

# THE TERROR OF THE WATER-TANK

by William Hope Hodgson

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Crowning the heights on the outskirts of a certain town on the east coast is a large, iron water-tank from which an isolated row of small villas obtains its supply. The top of this tank has been cemented, and round it have been placed railings, thus making of it a splendid "look-out" for any of the townspeople who may choose to promenade upon it. And very popular it was until the strange and terrible happenings of which I have set out to tell.

Late one evening, a party of three ladies and two gentlemen climbed the path leading to the tank. They had dined, and it had been suggested that a promenade upon the tank in the cool of the evening would be pleasant. Reaching the level, cemented surface, they were proceeding across it, when one of the ladies stumbled and almost fell over some object lying near the railings on the town side.

A match having been struck by one of the men, they discovered that it was the body of a portly old gentleman lying in a contorted attitude and apparently quite dead. Horrified, the two men drew off

their fair companions to the nearest of the aforementioned houses. Then, in company with a passing policeman, they returned with all haste to the spot.

By the aid of the officer's lantern, they ascertained the gruesome fact that the old gentleman had been strangled. In addition, he was without watch or purse. The policeman was able to identify him as an old, retired mill-owner, living some little distance away at a place named Revenge End.

At this point the little party was joined by a stranger, who introduced himself as Dr. Tointon, adding the information that he lived in one of the villas close at hand, and had run across as soon as he had heard there was something wrong.

Silently, the two men and the policeman gathered round, as with deft, skillful hands the doctor made his short examination.

"He's not been dead more than about half an hour," he said at its completion.

He turned towards the two men.

"Tell me how it happened—all you know?"

They told him the little they knew.

"Extraordinary," said the doctor. "And you saw no one?"

"Not a soul, doctor!"

The medical man turned to the officer.

"We must get him home," he said. "Have you sent for the ambulance?"

"Yes, sir," said the policeman. "I whistled to my mate on the lower beat, and 'e went straight off."

The doctor chatted with the two men, and reminded them that they would have to appear at the inquest.

"It's murder?" asked the younger of them in a low voice.

"Well," said the doctor. "It certainly looks like it."

And then came the ambulance.

At this point, I come into actual contact with the story; for old Mr. Marchmount, the retired mill-owner, was the father of my *fiancée*, and I was at the house when the ambulance arrived with its sad burden.

Dr. Tointon had accompanied it along with the policeman, and under his directions the body was taken upstairs, while I broke the news to my sweetheart.

Before he left, the doctor gave me a rough outline of the story as he knew it. I asked him if he had any theory as to how and why the crime had been committed.

"Well," he said, "the watch and chain are missing, and the purse. And then he has undoubtedly been strangled; though with what, I have been unable to decide."

And that was all he could tell me.

The following day there was a long account in the *Northern Daily Telephone* about the "shocking murder." The column ended, I remember, by remarking that people would do well to beware, as there were evidently some very desperate characters about, and ended that it was believed the police had a clue.

During the afternoon, I myself went up to the tank. There was a large crowd of people standing in the road that runs past at some little distance; but the tank itself was in the hands of the police officer being stationed at the top of the steps leading up to it. On learning my connection with the deceased, he allowed me up to have a look around.

I thanked him, and gave the whole of the tank a pretty thorough scrutiny, even to the extent of pushing my cane down through lock-holes in the iron manhole lids, to ascertain whether the tank were full or not, and whether there was room for someone to hide.

On pulling out my stick, I found that the water reached to within a few inches of the lid, and that the lids were securely locked. I at once dismissed a vague theory that had formed in my mind that there might be some possibility of hiding within the tank itself and springing out upon the unwary. It was evidently a common, brutal murder, done for the sake of my prospective father-in-law's purse and gold watch.

One other thing I noticed before I quitted the tank top. It came to me as I was staring over the rail at the surrounding piece of waste land. Yet at the time, I thought little of it, and attached to it no importance whatever. It was that the encircling piece of ground was soft and muddy and quite smooth. Possibly there was a leakage from the tank that accounted for it. Anyhow, that is how it seemed to be.

