

The Village Series



The Biggs Abduction

**A Tharston story that really hit the headlines,
nationally as well as locally.**

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Harriet Ann Biggs (1856 - 1919)

The 3rd February, 1880, saw an event in Tharston that hit the newspapers all around the country. It was alleged that a James Pitcher abducted Harriet Ann Biggs, the granddaughter of the Rev. William Biggs who had been the vicar of Tharston for 30 years, from 1844 to 1874.

Newspapers reported the incident and some highlights are:

"It seems that a young farmer names Pitcher, residing in the village, had some years ago courted a young girl named Harriett Ann Biggs. On the evening in question he proceeded to her mother's house, in company with three or four men and a horse and cart."

"The girl shrieked to her mother as she was being conveyed down the road. An uncle, who lived a few doors off, hearing her cries, ran after her, but was immediately pinned by two men, who held him down on the fence and muffled his face. Shortly afterwards the cart began to move off, and the men then left him and joined it."

"Information of the outrage was immediately sent to Policeman Stapleton, living at Long Stratton, who, with Policeman Hannant, proceeded to the spot and took measurements of the horse's feet and the cart wheels. They then telegraphed to the Deputy Chief-Constable (Mr. Paynton Pigott) at the County Police-station, and he at once turned out the whole of the Norwich division to guard the roads. It is supposed, however, that the delinquents must have passed into Norwich before the men had gained their posts, as no sign of them could be discovered. Policemen Stapleton and Hannant followed the marks of the horse and cart as far as Harford Bridge, leaving no doubt that the parties were making for Norwich."

"A reward of £10 has also been offered to any person who will give information leading to the apprehension of Pitcher or his confederates."

A full report of the incident was reported in The Ipswich Journal on February 7th, 1880.

NORFOLK.

EXTRAORDINARY OUTRAGE IN NORFOLK.—The *Eastern Daily Press* of Thursday contains the following description of an extraordinary case of abduction, which took place at Tharston, near Long Stratton, at half-past seven on Tuesday evening:—"It seems that a young farmer named Pitcher, residing in the village, had some years ago courted a young girl named Harriett Ann Biggs. On the evening in question he proceeded to her mother's house, in company with three or four men and

James Pitcher and two of his accomplices were arrested and were later granted bail:

"..... James Pitcher on his recognizances of himself and two sureties of £150 each, and to each of the other prisoners on recognizances of two sureties for £30 each."
- reported in The Ipswich Journal on March 13th, 1880.

THARSTON.

THE ABDUCTION CHARGE.—On the hearing of the adjourned application on the part of the prisoners on Monday last before Mr. Baron Pollock they were admitted to bail—as to James Pitcher on his recognizances of himself and two sureties of £150 each, and as to each of the other prisoners on the recognizances of two sureties for £30 each.

On August 5th, 1880, the case came was hear at the Norwich Assizes.

"This case, which made a great stir when before the Magistrate some months since, did not fail to attract a full Court now. The Grand Jury gallery was filled by ladies."

The court heard evidence of the girl's earlier relationship with Pitcher:

"The prisoner who was charged as the principal (Pitcher) had been known to the family for some years, and no doubt had been in the habit of courting the young lady for some time, although the acquaintance and courtship had been broken off about a year before the occurrence which they were now inquiring into."

Details were given by Miss Biggs about what happened following the abduction:

"When we got to Bergh Apton I was taken out of the cart by Pitcher, and carried into the cottage. Two women were in the cottage. I did not know who they were. They first washed my feet, as they were cut and bleeding. I afterwards went upstairs to change my dress and one of the women gave me another."

Evidence was given that Miss Biggs was a girl with considerable means:

"I was entitled to £3,000 when I became twenty-one, and a further sum of £2,000 on the death of a relative. I have not taken the £3,000 yet, and it is now in the hands of the trustees."

Some inconsistencies in intent were found in cross-examination of Harriet:

"Witness continuing, said: When we got to the bedroom I put my arms round Pitcher's neck. He kissed me and I kissed him. He told me I must get off his knee while he got into bed. When he was in bed he asked whether I was not coming. He then got out of bed, unhooked my dress in front, helped me further to undress, and got into bed again. I then put on my night dress and got into bed."

