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The SUSPICIONS
of
MR. WHICHER



*A Shocking Murder and the Undoing
of a Great Victorian Detective*

KATE
SUMMERSCALE

The
SUSPICIONS
of
MR WHICHER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Queen of Whale Cay

The
SUSPICIONS
of
MR WHICHER

or **THE MURDER at ROAD HILL HOUSE**
KATE SUMMERSCALE

BLOOMSBURY

To my sister, Juliet

'Do you feel an uncomfortable heat at the pit of your stomach, sir? and a nasty thumping at the top of your head? Ah! not yet? It will lay hold of you . . . I call it the detective-fever'

From *The Moonstone* (1868) by Wilkie Collins

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INTRODUCTION

This is the story of a murder committed in an English country house in 1860, perhaps the most disturbing murder of its time. The search for the killer threatened the career of one of the first and greatest detectives, inspired a 'detective-fever' throughout England, and set the course of detective fiction. For the family of the victim, it was a murder of unusual horror, which threw suspicion on almost everyone within the house. For the country as a whole, the murder at Road Hill became a kind of myth – a dark fable about the Victorian family and the dangers of detection.

A detective was a recent invention. The first fictional sleuth, Auguste Dupin, appeared in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Murders in the rue Morgue' in 1841, and the first real detectives in the English-speaking world were appointed by the London Metropolitan Police the next year. The officer who investigated the murder at Road Hill House – Detective-Inspector Jonathan Whicher of Scotland Yard – was one of the eight men who formed this fledgling force.

The Road Hill case turned everyone detective. It riveted the people of England, hundreds of whom wrote to the newspapers, to the Home Secretary and to Scotland Yard with their solutions. It helped shape the fiction of the 1860s and beyond, most obviously Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, which was described by T.S. Eliot as the first and best of all English detective novels. Whicher was the inspiration for that story's cryptic Sergeant Cuff, who has influenced nearly every detective hero since. Elements of the case surfaced in Charles Dickens' last, unfinished novel, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. And although Henry James's terrifying novella *The Turn of the Screw* was not directly inspired by the Road Hill murder – James said he based it on an anecdote told to him by the Archbishop of Canterbury – it was alive with the eerie doubts and slippages of the case: a governess who might be a force for good or evil, the enigmatic children in her charge, a country house steeped in secrets.

A Victorian detective was a secular substitute for a prophet or a priest. In a newly uncertain world he offered science, conviction, stories that could organise chaos. He turned brutal crimes – the vestiges of the beast in man – into intellectual puzzles. But after the investigation at Road Hill the image of the detective darkened. Many felt that Whicher's inquiries culminated in a violation of the middle-class home, an assault on privacy, a crime to match the murder he had been sent to solve. He exposed the corruptions within the house-hold: sexual transgression, emotional cruelty, scheming servants, wayward children, insanity, jealousy, loneliness and loathing. The scene he uncovered aroused fear (and excitement) at the thought of what might be hiding behind the closed doors of other respectable houses. His conclusions helped to create an era of voyeurism and suspicion, in which the detective was a shadowy figure, a demon as well as a demi-god.

Everything we know about Road Hill House is determined by the murder that took place there on 3 June 1860. The police and magistrates turned up hundreds of details of the building's interior: handles, latches, footprints, nightclothes, carpets, hotplates – and of its inhabitants' habits. Even the interior of the victim's body was exposed to the public with an unflinching, forensic candour that now seems startling.

