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**The Scarecrow Slasher**

Written by [Stefanina Hill](https://www.5minutemystery.com/author/shill)

“It’s hardly murder,” the inspector complained as he kicked at the shredded remains of the scarecrow.

“Well that’s just the thing, Inspector Gregson,” Mr. Forbes said. “This is the fourth time it has happened. It will be murder next and it will be me that gets murdered. I am to be knifed in my bed before you think to investigate properly.”

“There’s not much for me to investigate,” Gregson said. “Every day you put a scarecrow out on your estate and every night he gets viciously sabotaged.”

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“You admit it then!” The old man shrieked. “You admit it’s a sabotage!”

“The damage was certainly done with a knife of some kind. The tears are not the ragged kind I’d expect to see if a wild animal had done this.”

“Probably a gang.”

“Mr. Forbes, please. If you can give me some facts then do so, but leave the theorizing to the official forces,” said Inspector Gregson.

Mr. Forbes muttered something under his breath about the theories of the official forces. Inspector Gregson decided it was best to pretend he hadn’t heard. He wondered if the old man could have concocted this bizarre case himself in order to get some publicity for his business. Over in the courtyard, Gregson spotted the butler, a skinny but wiry man with an extremely sour expression on his face.

“My superior told me you actually saw this supposed gang last night.” Gregson said, continuing his discussion with Forbes.

“That’s right. I heard the sound of tearing cloth and looked out of my bedroom window.”

“How many were there?”

“Well, I couldn’t rightly say. My eyesight isn’t what it was, but I could make out some commotion in the vicinity of the scarecrow. Whoever it was certainly made a brutal attack. The scarecrow came apart as though it were made of paper, destroyed completely in seconds by the ferocious attack.”

The attack had certainly been ferocious, the inspector mused. Not only had the scarecrow's clothes been cut up, but the stick propping it up had been cut clean through.

“It was then that I phoned the police,” Mr. Forbes said, dramatically.

According to his superior, Mr. Forbes had called the police the previous night to report another attack in progress. Gregson had volunteered for the job. The idea of a psychopath incensed at scarecrows to the point of manically ripping them to shreds had been rather appealing to him, at least compared with spending Friday afternoon filling out dreary paperwork. The more time he spent with Mr. Forbes, however, the more he regretted not being back at the station.

“Why not just stop putting a scarecrow out?” Gregson asked.

“What?! Let them win? I have a business to run here. People come to look around the house. My grandfather was a great explorer and we have some of his things here for visitors to see. There is an amusing idea that he hid treasure somewhere on the grounds. Besides, if I stop putting out a scarecrow, what’s to say it won’t provoke whoever is doing this? What’s to say they won’t come after me that very night?”

“All right, all right,” the inspector said wearily, as he raised his hands to stop the tirade. “I’d like to speak to the other people in your household: the cook, the maid and the butler.”

The maid, Annie, was a shy girl of twenty who was working at the house for the summer. She gave Gregson the impression that she wasn’t much relishing her job and was outspoken in her dislike of Mr. Forbes. Gregson wondered if Annie would take such extreme measures to frighten her boss.

When Gregson questioned her, she told him that she had been too frightened to sleep the previous night. She had tried to calm her nerves by pacing her room and had occasionally glanced out the window towards the figure of the scarecrow.

“I felt ever so sorry for him, sir, the poor scarecrow all alone out there in the night. And then the slasher came.”

‘You saw someone!’ The inspector exclaimed.

“Not clearly, but I saw a single figure cross the field from the house. The person prowled along, very agile, like a cat, and darted from one shrubbery and potted plant to another, as if trying to stay hidden. When the figure got up to the scarecrow, he – or she, I suppose – seemed to attack it. Then I saw the gleam of a knife, shining silver in the moonlight. It was dreadful.”

“Do you recall the time when you saw the slasher?”

“Yes, I had looked at the clock just before I looked out the window. It was twenty minutes past eleven.” This matched exactly the time that his superior had said Mr. Forbes had called in the crime.