When evidence had all been presented and summing up completed, after just 15 minutes deliberation the jury returned their verdict:

"The Jury, after a quarter of an hour's deliberation, acquitted all the prisoners, and the verdict was followed by loud applause. Pitcher was enthusiastically cheered by the crowd outside the Court when he left."

This was reported in The Ipswich Journal on August 7th, 1880. Anyone who looks at the full report can see why the not guilty verdict was given.

NORWICH ASSIZES.

THURSDAY, August 5th.

(Before Mr. Baron Pollock.)

THE THARSTON ABDUCTION CASE.

This case, which made a great stir when before the Magistrates some months since, did not fail to attract a full Court now. The Grand Jury gallery was filled by ladies.

The prisoner, James Pitcher, who is 27 years of age, was formally indicted for that he "feloniously by force, did take away and detain against her will Harriet Ann Biggs, with intent to marry her, at Tharston, on the 3rd of February, 1880." Thomas Elvin, 49, and Robert Bensley, 27, labourers, on bail, were indicted "for feloniously

Many newspapers reported this "abduction" and some further examples can be found at the British Newspaper Archive.

It appears that if Harriet had conspired with James to leave her mother, the intention was short lived.

In 1871 Rebecca, the mother, and Harriet, were living in The Street, Tharston and is the next entry to John Seaman, Rebecca's brother. With the reference to John in the transcript below, it would be reasonable to assume that The Street is where the Biggs were living at the time of the abduction.

4		1	George Hestack	Head	Man	18	19	20
			Rebecca Biggs	Head	W	36		Annuitant
			Harriet D ^s	Serv	Woman	16		D ^s
			Fredrick W ^m D ^s	Son		12		D ^s
			Stephen J. Andrews	Nephew		7		Visitor

The picture below is of The Street, as it is now, probably where the incident happened.



Rebecca and Harriet are not found in Tharston in the 1881 Census but are residing in Morningthorpe, so must have moved away from Tharston soon after the incident.



Arthur Richard Alexander (1851 - 1925)

Harriet married a local farmer Arthur Richard Alexander in 1884, who is thought to be have been born in Wacton. They had a daughter, Edith Rebecca, born on July 4th, 1886, and at the time were probably living in Morningthorpe. By the time of the 1891 Census they had had three more children, Arthur, Frederick and Harriet and were all living at Hardwick Hall with Arthur's widowed mother, Mary Ann Alexander, and a live-in domestic servant, Rosina Fisher. The 1901 Census shows 5 more children, Herbert, Alice, Mildred, Elsie and Olive; but sadly daughter Harriet had already died in late 1891. In 1911, the Census shows the family still at Hardwick Hall, with six children living at home.

Harriet is buried in Hardwick churchyard with the monumental inscription:

"In loving memory HARRIETT ANN dearly beloved wife of ARTHUR RICHARD ALEXANDER born 7th April 1855 died 26th Feb. 1919 'What I say unto you I say unto all' Also of ARTHUR RICHARD ALEXANDER born January 4th 1851 died December 30th 1925".

The daughter Harriet is also buried there:

"In loving memory of HARRIET JANE the dearly loved child of ARTHUR R. HARRIET A. ALEXANDER born April 4th 1890 died Nov. 25th 1891 'Jesus called a little child'."

James was living in Tharston in 1881 with his widowed sister, Elizabeth, and her three children and a domestic servant, according to the Census. On the 1st January 1885 he married Helen Lane and a notice was printed in the Ipswich Chronicle in January 13th, 1885.

MARRIAGES.

PITCHER—LANE.—1st inst., at St. Michael-at-Thorn, by the Rev. W. F. Creeny, James Pitcher, farmer, Tharston, to Helen Lane, daughter of James Lane, 21, Cattle Market-street, Norwich.

