

The Ghost That Revealed a Murder

By Jessie Adelaide Middleton

Laid up among the city archives of the ancient City of York is a singular ghost story. It tells of a horrible crime committed long ago, and how it was brought to light by a ghost and of how the murderer was brought to justice.

This is not the only case in which the story of a ghost has been received as evidence in a court of law. There is a very celebrated case of a trial in Scotland, and quite lately two witnesses at inquests have given evidence of the kind in England.

In the year 1690 William Barwick, who lived at Canwood, a few miles from York, took his wife out on Palm Monday for a walk. When they came to a pond within sight of Canwood Castle, he threw her into the water and drowned her. She was near her confinement at the time, which made the cruel deed still more diabolical.

Drawing out her body, he hid it among the bushes, and the next night, when it grew dusk, he fetched a "hay-spade" from a large rick which stood near and buried the poor woman, fully dressed as she was.

Thinking himself secure, because unseen, he went the same day to see his brother-in-law, Thomas Lofthouse of Rufforth, about three miles from York, and told him that his wife had gone to stay with his uncle, Richard Harrison, at Selby, who would take care of her.

But Heaven, as the old chronicler says, would not be so deluded, but raised up the ghost of the murdered woman to make the discovery.

On the following Easter Tuesday, about two o'clock in the afternoon, Thomas Lofthouse had occasion to attend to a quickset hedge near his house. On going to the pond, to get a second pail of water to put on the hedge, he saw, to his amazement, his sister-in-law, Mrs. Barwick, sitting on a green mound near the pond. She seemed to dangle something white in her lap, which looked to him like a white bag. He returned with his pail, looking sideways to see if she was still there, and found she was. But as soon as he had emptied the pail (thinking her still alive and being only astonished to see her and not frightened) he looked again, and she had vanished.

He had noticed that she was dressed in the clothes she usually wore, and looked extremely pale and wan.

The apparition so preyed on the mind of Lofthouse that he told his wife what he had seen. She immediately concluded that her sister, Mrs. Barwick, was dead, and told him to go to Selby and make inquiries. This he did, and soon learnt that Mary Barwick had never been to stay with her husband's uncle at all.

His suspicions were now so much aroused that he went to the Lord Mayor of York and obtained a warrant for Barwick's arrest.

Barwick was arrested and brought before the Lord Mayor, and on September 16, 1690, he was tried, before Sir John Powel, at the York Assizes. He confessed his guilt, was sentenced to death and to be hanged in chains, and suffered the extreme penalty at York Castle. His written confession, witnessed by the Lord Mayor of York and the deposition of Thomas Lofthouse are preserved among the archives.