

# That Damned Fellow Upstairs

by Edmund Lester Pearson, 1880-1937

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Mr. Pickwick knew an old man who said that the rooms in the Inns of Court were *queer old places*—odd and lonely.

„Not a bit of it!“ said a sceptical friend.

Then the sceptic, who lived by himself in one of these rooms, died one morning of apoplexy, as he was about to open his door. Fell with his head in his own letterbox, and lay there for eighteen months. At last, as the rent was not being paid, the landlords had the door forced, „and a very dusty skeleton in a blue coat, black knee-shorts and silks, fell forward in the arms of the porter who opened the door.“

Years after Mr. Pickwick’s adventures were over, entrance was one day forced into another queer old room in a London house, and, with a tremendous clatter, out tumbled another skeleton, of a still stranger kind.

The noise it made was not heard in America, since we were completely absorbed, that summer, in the first Battle of Bull Run. The story would be forgotten in England today, were it not for the admirable essay published seven years ago by the late Sir John Hall, Bart. This gentleman is respected by all those who appreciate scholarly descriptions of curious events. It is probable, however, that of all who see my retelling of the tale, only experts like Messrs.

Alexander Woollcott and S.S. Van Dine will be familiar with Sir John Hall's work. And as it has been solemnly asserted, in print, that the names of both Mr. Woollcott and Mr. Van Dine are but pseudonyms of the writer of this piece, the circle is very much narrowed. So I feel moderately safe in going ahead, especially as I have unearthed one or two details on my own account.

Towards noon of a day in July, in that far-off year, Mr. Clay, the manager of the Catalonian Cork-Cutting Company, was in the rear of his premises in Northumberland Street, London. He heard two pistol shots from within the house, one shot following the other at a five-minute interval. He paid no attention, since he knew that one of the residents of the house had, for a month past, anticipated Sherlock Holmes in the eccentric custom of indoor pistol-practice.

After a few minutes, a rear window on the second floor was opened, and there appeared the hero of the story. His conduct, his accoutrement, and some of his speeches, have always recalled to me those half-demented and curious persons who flit through the novels of Mr. G.K. Chesterton. He was a man in his forties; wearing, I think, side-whiskers, and carrying in one hand an umbrella, in the other, half a pair of tongs. He put one foot on the sill, and seemed about to jump twenty feet or more into the yard.

This horrified the Catalonian cork-cutter, not only because the stranger's face was covered with blood, but because of the flagstones and an area, with iron railings, directly below the window. He adjured the bearer of the umbrella, in the name of God, to do nothing desperate, but to tell him what was the matter.

„Murder is the matter!“ replied the gory one, and continued his preparations for a desperate leap.

Mr. Clay sent one of his employees for the police, and ran indoors to try to get into the second-floor apartment. While he was banging at the locked doors, he heard glass breaking, and on looking out again, found that the mysterious person had jumped into the yard; fought off a workman who tried to stop him; clambered over a high wall into the next yard—still armed with the umbrella; gained an alley between the houses; and made his way into the street.

Here, he was surrounded by a group of people who had come running from various directions. He complained that someone who lived at Number 16 had tried to murder him. One of the men in the street must have secured the umbrella—perhaps while the wounded man was adjusting his cravat, or brushing off his clothes—for the stranger asked for the umbrella again, and said that he must be getting to his office. This in spite of the fact that he had lost his hat; had a terrible wound in the back of the neck; another, which was bleeding freely, on his cheek; and that both his hair and whiskers were singed.

Duty was evidently the keynote of his character. He was an officer and a gentleman, and to introduce him by name, he was Major William Murray, late of the 10th Hussars, but a total stranger to all in the street. As it will appear presently, deception was in his eyes a far more grievous offence than personal violence, and to him unsportsmanlike conduct seemed the blackest of sins. A man in the crowd reasoned with him about going to his office.

„You are badly wounded,“ said this one.

„Am I?“ replied the Major.

„Indeed, you are fearfully wounded.“

Then the Major remarked:

„It's that damned fellow upstairs—Grey.“

„There is nobody named Grey in that house,“ the man returned. „But if you mean the man I saw you go in with, about half an hour ago, his name is Roberts.“

Then, at last, the Major allowed a faint note of bitterness to creep into his tone.

„He told me,“ he said, „he told me, that his name was Grey.“

Meanwhile, much was going on in and about Number 16 Northumberland Street. The occupants of that and nearby houses had all heard the pistol shots, and one of them had heard other noises—as if someone were beating a mattress. But no one gave much thought to the reports, since they all knew the habit of their neighbour, Mr. Roberts, of amusing himself by target practice. Roberts was, by profession, a solicitor; actually he accommodated people by lending money. This he did at no great disadvantage to himself—his idea of a proper rate of interest being 133 1/3; per cent, per annum.