Because each piece of information that has come down to us was given in answer to a particular investigator's question, each is the mark of a suspicion. We know who called at the house on 29 June because one of the callers might have been the killer. We know when the house's lantern was fixed because it might have illuminated the path to the scene of the murder. We know how the lawn was cut because a scythe might have served as the weapon. The resulting portrait of life in Road Hill House is hungrily attentive, but it is also incomplete: the investigation into the killing was like a torch swun

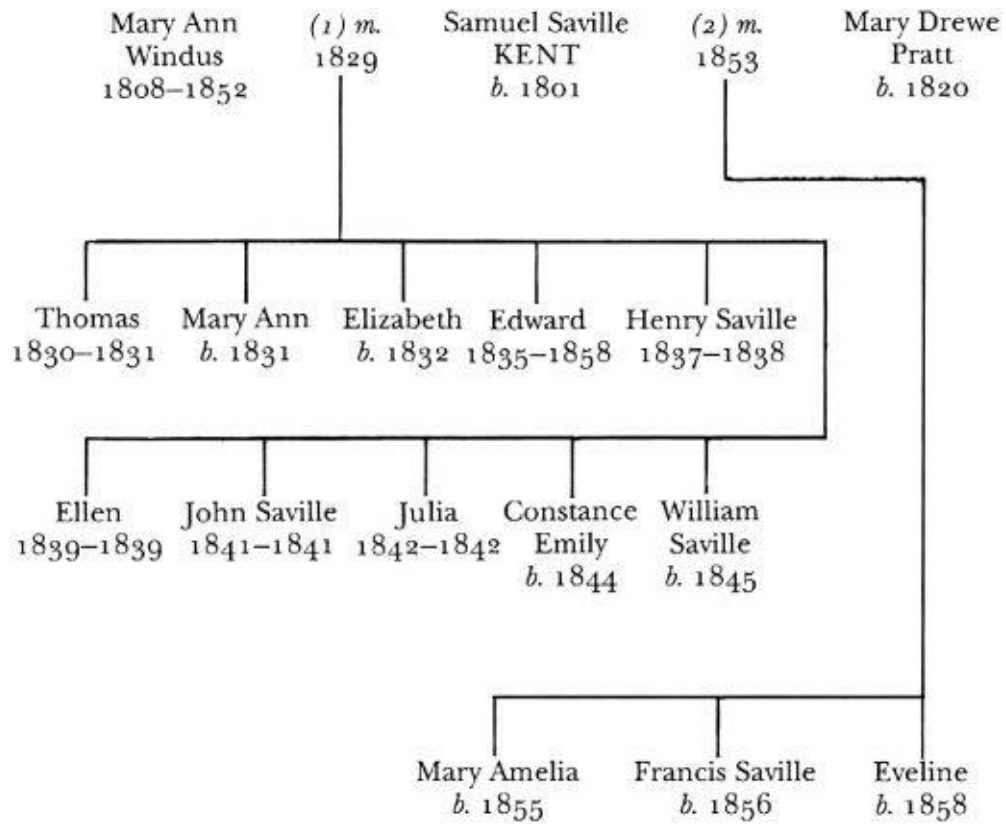
round onto sudden movements, into corners and up stairwells. Everyday domestic events were lit with possible meanings. The ordinary was made sinister. The method of the murder seeped into the gathering detail, in the witnesses' repeated references to hard and soft surfaces, such as knives and cloths, and to openings and closings, incisions and bolts.

For as long as the crime went unsolved, the inhabitants of Road Hill House were cast variously as suspects, conspirators, victims. The whole of the secret that Whicher guessed at did not emerge until many years after all of them had died.

This book is modelled on the country-house murder mystery, the form that the Road Hill case inspired, and uses some of the devices of detective fiction. The content, though, aims to be factual. The main sources are the government and police files on the murder, which are held in the National Archives at Kew, south-west London, and the books, pamphlets, essays and newspaper pieces published about the case in the 1860s, which can be found in the British Library. Other sources include maps, railway timetables, medical textbooks, social histories and police memoirs. Some descriptions of buildings and landscapes are from personal observation. Accounts of the weather conditions are from press reports, and the dialogue is from testimony given in court.

In the later stages of the story the characters disperse – notably to London, the city of the detective and to Australia, a land of exiles – but most of the action of the book takes place in an English village over one month in the summer of 1860.

