


Appendix 2: Representations and Afterlives

2.1 Red Barn Ballads

‘A Copy of Verses, on the Execution of Wm. Corder, for the Murder of Maria Marten, in the Red Barn, Polstead’



Hark! 'tis the dreary midnight bell,
That breaks the gloom profound,
It seems to toll my Funeral knell,
Ah! horrid is the sound,
But one short hour and I must stand,
Exposed to shame and scorn,
Oh sad and luckless was the day,
That Corder he was born.
Of all the crimes recorded,
In History from the first,
The horrid crime of murder,
It is the very worst,
To murder poor Maria,
Whose life to her was dear
It would fill the eyes of sympathy,
With many a flowing tear.
Twas in a place called the Red Barn,
Her body it was found,
And soon the tidings of the same,
Were spread the country round,
Then Corder apprehended was,
And unto prison sent,

Until the Assizes he did lie,
 His crime for to lament.
 And when his trial did come on,
 He at the bar was placed;
 They brought her heart, her skull, and ribs,
 And showed before his face;
 He still the murder did deny
 And did not seem to fear,
 While hundreds at the shocking sight
 Let fall a flowing tear.
 For near upon two days
 His trial it did last,
 But with all his perseverance,
 He was guilty found at last,
 The Judge while passing sentence,
 Made him this reply –
 “You’re found guilty William Corder,
 So prepare yourself to die!”
 On the eleventh day of August,
 William Corder he did die,
 For the murder of Maria Martin,
 Upon the gallows high
 So all young men take warning,
 By his untimely end,
 For blood for blood will be required,
 By the laws of God and man.
 May the Lord have mercy on his soul,
 Have mercy Lord, we pray,
 When he appears before thy throne,
 Upon the Judgement day,
 May he be numbered with thy flock,
 And happy may he be,
 And praise thee for redeeming love,
 To all eternity.

Source: Bodleian Library, Johnson Ballads 2416.

‘The Suffolk Tragedy or the Red Barn Murder’

Young lovers all I pray draw near and listen unto me,
 While unto you I do relate a dreadful tragedy;
 for cold-blooded cruelty the like was never heard,
 is as true as e’er was told or put upon record.

In the county of Suffolk 'twas in Polstead town,
 Maria Marten lived there, by many she was known,
 her beauty caused many young men to cour[t] her as we find
 At length upon a farmer's son, this damsel fix'd her mind.

As the[y] walked out one evening clear she said unto him did say
 Wm my dear my time draws near let's fix our wedding day
 You know I am with child by you then bitterly she cried
 Dry up your tears my dear said he you soon shall my bride

In eighteen hundred and twenty-seven nineteenth day of May,
 Maria was dressed in men's clothes he[r] mother then did say
 My daughter why disguise yourself I pray tell unto me
 Where are you going for I fear some harm will come to thee,

Mother I am going to the Red Barn to meet my Wm dear
 His friends won't know me on the road & when I get there
 I'll put on my weddings robes and then we shall haste away
 To Ipswich town, to-morrow is fix'd our wedding day

She straight way went to the barn and never more was seen
 Until eleven months were past the mother dreamed a dream
 That the daughter was murdered by the man she loved so dear,
 In the barn beneath the floor her body was buried there

Three times she dreamed the same dream then to the father said,
 I beg you will rise instantly and with you take the spade
 Our neighbour with his pickaxe will bear you company
 To the far corner of the Red barn where our daughter does lie,

The[y] went to the barn the corner they were told
 The same the mother dream'd they raised the mould,
 When they had dug 18 inches deep the body they found,
 Tied in a sack and mangled with many ghastly wounds.

Her shawl, her bonnet and pelisse in the grave were found
 That eleven months had been buried under ground,
 Soon as they were discovered they were identified,
 To be Maria Marten's when she left to be a bride.

A warrant soon was issued against the farmer's son,
 Who had married a lady near the city of London,

He soon was apprehended and placed in dreary cell,
For murdering the young girl that loved him so well.