Gregson went to the ground floor to interview the cook, a woman named Mrs. Avery. She met him as he was approaching the kitchens. She had a bad limp that seemed to encumber her movement to a great extent. To the inspector’s surprise, Mrs. Avery produced a large set of keys from her pocket and unlocked the door.

“You lock the house kitchen?” Gregson asked.

“I have to, sir. The butler has taken it into his head to help himself to provisions and I can’t baby-sit him as well as run this house. I can barely keep up with the work. The maid is too flighty and feeble to even help me with the washing let alone any of the heavy work. The butler seems more interested in loitering in here, probably trying to pinch food, than doing any real work. I even have to make up the scarecrow, only to have it ripped to shreds every night. As if I don’t have enough to do already.”

“Philips doesn't look like a man with a large appetite,” the inspector said, laughing.

“Perhaps he is developing one.”

“Developing, Mrs. Avery? How long have you had to lock him out like this?”

“Four days, sir. I remember exactly because he started up this silly behaviour when I sorted out the attic for old clothes to put on that wretched scarecrow. You can see the spare ones over there in the corner.”

The inspector nodded. “Thank you, Mrs. Avery. That will be all. Please tell Mr. Philips I wish to see him now.”

Mrs. Avery left while Inspector Gregson squatted down and rooted through the spare clothes. After a few moments, he drew his hand out from the pile and wrapped around his fingers was a beautiful, glittering necklace.”

“Why do you need to see me?” The butler snapped from the doorway.

“I was hoping that you could answer some questions for me,” Gregson said. “Have you seen or heard anything relating to these scarecrow slashings that could shed some light on the matter?”

“Seen nothing, heard nothing,” came the curt reply.

“Where were you last night between eleven o'clock and midnight?” The inspector asked.

“Sleeping in my bed, like any decent person. Is that against the law?”

“Not at all,” Gregson said. “And may I ask what has caused your recent increase in appetite? An appetite so intense, it seems, that Mrs. Avery felt it necessary to lock you out of the kitchen?”

The butler's face became a scowl. “High and mighty Mrs. Avery. She locks the kitchen because she can. She has a petty position of power and enjoys lording it over me.”

“Well, thank you for your co-operation,” the inspector said, dryly. “Perhaps it will interest you to know that I have reached my conclusion as to the identity of the scarecrow slasher.”

**Suspect List**

* Annie
* Mr. Forbes
* Mrs. Avery
* Philips

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“I knew it had to be someone in the house, since the figure of the slasher was seen to cross the field to the scarecrow from the direction of the house,” Gregson explained. “It couldn’t have been Mr. Forbes because he was on the phone with the police when the slasher was spotted by the maid. The maid also told me that the figure was very agile, which rules out the cook; with her bad leg her movement is cumbersome at best.”

“Why believe everything Annie says?” The butler snapped. “She could have done it!”

“No,” said Inspector Gregson. “Mrs. Avery told me that Annie can barely help with the household chores. If she cannot lug piles of sheets around, I doubt that she has the strength to hack scarecrows to pieces with a blade, and she certainly can’t cut wooden poles clean through.

“It's also extraordinary that your sudden burst of appetite started the day of the first scarecrow incident. It’s quite clear to me, Philips, that you wanted to get the scarecrow’s clothes, or rather something in the clothes, since you destroyed them in the process of searching them.”

Gregson held up the sparkling necklace for Philips to see.

Philips wrung his hands together. “I’ve not harmed anyone,” he wailed. “It has often been suggested that the old master of the house concealed something of great value within these walls. Over the years I’ve searched for it and then all of a sudden Mrs. Avery found those old clothes to use for the scarecrow, I’d have looked through them in my own time but she locked me out of the kitchen. I knew that if I destroyed the scarecrows she’d have to make new ones and gradually I’d be able to search all the clothes.”

Philips hid his face behind his hands and his shoulders started to shake.

“Now Philips,” the Inspector said gently. “I suggest you tell Mr. Forbes that you discovered the necklace during your round of duties and so return it to its rightful owner. If you are yearning for extra funds, I suggest that you write a book. A first-hand account of the terrifying attacks of the Scarecrow Slasher will certainly not be left to gather dust on the shelves.”