The 1891 Census lists him as a farmer and publican on the North Walsham Road in Coltishall. (The pub is believed to be the New Inn which is now called The Railway.) 1901 finds James listed as a publican in King's Lynn, The Grapes in Saturday Market Place, living with wife Alice, son James and daughter Erne; has he got married a second time? There is a record of a marriage in 1902 between James Pitcher and Alice Maude Alborough but there is no record found for the death of a Helen Pitcher - strange! If this is a second marriage then does this have indications on how the abduction is viewed regarding the idea that Harriet had asked him to promise to remain faithful? The 1911 Census has James a visitor in Norwich with two of his children, the oldest of which was born in King's Lynn and working as an insurance agent.

A lengthy account of the trial was reported in the Norfolk News on August 7th 1880, its length and detail probably an indication of the public interest in the case and its notoriety. The full article transcript reads:

NORFOLK & NORWICH ASSIZES

CROWN COURT

(Before Lord Baron Pollock.)

THE COUNTY ASSIZES

THURSDAY

In anticipation of the trial of the three prisoners charges with the abduction at Tharston, the Court, long before commencement of the proceedings, was crowded by those anxious to hear what may well be termed the cause célèbre of the Assizes. The Grand Jury gallery was filled by ladies.

His Lordship took his seat at ten o'clock, and immediately proceeded with

THE CHARGE OF ABDUCTION AT THARSTON.

James Pitcher (27), farmer, was indicted for that he feloniously by force, did take away and detain against her will Harriet Ann Biggs, with intent to marry her, at Tharston, on the 3rd of February, 1880. Thomas Elvin (49) and Robert Bensley (27), labourers (on Bail), were indicted for feloniously aiding, abetting, counselling and procuring James Pitcher in the committal of the offences.

Mr. Horace Brown and the Hon. J. De Grey were counsel for the prosecution; Mr. Bilwer, Q.C., and Mr. S. Reeve were counsel for the prisoners, all of whom on being arraigned pleaded not guilty.

Mr. Browne, in opening the case on the part of the prosecution, said that although it was probable the facts of the case were known to many of the jury in consequence of the excitement the case had raised, they were probably unacquainted with the particular offence with which the prisoners were charged, because happily it was very uncommon, and he (the learned counsel) did not remember a case of the same nature being tried on this circuit for some years. The prosecutrix, Harriet Ann Biggs, was the daughter of a farmer, and as they would find was very well connected, living in Tharston, her grandfather having been vicar of the parish. At the time in question she was residing with her mother. The prisoner who was charged as the principal (Pitcher) had been known to the family for some years, and no doubt had been in the habit of courting the young lady for some time, although the acquaintance

and courtship had been broken off about a year before the occurrence which they were now inquiring into. The acquaintanceship was not only broken off, but no letters had passed between them, and if the prosecutrix had seen Pitcher she had never spoken to him. It was unnecessary to go into the reasons why the courtship was broken off. The main fact was that the courtship was broken off, and he (the learned counsel) should lay considerable stress on that fact, as showing that no communication had taken place between them for some time. Learned counsel having given an outline of the facts, proceeded to argue the points of law bearing on the case.

His Lordship, however, said there could be no contention as to this being a criminal offence. The only way in which the subsequent conduct of the woman could have any bearing on the question would be in the way of inducing the jury to think that what was apparently *de facto* against her will was *de jure* with her consent.

Mr. Browne admitted that the real question to decide was whether the girl was taken from her mother's cottage against her will, and in conclusion read the letters written by the prosecutrix at the time she was with Pitcher. He then called

Mrs. Biggs who said - I am a widow living in Tharston. My daughter Harriet Ann Biggs lives with me. She is twenty-five years of age. I know the prisoner, James Pitcher. Some years ago he was in the habit of coming to the house as my daughter's lover. The engagement, however, was broken off about six years ago. They became acquainted about ten years ago, and continued until she was eighteen. Previous to the night of the 3rd February, Pitcher had not been to the house for six years. She received a letter from Pitcher about last spring twelve-months. She had destroyed that letter, but in it Pitcher said he would have my daughter by fair means or by foul. On the night of 3rd February I was at home with my daughter. My son lives with me, but on that night he was at church at practice. About half-past seven I heard a knock at the door and went to open it. When I opened the door I saw the prisoner Bensley, who I did know at the time, but I have recognized since. He gave me a note, written as follows:-

MRS. BIGGS - I write to inform you that your brother-in-law is in my house with a broken leg. Will you come down and see what is to be done? - Yours, JAMES CLAXTON.

