

The Suspicions of Mr Whicher

or The Murder at Road Hill House

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Extract

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CHAPTER ONE

TO SEE WHAT WE HAVE GOT TO SEE

29–30 June

In the early hours of Friday, 29 June 1860 Samuel and Mary Kent were asleep on the first floor of their detached three-storey Georgian house above the village of Road, five miles from Trowbridge. They lay in a four-poster bed carved from Spanish mahogany in a bedroom decked out with crimson damask. He was fifty-nine; she was forty, and eight months pregnant. Their eldest daughter, the five-year-old Mary Amelia, shared their room. Through the door to the nursery, a few feet away, were Elizabeth Gough, twenty-two, the nursemaid, in a painted French bed, and her two youngest charges, Saville (three) and Eveline (one), in cane cots.

Two other live-in servants slept on the second floor of Road Hill House – Sarah Cox (twenty-two), the housemaid, and Sarah Kerslake (twenty-three), the cook – and so did Samuel's four children from his previous marriage: Mary Ann (twenty-nine), Elizabeth (twenty-eight), Constance (sixteen) and William (fourteen). Cox and Kerslake shared a bed in one room. Mary Ann and Elizabeth shared a bed in another. Constance and William had a room each.

The nursemaid, Elizabeth Gough, rose at 5.30 that morning to open the back door to a chimney sweep from Trowbridge. With

his 'machine' of interlocking rods and brushes he cleaned the kitchen and nursery chimneys and the hotplate flue. At 7.30, the nursemaid paid him 4s.6d. and saw him out. Gough, a baker's daughter, was a well-mannered, good-looking young woman. She was thin, with fair skin, dark eyes, a long nose and a missing front tooth. When the sweep had gone she applied herself to cleaning the nursery of soot. Kerslake – the cook – sluiced down the kitchen. One other stranger called at the house that Friday, a knife-grinder, to whom Cox – the maid – answered the door.

In the grounds of Road Hill House, James Holcombe, the gardener, groom and coachman to the family, was cutting the lawn with a scythe – the Kents had a mowing machine, but a scythe was more effective when the grass was damp. That June had been the wettest and coldest on record in England, and it had again rained overnight. Having cut the grass, he hung the tool in a tree to dry.

Holcombe, who was forty-nine and crippled in one leg, had two helpers in the grounds that day: John Alloway, eighteen, 'a stupid-looking lad', according to one local newspaper, and Daniel Oliver, forty-nine. Both lived in the neighbouring village of Beckington. A week earlier Samuel Kent had turned down Alloway's request for a pay rise, and the young man had given his notice. On this, his penultimate afternoon in the Kents' employ, he was sent by the cook to see whether James Fricker, a plumber and glazier in the village, had finished fitting Mr Kent's square candle-lantern with a new pane of glass. Alloway had already called for it four times that week, but it had not been ready. This time he was successful: he brought the lamp back and put it on the kitchen dresser. A local girl of fourteen, Emily Doel, was also at work in the house. She helped Gough, the nursemaid, with the children from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. each day.

Samuel Kent was in the library, drafting his report on a two-day tour of local wool mills from which he had returned the previous night. He had been employed as a government sub-inspector of

factories for twenty-five years, and had recently applied for a full inspectorship, in support of which he had gathered signatures from two hundred West Country worthies – Members of Parliament, magistrates, clergymen. A wide-browed, scowling man, Kent was unpopular in the village, particularly with the inhabitants of the ‘cottage corner’, a slummy clutch of houses just across the lane from Road Hill House. He had banned the villagers from fishing the river near his house, and prosecuted one for taking apples from his orchard.

Saville, Samuel’s three-year-old son, came into the library to play while the nursemaid cleaned the nursery. The child doodled on the government report – he made an ‘S’-shaped pothook and a blot – and his father teased that he was a ‘naughty boy’. At this Saville clambered onto Samuel’s knee for a ‘romp’. He was a strong, well-built child with pale yellow curls.

That Friday afternoon Saville also played with his half-sister, Constance. She and her other brother, William, had been home from their boarding schools for nearly a fortnight. Constance took after their father – muscular and plump, with squinty eyes in a broad face – while William resembled their mother, the first Mrs Kent, who had died eight years earlier: he had lively eyes and a delicate build. The boy was said to be timid, the girl sulky and wild.

The same afternoon Constance walked over to Beckington, a mile and a half away, to pay a bill. She met William there, and the two came home together.

