

Footprints in the Snow

In tribute to M R James

The matter began I think in May of that year when a post-chaise drew up before the door of Brandeston Hall, and from within climbed a stout man in Piccadilly weepers. He paused to survey the broad expanse of gravel and the handsome features of the fine old building, then with barely a nod to the small coterie of staff drawn up beside the door he stepped inside.

The new owner of Brandeston Hall was Mr Charles Dornford Willoughby, a man for whom possession of the house and its estates represented the culmination of what most of his peers and certainly Mr Willoughby himself would have considered a successful career at the bar.

This success had been much dependent upon that strength of will which had cowed both juries and defence witnesses, and was now about to be brought to bear upon what might seem a small matter, though not to one of so formidable a character as Mr Willoughby.

Though there were several changes which he planned for the hall, merely the kind of domestic trivia which are the preoccupation of any person determined to enjoy a new property, on one thing above all Mr Willoughby was clear. The river was in the wrong place.

Though not ranking among the more celebrated rivers, the Deben had wound its blameless way through the water meadows behind the hall since this part of Suffolk was first put upon the earth. It was a pretty thing, but Mr Willoughby fancied it might be even more charming were it diverted from its course and brought some fifty yards closer to the house, so that he and his guests might admire it more fully from the terrace.

Mr Willoughby was not a man to be gainsaid, and arrangements were made accordingly. We need not dwell upon the niceties of marine navigation, but the scheme was to begin the diversion where the river left a wood which sat at the foot of a hill to the south and west of the hall, and so bring the course across the water meadow behind the hall. A team of men was recruited from the village and surrounding district and the work began.

Yet for one such as Mr Willoughby, a man who knew his own mind and prided himself on knowing the minds of others equally as well, the work was too slow. The man he had placed to oversee the matter assured his master that his party were committed to their task, but Mr Willoughby was not so certain. He had, he told visitors, spent a career in the law dealing with just such as those who now laboured on his behalf. He knew the proper way to deal with them.

So it was that, as the seasons passed, Mr Willoughby became more vexated at the slow progress. For him the final straw came when one morning at the onset of winter he rose to

observe that no work at all was under way. He called his man to him and, on being informed that it was too cold and conditions too dire for working in freezing water, he made it plain that he expected the whole retinue to be present and back at their labour the following day, snow or no snow. The penalty, he hinted darkly, might see one or more of them thrown out of their cottages.

The working party duly assembled the next morning and Mr Willoughby was gratified as he opened his drapes to find them fully engaged in their task. Snow began to fall, and work was particularly hard since they had reached that part of the river which skirted the wood, so that it was necessary for some of the men actually to climb into the freezing water to cut away some of the roots. But since Mr Willoughby periodically came from out the warmth of the hall to stride his terrace and glower at those toiling on his behalf, they pressed on as best they could.

It was during the afternoon of that day, as the light began to dwindle, that Mr Willoughby was disturbed from his papers by a loud commotion from outside the window. He was not best pleased, but in due course it was made known to him that an accident had occurred. A man had collapsed, overcome by working in the icy water, and though his colleagues had after some frantic effort managed to pull him out, it was feared that he was gravely ill.

Indeed, most tragically the man died that very night. Mr Willoughby was naturally concerned, though it must be said that uppermost in that displeasure was the effect that the loss of one of the party might make upon progress. Yet the tragedy was not yet done.

It seemed the man left a widow, a woman now left entirely without means after the death of her husband. Mr Willoughby reluctantly agreed to receive a deputation from the village on her behalf, including no lesser person than the parson, with a view perhaps to finding the woman a place in the hall's kitchens, or some other means of assuring her wellbeing.

But Mr Willoughby was perfectly clear in his own mind that such actions on his part might only serve to undermine what little determination the poor woman might still have after the death of her husband. He made it apparent to the parson, therefore, that it was for her own good that he encouraged her to seek some respectable employment of her own, and not look to make a living out of the fortunes of others.