And when the trial did come on he at the bar did stand
Like a guilty criminal waiting the Judge's command
The Judge then passing sentence made him this reply
You're guilty of the murder so prepare yourself to die,

You must prepare yourself to die on Monday on the tree
When hung the usual time thereon dissected you must be,
And when you bid this world farewell prepared may you be,
To dwell with Christ our Saviour that died upon a tree.

Source: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Johnson Ballads 2889.

'William Corder'

Good people I pray draw near
A shocking story you shall hear
Committed on a female dear
By my own hand I do declare

Its William Corder is my name,
I've brought my friends to grief & shame
Unlawful passions caus'd my fall
And now my life must pay for all.

I courted her both night and day
At length she prov'd with child by me,
Not many weeks she had to go
Which made me work her overthrow

'Twas on the eighteenth day of May
that I did entice her away,
Under pretence of marriage vows
she left her home dress'd in men's clothes

She reach'd the barn, oh sadness[s] nigh
but did not think she there must die,
Instead of bridal joys so bright
I closed her eyes on death's dark night.

I dug a hole both large and deep
and laid her there in silent sleep,

To ramble then I thought was best
but night nor day I would get no rest

Her image always in my view
Most sadly it caus'd me to rue
And curse they day I did the deed
alas, it makes my heart to bleed.

And soon to prison I was taken
upon suspicion of the same.
Tried and sentenced for to die
for my un-natural cruelty.

Young people all a warning take
By my sad and unhappy fate,
Govern your Passions and beware
else, soon they'll draw you in a snare.

This man, I'm sorry here to tell,
to his base love a victim fell,
Murder most cruel, and most foul,
May God have Mercy on his Soul!

Source: Oxford, Bodleian Library, 2806 c.17(471)
[G. Thompson, printed at Liverpool].

‘The Red Barn Tragedy’

Come all you young lovers, I pray you attend,
Unto these few verses that I have here penn'd,
Of a horrid murder you quickly shall hear,
Which happened at Polstead in fair Norfolkshire.
A charming young lassie in that town did dwell,
For wit and for beauty none could her excell;
One Corder a young farmers son lived near,
And how he betrayed her you quickly shall hear.
Maria Marten was the fair ones name,
But Corder a courting unto her he came,
He vow'd that no other but her he did love,
She thought him sincere, till with child she did prove.
As soon as her sweet lovely infant was born,
He could not look at her unless 'twas with scorn;
Five months in her father's with shame she did hide,

He never came near her till her baby died.
 On the eighteenth of May to her father's house he came,
 And said dear Maria I own I'm to blame,
 I now do acknowledge I have wronged thee,
 Do come on to Ipswich and married we'll be.
 It's in men's apparel you'll have for to go,
 I don't wish my mother of it for to know;
 Off to Red Barn your clothes I will bear,
 You may change your dress love as soon as you get there,
 In her brothers clothes she dressed with great speed,
 And off to the Red Barn they then did proceed,
 As soon as they entered the Barn we're told,
 Of his dear Maria he quickly laid hold.
 When this he had done he did fasten the door,
 As mild as an angel she stood on the floor,
 He drew out a pistol well loaded with ball,
 And shot his own true love so down she did fall.
 He buried her there, and for London did steer,
 Where he remained for near half a year,
 And there he got married unto a young maid,
 A beautiful lass and dressmaker to trade.
 During the time that she there did remain,
 Maria's step-mother she dreamed a dream,
 That her lovely daughter Maria was dead,
 And in the Red Barn her body was laid.
 The Barn was searched and the body was found,
 Where it had remained eleven months under ground,
 The news of the murder soon spread far and near,
 But what followed after you quickly shall hear.
 So Corder was taken for this horrid crime,
 And in Bury Gaol he did lie for some time,
 And in Bury city its there he was tried,
 Before judge and jury the same he denied.
 But he was found guilty and sent back to gaol,
 Where to the Governor his mind did reveal,
 He said I did love her once and sincere,
 I vow I did kill her whom I did love dear.
 Now at the age of twenty-four you see,
 From friends and acquaintances I cut off must be,
 A dissolute life I have led on this earth,
 The vilest of mortals that ever drew breath.
 Both married and single take warning in time,

And keep your hands clear of that barbarous crime,
 So never prove false to the girl that you love,
 As you'll be rewarded by the just one above.