In the early evening Hester Holley, a washerwoman who lived in the cottages next to the house, called to return the Kents’ clothes and linen, which she had laundered each week since they moved to Road five years earlier. The older Misses Kent – Mary Ann and Elizabeth – took the clothes from the baskets and sorted them out for distribution to the bedrooms and cupboards.

At 7 p.m. the three gardeners and Emily Doel, the assistant nursemaid, left Road Hill House for their own homes. Holcombe

locked the garden door from the outside as he went, and returned to his cottage across the lane. Samuel Kent locked the garden gate once all the live-out servants had gone. Twelve people were left in the house for the night.

Half an hour later Gough carried Eveline up to the nursery, and put her in the cot next to her own bed, opposite the door. Both the children's cots were made of thick cane backed with fabric, and set on wheels. Gough then went downstairs to give Saville a laxative, under Mrs Kent's supervision. The boy was recovering from a mild illness and the family doctor, Joshua Parsons, had sent a messenger to Road Hill House with an 'aperient' – the term was derived from the Latin for 'uncover' or 'open' – which took effect after six to ten hours. The pill 'consisted of one grain of blue pill and three grains of rhubarb', said Parsons, who had prepared it himself.

Saville was 'well and happy' that evening, said the nursemaid. At 8 p.m. she put him in his cot, in the right-hand corner of the nursery. The five-year-old Mary Amelia was put to bed in the room that she shared with her parents, across the landing. The doors to both bedrooms were left ajar, so that the nursemaid could hear if the older girl woke, and the mother could look in on her drowsing infants.

Once the children were asleep Gough tidied the nursery, restoring a stool to its place under her bed, returning stray objects to the dressing room. She lit a candle and sat down in the dressing room to eat her supper – that night she had only bread, butter and water. Then she joined the rest of the household downstairs for evening prayers, led by Samuel Kent. She also took a cup of tea with Kerslake in the kitchen. 'I don't usually have any tea at all,' Gough said afterwards, 'but I did that day take a cup from the general family teapot.'

When she went back up to the nursery, she said, Saville was lying 'as he usually did, with his face to the wall, with his arm under his head'. He was wearing a nightdress and a 'little flannel

shirt'. He was 'a very heavy sleeper, and had not been to bed in the daytime that day, and so slept all the sounder'. She had been busy cleaning the room in the afternoon, when he usually had his nap. The nursery, as Gough described it, was a place of softness, hushed and muffled with fabric: 'The room is carpeted all over. The door opens very noiselessly, it is bound round with list to make it do so, that I might not wake the children.' Mrs Kent agreed that the door opened and closed quietly, if pushed and pulled with care, though the handle squeaked a little when turned. Later visitors to the house detected the rattle of a metal ring on the door, and the creak of the latch.

Mrs Kent came in to kiss Saville and Eveline goodnight, and then went upstairs to look out for the comet that was passing through the skies that week. In *The Times*, the newspaper her husband took, sightings were being reported each day. She called Gough to join her. When the nursemaid appeared Mrs Kent remarked on how sweetly Saville was sleeping. The mother and the nursemaid stood together at a window and watched the sky.

At 10 p.m. Mr Kent opened the yard door and unchained his black Newfoundland guard dog, a big, sweet-tempered creature that had been with the family for more than two years.

At about 10.30 William and Constance made their way up to bed, carrying their candles. Half an hour later Mary Ann and Elizabeth followed. Before going to sleep Elizabeth left her room to check that Constance and William had put out their lights. On seeing that their rooms were dark, she stopped at a window to watch for the comet. When she retired for the night her sister locked their bedroom door from within.

Two floors below, at about 10.45 p.m., Cox fastened the windows in the dining room, the hall, the drawing room and the library, and locked and bolted the front door and the doors to the library and the drawing room. The drawing-room shutters 'fasten with iron bars', she said later, 'and each has two brass bolts

besides; that was all made secure'. The drawing-room door 'has a bolt and a lock, and I bolted it and turned the key of the lock'. Kerslake locked the kitchen, laundry and back doors. She and Cox went up to bed by the back stairs, a spiral staircase used mainly by the servants.

In the nursery at eleven, Gough tucked the bedclothes around Saville, lit a nightlight and then closed, barred and bolted the nursery windows before climbing into bed herself. She slept deeply that night, she said, exhausted by cleaning up after the sweep.

When Mrs Kent went to bed a little later, leaving her husband downstairs in the dining room, she pushed the nursery door gently shut.

Samuel Kent went out to the yard to feed the dog. By 11.30, he said, he had checked that every door and window on the ground floor was locked and bolted against intruders, as he did each evening. As usual, he left the key in the drawing-room door.