FAMILY TREE



LIST OF CHARACTERS

AT ROAD HILL HOUSE

Samuel Kent, sub-inspector of factories, aged 59 in June 1860
Mary Kent, *née* Pratt, Samuel's second wife, 40
Mary Ann Kent, daughter of Samuel Kent's first marriage, 29
Elizabeth Kent, daughter of Samuel Kent's first marriage, 28
Constance Kent, daughter of Samuel Kent's first marriage, 16
William Kent, son of Samuel Kent's first marriage, 14
Mary Amelia Kent, daughter of Samuel Kent's second
marriage, 5
Saville Kent, son of Samuel Kent's second marriage, 3
Eveline Kent, daughter of Samuel Kent's second marriage, 1
Elizabeth Gough, nursemaid, 22
Sarah Cox, housemaid, 22
Sarah Kerslake, cook, 23

LIVE-OUT SERVANTS

James Holcombe, gardener, groom and coachman, 49
John Alloway, odd-job boy, 18
Daniel Oliver, assistant gardener, 49
Emily Doel, assistant nursemaid, 14
Mary Holcombe, charwoman
Anna Silcox, retired monthly nurse, 76

OTHER VILLAGERS

The Reverend Edward Peacock, perpetual curate of Christ
Church, 39
Hester Holley, washerwoman, 55
Martha Holley, daughter of Hester, 17
William Nutt, shoemaker, 36
Thomas Bengier, farmer, 46
Stephen Millet, butcher, 55
Joe Moon, tilemaker, 39
James Fricker, plumber and glazier, 40
James Morgan, baker and parish constable, 56

THE POLICE

Superintendent John Foley, 64, of Trowbridge
Police Constable William Dallimore, 40, of Trowbridge
Eliza Dallimore, police 'searcher', 47, of Trowbridge
Police Constable Alfred Urch, 33, of Road
Police Constable Henry Heritage, of Southwick
Police Sergeant James Watts, of Frome
Captain Meredith, the Chief Constable of Wiltshire, 63, of
Devizes
Superintendent Francis Wolfe, 48, of Devizes

THE DETECTIVES

Detective-Inspector Jonathan Whicher, 45
Detective-Sergeant Frederick Adolphus Williamson, 29
Detective-Sergeant Richard Tanner, 29
Ignatius Pollaky, private inquiry agent, 31

IN NEIGHBOURING TOWNS

George Sylvester, surgeon and county coroner, 71, of
Trowbridge
Joshua Parsons, surgeon, 45, of Beckington
Joseph Stapleton, surgeon, 45, of Trowbridge
Benjamin Mallam, physician, of Frome
Rowland Rodway, solicitor, 46, of Trowbridge
William Dunn, solicitor, 30, of Frome
Henry Gaisford Gibbs Ludlow, landowner, magistrate for
Wiltshire and Deputy Lieutenant for Somersetshire, 50, of
Westbury
William Stancomb, wool manufacturer, magistrate for
Wiltshire and Deputy Lieutenant for Wiltshire, 48, of
Trowbridge
John Stancomb, wool manufacturer and magistrate for
Wiltshire, 45, of Trowbridge
Peter Edlin, barrister, 40, of Bristol
Emma Moody, wool-worker's daughter, 15, of Warminster
Louisa Hatherill, farmer's daughter, 15, of Oldbury-on-the
Hill, Gloucestershire
William Slack, solicitor, of Bath
Thomas Saunders, magistrate and former barrister, of
Bradford-upon-Avon

A NOTE ON MONEY

In 1860, £1 had the purchasing power of £65 (\$130) in today's money. A shilling (*s*) was worth twentieth of £1 and had the purchasing power of about £3.25 (\$6.50) today. A penny (*d*) was worth twelfth of a shilling and had the purchasing power of about twenty-five modern pence (fifty cents). This measure – based on the retail price index – is useful for calculating the relative cost of everyday items, such as fares, food, drink.

When assessing salaries, a more meaningful calculation is that an income of £100 in 1860 is the equivalent of about £60,000 (\$120,000) today.