Source: Oxford, Bodleian Library, 2806 c.13(96)
 [J. Lindsay, printed at Glasgow].

‘The Murder of Maria Marten, by W. Corder’

Come all you thoughtless young men, a warning take by me,
 And think upon my unhappy fate to be hanged upon a tree;
 My name is William Corder, to you I do declare,
 I courted Maria Marten, most beautiful and fair.

I promised I would marry her upon a certain day,
 Instead of that, I was resolved to take her life away,
 I went into her father's house the 18th day of May,
 Saying, my dear Maria, we will fix the wedding day.

If you will meet me at the Red-barn, as sure as I have life,
 I will take you to Ipswich town, and there make you my wife;
 I then went home and fetched my gun, my pickaxe and my spade,
 I went into the Red-barn, and there I dug her grave.

With heart so light, she thought no harm, to meet him she did go
 He murdered her all in the barn, and laid her body low;
 After the horrible deed was done, she lay weltering in her gore,
 Her bleeding mangled body he buried beneath the Red-barn floor.

Now all things being silent, her spirit could not rest,
 She appeared unto her mother, who suckled her at her breast;
 For many a long month or more, her mind being sore oppress'd,
 Neither night or day she could not take any rest.

Her mother's mind being so disturbed, she dreamt three nights o'er,
 Her daughter she lay murdered beneath the Red-barn floor;
 She sent the father to the barn, when he the ground did thrust,
 And there he found his daughter mingling with the dust.

My trial is hard, I could not stand, most woeful was the sight,
 When her jaw-bone was brought to prove, which pierced my heart quite;
 Her aged father standing by, likewise his loving wife,
 And in her grief her hair she tore, she scarcely could keep life.

Adieu, adieu, my loving friends, my glass is almost run,
 On Monday next will be my last, when I am to be hang'd;
 So you, young men, who do pass by, with pity look on me,
 For murdering Maria Marten, I was hang'd upon the tree.

Source: J. Catnach, printed at London (1828).

2.2 ‘The *Red Barn*, or the Mysterious Murder’ [West Digges, Royal Pavilion, Mile-End Road, 1828]

Act I. – Scene 1st

[*After promising an immediate Marriage, MARIA withdraws, and leaves CORDER to his soliloquy.*]

CORDER. – How well this pent up soul assumes the garb of smiling love to give my fiend-like thoughts the prospect of success! – the deed were bloody, sure, but I will do’t, and rid me of this hated plague: – her very shadow moves a scorpion in my sight! I loathe the banquet I have fed upon! – by heaven –

[*Enter Dame MARTEN and MARIA.*]

– Hah! what has detained thee, love? – Mother, I wished to speak to thee.

* * *

ACT I. – Scene 2nd. (*Village Landscape.*)

[*Enter CORDER.*]

CORDER. – Am I turned coward, or what is’t makes me tremble thus? Have I not heart sufficient for the deed, or do I falter with remorse of conscience? No, by heaven and hell, ‘tis false, – a moment, and I launch her soul into Eternity’s wide gulf, – the fiends of hell work strong within me, – ‘tis done! – I’ll drown my fears and slake my thirst for vengeance in her blood! – Who’s there? – hah! ‘tis no one, – and yet methought I heard a footstep; – How foolish are those startling fears! Come, shroud me, demons! hide, hide my thoughts within your black abyss! – The Red Barn is the spot I’ve fixed on to complete my purpose, – everything is ready to inhume the body – that disposed of, I defy detection; – now for the cottage –

* * *

Scene 4. – *Exterior of the Barn* – CORDER watching for the approach of MARIA.