"There ain't nothin' much to be seen, sir," volunteered the policeman, as I prepared to descend the steps on my way back to the road.

"No," I said. "There seems nothing of which to take hold."

And so I left him, and went on to the doctor's house. Fortunately,

he was in, and I at once told him the result of my investigation. Then I asked him whether he thought that the police were really on the track of the criminal.

He shook his head.

"No," he answered. "I was up there this morning having a look round, and since then, I've been thinking. There are one or two points that completely stump me—points that I believe the police have never even stumbled upon."

Yet, though I pressed him, he would say nothing definite.

"Wait!" was all he could tell me.

Yet I had not long to wait before something further happened, something that gave an added note of mystery and terror to the affair.

On the two days following my visit to the doctor, I was kept busy arranging for the funeral of my fiancée's father, and then on the very morning of the funeral came the news of the death of the policeman who had been doing duty on the tank.

From my place in the funeral procession, I caught sight of large local posters announcing the fact in great letters, while the newsboys constantly cried:

"Terror of the Tank—Policeman Strangled."

Yet, until the funeral was over, I could not buy a paper to gather any of the details. When at last I was able, I found that the doctor who had attended him was none other than Tointon, and straightway I went up to his place for such further particulars as he could give.

"You've read the newspaper account?" he asked when I met him.

"Yes," I replied.

"Well, you see," he said, "I was right in saying that the police were off the track. I've been up there this morning, and a lot of trouble I had to be allowed to make a few notes on my own account. Even then it was only through the influence of Inspector Slago with whom I have once or twice done a little investigating. They've two men and a sergeant now on duty to keep people away."

"You've done a bit of detective-work, then?"

"At odd times," he replied.

"And have you come to any conclusion?"

"Not yet."

"Tell me what you know of the actual happening," I said. "The newspaper was not very definite. I'm rather mixed up as to how long it was before they found that the policeman had been killed. Who found him?"

"Well, so far as I have been able to gather from Inspector Slago, it was like this. They detailed one of their men for duty on the tank until two A.M., when he was to be relieved by the next man. At about a minute or so to two, the relief arrived simultaneously with the inspector, who was going his rounds. They met in the road below the tank, and were proceeding up the little side lane towards the passage, when, from the top of the tank, they heard someone cry out suddenly. The cry ended in a sort of gurgle, and they distinctly heard something fall with a heavy thud.

"Instantly, the two of them rushed up the passage, which as you know is fenced in with tall, sharp, iron railings. Even as they ran, they could hear the beat of struggling heels on the cemented top of the tank, and just as the inspector reached the bottom of the steps there came a last groan. The following moment they were at the top. The policeman threw the light of his lantern around. It struck on a huddled heap near by the right-hand railings—something limp and inert. They ran to it, and found that it was the dead body of the officer who had been on duty. A hurried examination showed that he had been strangled.

"The inspector blew his whistle, and soon another of the force arrived on the scene. This man they at once dispatched for me, and in the meantime they conducted a rapid but thorough search, which, however, brought to light nothing. This was the more extraordinary in that the murderer must have been on the tank even as they went up the steps."

"Jove!" I muttered. "He must have been quick."

The doctor nodded.

"Wait a minute," he went on, "I've not finished yet. When I arrived I found that I could do nothing; the poor fellow's neck had been literally crushed. The power used must have been enormous.

"Have you found anything?" I asked the inspector.

"'No,' he said, and proceeded to tell me as much as he knew, ending by saying that the murderer, whoever it was, had got clean away.

“‘But,’ I exclaimed, ‘he would have to pass you, or else jump the railings. There’s no other way.’

“‘That’s what he’s done,’ replied Slago rather testily. ‘It’s no height.’

“‘Then in that case, inspector,’ I answered, ‘he’s left something by which we may be able to trace him.’”

“You mean the mud round the tank, doctor?” I interrupted.

“Yes,” said Doctor Tinton. “So you noticed that, did you? Well, we took the policeman’s lamp, and made a thorough search all round the tank—but the whole of the flat surface of mud-covered ground stretched away smooth and unbroken by even a single footprint!”

The doctor stopped dramatically.