Estimates based on the calculations of the American economics professors Lawrence H. Officer and Samuel H. Williamson, explained on their website measuringworth.com.

PROLOGUE

*Paddington Railway Station,
15 July 1860*

On Sunday, 15 July 1860, Detective-Inspector Jonathan Whicher of Scotland Yard paid two shillings for a hansom cab to take him from Millbank, just west of Westminster, to Paddington station, the London terminus of the Great Western Railway. There he bought two rail tickets: one to Chippenham in Wiltshire, ninety-four miles away, for 7s.10d., another from Chippenham to Trowbridge, about twenty miles on, for 1s.6d. The day was warm: for the first time that summer, the temperature in London had nudged into the seventies.

Paddington station was a shining vault of iron and glass, built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel some years earlier, its interior hot with smoke and sun. Jack Whicher knew the place well – the thieves of London thrived on the surging, anonymous crowds in the new railway stations, the swift comings and goings, the thrilling muddle of types and classes. This was the essence of the city that the detective had been created to police. William Frith's *The Railway Station*, a panoramic painting of Paddington in 1860, shows a thief apprehended by two whiskered plain-clothes officers in black suits and top hats, quiet men able to steady the turmoil of the metropolis.

At this terminus in 1856 Whicher arrested the flashily dressed George Williams for stealing a purse containing £5 from the pocket of Lady Glamis – the detective told the magistrates' court that he had 'known the prisoner for years past as a member, and a first-rate one, of the swell mob'. At the same station in 1858 he apprehended a stout, blotchy woman of about forty in the second-class compartment of a Great Western train, with the words: 'Your name, I think, is Moutot.' Louisa Moutot was a notorious fraudster. She had used an alias – Constance Brown – to hire a brougham carriage, a party and a furnished house in Hyde Park. She then arranged for an assistant of the jewellers Messrs Hunt and Roskell to call round with bracelets and necklaces for the inspection of a Lady Campbell. Moutot asked to take the jewels upstairs to her mistress, who she claimed was sick in bed. The jeweller handed over a diamond bracelet, worth £325, with which Moutot left the room. After waiting for fifteen minutes he tried the door, to find he had been locked in.

When Whicher captured Moutot at Paddington station ten days later, he noticed that she was busying her arms beneath her cloak. He seized her wrists and turned up the stolen bracelet. Also on her person were a man's wig, a set of false whiskers and a false moustache. She was an up-to-the-minute urban criminal, a mistress of the twisty deceits that Whicher excelled in untangling.

Jack Whicher was one of the original eight Scotland Yard officers. In the eighteen years since the detective force had been formed, these men had become figures of mystery and glamour, the surreptitious, all-seeing little gods of London. Charles Dickens held them up as models of modernity. They were as magical and scientific as the other marvels of the 1840s and 1850s – the camera, the electric telegraph and the railway train. Like the telegraph and the train, a detective seemed able to jump time and place; like the camera, he seemed able to freeze them – Dickens reported that 'in a glance' a detective 'immediately takes an inventory of the furniture' in a room and makes 'an accurate sketch' of its inhabitants. A detective's investigations, wrote the novelist, were 'games of chess, played with live pieces' and 'chronicled nowhere'.

Whicher, at forty-five, was the doyen of the Metropolitan force – 'the prince of detectives', said

colleague. He was a stout, scuffed man with a delicate manner, 'shorter and thicker-set' than his fellow officers, Dickens observed, and possessed of 'a reserved and thoughtful air, as if he were engaged in deep arithmetical calculations'. His face was pitted with smallpox scars. William Henry Wills, Dickens' deputy at his magazine *House-hold Words*, saw Whicher in action in 1850. His account of what he witnessed was the first published description of Whicher, indeed of any English detective.