Inside the house, during the talk on the street, was a Mr. Preston-Lumb, an engineer. To him came young Mr. Roberts, son of the moneylender.

„Oh! Mr. Lumb,“ he cried—forgetting, in his excitement, the glories of the hyphenated name, „oh, Mr. Lumb, someone has been and murdered Father!“

Thus, at last, we learn the real origin of the remark which Miss Lizzie Borden called up the stairs to Bridget Sullivan, on another warm and sanguinary noonday, many years afterwards.

Meanwhile, the man in the crowd, and most of the crowd, too, were escorting the wounded Major, first to a chemist's for immediate relief, and then to a bed in the Charing Cross Hospital. His injuries were serious, but he was able, as they walked along, to give the First Citizen a perfectly lucid account of the surprise attack which had been made upon him by the fellow who said his name was Grey.

When the police arrived, and began to search for Mr. Roberts, another inquirer came upon the scene. This was one Timms, a man who had been engaged in washing down the back of the house. To him, shortly before the shots were fired, had come Mr. Roberts, given him a shilling, and asked him to go to the top of St. Martin's Lane, and buy a linnet. He added that the price of the bird was ninepence. Now, Mr. Timms returned, and was left in possession of the linnet, and of the threepence change.

This, in a modern American murder trial, would have been a winsome incident, to be repeated to the jury by the weeping lawyer for the defence, coupled with a demand for the instant acquittal of the prisoner, as one whose tender heart was solely concerned with feathered songsters of the air.

The police, by means of ladders, at last effected an entrance to the rooms of Mr. Roberts. To these locked apartments hardly anyone, not even the moneylender's son, had ordinarily been admitted.

The officers looked at an amazing sight. The rooms were elaborately overfurnished in the French style of the period of Louis Philippe. There were half a dozen good watercolour paintings, with heavy gold frames. Brackets and shelves were ornamented with statuettes and bric-a-brac under glass covers. The floor space was crowded with ormolu tables and boule cabinets. Everything in the room was filthy with dirt and dust—the thick, black encrustation which follows years of neglect. On the floor was a great heap of crumpled papers, also

powdered with dust, while the marble mantelpiece was scarred and chipped by the bullets from Mr. Robert's pistol.

In the front room the ornate and dirty furniture was little disarranged, but the other room showed the marks of a terrific fight. Chairs and gilded tables had been upset. The dust had been beaten down; the inlaid cabinets were smeared by bloody fingers. There were splashes of blood on the walls, and a shower of drops of blood on the glass covers over the ornaments. In places, the room looked „as if a bloody mop had been trundled round and round“.

The police found parts of the broken tongs, „actually coated with bits of flesh and blood“, and another weapon of the fight, a broken wine bottle, lying in a pool of blood. Near the wall in the front room, his head a shocking mass of wounds, lay the owner of all this: Roberts, the moneylender. He had a dozen or twenty injuries, any one of which looked as if it alone should have been instantly fatal. Yet he lived, and could talk.

He, also, was taken to the hospital, where, to the astonishment of the surgeons, he lived for six days. Most of this time he was conscious, but did not say much to help the police. He said that Murray, whom he met by accident in the street, had come to his rooms for a loan. And then, „Murray shot himself in the neck, attacked me with the tongs like a demon, and hit me with a glass bottle.“

Aside from the improbability of this, the chief wound of the Major made the moneylender's story absurd, and indicated that Roberts had done the shooting. The Major had said, from the start, that Roberts was an utter stranger, whom he had met in the street; that he had been asked to come to the house in Northumberland Street to discuss a proposed loan to a company, and that he had been shot and almost killed for no reason which he could imagine. He then defended his life with the weapons that came to hand.

Young Roberts was brought to his bedside, but still the name meant nothing.

„What Roberts?“ said the Major.

„Why, the son of the Roberts who shot you,“ was the reply.

Then the exasperation of Major Murray burst forth again.

„Why, damn him,“ he said, „he ought to be hanged for shooting a man on the ground!“

To the sporting Major, especially at a time of the year when the thoughts of all Englishmen were dwelling upon the approach of the grouse season, it was scandalous that Roberts had not flushed him before firing.

Since Roberts died without giving any reason for the fight, and since it was a mystery to Major Murray, the police continued to search the rooms for an explanation. At last, as in a detective story, they believed they had found it in a few marks on a bloodstained sheet of blotting paper. Holding this to the mirror, they deciphered the name „Mrs. Murray“, and an address: Elm Lodge, Tottenham. There were also some fragments of letters from Mrs. Murray to Mr. Roberts.