“Good God!” I exclaimed, excitedly. “Then how did the fellow get away?”

Doctor Tinton shook his head.

“That is a point, my dear sir, on which I am not yet prepared to speak. And yet I believe I hold a clue.”

“What?” I almost shouted.

“Yes,” he replied, nodding his head thoughtfully. “Tomorrow I may be able to tell you something.”

He rose from his chair.

“Why not now?” I asked, madly curious.

“No,” he said, “the thing isn’t definite enough yet.”

He pulled out his watch.

“You must excuse me now. I have a patient waiting.”

I reached for my hat, and he went and opened the door.

“Tomorrow,” he said, and nodded reassuringly as he shook hands.

“You’ll not forget.”

“Is it likely?” I replied, and he closed the door after me.

The following morning I received a note from him asking me to defer my visit until night, as he would be away from home during the greater portion of the day. He mentioned 9:30 as a possible time at which I might call—any time between then and 10 P.M. But I was not to be later than that.

Naturally, feeling as curious as I did, I was annoyed at having to wait the whole day. I had intended calling as early as decency would allow. Still, after that note, there was nothing but to wait.

During the morning, I paid a visit to the tank, but was refused

permission by the sergeant in charge. There was a large crowd of people in the road below the tank, and in the little side lane that led up to the railed-in passage. These, like myself, had come up with the intention of seeing the exact spot where the tragedies had occurred; but they were not allowed to pass the men in blue.

Feeling somewhat cross at their persistent refusal to allow me upon the tank, I turned up the lane, which presently turns off to the right. Here, finding a gap in the wall, I clambered over, and disregarding a board threatening terrors to trespassers, I walked across the piece of waste land until I came to the wide belt of mud that surrounded the tank. Then, skirting the edge of the marshy ground, I made my way round until I was on the town side of the tank. Below me was a large wall which hid me from those in the road below. Between me and the tank stretched some forty feet of smooth, mud-covered earth. This I proceeded now to examine carefully.

As the doctor had said, there was no sign of any footprint in any part of it. My previous puzzlement grew greater. I think I had been entertaining an idea somewhere at the back of my head that the doctor and the police had made a mistake—perhaps missed seeing the obvious, as is more possible than many think. I turned to go back, and at the same moment, a little stream of water began to flow from a pipe just below the edge of the tank top. It was evidently the “overflow.” Undoubtedly the tank was brim full.

How, I asked myself, had the murderer got away without leaving a trace?

I made my way back to the gap, and so into the lane. And then, even as I sprang to the ground, an idea came to me—a possible solution of the mystery.

I hurried off to see Dufirst, the tank-keeper, who I knew lived in a little cottage a few hundred feet distant. I reached the cottage, and knocked. The man himself answered me, and nodded affably.

“What an ugly little beast!” I thought. Aloud, I said: “Look here, Dufirst, I want a few particulars about the tank. I know you can tell me what I want to know better than anyone else.”

The affability went out of the man’s face. “Wot do yer want to know?” he asked surly.

“Well,” I replied. “I want to know if there is any place about the tank where a man could hide.”

The fellow looked at me darkly. “No,” he said shortly.

“Sure?” I asked.

“Course I am,” was his sullen reply.

“There’s another thing I want to know about,” I went on. “What’s the tank built upon?”

“Bed er cerment,” he answered.

“And the sides—how thick are they?”

“About ‘arf-inch iron.”

“One thing more,” I said, pulling half-a-crown from my pocket (whereat I saw his face light up). “What are the inside measurements of the tank?” I passed him over the coin.

He hesitated a moment; then slipped it into his waistcoat-pocket. “Come erlong a minnit. I ‘ave ther plan of ther thing upstairs, if yer’ll sit ‘ere an’ wait.”

“Right,” I replied, and sat down, while he disappeared through a door, and presently I heard him rummaging about overhead.

“What a sulky beast,” I thought to myself. Then, as the idea passed through my mind, I caught sight of an old bronze luster jug on the opposite side of the room. It stood on a shelf high up; but in a minute I was across the room and reaching up to it; for I have a craze for such things.