After I received the note I turned to the light to read it, when he seized my arm and pulled me down. I first fell on my knees, and while in that position he threw a shawl at the back of my head. I called out "Murder," and he then pulled the shawl completely over my head, and pressed my head on the doorstep. My daughter was in the sitting-room at the time with her shoes and stockings off. While I was lying on the floor I was enabled to see James Pitcher come into the house. He had her under his arms and carrying her. She was shrieking "Murder," and was carried out of the house. After a few minutes I was allowed to get off the ground, and again called out "Murder." I saw the man go down the yard into the road. After I shrieked out

my brother John Seaman came, a few minutes after my daughter had gone. I told him what had happened, and he went off after my daughter. I found the note on the doorstep after I got up. The dress produced was what my daughter wore on the night in question. I afterwards gave notice to the police.

Cross-examined by Mr. Bulwer - My son and my daughter live with me, and they allow me 100l. a year. Before that I was in the receipt of 12s. a week, which was left to me. Pitcher was then paying his addresses to my daughter. Pitcher lived close by. I may have been to his house five or six times with my daughter. I knew he was engaged to my daughter. All went on very nicely for a certain time. I remember going to Mr. Rackham's office and finding that the money was left to my son and daughter, I living on the interest till they came of age. It was a year or two after this that I told Pitcher to leave my house, but it was in consequence of his insulting me.

By His Lordship - Pitcher never made an offer of an allowance to me.

Mr. Bulwer - Was it not in a letter to your daughter.

Witness - I never heard a word about it, or saw it in a letter.

Mr. Bulwer then subjected the witness to a long cross-examination in reference to a letter written to her by Pitcher. She admitted several particulars in it, but denied that the letter produced was a correct copy. She denied that Pitcher said in it, "I will take Harriet just as she is with no money or anything she has." He did not say "Before the girl had money, I was welcome, but after she had the money I was not wanted."

She gave her answers in such a careless way that both his lordship and Mr. Bulwer had to caution her to be more careful, learned counsel reminding her that if convicted of this offence, Pitcher was liable to fourteen years of penal servitude. In further cross-examination she said that Mary Ann Seaman, her sister-in-law was in the habit of taking letters to her daughter from Pitcher, and from her daughter to Pitcher. Witness knew that Seaman was the go-between. Witness saw all the letters.

Mr. Bulwer - So you knew what he wrote to her, and what she wrote to him? - Yes.

And you spoke to her about them before your daughter sent her answer? - No.

Do you mean to say you never spoke to your daughter before she wrote her letters? - Never.

His Lordship - Did you see the letters she wrote to him before she answered them? - Yes.

And do you mean to say that you never talked to your daughter about them? - Sometimes I did. [Laughter.]

Witness was subjected to a further cross-examination by Mr. Bulwer in reference to three anonymous letters sent to her in reference to her daughter and Pitcher, but denied that she

had said anything further to her daughter about them than that they must have been written by a friend of Pitcher.

Mr. Bulwer - Do you still swear that Bensley was the man who put the shawl over your head? - I do.

You would be surprised if you heard that it was anybody else? - I should.

You say this was the first time you had ever seen him? - Yes.

And that it was a dark night? - Yes.

And you still swear that Bensley was the man? - I do.

Probably you were expecting something of the sort was going to happen? - No.

You knew that Pitcher had written to your daughter proposing to get away from you? - Yes.

You gave the information to the police? - I did.

You saw your daughter at the Police-station with Sergeant Rix? - I did.

Did you in Rix's presence say to your daughter, "Did they carry you away?" - I don't remember.

His Lordship - Surely you can remember whether you did or not. Just think whether you did or not.

Witness - I might say it.

Mr. Bulwer - And did your daughter say, "No, mother?"

Witness - She may have said it.

His Lordship - It is easy to say. Just think.

Witness - I can't say.

Mr. Bulwer - Now, then, I will have an answer.

Witness - I don't remember.

Do you mean to say such a thing would have passed and you not remember it? - No answer.

Did you also in the presence of Rix say to your daughter are you going home with me or Pitcher? - Yes.