By midnight, everyone in the house was in bed, the knot of the new family on the first floor, the stepchildren and servants on the second.

Shortly before 1 a.m. on Saturday, 30 June, a man named Joe Moon, a tilemaker who lived alone on Road Common, was laying a net out to dry in a field near Road Hill House – he had probably been fishing by night to elude Samuel Kent – when he heard a dog bark. At the same time Alfred Urch, a police constable, was walking home after his shift when he heard the dog give about six yelps. He thought little of it, he said: the Kents' dog was known to bark at the slightest thing. James Holcombe heard nothing that night, even though there had been occasions in the past when he had been woken by the Newfoundland ('it kicked up a terrible noise') and had gone back to the courtyard to hush it. The heavily pregnant Mrs Kent was not disturbed by barking that night either, though she said she slept lightly: 'I awoke frequently.' She heard nothing out of the ordinary, she said, apart from 'a noise as of the

drawing-room shutters opening' in the early morning, soon after dawn had broken – she imagined that the servants had started work downstairs.

The sun rose two or three minutes before 4 a.m. that Saturday. An hour later Holcombe let himself into the grounds of Road Hill House – 'I found the door safe as usual.' He chained up the Newfoundland and went to the stable.

At the same time Elizabeth Gough woke and saw that Eveline's bedclothes had slipped off. She raised herself on her knees to pull them back over the girl, whose cot was drawn up to the bed. She noticed, she said, that Saville was not in his cot across the room. 'The impression of the child was there as if he had been softly taken out,' Gough said. 'The clothes were smoothly put back as if his mother or myself had taken him out.' She assumed, she said, that Mrs Kent had heard her son crying and taken him to her own room across the hall.

Sarah Kerslake said she also woke briefly at 5 a.m., then went back to sleep. Just before six she woke again and roused Cox. The two rose, dressed and headed down to start work – Cox took the front stairs and Kerslake the back. When Cox went to unlock the drawing-room door, she was surprised to find it already open. 'I found the door a little way open, the shutters unfastened, and the window a little way up.' This was the middle of three floor-to-ceiling windows in the semi-circular bay at the back of the house. The bottom sash was raised by six inches or so. Cox said she supposed that someone had opened it to air the room. She closed it.

John Alloway walked over from his home in Beckington and at 6 a.m. found Holcombe in the Road Hill House stable, tending to the Kents' chestnut mare. Daniel Oliver arrived fifteen minutes later. Holcombe sent Alloway to water the plants in the greenhouse. The boy then fetched a basket of dirty knives – including two carving knives – from the kitchen, where Kerslake was at

work, and two pairs of dirty boots from the passage. He took them to a shed in the yard known as the 'shoe-house' or the 'knife-house', turned the knives out onto a bench and started cleaning the boots – one pair belonged to Samuel Kent, one to William. 'There was nothing unusual about the boots that morning,' he said. Ordinarily he cleaned the knives as well, but today Holcombe took over the task so that the boy could be ready sooner: 'I want you in the garden,' he told him, 'to help me about some manure. I will clean the knives if you will clean the boots.' Holcombe used a knife-cleaning machine in the shed. As far as he could tell, he reported later, none of the knives was missing or bloodied. He took the clean cutlery to the kitchen at about 6.30. With Alloway, he then spread the mare's manure.

Soon after 6 a.m., Elizabeth Gough said, she rose, dressed, read a chapter of the Bible and said her prayers. The nightlight had burnt out, as usual, after six hours' use. Saville's cot was still empty. At 6.45 – she noticed the time on the clock that sat on the nursery mantelpiece – she tried Mr and Mrs Kent's room. 'I knocked twice at the door, but obtained no answer.' She claimed that she didn't persist because she was reluctant to wake Mrs Kent, whose pregnancy made it difficult for her to sleep. Gough returned to the nursery to dress Eveline. In the meantime Emily Doel had turned up for work. She entered the nursery carrying the children's bath shortly before 7 a.m., and took it to the adjoining dressing room. As she brought in buckets of hot and cold water with which to fill the tub she noticed Gough making her bed. They didn't say anything to one another.

Gough again knocked on Mr and Mrs Kent's bedroom door. This time it was opened – Mary Kent had got out of bed and put on her dressing gown, having just checked her husband's watch: it was 7.15. A confused conversation ensued, in which each woman seemed to assume Saville was with the other.

'Are the children awake?' Gough asked her mistress, as if she took for granted that Saville was in his parents' bedroom.

‘What do you mean by children?’ asked Mrs Kent. ‘There is only one child.’ She was referring to Mary Amelia, the five-year-old, who shared her parents’ room.