Wills was standing on the stairs of an Oxford hotel exchanging pleasantries with a Frenchman – he noted 'the jetty gloss of his boots, and the exceeding whiteness of his gloves' – when a stranger appeared in the hall below. 'On the mat at the stair-foot there stands a man. A plain, honest-looking fellow, with nothing formidable in his appearance, or dreadful in his countenance.' This 'apparition' had an extraordinary effect on the Frenchman, who 'raises himself on his toes, as if he had been suddenly overbalanced by a bullet; his cheek pales, and his lip quivers . . . He knows it is too late to turn back (he evidently would, if he could), for the man's eye is upon him.'

The stranger with a gaze like a gun mounted the stairs and instructed the Frenchman to leave Oxford, with the rest of his 'school', on the seven o'clock train. He then made for the hotel dining room, where he approached three men who were carousing over their supper. He put his knuckles on the table and leant forward, fixing the men with a stare, one by one. 'As if by magic', they froze and fell silent. The uncannily powerful stranger ordered the trio to pay their bill and catch the seven o'clock train to London. He followed them to Oxford railway station, and Wills followed him.

At the station, the reporter's curiosity overcame his fear of the man's 'evident omnipotence', and he asked him what was going on.

'The fact is,' the fellow told Wills, 'I am Sergeant Witchem, of the Detective police.'

Whicher was a 'man of mystery', in Wills' phrase, the prototype of the enigmatic, reserved investigator. He appeared from nowhere, and even his unmasking was masked with an alias. 'Witchem', the name given him by Wills, had suggestions of detection – 'which of 'em?' – and of magic – 'bewitch 'em'. He could turn a man to stone or strike him dumb. Many of the traits that Wills saw in Whicher became the stuff of the fictional detective hero: he was ordinary-looking, keen-sighted, sharp-witted, quiet. In accordance with his discretion, and his profession, no pictures of Whicher seem to have survived. The only clues to what he looked like are the descriptions given by Dickens and Wills and the details on the police discharge papers: Whicher was five feet eight inches tall, his hair was brown, his skin was pale, his eyes were blue.

At railway station bookstalls, travellers could buy cheap, paperback detective 'memoirs' (actual collections of short stories) and magazines featuring mysteries by Dickens, Edgar Allan Poe and Wilkie Collins. That weekend's issue of Dickens' new journal *All the Year Round* ran the thirty-third instalment of Collins' *The Woman in White*, the first of the 'sensation' novels that were to dominate the 1860s. In the story so far, the villainous Sir Percival Glyde had imprisoned two women in a lunatic asylum in order to conceal a dark episode in his family's past. The instalment of 14 July had the dastardly Glyde burnt to death in the vestry of a church while trying to destroy evidence of his secret. The narrator watched as the church blazed: 'I heard nothing but the quickening crackle of the flames and the sharp snap of the glass in the skylight above . . . We look for the body. The scorching heat of our faces drives us back: we see nothing – above, below, all through the room, we see nothing but a sheet of living fire.'

The death that Whicher was leaving London to investigate was a brutal, seemingly motiveless murder in a country house near Trowbridge in Wiltshire, which had confounded the local police and the national press. The victim's family, though outwardly respectable, was rumoured to harbour its own secrets, matters of adultery and madness.

A Great Western Railway telegraph had summoned Jack Whicher to Wiltshire, and one of the same

company's trains bore him there. At 2 p.m. a huge six-wheeled steam engine pulled his carriage liveried in chocolate and cream, out of Paddington station along a track that measured seven feet across. The Great Western was the smoothest, steadiest, fastest railway line in England. Even the penny-a-mile train, which Whicher took, seemed to skim across the flat country to Slough and glide over the broad arches of the railway bridge at Maidenhead. In J.M.W. Turner's painting *Rain, Steam, and Speed – the Great Western Railway* (1844) a locomotive hurtles over this bridge out of the east, a dark bullet casting off glittering sheets of silver, blue and gold.

Whicher's train reached Chippenham at 5.37 p.m., and eight minutes later the detective caught the connecting service to Trowbridge. He would be there in less than an hour. The story that awaited him – the sum of the facts gathered by the Wiltshire police, magistrates and newspaper reporters – began a fortnight earlier, on 29 June.

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