

The Mystery of the One-Legged Man

by John B. Hawley, ...

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Chapter 1

Peg-Leg's Victims.

Newspaper readers will recall the series of brutal and seemingly senseless murders that occurred in England and were attributed to a criminal whom some clever writer dubbed Peg-Leg because after each of his appearances he left conclusive evidence in the form of footprints that he was minus his right leg and wore in its place an old-fashioned wooden affair ending in a round steel ferrule.

I have said that these murders were seemingly senseless affairs, and that must have been the opinion of everyone who considered that they were committed without any apparent motive. From none of his victims was anything stolen and in the history of their lives there were no passages to denote the existence of an enemy who might kill in a spirit of revenge for a real or fancied grievance.

The first of these horrible crimes occurred in York. The victim was a certain John Elder, manufacturer of buttons, a highly respectable citizen.

On the night of his death, Elder had retired to his study to write some letters. As the evening was warm he had opened the French window, and according to the testimony of his butler who was the last of his household to see him alive, had dragged forward a small table and placed it just in the window's opening. He had seated himself beside this table and begun to write when the servant left the room.

At about eleven o'clock this same servant had heard a cry coming from the study. He had hurried to see if anything were wrong with his master and had found him lying beside the table with a knife wound gaping in his chest. Outside the French window, the police had found unmistakable footprints of a one-legged man. These they followed across the lawn until they came to the road where they became blurred and finally lost in the medley of other prints on this much-traveled thorough fare.

Of course the detectives rounded up every one-legged man in York and questioned them closely. But all had unquestionable alibis, and as the police were unable to discover or invent a means of tracing the criminal, they eventually dropped the case.

Peg-Leg's second victim was a little higher on the social scale. No lover of English sport will ever forget the name of Sir Roger Bascom. Nor will the many unfortunate souls whom he helped in their need be more backward in cherishing his memory. As in the case of John Elder, Bascom was killed between the hours of eleven and midnight.

And on the grounds of his estate in Sussex were found another series of the footprints of a one-legged man. Because of his prominence, the police put forth their best efforts to run down his murderer. But these went as unrewarded as had those of their colleagues in York.

These two murders happened within three months of each other. Then for over a year Peg-Leg was not heard from again. His next appearance was in London where on Hempstead Heath he stabbed Professor Thomas Belding, the noted authority on Eastern religions.

Now I come to the last of Peg-Leg's activities. His final murder occurred here in Camberwell and robbed me of one of my dearest friends.

The Reverend Frank Parkington was a bachelor, and with young Harry Fellows, his curate, lived in the old stone Vicarage just behind the church of St. Annes. He was in all particulars the finest man I have ever known, a brilliant preacher, a good friend, an ardent worker in his chosen field.

His home was a rendezvous for a few of us who over a convivial pipe liked to discuss those matters of the day that interested us. On the night of his death we had gathered at his request to meet Captain Charles Wonderly, the Indian explorer who was his guest.

We found this fellow Wonderly a very interesting talker. He had traveled far and seen much and knew how to picture in words what he had seen. With his descriptions and anecdotes he held us interested until well toward midnight.

I remember that I arrived home at about twelve-fifteen. I retired immediately. But I did not go to sleep at once as my mind was still full of the Captain Wonderly's stories. Just as I was dozing off I heard the church clock strike two and at the same instant there came a violent ringing at my door-bell.

I found Harry Fellows awaiting me on my door-step.

„Come! Come quickly!" he said in a voice hoarse from excitement. „Dr. Parkington is dead—murdered!"

„Murdered! Good heavens, man, are you mad!" I shouted, staring into his face that showed pale and haggard in the feeble light of my hall lamp.

For answer he reached out and shook me roughly by the shoulder.

„Will you come," he said fiercely, „or shall I have to carry you?"

Had I not immediately shown signs of obeying his demand, I really believe the young giant would have picked me up and carried me just as I was in pajamas and slippers. His love for Parkington who had been more than a father to him was a strong thing, and at that moment his grief made him less than reasonable.