“What a beauty,” I muttered, as I seized hold of the handle. “I’ll offer him five dollars for it.”

I had the thing in my hands now. It was heavy. “The old fool!” thought I. “He’s been using it to stow odds and ends in.” And with that, I took it across to the window. There, in the light, I glanced inside—and nearly dropped it; for within a few inches of my eyes, reposed the old gold watch and chain that had belonged to my murdered friend. For a moment, I felt dazed. Then I knew.

“The little fiend!” I said. “The vile little murderer!”

I put the jug down on the table, and ran to the door. I opened it and glanced out. There, not thirty paces distant was Inspector Slago in company with a constable. They had just gone past the house, and were evidently going up on to the tank.

I did not shout; to do so would have been to warn the man in the room above. I ran after the inspector and caught him by the sleeve.

“Come here, inspector,” I gasped. “I’ve got the murderer.”

He twirled round on his heel. “What?” he almost shouted.

“He’s in there,” I said. “It’s the tank-keeper. He’s still got the watch and chain. I found it in a jug.”

At that the inspector began to run towards the cottage, followed by myself and the policeman. We ran in through the open door, and I pointed to the jug. The inspector picked it up, and glanced inside.

He turned to me. "Can you identify this?" he asked, speaking in a quick, excited voice.

"Certainly I can," I replied. "Mr. Marchmount was to have been my father-in-law. I can swear to the watch being his."

At that instant there came a sound of footsteps on the stairs and a few seconds later the bearded little tank-keeper came in through an inner door. In his hand he held a roll of paper—evidently the plan of which he had spoken. Then, as his eyes fell on the inspector holding the watch of the murdered man, I saw the fellow's face suddenly pale.

He gave a sort of little gasp, and his eyes flickered round the room to where the jug had stood. Then he glanced at the three of us, took a step backwards, and jumped for the door through which he had entered. But we were too quick for him, and in a minute had him securely handcuffed.

The inspector warned him that whatever he said would be used as evidence; but there was no need, for he spoke not a word.

"How did you come to tumble across this?" asked the inspector, holding up the watch and guard. "What put you on to it?"

I explained and he nodded.

"It's wonderful," he said. "And I'd no more idea than a mouse that it was him," nodding towards the prisoner.

Then they marched him off.

That night, I kept my appointment at the doctor's. He had said that he would be able to say something; but I rather fancied that the boot was going to prove on the other leg. It was I who would be able to tell him a great deal more than "something." I had solved the whole mystery in a single morning's work. I rubbed my hands, and wondered what the doctor would have to say in answer to my news. Yet, though I waited until 10:30, he never turned up, so that I had at last to leave without seeing him.

The next morning, I went over to his house. There his housekeeper met me with a telegram that she had just received from a friend of his away down somewhere on the South coast. It was to say that the

doctor had been taken seriously ill, and was at present confined to his bed, and was unconscious.

I returned the telegram and left the house. I was sorry for the doctor; but almost more so that I was not able personally to tell him the news of my success as an amateur detective.

It was many weeks before Dr. Tointon returned, and in the meantime the tank-keeper had stood his trial and been condemned for the murder of Mr. Marchmount. In court he had made an improbable statement that he had found the old gentleman dead, and that he had only removed the watch and purse from the body under a momentary impulse. This, of course, did him no good, and when I met the doctor on the day of his return, it wanted only three days to the hanging.

"By the way, doctor," I said, after a few minutes' conversation, "I suppose you know that I spotted the chap who murdered old Mr. Marchmount and the policeman?"

For answer the doctor turned and stared.

"Yes," I said, nodding, "it was the little brute of a tank-keeper. He's to be hanged in three days' time."

"What—" said the doctor, in a startled voice. "Little Dufirst?"

"Yes," I said, yet vaguely damped by his tone.

"Hanged!" returned the doctor. "Why the man's as innocent as you are!"

I stared at him.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "The watch and chain were found in his possession. They proved him guilty in court."

"Good heavens!" said the doctor. "What awful blindness!"

He turned on me. "Why didn't you write and tell me?"

"You were ill—afterwards I thought you'd be sure to have read about it in one of the papers."