CORDER. – How dreadful the suspense each morning brings! – would it were over. – There's not a soul abroad, everything favours my design. – This knocking at my head doth augur fear, but 'tis a faint and foolish fear that must not be – suspicion's self will sleep, aye sleep for ever. Yes – wild conjecture! The burning fever playing round my temples gives to this livid cheek a deeper hue, screening from human sight the various workings of my soul within – hark! – by heaven she comes. Now, all ye fiends of hell! spur me to the deed – give me to feel nor pity, nor remorse! Let me but shew some cause of quarrel for the act, and smooth with a cunning guile my fell resolve, that it may seem less bloody in the execution, – hold, hold, she's here –

[Enter MARIA.]

– I fear, Maria, the Magistrates are on the watch – were you *observed* upon the way, – *sure, quite* sure you passed unnoticed?

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ACT II. – Scene 1st.

Exterior of the Red Barn. – After committing the Murder, enter CORDER with a pickaxe (hurried and agitated.)

CORDER. – Why do I start at every sound I hear, and fancy into life what the disturbed and tortured mind proclaims is but the vision of my dream? – Methought, oh horrid, dread reality! – methought all pale and bleeding I beheld my victim's form, her little infant clinging to the spot from whence her mother's life-blood gushed, seeming to imbibe reanimation, while weltering in the gory wound. Oh! awful agony of thought! – but calm thee, calm thee, my soul – Lie still, foul conscience! give me, give me but the veil of innocence to hide my guilt. I must dispose of the body, – consign it deep within the barn – 'twere easy done, all then will be at rest; no clue remain to risk discovery. Now, now then for the Barn – Oh, my God! I dread to approach it! [Exit.]

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ACT II. – Scene 2d.

Interior of MARTEN'S Cottage. DAME discovered apparently fatigued.

DAME. – Bless me, how fatigued I feel – the hard exertions of the day are o'er, and I would fain restore my spirits by an hour's repose. The

sultry heat of noon is past, and a calm eve of languor creeps throughout the frame; my child, my Maria, is happy before this time, and her poor mother lies down in peace, content and satisfied.

[She sinks into a chair – as DAME sleeps, the scenes are drawn gradually off, and through a gauze curtain is seen the interior of the Red Barn, and CORDER with a pickaxe burying the body. – During the scene, DAME’S sleep becomes disturbed, and at last she arises from her chair in great agitation, and rushes to the front of the stage, when the flats are drawn on, and the scene closes gradually.]

DAME. – Help! help! my child! I saw her, sure, lifeless, smeared with blood! – ‘twas in the Red Barn! – and there stood Corder, with a pickaxe digging out her grave. But no, no, no, ‘twas all a dream! I have been sleeping. – thank God, thank God! it is so, – but oh! how frightful; ‘t has harrowed up my soul with fear.

[Enter THOMAS MARTEN, ANNE and GEORGE hastily; DAME screams on seeing them.]

MARTEN – What’s the matter, wife? how came you to scream so? has anything alarmed you?

ANNE.– Speak, dear mother, why do you look so pale?

DAME.– I saw her in the Red Barn, gashed with wounds!

MARTEN.– Saw whom? oh ‘tis folly! you have been dreaming – whom did you see?

DAME.– Maria, my child Maria! there has been a murder – But what, what am I saying! my senses surely wander; my mind is sore disturbed.

ANNE.– Dear mother, compose yourself, sit down.

MARTEN.– Let me know, Dame, tell us what occurred; dreams are sure prognostics of some great event; but once I did not believe so.