‘Master Saville!’ said Gough. ‘Isn’t he with you?’

‘With me!’ returned Mrs Kent. ‘Certainly not.’

‘He is not in the nursery, ma’am.’

Mrs Kent went to the nursery to see for herself, and asked Gough if she had left a chair against the crib, by means of which Saville might have climbed out. The nursemaid said not. Mrs Kent asked when she had first noticed that he was gone. At five o’clock, Gough told her. Mrs Kent asked why she had not been roused immediately. Gough replied that she thought Mrs Kent must have heard the child crying in the night, and taken him to her room.

‘How dare you say so?’ said the mother. ‘You know I could not do it.’ The day before, she reminded Gough, she had mentioned that she could no longer carry Saville, he being a ‘heavy, strong boy’ of nearly four, and she being eight months pregnant.

Mrs Kent sent the nursemaid upstairs to ask her stepchildren if they knew where Saville was, then told her husband: ‘Saville is missing.’

‘You had better see where he is,’ replied Samuel, who had, he said, been woken by Gough’s knock. Mrs Kent left the room. When she returned with news that Saville had not been found, her husband got up, dressed, and headed downstairs.

Gough knocked on Mary Ann and Elizabeth’s door at 7.20 or so and asked if Saville was with them. They said he wasn’t, and asked whether Mrs Kent knew that he was missing. On hearing the commotion, Constance emerged from her room next door. She ‘did not make any comment’ on the news that her half-brother had disappeared, said Gough. Constance later said that she had been awake for forty-five minutes. ‘I was dressing. I heard her knock at the door, and went to my own door to listen to hear what it was.’ William, who said he woke at seven, was in a bedroom further along the landing, probably out of earshot.

Gough went two storeys down to the kitchen and asked Cox and Kerslake if they had seen the boy. Kerslake, who had lit a fire beneath the hotplate to scald milk for breakfast, said she hadn't. Cox said she had not either, but reported that she had found the drawing-room window open. The nursemaid told this to her mistress. By now Mr and Mrs Kent were scouring the house for their son. 'I was here, there and everywhere,' said Mrs Kent, 'looking for him. We were all in a state of bewilderment, going backwards and forwards from room to room.'

Samuel extended the search to the grounds. At about 7.30, said Holcombe, he told the gardeners that 'young Master Saville was lost, stolen, and carried away. That was all he said, and he ran round the garden . . . We went out directly in search of the child.'

'I desired the gardeners to search the premises to see if they could find any trace of the child,' explained Samuel. 'I mean to say traces of the child or any one having left the premises.' Gough helped search the gardens and the shrubbery.

Samuel asked the gardeners if there were any policemen nearby. 'There is Urch,' said Alloway. Alfred Urch was a police constable who had recently moved to Road with his wife and daughter; a month earlier he had been reprimanded for drinking at the George, a pub in Road, while on duty. It was Urch who had heard a dog bark at Road Hill House the previous night. Samuel sent Alloway to the village to fetch him. He also sent William to summon James Morgan, a baker and parish constable who lived in Upper Street. Urch was an officer of the Somersetshire county constabulary, set up in 1856, while Morgan was a member of the older policing system, still being phased out, in which villagers were appointed to serve as unpaid parish constables for a year at a time. The two were neighbours.

Morgan hurried Urch along. 'Let us make haste,' he urged. They headed for Road Hill House.

William, on his father's instructions, asked Holcombe to prepare the horse and carriage – Samuel had decided to ride to

Trowbridge to fetch John Foley, a police superintendent with whom he was acquainted. When Samuel took leave of his wife, she told him that the blanket was missing from Saville's bed. Gough had noticed its absence, she said. Mrs Kent 'seemed pleased with the idea' that he had been carried off in a blanket, said Samuel, 'as it would keep the child warm'.

Samuel put on a black overcoat and set out in his phaeton, a dashing, four-wheeled carriage with a skimpy body and high back wheels, pulled by the red mare. 'He went away in a great hurry,' said Holcombe. As Urch and Morgan approached the drive at about 8 a.m., they met him turning left onto the Trowbridge road. Morgan assured Samuel he need go only to Southwick, a mile or so away, from where a Wiltshire police officer could send a message on to the town. But Samuel wished to ride the full five miles to Trowbridge: 'I shall go on,' he said. He asked Urch and Morgan to join the search for his son.

At Southwick turnpike gate, Samuel pulled up his carriage and, as he was paying the toll ($4\frac{1}{2}d.$), asked the keeper of the gate, Ann Hall, to direct him to the local policeman's house.