Did your daughter say, "Mother, don't be hard with him? - Yes.

You can be violent at times? - Not so very violent. [Laughter.]

I don't mean by striking people, I mean with regard to language? - No.

Have you never used abusive language to Pitcher? - In front of his face, do you mean; or behind his back? - No.

Had Rix to caution you not to be so violent, and to remind you that you were in his house? - No.

I believe you prosecute in this case? - No.

Who is prosecuting? - My daughter.

Has she been talking to you about it? - Yes.

I suppose you have a good deal of talking about it? - Oh yes; of course I have.

Had your daughter told you that while at the cottage Pitcher wrote to Mr. Holmes to get a license, a dress, and a wedding ring? - Yes, but they were unable to get a license.

His Lordship - Why were they not able to get it?

Witness - They said it would cost 50l. They were to be married at the house.

Witness, in answer to further questions from Mr. Bulwer, said her daughter stayed at the cottage with Pitcher on the Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday nights, and until she was found in bed with him on the Friday morning, when the police came. Her daughter had told her that she had a wedding ring on her finger on the Thursday.

Did she tell you that she sat on his knee in the cart? - Yes.

And that he put his arm round her waist? - Yes

And that they were very happy and comfortable? - No, she told me that she cried all the way.

In re-examination by Mr. Browne, witness persisted in asserting that Bensley was the man who threw the shawl over her head.

Harriet Ann Biggs, examined by Mr. Browne, said - I live with my mother at Tharston, and am 25 years old. I have been acquainted with Pitcher, but previous to the 3rd February I had not spoken to him for six years. Previous to that date I had no communication with him for eight months. The last letter I had was from him, which I did not answer. I destroyed the letter. Previous to that I had no correspondence for five years, when he wrote three letters, wishing to renew the engagement. In the third letter he proposed I should go away with him. I wrote a letter declining his proposal. On the evening of the 3rd February I was sitting at home with my mother, and had a dress and a scarlet jacket on. My mother went to answer a knock, and while she was reading a letter I was seized by James Pitcher near the door. He dragged me out of the door and down the yard, having hold of one arm, another man, whom I don't know holding the other. They dragged me down the road over a hundred yards. My dress was torn off my back, as I threw myself on the ground, and they dragged me along the road. I shrieked "Murder," and called to my uncle John, who lived close by. When I had been dragged about a hundred yards a cart was brought out of a meadow. The driver of the cart said, "Jimmy, I won't have anything to do with this, as we are getting ourselves into a nice row." I can't say

who the driver was. When Pitcher got me into the road he said, "It is I." I asked him to let me go back; but he said, "You shall go with me." I continued crying "Murder," as loud as I could. After the man in the cart drove a little way, Pitcher asked him to stop. I was then pulled into the cart by Pitcher, and pushed by another man. They then drove off with me. I then said, "Although you have taken me away I will not have you." A handkerchief was then put over my head, as I had no bonnet. I cannot say who put the handkerchief over my head. Several times during the journey I asked Pitcher to let me go back. I was then sitting on his lap, as he pulled me onto his knee. I said I would pay the driver well if he would drive me back; but he made no answer. Pitcher told me he was going to take me to his sister's at first, and afterwards said he was going to Burgh Apton. A third man ran behind the cart for about half a mile, when Pitcher said to him, "Good night, George, I will see you in the morning." The man then left. When we got to Burgh Apton I was taken out of the cart by Pitcher, and carried into the cottage. Two women were in the cottage. I did not know who they were. They first washed my feet, as they were cut and bleeding. I afterwards went upstairs to change my dress, and one of the women gave me another. I then went downstairs, and Pitcher pulled me onto his lap, kissed me, and asked one of the women to fetch a ring and show to me. The woman brought a watch, albert, and ring. One of the women said, "You must go upstairs for fear you are seen."

His Lordship - Did you say anything to that? - No, my lord.

Examination continued - I went upstairs, and Pitcher and one of the women with me. Pitcher then pulled me onto his lap and sat by the fire. He afterwards got up, undresses, and went to bed. One of the women brought up some brandy and water and sponge-cake to Pitcher, and we both has some. I was sitting by the fire while Pitcher was in bed. He said, "You must come to bed."