DAME.– I will – Bless me, I am all of a tremor; you must know that I sat myself down in this very chair, overpowered with fatigue, and fell asleep – To be sure ‘twas nothing but a foolish dream; still methought I saw within the Red Barn, our child, Maria, covered with blood, murdered and stretched on the ground; beside her, with a pickaxe, stood William Corder! but, oh dear me, ‘twas but a dream!

MARTEN.– Go on, Dame, for heaven’s sake proceed!

DAME.– Well, well, I will – He then, I thought, seized my dear child by the silken handkerchief she wore around her neck, and dragged her body close to the spot he had been digging, and was in the act of consigning it

within the horrid grave he just made, when in my phrenzy or my horror I awoke.

MARTEN.– How strange! and yet – but no, no – come wife, banish those timid fancies, we must not for a foolish dream give way so. Anne, assist and lead your mother to the air. Maria, our dear child, will be here to-morrow, and then –

DAME.– Never! she never will return; but what, what am I saying? my brain is distracted –

MARTEN.– Gently, dame, gently, – come with me.

DAME.– Thomas, promise me you'll go to the Barn and inquire at what time they set off; t' will ease this wretched heart.

MARTEN.– Well, well, I'll do it to please you, but rest assured that they are by this time on the road to London. I know the heart of Corder well, – he is a rough, but honest fellow.

[Enter GEORGE.]

GEORGE.– Do you know, father, I saw William Corder just now going across the field which leads to Phœbe Stowe's cottage with a pickaxe across his shoulder. (*Dame screams and faints*). I thought, father, that he was gone to London with sister, but I'm sure it was him.

MARTEN.– You are mistaken, child, it could not be.

GEORGE.– Indeed I am not, father, for he had his velveteen jacket on, and look'd round several times, so I got a full view of him, but he could not see me.

MARTEN.– How strange is all this! – my boy's account strengthens his mother's dream, so that I do startle, shake, tremble like an aspen leaf to know the truth – Great God! should aught have happened to my child, if – but hold, hold, – come, wife, come children, help thy mother. I'll this instant to the Barn. [Exit.]

ACT II. – Scene 3d.

[Interior of CORDER'S House at Brentford.]

CORDER.– Last night my rest was sore disturbed by a distressful, horrid dream, the thoughts of which I cannot banish from my remembrance – Methought I saw Maria Marten's form arrayed in white, close to her father's cottage: twice she seemed to pause, and cast her eyes towards the Red Barn. – I saw no more, – dreams oft denote some hidden truth, and I am given to credit them. – Were it not that all is so secure, and

rank suspicion lull'd into a dead repose, by heaven, this soul might take th' alarm! – but no, she sleeps for ever, and dreams are but the fleeting visions of a troubled mind, – no more! (*Knock outside.*) Who's there?

[Enter SERVANT.]

SERVANT.– A stranger, Sir, is coming up the garden, who has been inquiring for you.

CORDER (*uneasy.*) – A stranger inquiring for me! who! where! ha! (*looking out of the window*) – I'll retire – say I'm not at home, now know you when I will – (*as he is going, enter LEA the officer, who stops him.*)

The following is a very affecting scene.

[MARTEN, *after discovering the body of his murdered Daughter, thus addresses his Wife, who attempts to comfort him.*]

MARTEN.– I'll hear no more, dame, leave me to myself – 'tis over, past, and I'm a broken-hearted man.

DAME MARTEN.– But, Thomas, where's that fortitude you boast so much of?

MARTEN.– Fortitude! – who, – where, – shew me the father who can behold his murdered child, and not betray his feelings,– my poor Maria, – and has the old man lived to see it?

DAME to ANNE.– Try, Anne, – see if you can yield him any comfort, – for me to 'tempt it is in vain.

MARTEN (*in dreadful agony.*) – The child of all I loved the most, now torn for ever from my arms, – oh!

ANNE.– Hold, dear father, you have a daughter who yet will make you happy.