In less than ten minutes we were on the road to the vicarage. As we hurried through the still night. Fellows briefly told me what had happened.

Chapter 2

A Blood-Curling Moan.

After his guests had left, Parkington and Captain Wonderly, who was staying for the night, went to their rooms. Because he had some work to finish, Fellows had remained down stairs. At about one-fifteen he was just finishing his writing when he was startled and frightened by the sound of a blood-curdling moan followed by the sound of someone choking.

As soon as he had pulled himself together, he ran upstairs and instinct guided him to Parkington's room. He knocked at the door and when there was no answer he pushed it open and entered the bedroom.

There on his knees beside the bed he found Parkington dead. A knife or some long, sharp instrument had been driven into his back.

„What did you do then?" I asked.

„Called Rodgers, the servant, and sent him off for the police.”

„You didn’t rouse Wonderly?”

„No. In the excitement I forgot all about the fellow.”

We entered the vicarage and raced up the stairs to Parkington’s room. There we found Chief Constable Smithers in charge, and with him a quiet looking man whom he introduced as Inspector Grant of Scotland Yard, „down for a bit of a holiday, sir, and stopping with me.”

But for the moment I paid but little attention to Smithers and his friend. I was too greatly upset by the sight of the body I could make out lying beside the bed. My natural sorrow at Parkington’s death was added to by the awfulness of the way in which he had been taken from us. I went over and stood beside his body and looking down on it swore that I would find his murderer and see that he paid for his crime.

Then I turned to Smithers for his report.

„Squire,” he began gravely, „what I have to tell you will probably surprise you. You have heard of the notorious Peg-Leg. Well, sir, there is every indication that this is another of his fiendish crimes.”

Both Fellows and myself stared in amazement. Smithers continued.

„Yes, sir, I know that it sounds impossible but nevertheless it seems to be a fact. Inspector Grant here who worked on both the Bascom case and that of Professor Belding, will bear me out when I say that all the clues we have been able to find point in that direction.”

Inspector Grant nodded his head. Smithers crossed the room and stood midway between the bed and an open window that looked out on poor Parkington’s lawn.

He pointed downward at the carpet.

„See here, sir. Those little round marks—and here—and here—leading right to the window, sir. And plenty more of them on the ground below accompanied by the print of one shoe which does not show on this carpet.”

„And those marks—” I began.

„They’re from a wooden leg,” Smithers finished.

„But see here,” Fellows cried from beside the window. “How did the beggar get in the house. No man with a wooden leg could climb up here.”

Smithers shook his head.

„No good, sir. It’s really a very easy job. You have the hooks that hold the drain pipe all the way. Both Grant and I tried it and had no trouble at all.”

„Have you tried to follow the trail?” I asked.

„Lor’ bless you, yes, sir. We did that at once. But it leads nowhere. The prints are lost on the stone road less than a hundred feet down the highway.”

We were all bending over those horrible indentations in the carpet when a sound at our backs caused us to look up. In the doorway clad in his pajamas was Captain Wonderly rubbing his eyes and yawning.

„I say, you chaps,” he said, „what’s up?”

Then he caught sight of Parkington’s body and started forward.

„Good heavens! Parkington!” he exclaimed. „What’s wrong with him? Is he hurt?”

„Dead,” I answered briefly.

In a dazed sort of way Wonderly turned his eyes from one to another of us. At last they rested on Smithers, and guided by the constable’s uniform, addressed him as the officer of the law.

„Have you got the man that did this?”

„Not yet,” Smithers replied. „And now, sir. I’ll trouble you to tell me who you are and what you know of this business.”

Wonderly indicated Fellows and me.

„These gentlemen know me,” he said. “My name’s Wonderly. I was a friend of Dr. Parkington. As for what I know of this business—unfortunately I can’t help you a bit.”

„You were staying in the house?” Wonderly looked down significantly at his night clothes.