By his Lordship - The woman then left.

By Mr. Browne - I told him I should not go to him, and he got out of bed, unhooked my dress, and said I should. I then undressed and went to bed.

By his Lordship - I went to bed directly.

By Mr. Browne - I remained in bed with him all night. On the following morning I got up and went downstairs. One of the women went frequently to the door to see that they were all right. On the Wednesday morning Pitcher told me that he had written to his sister to get a license but she told him she could not get married in that way. They afterwards read a letter from his sister, who said she could not get married as police officers were watching them all ways, and that a special license could only be got at Norwich or London, and would cost 50l. Pitcher afterwards told her that he sent a letter to her mother through his sister, who had told him that he had convicted himself. He then told me that I must write, and unless I swore that I was a consenting party he was a lost man, and should have to be off to London at once. I then

wrote the letter (produced), in which I told my mother I was away of my own free will and consent. I wrote that at Pitcher's dictation. On the Thursday Pitcher put a ring on my finger, and told me if the police came I was to say I was married. On the Friday morning, Mr. Pigot, the acting Chief-constable, came to the cottage and found me in bed with Pitcher, who was arrested and taken to Norwich. I was entitled to 3000l. when I became twenty-one, and a further sum of 2000l. on the death of a relative. I have not taken the 3000l. yet, and it is now in the hands of the trustees. I had no message from Pitcher the night he came and had no knowledge whatever of his coming.

Cross-examination by Mr. Bulwer - I have had a good deal of conversation about the affair with my mother. There is a clergyman of the name of Pooley in my parish, but I have not spoken much to him about it as I have lived in different places since the affair. I have always been with my mother. I first saw the clergyman on the Friday morning at Norwich, after Pitcher had been taken into custody. He came also to me on Saturday, but we had no conversation about it. Somebody told me that he had preached about it on the Sunday, though the examination was to take place before the magistrates on the Tuesday. He went with me to the magistrates' meeting, and shook hands with me at the door of the room. I do not know that he sat opposite me while I was giving evidence. He took a great deal of interest in the case, but I have had no conversation with him in the last day or two. Neither I nor any of my friends went to church on the Sunday. From the time I was fifteen to the time I was nineteen, I considered myself engaged to Pitcher, with the exception of one year out of the four when he did not come. We never discussed the question of marriage. My mother broke the engagement. I knew that Pitcher was willing to marry me without my money.

By his Lordship - Pitcher never expressed any wish about the money, as to how it should be settled or not.

By Mr. Bulwer. - Never said he would take you and did not care anything about your money.

His Lordship - People between 15 and 19 don't care so much for money as they do when they get older. [Laughter]. [To witness]. Try and recollect whether he said anything about it.

Witness - I don't remember anything.

By Mr. Bulwer - Aunt Mary Ann gave me two letters written by Pitcher and I wrote to0 him. They were sent in the leaves of the *London Journal* so that my mother might not know it. One of them commenced "My dearest James," and concluded "Don't let anyone know this."

I suppose you were willing to marry him then? - No.

What do you mean, then, by commencing "My dearest James." Do you mean to say you would not have married him? - Yes.

By his Lordship - If I could have married in a proper manner and my mother had consented, I would have married him.

After an adjournment for luncheon, Mr. Bulwer resumes his cross-examination of Miss Biggs. In answer to questions as to another letter written by her to Pitcher in which she alluded to a question asked by him as to whether he would have anything further to do with her if he made himself with any other girl, she explained it was in reference to some other girl with whom he had become acquainted. The reason she asked him if he sent any more notes, not to send them to her uncle John's, was because a disturbance had been caused by his sending them there. In reference to the occurrence on the night in question, when she was taken away from her mother's house, she said - I never said before the magistrate that I threw myself down. This is the first time I have said it, I don't know that I was thrown down by his treading on my dress. I don't remember his putting his arms round my waist and pulling me up. He first got into the cart and pulled me in. I don't know what sort of a cart it was. We drove along with Pitcher's arm round my waist.

And your arm round his neck? - No, because he took hold of my hand and said how cold it was. And you said, "Warm it love?" [Laughter.]