MARTEN.– Never – never. – I loved you all, but she,– she was the darling of my age, the prop of my existence, – the hope which blest me, – I – I thought the evening of my life should set in peace, and the English Cottager's fire-side be circled with his little family, happy and content; but a villain – a damned and treacherous villain has blasted all my hopes – robbed me of my child – my Maria, – my poor Maria – and savagely murdered her. – (*Becomes frantic.*)

DAME.– Oh! heaven support me. (*Sinks into a chair.*)

MARTEN.– Look to your mother, child (*kneels*). Great God, let thy just vengeance light upon the monster – deliver him into the hands of justice – shew no mercy for the bloody deed. – Let not those glorious

laws, the brightest pearls which gem our Monarch's throne, and dear to every Briton's heart, be thus outraged, and the great tie which links us to society be thus basely violated.

ANNE.– Father – dear father,–

MARTEN.– I took him to my arms, foster's him, call'd him my son – and, as he led my poor Maria from this humble roof, I cried “Heaven bless thee!” – Yes, I gave the murderer of my child my blessing, a poor old father's blessing – Oh! God of Nature, shield me, or I shall sure go mad.

ANNE.– Your poor Anne will comfort you, and do all she can to make you happy.

MARTEN.– I know it, my child, I know it, but then my poor Maria – hah! – I see her now before me, mangled and bleeding, pointing to her gory wounds. Oh! what a sight for an old heart-broken father – she beckons me, – my child, my dear Maria, thy father's coming, he will revenge thee, child,– he will revenge thee. – (*Rushes out in a state of distraction.*)

LAST SCENE.– (CORDER'S Cell in Bury Jail.)

CORDER.– Life's fleeting dream is closing fast, and the great conflict 'gainst the which I warr'd with God and man is now upon the wane – all earthly hopes are fled – this bosom is a waste, a wilderness; a blank in the creation. *Sin*, fell, remorseless sin hath blighted all my hopes, and left me desolate – a very wretch, fit prey for the unletter'd hangman – A short, short hour, and Oh! the great account I have to render freezes up my soul, so that I grow sick, and long to taste oblivion's cup, though poisoned with my crime – I'll sleep, perhaps her potent spell may lull me to repose – (*He sleeps.*)

[*Enter Ghost of MARIA.*]

GHOST.– Canst thou, murderer, hope that sleep, soft, balmy sleep, can e'er be thine? Look on thy victim who adored thee, pale, cold, and lifeless, – see, see from whence her life's blood gush'd. –William, William, thy poor Maria pities, pities and forgives her murderer!

(*The Ghost vanishes – CORDER rushes from his pallet, and falls upon his knees.*)

CORDER.– I come – shield, mercy, pardon, pity, spare me, spare me, – (*Ghost again appears*) – Hence! avaunt! thou art not of this earth – Vision, hence I say, begone! I know thee not – ha! what! vanished, whither – but no,– she's there again – spectre shade, Maria, Mari, Mar, Ma, M, (*vanishes*) – gone – gone – no sound, all quiet! – where, where

am I? – oh, my God, 'tis but the dark, dark image of my soul doth haunt me, – 'twas, 'twas but a dream. – Guilt, guilt, I cannot hide thee. – there, (*throws down a paper*) there is my confession – I am, I am her murderer!

[*Executioner and Officers enter.*]

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Source: Curtis, pp. 437–44.

2.3 'William Corder's Skull'

The body of Maria Marten, stabbed, shot and possibly strangled, was found buried in the Red Barn at Polstead, Suffolk, in April, 1828. Four months later her lover and murderer, twenty-three-year-old William Corder, was publicly executed at Bury St. Edmunds Jail, watched by a crowd of more than 20,000.

Corder's body hung on the scaffold for an hour. It was then taken down and three surgeons made an incision along the chest, folding back the skin to display the chest muscles, after which the body was exhibited on a trestle in one of the courtrooms, sightseers filing past. Finally, as directed by the sentence of the times, the body was dissected and anatomised, for the benefit of medical students at the West Suffolk General Hospital.