„I certainly was,” he answered, „in that room across the hall.”

„And you heard nothing? No sound?”

An expression of sorrow—almost of shame passed over Wonderly’s face.

„If I only had,” he replied quietly, „I’ll wager Parkington would be alive now. You see, gentlemen, some years ago I lost the hearing in my right ear. This deficiency doesn’t bother me ordinarily but if I happen to go to sleep on my left ear as I did tonight, I’m as deaf as a post.”

At my suggestion we went downstairs and seated ourselves in the library, leaving the murder chamber and its ghastly inhabitant untouched to await the offices of the coroner. But hardly had we taken our chairs when Fellows jumped to his feet, exclaiming: „This sitting around when Dr. Parkington’s murderer is making good his escape is too much for me. I’m going to have a look around.”

I put out my hand to stop him but at a signal from Smithers let it fall.

„Let him go,” he said after Fellows had left the room. „It won’t do any good but it won’t do any harm and it may ease the poor lad to be doing something.”

„Of course you have sent out a general alarm,” I asked Smithers a minute later.

He nodded.

„Of course, sir. Any one-legged man seen hereabouts will find his way to the police station.”

Then we began a careful consideration of the crime, each man suggesting that which he thought might help toward clearing it up and bringing the criminal to justice.

In this consultation, I conceived a great admiration for Captain Wonderly. The man had an exceedingly keen mind. In competition with Smithers and Inspector Grant, both old hands in the pursuit of criminals, he showed up wonderfully. No point escaped him and several times he set the others right in the development of a theory or in the statement of facts. Then and there, I said to myself, that could I persuade Wonderly to give up his time to seeking the murderer of my friend, I might hope for some results.

I was about to put the suggestion to him when we were all startled by the sound of quick footsteps on the stairs and along the hall. An instant later the library door swung wide and the huge bulk of Fellows filled the aperture.

I caught my breath in amazement as I saw the expression on his face. His eyes were wild with excitement and about his lips were lines of grim determination.

Without a word to the detectives or me, he crossed the room to Wonderly and bending over him whispered in his right ear.

A look of utter amazement came into Wonderer’s eyes. This was quickly followed by fear which in turn changed to a sort of blind rage. He strove to rise, but Fellows’s hand was about his throat and held him tightly to his chair.

Then very slowly, Fellows brought his other hand from behind his back. In it was a long knife and some queer contrivance whose purpose I could not make out. He threw these things on the table in front of Wonderly.

„Smithers,” he said in a cold, hard voice, „I want you to arrest this man for the murder of John Elder, Sir Roger Bascom, Professor Belding and Dr. Parkington.”

Chapter 3

Wonderly's Diary.

What happened then happened so quickly that we others had not the time to pull ourselves together and go to Fellows's aid. There was a brief struggle between Fellows and Wonderly, a cry from the latter, the tinkle of broken glass on the floor and then suddenly Wonderly's body went limp in Fellows's hands.

„Poison,” Fellows muttered, bending over the body of his late antagonist. „The beggar had it in the pocket of his dressing-gown.”

He picked up a rug from the floor and threw it over the body in front of him.

Now we all crowded around Fellows and burst into a babel of questions. He raised one hand to silence us and with the other pointed at the queer contrivance which with the knife lay in front of Wonderly's corpse.

„There,” he said, „is the wooden leg of your Peg-Leg.”

The thing was a piece of board cut in the shape of the sole of a shoe. From the bottom projected a short, round stick tipped with an iron ferrule. At the front and back were straps by which it might be fastened to a man's foot. Only a brief examination of it was needed to see how once so fastened the prints the wearer would leave behind him would certainly resemble those of a one-legged man.

Smithers was the first to break the silence.

„Mr. Fellows,” he said, „I must congratulate you. You have laid by the heels a man whom the best detectives in England couldn't catch. But I beg of you, sir, tell us how you did it.”

Fellows sank into a chair.