Witness - No. I said before the magistrate that Pitcher was the only man who helped me into the cart, but what I have said to-day is correct. I was so ill then I didn't know what I said. Pitcher was kind to me while in the cart, and we chatted together, but about nothing in particular. I don't remember asking whether he would behave well to me.

His Lordship - Surely you must remember one way or another.

Witness - I don't remember saying anything about it. Pitcher might have said "Yes," but I was so frightened I can't recollect. I cannot say whether I passed any person I knew on the road. We passed some houses, but I said nothing. We passed a public-house, but I don't know whether people were standing outside. I did not call out or make any noise so as to attract people's attention.

Did you ask Pitcher whether he loved you? - I don't remember. I won't swear that I did not.

Did he ask you whether you loved him? - I don't remember.

Did he not ask you, and did you not say "Yes?" - I don't remember.

His Lordship - Now try and remember. This is a very serious case.

Witness - I can't remember.

Mr. Bulwer - And upon his saying that did he not kiss you and you kissed him? - Yes, I can't say which kissed first.

Perhaps you did it both together? [Laughter.] - And this kissing was continued all the way? - I can't say all the way.

I didn't say all the way. You may have too much of a good thing you know. Every half-mile or so? - I can't say.

Whenever he gave you a kiss you gave him one? - Yes [Laughter.]

In the interval of the kisses there was some talk about the mortgage to Mr. Hotson on Pitcher's father's farm? - That was not until the Wednesday.

You asked him whether he wanted to marry you for your money? - Yes and he said "No, what makes you think so?" I then told him that I had read the anonymous letter stating that his father's farm was mortgaged to Lawyer Hotson.

Did you not say to him, if he would promise to behave well to you, keep from all other women, and would be loving and kind to you you would keep with him? - No.

Did you not say this before the magistrates? - No. (After being pressed, however, several times witness admitted she had said so before the magistrate, but she not remember where it was said).

When you arrived at Burgh Apton did not Pitcher say stand up dear, till I get down? - Yes. I then stooped down, he put his arms round my waist, and carried me into the house. After I had my feet washed I brushed my hair and made myself tidy.

And when you came downstairs, Pitcher was waiting for you and gave you a kiss? - No.

Did he say how nice you looked? - No.

Why you don't mean to say that you stood looking at each other, as they say in Norfolk, like two stuck pigs. [Laughter.] Come tell me what happened? - He pulled me onto his knee.

And he gave you a kiss? - No.

Well you gave him one? - I can't say.

His Lordship - Try and remember.

Mr. Bulwer - I shall be quite content if you say one.

Witness - We kissed once.

Mr. Bulwer - You tried the wedding ring on, on the Wednesday. - I tried it on, but said it was too large for me. I never said it was too large because I had fretted about it.

Will you swear you did not say this? - No, I will not swear it.

By his Lordship - I don't know how it got on my finger.

Witness continuing, said - when we got to the bedroom I put my arms around Pitcher's neck. He kissed me and I kissed him. He told me I must get off his knee while he got into bed. When he was in bed he asked whether I was not coming. He then got out of bed, unhooked my dress in front, helped me to further undress, and got into bed again. I then put on my night dress and got into bed.

You on one side and he on the other? - Yes. [Laughter.]

And without going into any further details you were very happy and comfortable together? - Not happy, so far as I was concerned.

Did you not ask him what dress you were to be married in? - No, I asked him about a dress I was to go to his sister's in, and he said he would write to his sister about one. I never asked him how much he would allow me a year for dresses. He asked me how much I spent upon dresses, and I told him I did not know.

By his Lordship - I intended to go to Pitcher's sister'. I was compelled to go where he took me.

Mr. Bulwer - You meant to go to the sister's to be married, didn't you? - No; I should have gone back if I could.

What do you mean? You knew there were cottages close by? - No, I didn't. The blinds were down.

But you could have pulled them up when Pitcher left the room? - He told me not to go to the windows.

But you could have gone when he went out of the room? - He never left the room.

Do you mean to say he never left the room? - Yes.

What, on the Tuesday, the Wednesday, and the Thursday? - Yes.

His Lordship - Just think what you are saying.

