

Household Words 1853: Fisher's Ghost

IN the colony of New South Wales, at a place called Penrith, distant from Sydney about thirty-seven miles, lived a farmer named Fisher. He had been, originally, transported, but had become free by servitude. Unceasing toil, and great steadiness of character, had acquired for him a considerable property, for a person in his station of life. His lands and stock were not worth less than four thousand pounds. He was unmarried, and was about forty-five years old.

Suddenly Fisher disappeared; and one of his neighbours a man named Smith gave out that he had gone to England, but would return in two or three years. Smith produced a document, purporting to be executed by Fisher; and, according to this document, Fisher had appointed Smith to act as his agent during his absence. Fisher was a man of very singular habits and eccentric character, and his silence about his departure, instead of creating surprise, was declared to be "exactly like him."

About six months after Fisher's disappearance, an old man called Ben Weir, who had a small farm near Penrith, and who always drove his own cart to market, was returning from Sydney, one night, when he beheld, seated on a rail which bounded the road Fisher. The night was very dark, and the distance of the fence from the middle of the road was, at least, twelve yards. Weir, nevertheless, saw Fisher's figure seated on the rail. He pulled his old mare up, and called out, "Fisher, is that you?" No answer was returned; but there, still on the rail, sat the form of the man with whom he had been on the most intimate terms. Weir who was not drunk, though he had taken several glasses of strong liquor on the road jumped off his cart, and approached the rail. To his surprise, the form vanished.

"Well," exclaimed old Weir, "this is very curious, anyhow;" and, breaking several branches of a sapling so as to mark the exact spot, he remounted his cart, put his old mare into a jog-trot, and soon reached his home.

Ben was not likely to keep this vision a secret from his old woman. All that he had seen he faithfully related to her.

"Hold your nonsense, Ben!" was old Betty's reply. "You know you have been a drinking and disturbing of your imagination. Ain't Fisher agone to England? And if he had a come back, do you think we shouldn't a heard on it?"

"Ay, Betty!" said old Ben, "but he'd a cruel gash in his forehead, and the blood was all fresh like. Faith, it makes me shudder to think on't. It were his ghost."

"How can you talk so foolish, Ben?" said the old woman. "You must be drunk surely to get on about ghostes." "

"I tell thee I am not drunk," rejoined old Ben, angrily. "There's been foul play, Betty; I'm sure on't. There sat Fisher on the rail not more than a matter of two mile from this. Egad, it were on his own fence that he sat. There he was, in his shirt-sleeves, with his arms a folded; just as he used to sit when he was a waiting for anybody coming up the road. Bless you, Betty, I seed 'im till I was as close as I am to thee; when, all on a sudden, he vanished, like smoke."

"Nonsense, Ben: don't talk of it," said old Betty, "or the neighbours will only laugh at you. Come to bed, and you'll forget all about it before to-morrow morning."

Old Ben went to bed; but he did not next morning forget all about what he had seen on the previous night: on the contrary, he was more positive than before. However, at the earnest, and often repeated request of the old woman, he promised not to mention having seen Fisher's ghost, for fear that it might expose him to ridicule.

On the following Thursday night, when old Ben was returning from market again in his cart he saw, seated upon the same rail, the identical apparition. He had purposely abstained from drinking that day, and was in the full possession of all his senses. On this occasion old Ben was too much alarmed to stop. He urged the old mare on, and got home as speedily as possible. As soon as he had unharnessed and fed the mare, and taken his purchases out of the cart, he entered his cottage, lighted his pipe, sat over the fire with his better half, and gave her an account of how he had disposed of his produce, and what he had brought back from Sydney in return. After this he said to her, "Well, Betty, I'm not drunk tonight, anyhow, am I?"

"No," said Betty. "You are quite sober, sensible like, tonight, Ben; and therefore you have come home without any ghost in your head. Ghosts! Don't believe there is such things."

"Well, you are satisfied I am not drunk; but perfectly sober," said the old man.

"Yes, Ben," said Betty.

"Well, then," said Ben, "I tell thee what, Betty. I saw Fisher tonight again!"

"Stuff!" cried old Betty.

"You may say stuff" said the old farmer; but I tell you what I saw him as plainly as I did last Thursday night. Smith is a bad 'un. Do you think Fisher would ever have left this country without coming to bid you and me good bye!"

"It's all fancy!" said old Betty. "Now drink your grog and smoke your pipe, and think no more about the ghost. I wont hear on't."

"I'm as fond of my grog and my pipe as most men," said old Ben; "but I'm not going to drink anything tonight. It may be all fancy, as you call it, but I am now going to tell Mr. Grafton all I saw, and what I think;" and with these words he got up, and left the house.