"Haven't seen one since I've been ill," he replied sharply. "By George! You've made a pretty muddle of it. Tell me how it happened."

This I did, and he listened intently.

"And in three days he's to be hanged?" he questioned when I had made an end.

I nodded.

He took off his hat and mopped his face and brow.

"It's going to be a job to save him," he said slowly. "Only three days. My God!"

He looked at me, and then abruptly asked a foolish question.

"Have there been any more—murders up there while I've been ill?" He jerked his hand toward the tank.

"No," I replied. "Of course not. How could there be when they've got the chap who did them!"

He shook his head.

"Besides," I went on, "no one ever goes up there now, at least not at night, and that's when the murders were done."

"Quite so, quite so," he agreed, as if what I had said fell in with something that he had in his mind.

He turned to me. "Look here," he said, "come up to my place tonight about ten o'clock, and I think I shall be able to prove to you that the thing which killed Marchmount and the policeman was not—well, it wasn't little Dufirst."

I stared at him.

"Fact," he said.

He turned and started to leave me.

"I'll come," I called out to him.

At the time mentioned, I called at Dr. Tointon's. He opened the door himself and let me in, taking me into his study. Here, to my astonishment, I met Inspector Slago. The inspector wore rather a worried look, and once when Tointon left the room for a minute, he bent over towards me.

"He seems to think," he said in a hoarse whisper, and nodding towards the doorway through which the doctor had gone, "that we've made a silly blunder and hooked the wrong man."

"He'll find he's mistaken," I answered.

The inspector looked doubtful, and seemed on the point of saying something further, when the doctor returned.

"Now then," Dr. Tointon remarked, "we'll get ready. Here," he tossed me a pair of rubbers, "shove those on. You've got rubber heels, inspector?"

"Yes, sir," replied Slago. "Always wear 'em at night."

The doctor went over to a corner, and returned with a double-barreled shotgun which he proceeded to load. This accomplished, he turned to the inspector.

"Got your man outside?"

"Yes, sir," replied Slago.

"Come along, then, the two of you."

We rose and followed him into the dark hall and then out through the front doorway into the silent road. Here we found a plainclothes policeman waiting, leaning up against a wall. At a low whistle from the inspector, he came swiftly across and saluted. Then the doctor turned and led the way towards the tank.

Though the night was distinctly warm, I shuddered. There was a sense of danger in the air that got on one's nerves. I was quite in the dark as to what was going to happen. We reached the lower end of the railed passage. Here the doctor halted us, and began to give directions.

"You have your lantern, inspector?"

"Yes, sir."

"And your man, has he?"

"Yes, sir," replied the man for himself.

"Well, I want you to give yours to my friend for the present."

The man in plainclothes passed me his lantern, and waited further commands.

"Now," said Dr. Tointon, facing me, "I want you and the inspector to take your stand in the left-hand corner of the tank top, and have your lanterns ready, and mind, there must not be a sound, or everything will be spoiled."

He tapped the plainclothes man on the shoulder. "Come along," he said.

Reaching the tank top, we took up positions as he had directed, while he went over with the inspector's man to the far right-hand corner. After a moment, he left the officer, and I could just make out the figure of the latter leaning negligently against the railings.

The doctor came over to us, and sat down between us.

"You've put him just about where our man was when we found him," said the inspector in a whisper.

"Yes," replied Dr. Tointon. "Now, listen, and then there mustn't be another sound. It's a matter of life and death."

His manner and voice were impressive. "When I call out 'ready,' throw the light from your lanterns on the officer as smartly as you can. Understand?"

"Yes," we replied together, and after that no one spoke.

The doctor lay down between us on his stomach, the muzzle of his gun directed a little to the right of where the other man stood. Thus we waited. Half an hour passed—an hour, and a sound of distant bells chimed up to us from the valley; then the silence resumed sway. Twice more the far-off bells told of the passing hours, and I was getting dreadfully cramped with staying in one position.