This operation was performed by Mr George Creed, surgeon to the hospital, who also tanned the murderer's skin, part of which was used to bind an account of the crime, and pickled the scalp. When all this was done, the skeleton that remained was put on public view at the hospital, after which it came into use for teaching anatomy to the students.

Creed, on his death, bequeathed Corder's skin and scalp to his friend Dr John Kilner, a medical officer at the hospital and a well-known practitioner in Bury. In the late 1870s, by which time the skeleton had been in use at the hospital for some fifty years, Dr Kilner began to look at it with more than a professional eye. Corder's skull, he thought, would make an interesting addition to his collection – he could easily remove it and put a spare anatomical skull in its place. He resolved to make this change.

The doctor naturally did not want to be disturbed at his task and planned to switch the skulls late one night. Arrived at the room containing the skeleton he lighted three candles, but no sooner were they all

lit than one snuffed itself out. He turned to relight it, but as he did so, the flames of the other two candles died. This strange behaviour of the candles went on all the time he was busy removing the murderer's skull and wiring the spare one to the skeleton in its place; first one and then another candle would flicker and snuff out. But he managed to keep at least one candle alight while he was working.

It was an uncanny incident, and Dr Kilner said afterwards that from the first moment he removed Corder's skull he felt very uncomfortable about "something". However, he was a man entirely free of superstitions and scornful of "all this mumbo-jumbo nonsense about ghosts". To the close friend in whom he confided, he remarked that even if the skeleton had possessed some kind of supernatural quality, it must have had most of that nonsense knocked out of it during the half a century it had been handled by doctors and students at the hospital.

Dr Kilner now had Corder's skull polished, mounted and enclosed in a square ebony box, which he placed in a cabinet in the drawing-room of his home. A few days later, just after he had finished evening surgery, a maid came in to the doctor and said a gentleman had called to see him. Kilner, irritated by this unwarranted interruption of his leisure hours, asked if the caller was anyone she had seen before. No, said the maid. She added that the man was "proper old-fashioned looking, wearing a furry top hat and a blue overcoat with silver buttons".

Telling the maid to bring a lamp, Kilner reluctantly went to meet the caller, whom she had left waiting in the surgery in the twilight. The doctor said afterwards that when he looked into the room it was rather dark; there *might* have been someone waiting by the window, he was not sure. However, he experienced the strong feeling, independent of sight and hearing, that he was not alone in the room. Then the maid came behind him with the lamp, and when its light crossed the doorway it was to show a totally empty room.

The puzzled doctor chaffed the maid, saying she must have been dreaming. But she remained quite positive that a gentleman had called. Perhaps, she suggested, it was a patient with toothache who had made off when the pain stopped. She recalled that a man with toothache had changed his mind and rushed out like that only a few months back.

After a few days the doctor had nearly forgotten about the mysterious visitor. Then, one evening on looking out of the drawing-room window, he caught sight of somebody lurking near the summerhouse at the end of

the lawn. He could just see that the figure was that of a man in a beaver hat and a greatcoat of antique cut. The doctor quickly stepped out into the garden, but the figure vanished.

Kilner was now thoroughly uneasy, and, suffering the pangs of a guilty conscience for having disturbed the murderer's remains to gratify a personal whim, he became convinced that there was someone dogging his footsteps. The someone, whoever it was, seemed very anxious to communicate with him but its presence did not seem quite strong enough to accomplish this.

Tension now rose in the doctor's house as things began to happen at night. "It" opened doors, walked about through the house, and stood breathing heavily and muttering outside bedroom doors. Occasionally the members of the household heard a frantic hammering and sobbing below in the drawing-room. And all this time, through a maze of dreams, the doctor felt sure that someone was pleading and begging him to listen and attend to his needs.