The inquest was held ten days after the fight. The jury met in the hospital, where they could most easily inspect the battered remains of the man who lost the combat, and also question the winner of it. The so-called Mrs. Murray appeared, heavily veiled. When she lifted this veil, she disclosed „the features of a remarkably pretty woman“ of about twenty-five. Her name was Anna Maria Moody. Seven or eight years earlier, she had left her family „to live under Major Murray's protection“, and she had called herself Mrs. Murray for five years. The

Major had taken Elm Lodge for her, and had always treated her in the most „noble-hearted manner“, in accordance with his disposition, which was „amiable and kind“. When her baby was born, she was embarrassed for funds, and was unwilling to ask for more money from the Major, who, although apparently a bachelor, was „under heavy expenses“.

Someone told her of Roberts; she went to him, and found him willing to lend her fifteen pounds, provided she signed a three-months' note for twenty pounds.

She had never been able to pay the debt, but had continued to make quarterly payments of five pounds, as interest. From the beginning, Roberts had tried to make love to her, and offered to release her from the debt, if she would leave Major Murray, and go to Scotland with him.

It was believed that Miss Moody told the truth; that she was faithful to the Major; and that she was forced to accept Roberts's company, and go with him usually chaperoned by his wife to church and to entertainments; and even to write affectionate notes to him; and that all this was the craft of a helpless woman who was badgered and threatened by a usurer. She said the two men had never met before the day of the fight, and Major Murray had not known of the other's existence.

The Major gave his testimony in the hospital ward; his throat bandaged, and his neck too stiff to let him move his head. He unfolded a tale which impressed everybody with its melodramatic qualities and caused Thackeray to refer to the affair in Roundabout Papers.

Roberts had accosted him in the street; introduced himself as „Grey“, and offered a loan of fifty thousand pounds to the Railway Palace Hotel, of which project the Major was a director. The two men went to Roberts's rooms, where the host left his guest alone for a few minutes. (He went on the errand about the linnets, in order to get rid of a possible witness.) He came back, stopped behind the chair in which the Major was sitting, and, under pretence of looking for some papers, held a pistol directly against the neck of his victim, and fired. The Major fell to the floor, paralysed. Roberts left the room again, and came back to see the Major beginning to move. He walked up and again fired at his right temple. The outrush of blood from this wound relieved the Major a little, and, as he said, „I knew if I could get on my feet I could make a fight for it.“

He opened his eyes and saw the tongs. With these in his hands, he jumped up and attacked his intending murderer. Then occurred a fight which raged all over the room. The tongs were smashed against Roberts's skull, after which the Major found a large black wine-bottle and smashed that in the same manner. Both men were up and down, sprawled on the floor, and fighting desperately for whatever weapon the Major tried to employ. Once, Murray caught up a metal vase and threw it at the other's head but missed. Two or three times, Roberts seemed to be down and out, but he would recover his feet, and—a hideous sight—come lurching towards the Major, who was trying to find an escape from the apartment. At last Roberts fell on his face as though dead; the Major pushed him through into the front room, shut the folding doors, and leaped out the window. He regarded the men in the back yard as possible enemies, because he thought that people who could listen to pistol shots and all the uproar or the fight, and take no notice of it, must be associate ruffians in a den of thieves and murderers.

Major Murray's story was corroborated by all the facts known to the jury, who brought in a verdict of „justifiable homicide“—this amidst the applause of the crowd of spectators.

Roberts's motive for the attempt at murder seems absurdly inadequate but it is probable that, in his desperate infatuation for Miss Moody, he thought that with the Major out of the way he might somehow become the heir to her affections. How he planned to dispose of the body is not clear: perhaps, in the mass of other rubbish which filled his strange dwelling, he thought that the corpse of a retired officer would pass unnoticed.

Miss Moody, like Mr. Timms's linnet, disappears from the history. Whether she was a member of the Major's family at a later date, I do not know.

If you should be eccentric enough to look at The Times for April 1, 1907, you will find this, under Deaths:

MURRAY, on the 28<sup>th</sup> March, at Ossemsley Manor, Christchurch, Hants, Major William Murray, late 97th Regiment, and 10th Hussars. Service Newmilton, 9 a.m., Wednesday. Cremation, Woking. No flowers, by his special request.

All the bullets of that damned fellow upstairs had not prevented the gallant Major from reaching the hearty old age of eighty-eight. But not even in the Crimea—if he was in that war, which is doubtful—did he ever come so near death as on that day when he fought „like a demon“ against a man whose name, and whose purpose, were alike, to him, a mystery.