„All right,” he said, „it must be sometime and I suppose it might as well be now.”

He drew a square, leather-bound book from his pocket.

„But first,” he went on, „I want you to listen to a few extracts from Wonderly's diary. They will throw some light on the man's motives for his dastardly crimes.”

Then in a low voice he read us the following:

Calcutta, November 16—Civilization again! After five years of freedom to be cooped up in this place of narrow streets and silly houses! But if it is my destiny to carry on the war among men of my own race, I must not begin by complaining.

I see none but strange faces on the streets and in the clubs. Thanks to the gods, the men who knew me have gone their ways. The fools! They

despised me because my eyes sought the Light. And when, having found it, I followed it, they said that I had gone fantee.

How I could laugh at them now. The pretentious asses with their weak, anaemic gods, thinking they know the secrets of life. I who have stood before the altar of Siva and watched the spilling of the blood; I who have harkened to the angry voice of Kali, would bid them halt and reconsider their conceit lest the vengeance that is Asia's descend upon them.

* * * * *

London—The message came today, and it is to kill—kill—Kill!

* * * * *

My birthday, and I have begun the great work. John Elder is dead. Even now the police are searching for the one-legged man who killed him. One-legged! I wonder if the fools will ever see through my little scheme for sending them hunting the wild goose.

* * * * *

The good work continues. Bascom and Belding are gone the way of Elder. So may all men go who lift their hands against the holy gods!

Fellows closed the book and threw it aside.

„A mad man!” I whispered.

„A religious fanatic of the worst type,” Fellows answered. „I think I can piece his story together. He became enamored with native life and probably fell into the hands of the priests. Or perhaps a woman led him to the native shrines. And their damnable religion got into his blood and drove him mad.”

Smithers scratched his head.

„But what made him kill?”

„Because his victims were the enemies of his religion. All four of them knew the evil practices of his cult; knew how his priests were holding back the people of India. With their best efforts and their money, here in England, they were fighting the battles of their dark-skinned brothers thousands of miles away.”

„Now will you tell us how you found this fellow out?”

The question came from Inspector Grant. Fellows nodded and began.

„There was one thing that bothered me from the time Wonderly entered the room upstairs. And that was his explanation for not hearing Parkington's cry and the ensuing commotion which I and the rest of us must have made.

„You remember he said that he was totally deaf in the right ear. That would have been all right had I not happened to remember that I sat on his right side at dinner tonight and once spoke to him in a voice barely above a whisper in his right ear. And he heard perfectly.

„My first idea was that the man was a coward and had stayed in his room because he had been afraid to come out and see what all the noise was about. I held to that opinion until we had come downstairs and I left you to wander about the garden.

„When I went outside, my first impulse was to take a lantern and examine the famous foot-prints. I did so and traced them as you did down to the stone road. Then I came back to the house and began to wander aimlessly about the other side of it.

„I ended up a few yards away from Wonderly's window. Happening to glance downward, I saw something that sent the blood racing through my veins. There on the ground before me in a soft spot on the gravel were another set of foot-

prints. And these were of a man with two legs wearing shoes that seemed to correspond to the single shoe worn by the man .with one leg.

„I raced around to the other side of the house and verified my suspicion. Then I went back to my find.

„I took the direction the prints pointed out and followed it slowly, my lantern close to the ground. A ways farther on I found another set of prints and so on every little while I found them until I had made a wide detour and was out on the stone road where the murderer's prints began, and ended.

„At first I did not realize the significance of what I had discovered. Then it suddenly came to me that a man could easily leave the foot-prints of a one-legged man if in walking he used a stilt or some such device. Also I recalled that the new prints had begun at Wonderley's window. Then I knew why he hadn't joined us in Parkington's room sooner. It was because he was probably in hiding somewhere at the other side of the house waiting for a chance to slip back into his room after having murdered my friend and left those bewildering prints.

„I came back to the house, crept upstairs and went through his things. You know what I found and what happened after that.”