The doctor had little sleep for some three weeks. There seemed no doubt that Corder's ghost, if such it was, would go on making things very unpleasant until the skull was returned. But this was an impossible thing to do: the skull, which now had a highly polished tortoise-shell gloss, would attract attention immediately it was restored, and it would be very difficult to explain away the sudden change in its appearance. So Kilner decided to wait a few more days, and if the ghostly visitor did not cease its wanderings, he would have to think of some other way of disposing of the skull.

The next night, Kilner left his bedroom door wide open, so that he would know immediately of any disturbance. He then got into bed and drifted off to sleep. An hour or two later he awoke suddenly, some noise having disturbed him.

He listened. The sound came from downstairs. He debated whether to call out and rouse the household, and decided against it. He did not want to appear an alarmist. So he stayed in bed for some minutes, watching and waiting. He then got cautiously out of bed, lighted a candle and walked out on the landing. Holding the candle over the stair-rail, he could just see, below, the glass handle of the drawing-room door, as it reflected the candlelight from its many facets. Suddenly, as he looked, the glass knob was blotted out. A white hand was on the knob, he could see it distinctly. But apparently the hand belonged to no one, for he could not see any figure near it.

As he watched, the handle was slowly and softly turned by the phantom hand; he could just hear the faint squeak of the bolt as it turned in the lock-case. The door was gradually and stealthily opening, there was no doubt of it.

Kilner was gazing in wonderment at this phenomenon when he was startled by a loud explosion, which sounded like the report of a blunderbuss. Filled with a sudden anger, and a great loathing for the skull he had so foolishly “acquired”, he dashed downstairs, pausing only to pick up the heavy plated candlestick as a weapon before rushing to the drawing-room. At the doorway he was met with a tremendous gust of wind which extinguished his candle. But was it wind? It seemed like a powerful, menacing form which enveloped rather than touched him.

He thrust forward into the darkness of the room, agitatedly striking a match. As the match flamed, his attention was caught by a litter of black splinters on the pale carpet. After his first puzzlement he quickly realized what had happened: the box which had held the skull was broken into fragments. His eyes went to the cabinet which had contained the box. The door was open, and there, exposed on a shelf, was the grinning skull.

Dr Kilner now lost no time in ridding himself of the ghostly trophy. Thinking, no doubt, that once the skull was out of his house its supernatural qualities would cease, he insisted that his close friend, Frederick Hopkins, a local builder, should accept it as a gift. Hopkins, a former prison official, was now the owner of Bury Jail, where Corder was executed. He had bought the property when it was vacated as a prison and moved his family into the governor’s residence, Gyves House, within the walls of the jail. Kilner told him, “As you are the owner of Corder’s condemned cell and the gallows on which he was hanged, perhaps it won’t hurt you to take care of his skull.”

But misfortune visited Hopkins from the start, even as he was on his way back to Gyves House with the skull, wrapped in a silk handkerchief. While coming down the steps of an hotel he twisted his foot and fell heavily, the skull rolling to the feet of a shocked member of the local gentry, Lady Gage, who sprang back with a cry of alarm.

The twisted foot kept Hopkins in bed for a week, but a further blow followed only the next day, When his best mare rolled over the side of a chalk pit and broke her back.

In the next few months Hopkins knew illness, sorrow and financial disaster. With Dr Kilner he had embarked on several very successful

land and property deals, but suddenly the tide turned and, overtaken by heavy losses, both men were swept to the verge of bankruptcy.

Hopkins, in desperation, resolved to break the skull's evil spell once and for all. He took it, one day, to a country churchyard near Bury St. Edmunds, and bribed a gravedigger to give the thing a Christian burial. He thanked heaven that he had cast the trouble some relic out of his house.

This was the uncanny story which young Robert Thurston Hopkins, one of five children, heard his father and Dr Kilner tell and retell many times afterwards in family circle, a story frankly and openly told, and verifiable to the smallest detail.

Source: H. Ludlam (1966)
The Mummy of Birchen Bower and other True Ghosts
(London: Foulsham), pp. 108–12.