Mr. Grafton was a gentleman who lived about a mile from old Weir's farm. He had been formerly a lieutenant in the navy, but was now on half pay, and was a settler in the new colony; he was, magistrate, in the commission of the peace.

When old Ben arrived at Mr. Grafton's house, Mr. Grafton was about to retire to bed; but he requested old Ben might be shown in. He desired the farmer to take a seat by the fire, and then inquired what was the latest news in Sydney.

"The news in Sydney, sir, is very small," said old Ben; "wheat is falling, but maize still keeps its price seven and sixpence a bushel: but I want to tell you, sir, something that will astonish you."

"What is it, Ben?" asked Mr. Grafton.

"Why, sir," resumed old Ben, "you know I am not a weak-minded man, nor a fool, exactly; for I was born and bred in Yorkshire."

"No, Ben, I don't believe you to be weak-minded, nor do I think you a fool," said Mr. Grafton; "but what can you have to say that you come at this late hour, and that you require such a preface!"

"That I have seen the ghost of Fisher, sir," said the old man; and he detailed the particulars of which the reader is already in possession.

Mr. Grafton was at first disposed to think with old Betty, that Ben had seen Fisher's Ghost through an extra glass or two of rum on the first night; and that on the second night, when perfectly sober, he was unable to divest himself of the idea previously entertained. But after a little consideration the words "How very singular!" involuntarily escaped him.

"Go home, Ben," said Mr. Grafton, "and let me see you tomorrow at sunrise. We will go together to the place where you say you saw the ghost."

Mr. Grafton used to encourage the aboriginal natives of New South Wales (that race which has been very aptly described 'the last link in the human chain') to remain about his premises. At the head of a little tribe then encamped on Mr. Grafton's estate, was a sharp young man named Johnny Crook. The peculiar faculty of the aboriginal natives of New South Wales, of tracking the human foot not only over grass but over the hardest rock; and of tracking the whereabouts of runaways by signs imperceptible to civilized eyes, is well known; and this man, Johnny Crook, was famous for his skill in this particular art of tracking. He had recently been instrumental in the apprehension of several desperate bushrangers whom he had tracked over twenty-seven miles of rocky country and fields, which they had crossed bare-footed, in the hope of checking the black fellow in the progress of his keen pursuit with the horse police.

"When old Ben Weir made his appearance in the morning at Mr. Grafton's house, the black chief, Johnny Crook, was summoned to attend. He came and brought with him several of his subjects. The party set out, old Weir showing the way. The leaves on the branches of the saplings which he had broken on the first night of seeing the ghost were withered, and sufficiently pointed out the exact rail on which the phantom was represented to have sat. There were stains upon the rail. Johnny Crook, who had then no idea of what he was required for, pronounced these stains to be "White man's blood;" and, after searching about for some time, he pointed to a spot whereon he said a human body had been laid.

In New South Wales long droughts are not very uncommon; and not a single shower of rain had fallen for seven months previously, not sufficient even to lay the dust upon the roads.

In consequence of the time that had elapsed, Crook had no small difficulty to contend with; but in about two hours he succeeded in tracking the footsteps of one man to the unfrequented side of a pond at some distance. He gave it as his opinion that another man had been dragged thither. The savage walked round and round the pond, eagerly examining its borders and the sedges and weeds springing up around it. At first he seemed baffled. No clue had been washed ashore to show that anything unusual had been sunk in the pond; but, having finished this examination, he laid himself down on his face and looked keenly along the surface of the smooth and stagnant water. Presently he jumped up, uttered a cry peculiar to the natives when gratified by finding some long-sought object, clapped his hands, and, pointing to the middle of the pond to where the decomposition of some sunken substance had produced a slimy coating streaked with prismatic colours, he exclaimed, "White man's fat!" The pond was immediately searched; and, below the spot indicated, the remains of a body were discovered. A large stone and a rotted silk handkerchief were found near the body; these had been used to sink it.

That it was the body of Fisher there could be no question. It might have been identified by the teeth; but on the waistcoat there were some large brass buttons which were immediately recognised, both by Mr. Grafton and by old Ben Weir, as Fisher's property. He had worn those buttons on his waistcoat for several years.

Leaving the body by the side of the pond, and old Ben and the blacks to guard it, Mr. Grafton cantered up to Fisher's house. Smith was not only in possession of all the missing man's property, but had removed to Fisher's house. It was about a mile and a half distant. They inquired for Mr. Smith. Mr. Smith, who was at breakfast, came out, and invited Mr. Grafton to alight; Mr. Grafton accepted the invitation, and after a few desultory observations said, "Mr. Smith, I am anxious to purchase a piece of land on the other side of the road, belonging to this estate, and I would give a fair price for it. Have you the power to sell? "

"Oh yes, sir," replied Smith. "The power which I hold from Fisher is a general power;" and he forthwith produced a document purporting to be signed by Fisher, but which was not witnessed.