'I have had a child stolen and carried off in a blanket,' Samuel told her.

'When did you lose it?' asked Mrs Hall.

'This morning,' replied Samuel.

She pointed him towards Southwick Street, where Samuel gave a boy a halfpenny to show him the house of PC Henry Heritage. Ann Heritage answered the door and told Samuel that her husband was in bed.

'You must call him up,' said Samuel, without getting out of his carriage. 'I have had a child stolen out of my house tonight . . . a little boy aged three years and ten months . . . wrapped up in a blanket . . . I am going to Trowbridge to give information to Foley.'

Mrs Heritage asked him for his name and residence.

'Kent,' he replied. 'Road Hill House.'

When PC Urch and parish constable Morgan reached Road Hill House, they found Sarah Cox in the kitchen and asked her how the child had been taken away. She showed them the open window in the drawing room. Elizabeth Gough took them into the nursery and turned back the bedclothes in Saville's cot: Morgan noticed 'the mark where the little boy had lain on the bed, and on the pillow'. Gough told the constables that when she joined the Kent household, eight months earlier, the nurse she replaced had mentioned that the boy's mother sometimes fetched him to her room in the night. Morgan asked: 'Have you lost anything from the nursery besides the child?' She hesitated, he said, before replying that 'there was a blanket taken from the cot, or drawn from the cot'.

Urch and Morgan asked to see the cellar, but found it was locked. One of the elder Misses Kent held the key but the constables chose not to involve the family in their inquiries. They returned to the drawing room to look for 'foot-tracks', as Morgan referred to them – to Urch they were 'footmarks' or 'footprints'; the science of detection was young, and its vocabulary still unsettled. Soon afterwards Elizabeth Gough looked for footmarks there, and found the imprints of two large hobnailed boots on the white drugget, a coarse woollen rug that lay over the carpet by the window. It turned out that these had been made by PC Urch.

Mrs Kent sent her stepdaughter Constance to ask the Reverend Peacock to come to Road Hill House. Edward Peacock lived in a three-storey gothic parsonage next to Christ Church with his wife, their two daughters, two sons and five servants. He and Samuel were friends, and the parsonage was only a few minutes' walk from the Kents' house. The vicar agreed to help with the search.

William Nutt, a shoemaker with six children who lived in the tumbledown cottages by the house, was at work in his shop when he overheard Joseph Greenhill, an innkeeper, talking about Master Saville's disappearance. Nutt headed for Road Hill House: 'Having an affection like for the father, I said, "I must go and hear

further about this.” Nutt was ‘a strange-looking person’, reported the *Western Daily Press*: ‘sallow, thin, and bony, with prominent cheek bones, pointed nose, receding forehead, and a cast in one eye; while he is what is called “bumble-footed”, and has a habit of placing his attenuated arms in front of his chest, with his hands drooping’. Just outside the gates, Nutt came across Thomas Benger, a farmer, driving his cows. Benger suggested to Nutt that they join the search. Nutt hesitated to go on the lawn without permission, and told Benger he ‘did not like to go on a gentleman’s premises’. Benger, who had heard Samuel Kent offer Urch and Morgan a £10 reward if they found his son, persuaded Nutt that no one could reprimand them for looking for a lost child.

As they searched the thick shrubbery to the left of the front drive, Nutt remarked that they would find a dead child if the living one was not found. He then struck off to the right, towards a servants’ privy hidden in the bushes, and Benger followed. They came to the privy and looked in: a small pool of clotted blood lay on the floor.

‘See, William,’ said Benger, ‘what we have got to see.’

‘Oh, Benger,’ said Nutt. ‘It is as I predicted.’

‘Get a light, William,’ said Benger.

Nutt went to the back door of the house and along the passage to the scullery. There he found Mary Holcombe, the gardener’s mother. She was employed by the Kents as a charwoman for two days or so each week. Nutt asked for a candle, and she looked at him.

‘For God’s sake, what’s the matter, William?’

‘Don’t alarm yourself, Mary,’ he said. ‘I only want a candle for a minute to see what we can see.’

While Nutt was gone, Benger lifted the lavatory lid and peered in until his eyes adjusted to the darkness. ‘By steadily looking down, I could see better, and saw a something like clothing below; I put my hand down and raised the blanket.’ The blanket was

soaked with blood. About two feet under the seat, on the wooden 'splashboard' that partly blocked the descent to the pit beneath, was the boy's body. Saville was lying on his side, one arm and one leg slightly drawn up.

'Look here,' said Benger as Nutt appeared with the candle. 'Oh, William, here it is.'