow, although at times a bit light in the head, but he also had a sniggering little vice which cost Peeping Tom dearly two centuries earlier at Coventry. And it cost John Copley dearly, too.

After some time with his cronies at the Gold Nugget bar, Copley set off one evening for his humpy, about a mile down the darkening road. As he approached a lane which branched off the road towards a near-by creek he saw a man and woman enter it and, deciding to indulge his doubtful hobby, he entered behind them and heard the man say "Sit down. You can rest here". Copley recognised the voice as that of Bill Matthews, an itinerant fossicker, who had married a girl from the tavern that morning. Crawling closer, he recognised the woman as the new bride and suddenly, as he waited for the comedy to begin, tragedy suddenly began. For Matthews, who had climbed into a nearby bush, slid back down the bank with a stake in his hand, and beat the woman over the head with it again and again.

"I think I went into a faint", Copley said later, "and when I woke up the stake was lying near me. I got out of there pretty quick, for I thought they'd blame me for it.

Always garrulous in his cups, Copley, whose mind was obviously affected by what he had seen in the lane, hinted to his drinking mates what he could tell them about the woman's death and they told the village constable about it. As a result he told the district police his story and two months later Matthews was hanged.

"I'll come for you", he screamed at Copley in court. "Just see if I don't".

But the centre of the story went beyond the execution of Matthews, for the landlord of the Gold Nugget, thinking to attract custom, hung the hedge stake on the bar wall, but the tavern knew no peace until he parted with it. Early in the morning of the tenth of December, the anniversary of the crime, it was missing from its place on the wall and each time it was found near the scene of the crime in the lane. Someone having a joke, thought the tavern keeper, but it certainly was queer and, with an air of altruism, he passed it on to a friend at the Miner's Rest in a nearby country town.

Here the landlord who set a value on it and suspected that one of his customers might covet it, had it clamped to the bar-parlor wall with an iron ~~stap~~ hasp. But again on the fateful day they found the hasp broken and the hedge stake gone. Again it was ~~recovered~~ recovered from the lane and this owner decided to do something about it.

The latest story of the broken hasp soon spread, and created fear in the mining community, so the landlord invited all his neighbors to a bonfire in front of his inn, and when it was well alight the hedge stake was tossed in. And thereafter there was peace of a sort for John Copley, for the stake's secret lay with him and had he died suddenly it would have stayed with him. But during a long illness following a fall down a mine shaft, he told the doctor his story in his own queer way:

"It was the very night of the murder a twelvemonth after that I went to bed at dusk hour but I couldn't get no sleep and suddenly Bill Matthews stood before me with the ~~hangman's~~ rope around his neck, and he said "It's time. Come o' long with me". and I knew that I would have to go, so I went with him.

"Go and fetch the stake", he says, so I broke into the Gold nugget and fetched the stake for him. And when I got ~~to~~ ^{outside} the door the woman was with him and we walked down the road to the lane. We turned down it and when we came to the very same spot as before he spoke the very same words as he did a twelvemonth before - "Sit down. You can rest ^{here}" Then he turns to me wild-like and says "Now then, quick", and somehow I threw up the ~~stake~~ stake and gave her a hard clout like he did a twelvemonth before.

"And every December for years, no matter where I might be the same tired feeling would come over me and Bill Matthews, with the hanging rope around his neck would come to me and say "It's time. Come with me", and I would fetch the stake from wherever it ~~was~~ might be, and do the murdering all over again. Once when the stake was fastened to the wall with a hasp he came and helped me pull it down.

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"For years this went on and the stake was always found in the lane where I threw it like he did on that murder night, and when I found meself walking home afterwards I'd be wet with sweat. And I had no peace until the stake was burned in the big bonfire in front of the Miner's Rest. After that was done the murderer never came to fetch me to go with him to murder her no more".

And that is the tale of a superstitious, simple mine worker, two taverns and a hedge stake in the days when our grandparents were very young.

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