Sadly however, that godly man could not have conveyed this enlightenment to the widow, or perhaps she did not fully understand the good advice Mr Willoughby had given her, because not two days later her grief became too much for her to bear and she wandered off to die alone in the snow.

Naturally the parson was among the first to consign the death to a malign fate, being taken unawares in a sudden blizzard, so to avoid any suggestion that she might have sought to take her own life. Such an action would have been a mortal sin, of course, as

well as causing Mr Willoughby to rethink posthumously the good wishes which he had bestowed upon her.

But so it was that in the fullness of time during the next spring, work on the river was completed and the Deben now flowed more picturesquely close to the terrace of Brandeston Hall. Mr Willoughby was content at last, and many were the guests who admired the new view through that summer and into what was a particularly charming autumn. Mr Willoughby was, as far as was possible for one of so demanding a temperament, a happy man.

It is difficult to state precisely when things began to change. Towards the end of that autumn there were occasions when Mr Willoughby became displeased with the exact curve which the river now took, or wondered whether it might seem a trifle reckless having a river even as benign as the Deben so close to the house. But he put it down to the growing inclemency of the weather, and when winter forced him to limit his regular walks on the terrace he hoped to forget his nagging doubts.

On those occasions when he did however venture out onto the terrace, it was the wood which gradually became the focus of his displeasure. What he had originally seen as a fine complement to the stretching water meadows now seemed out of place, almost oppressive. On those fine winter's afternoons when the sun settled among the bare branches and should have provided a mellow and beautiful introduction to the evening ahead, instead Mr Willoughby found the sight bleak and inhospitable.

The days grew colder and brought snow. Soon, the regular habit of going out upon the terrace to take in the view became a burden to him, and he ceased to visit that part of the house. On the one occasion when he did step out onto the terrace he was displeased to find the otherwise smooth expanse of snow behind the hall was clearly marked with footprints. Since he was not aware of having had visitors he naturally assumed it might be one of the staff or someone from the village, although it had been made perfectly plain that Mr Willoughby would not tolerate trespass.

But then, the village was in the other direction. These footprints led from the direction of the wood.

Mr Willoughby therefore assumed it was some passer-by, a tramp perhaps, and accordingly gave instructions to his staff to see off anybody found loitering. So it was that the days began to draw in more perceptibly than ever. It had become Mr Willoughby's custom during the dark evenings to begin the task of catalogueing the books and papers in the library which he had acquired with the sale of the house, but soon he began to feel that he was only undertaking this course in order to preoccupy his mind against some shadow which impinged upon it. Though at that time, what the nature of that shadow might be he could not bring to mind.

The footprints too remained, another cause of unease. Although almost invariably there would be fresh snow overnight, each morning the footprints had returned.

Mr Willoughby began to feel the house was too large and too lonely for a man living by himself. There were live-in servants, of course, but they were naturally confined to their own quarters except when required by their master. He wondered whether he should look for company of some sort, but then it occurred to him what it was that had occupied some small space at the back of his mind these past few days. He rather felt that he already had company of some kind, though on the manner of that company he decided not to conjecture.

It must be said that even one of Mr Willoughby's enemies, and during the full course of a career at the bar there may have been one or two, would not have described him as a fanciful man. The wind moaning about an old house can, it is true, give rise to certain notions among those prone to a colourful imagination. This had never been a description of Mr Willoughby. Now though, of an evening when he sat by the fire and continued his cataloguing of the library, that sound in the chimneys did sometimes appear to him almost like a human voice.

One evening in December Mr Willoughby had decided to retire and was carrying his candle up to his chamber, when the usual loud creaking of the old oak stairs suddenly included what sounded like another footfall behind him. Mr Willoughby spun round immediately, as might be surmised, and in fact was so surprised that he almost dropped the candle.

There was of course nobody there on the stairs behind him, as far as the glimmer of his candle could make out, though afterwards as he hurried to his chamber he did not like to dwell on what the consequences of having dropped the candle and being plunged into sudden darkness might have been.