Then, abruptly, from somewhere across the tank there came a slight, very slight, slurring, crawling sort of noise. A cold shiver took me, and I peered vainly into the darkness till my eyes ached with the effort. Yet I could see nothing. Indistinctly, I could see the lounging figure of the constable. He seemed never to have stirred from his original position.

The strange rubbing, slurring sound continued. Then came a faint clink of iron, as if someone had kicked against the padlock that fastened down the iron trap over the manhole. Yet it could not be the policeman, for he was not near enough. I saw Dr. Tinton raise his head and peer keenly. Then he brought the butt of his gun up to his shoulder.

I got my lantern ready. I was all tingling with fear and expectation. What was going to happen? There came another slight clink, and then, suddenly, the rustling sound ceased.

I listened breathlessly. Across the tank, the hitherto silent policeman stirred almost, it seemed to me, as if someone or something had touched him. The same instant, I saw the muzzle of the doctor's gun go up some six inches. I grasped my lantern firmly, and drew in a deep breath.

"Ready!" shouted the doctor.

I flashed the light from my lantern across the tank simultaneously with the inspector. I have a confused notion of a twining brown thing about the rail a yard to the right of the constable. Then the doctor's gun spoke once—twice, and it dropped out of sight over the edge of the tank. In the same instant the constable slid down off the rail on to the tank top.

"My God!" shouted the inspector, "has it done for him?"

The doctor was already beside the fallen man, busy loosening his clothing.

"He's all right," he replied. "He's only fainted. The strain was too much. He was a plucky devil to stay. That thing was near him for over a minute."

From somewhere below us in the dark there came a thrashing, rustling sound. I went to the side and threw the light from my lantern downwards. It showed me a writhing yellow something, like an eel or a snake, only the thing was flat like a ribbon. It was twining itself into knots. It had no head. That portion of it seemed to have been blown clean away.

"He'll do now," I heard Dr. Tointon say, and the next instant he was standing beside me. He pointed downwards at the horrid thing. "There's the murderer," he said.

It was a few evenings later, and the inspector and I were sitting in the doctor's study.

"Even now, doctor," I said. "I don't see how on earth you got at it."

The inspector nodded a silent agreement.

"Well," replied Dr. Tointon, "after all it was not so very difficult. Had I not been so unfortunately taken ill while away, I should have cleared the matter up a couple of months ago. You see, I had exceptional opportunities for observing things, and in both cases I was very soon on the spot. But all the same, it was not until the second death occurred that I knew that the deed was not due to a human hand. The fact that there were no footprints in the mud proved that conclusively, and having disposed of that hypothesis, my eyes were open to take in details that had hitherto seemed of no moment. For one thing, both men were found dead almost in the same spot, and that spot is just over the overflow pipe."

"It came out of the tank?" I questioned.

"Yes," replied Dr. Tointon. "Then on the railings near where the thing had happened, I found traces of slime; and another matter that no one but myself seems to have been aware of, the collar of the policeman's coat was wet, and so was Mr. Marchmount's. Lastly, the shape of the marks upon the necks, and the tremendous force applied, indicated to me the kind of thing for which I must look. The rest was all a matter of deduction."

"Naturally, all the same, my ideas were somewhat hazy; yet before I saw the brute, I could have told you that it was some form of snake or eel, and I could have made a very good guess at its size. In the course of reasoning the matter out, I had occasion to apply to little Dufirst. From him, I learned that the tank was supposed to be

cleaned out annually, but that in reality it had not been seen to for some years."

"What about Dufirst?" I asked.

"Well," said Dr. Tointon dryly, "I understand he is to be granted a free pardon. Of course the little beast stole those things; but I fancy he's had a fair punishment for his sins."

"And the snake, doctor?" I asked. "What was it?"

He shook his head. "I cannot say," he explained. "I have never seen anything just like it. It is one of those abnormalities that occasionally astonish the scientific world. It is a creature that has developed under abnormal conditions, and, unfortunately, it was so shattered by the heavy charges of shot, that the remains tell me but little —its head, as you saw, was entirely shot away."

I nodded. "It's queer—and frightening," I replied. "Makes a chap think a bit."

"Yes," agreed the doctor. "It certainly ought to prove a lesson in cleanliness."