"If you are not very busy, I should like to show you the piece of land I allude to," said Mr. Grafton.

"Oh certainly, sir. I am quite at your service," said Smith; and he then ordered his horse to be saddled.

It was necessary to pass the pond where the remains of Fisher's body were then exposed. When they came near to the spot, Mr. Grafton, looking Smith full in the face, said, "Mr. Smith, I wish to show you something. Look here!" He pointed to the decomposed body, and narrowly watching Mr. Smith's countenance, remarked: "These are the remains of Fisher. How do you account for their being found in this pond?"

Smith, with the greatest coolness, got off his horse, minutely examined the remains, and then admitted that there was no doubt they were Fisher's. He confessed himself at a loss to account for their discovery, unless it could be (he said) that somebody had waylaid him on the road when he left his home for Sydney; had murdered him for the gold and bank-notes which he had about his person, and had then thrown him into the pond. "My hands, thank Heaven!" he concluded, "are clean. If my old friend could come to life again, he would tell you that I had no hand in his horrible murder."

Mr. Grafton knew not what to think. He was not a believer in ghosts. Could it be possible, he began to ask himself, that old Weir had committed this crime, and finding it weigh heavily on his conscience, and fearing that he might be detected had trumped up the story about the ghost, had pretended that he was led to the spot by supernatural

agency and thus by bringing the murder voluntarily to light, hoped to stifle all suspicion. But then he considered Weir's excellent character, his kind disposition, and good nature. These at once put to flight his suspicion of Weir; but still he was by no means satisfied of Smith's guilt, much as appearances were against him.

Fisher's servants were examined, and stated that their master had often talked of going to England on a visit to his friends, and of leaving Mr. Smith to manage his farm; and that though they were surprised when Mr. Smith came, and said he had "gone at last," they did not think it at all unlikely that he had done so. An inquest was held, and a verdict of wilful murder found against Thomas Smith. He was thereupon transmitted to Sydney for trial, at the ensuing sessions, in the supreme court. The case naturally excited great interest in the colony; and public opinion respecting Smith's guilt was evenly balanced.

The day of trial came; and the court was crowded almost to suffocation. The Attorney-General very truly remarked that there were circumstances connected with the case which were without any precedent in the annals of jurisprudence. The only witnesses were old Weir and Mr. Grafton. Smith, who defended himself with great composure and ability, cross-examined them at considerable length, and with consummate skill. The prosecution having closed, Smith addressed the jury, (which consisted of military officers) in his defence. He admitted that the circumstances were strong against him; but he most ingeniously proceeded to explain them. The power of attorney, which he produced, he contended had been regularly granted by Fisher, and he called several witnesses, who swore that they believed the signature to be that of the deceased. He, further, produced a will, which had been drawn up by Fisher's attorney, and by that will Fisher had appointed Smith his sole executor, in the event of his death. He declined, he said, to throw any suspicion on Weir; but he would appeal to the common sense of the jury whether the ghost story was entitled to any credit; and, if it were not, to ask themselves why it had been invented. He alluded to the fact which in cross-examination Mr. Grafton swore to that when the remains were first shown to him, he did not conduct himself as a guilty man would have been likely to do, although he was horror-stricken on beholding the hideous spectacle. He concluded by invoking the Almighty to bear witness that he was innocent of the diabolical crime for which he had been arraigned. The judge (the late Sir Francis Forbes) recapitulated the evidence. It was no easy matter to deal with that part of it which had reference to the apparition: and if the charge of the judge had any leaning one way or the other, it was decidedly in favour of an acquittal. The jury retired; but, after deliberating for seven hours, they returned to the court, with a verdict of Guilty.

The judge then sentenced the prisoner to be hanged on the following Monday. It was on a Thursday night that he was convicted. On the Sunday, Smith expressed a wish to see a clergyman. His wish was instantly attended to, when he confessed that he, and he alone,

committed the murder; and that it was upon the very rail where Weir swore that he had seen Fisher's ghost sitting, that he had knocked out Fisher's brains with a tomahawk. The power of attorney he likewise confessed was a forgery, but declared that the will was genuine.

This is very extraordinary, but is, nevertheless, true in substance, if not in every particular. Most persons who have visited Sydney for any length of time will no doubt have had it narrated to them.