But he retired, in some slight disquiet it must be said, and there was nothing else that evening to preoccupy him. Except, perhaps, the feeling as he prepared to snuff out his candle that something had been called which should not have been. Moreover and whatever it was, he was as sure as he could be that it was outside, watching the house, watching the flickering candlelight at his very window. So it was that he decided, for perhaps the first time since he was a very small boy, to leave his candle alight through the hours of darkness.

Eventually towards dawn he fell into a fitful sleep and awoke to another bitter morning. There had been the usual fresh fall of snow and the gardener was already occupied in shovelling it clear of the path. But he had not yet obliterated the footprints.

This time there were many more of them, and their number and the way they had trodden and scuffed the snow suggested a most unpleasant frenzy. Their other characteristic which Mr Willoughby noted with something approaching horror was that they seemed to encircle the house, round and round, as though whoever or whatever had made them was seeking a way in.

When he had completed his ablutions and before he addressed the matter of breakfast, Mr Willoughby went out to speak to the gardener.

'Look here,' said he. 'Do you know who is responsible for all these prints?'

The man set aside his shovel and thought of wiping his sleeve across his nose, then thought better of it.

'It was no-one of the staff, sir, of that you can be sure,' he said. 'Only a madman would have been outside in that storm anyway. That is to say, a madman or...'

He paused as though in some embarrassment.

'Or what, man?' his master demanded.

'Well I don't rightly know how to put it, sir,' the fellow finally replied. 'Only if you look at them prints close like, it seem as though this madman or, or whatever he was, spent the night out here in bare feet. See for yourself, sir.'

Sure enough, when Mr Willoughby looked closely it was clear that the prints were those of bare feet, and peculiarly thin and bony feet at that.

'Well in any case,' Mr Willoughby blustered. 'Get them cleared up. They have made the very devil of a mess.'

'The devil you say, sir,' muttered the man uncomfortably. 'Ah, well sir, that's as may be. You're a scholared gentleman and I wouldn't like to pass judgment. It's not for the likes of me.'

The fellow continued his progress with the shovel and Mr Willoughby retired indoors to his breakfast.

For the rest of the day he did not leave the house. According to the accounts of his staff afterwards he seemed in an agitated frame of mind. One of the maids reported that when she brought him tea he started as though she had given him a fright, and berated her for the noise she and the rest of the household made about the place, though they had become accustomed to their master's ways and went about the house almost of tiptoe for fear of disturbing him.

He also bade her check all the doors and windows, even though it was still day.

'He must not get in,' he added.

There was nothing more that the staff could add to the subsequent mystery, except reporting that the weather during the night to follow was even more noisy than those preceding, with a storm which blew around the house and whistled and rattled down every chimney and through every crevice.

In the morning when the maid brought Mr Willoughby his tea she found him gone. His bed had been slept in but the linen was fearfully tousled as though he had suffered a turbulent night's sleep. Also and more curiously, the window to his chamber stood open and banging in the wind.

Neither the policeman who came to investigate nor any of those who followed could elicit any explanation as to why Mr Willoughby should choose a bitterly cold night to

throw open his windows. Nor could they explain how he came to be missing with all the locks still sported and the windows fastened, or how the floor was puddle with water, as though of melted snow. The window was the only means by which he might have left the house, and eventually when still nothing more was learned of his disappearance it was supposed that he must have suffered some kind of brainstorm and lost his senses.

There was one other observation, though one to which it was decided to pay no credence. There were footprints in the snow, leading from the wood and back again, as before. The gardener confirmed that it had been a regular occurrence and so nothing was done to investigate further. So it was that nobody thought to examine them in other than the most cursory way, even though they differed from the prints on which Mr Willoughby had remarked. For such close observation as was omitted would have revealed that, although the prints from the wood were those of a single man, on his return he clearly had a companion.