Witness made no answer. In further cross-examination she said - Pitcher left me on the Thursday to go to his sister's to get the special license, a dress, and an ulster. When I asked where we were to be married he said we could be married by the fireside. I asked who were to be the witnesses, and he said they did not require any.

On the Thursday you asked him to write to your mother telling her you were all right? - No, I wished him to write to her to tell her where I was. I afterwards sent a letter to my mother at prisoner's dictation. (The letter was read by his Lordship, in which witness told her mother that she had heard the police were after them, but asking her not to take any proceedings in the matter, as she was perfectly happy, that James behaved well to her, and that all she wanted was her mother's consent).

His Lordship - Was that letter written, so that every word was dictated by Pitcher like giving a child a copy? - Every word.

All of it? - Part of it was written when he left the room. When he came back he asked me whether I had finished. I told him no, and he said, "You will have to finish it."

Mr. Bulwer - You wrote it together, did you not? - No, because he said I went away of my own free will, and I did not do that. When I saw my mother at the station in Norwich, she asked me how I came to write the letter, and I said Pitcher made me. She asked me whether I really knew I was going away that night, and I told her no. My mother was very angry. I don't remember whether my mother asked me whether they carried me away. I can't remember saying "No, mother." I can't remember a word of it, but I won't swear I did not. My mother asked me whether I was going away with her or with Pitcher. I told her with her.

Did you say - "Pray don't be hard upon him. Don't prosecute him. Pray don't, Mother?" - Yes.

Did you say in the presence of Sergeant Rix at Norwich that you were going to Mrs. Holmes? - No.

Were you asked if you were a consenting party? - Yes.

And did you say "Yes? - I don't remember.

His Lordship - Can you undertake on your oath to say that you did not say it? - No, I can't say that.

What makes you have any doubt? I cannot say.

But you might have said it? - Yes. [Sensation.]

This was before you had any conversation with your mother? - Yes.

Supposing instead of your mother, Pitcher's sister had come and had said, "Now that you are my sister-in-law there is a home for you. I have got the license, and you can be married next Monday," would you have married him then? - No; I did not wish to marry him.

His Lordship - That is not an answer. I don't want to know your wish, but what might have been. Would you have married him then? - I might have done.

After you had seen your mother? - I would not have married him then under any consideration.

Re-examined by Mr. Browne - I wrote the letter to my mother entirely at Pitcher's dictation. I wanted to let my mother know where I was.

Witness did not leave the box till four o'clock, having been under examination about three hours.

John Seaman, farm-bailiff, living nearly opposite the house of his sister, Mrs. Biggs, was the next witness. He spoke of hearing shrieks of "Murder" on the night in question. On going out and in the direction of the sounds, witness ran against a man, who "chucked him up and threw him into the hedge." [Laughter.] Witness caused more laughter by saying that his head was jammed into the hedge, and when he got up he saw another man standing on the road. He then said he would get a gun, and the men went off. He afterwards went to his sister's, and heard the sounds of a cart going away.. He was unable to identify the men.

Mr. P. Pigott, Deputy-Chief-Constable of the county, examined by Mr. De Grey, said that on Wednesday morning, 4th February, he went to Tharston to make inquiries in this case. On Friday morning he went to the house of Mrs. Potter at Burgh Apton, and went to the bedroom there. He rapped at the door, told the persons inside he was a police-officer, and entered the room. He then saw Pitcher sitting on the bed. Miss Biggs was with him. On telling him he had a warrant for his apprehension, Pitcher took hold of the girl's hand, showing a wedding ring on her finger, and told the witness he had come too late. Witness told him if he would come with him he would put him to as little inconvenience as possible. He then got up and dressed, kissed the girl, and told her the police would do her no harm. He did not think the girl kissed Pitcher. When at the station, Elvin said he had driven the cart by the direction of Pitcher. He had found a cart at Hempnall, the wheels of which fitted the marks on the road.

Police-constable Richardson said he knew the prisoner Bensley, who he believed was stepson to the prisoner Elvin. He saw him on the 9th February, when he had a tuft of hair on his chin. Between that and the time he was taken into custody it was shaved off.

The Clerk of Arraignment then read the statements of the three prisoners when before the magistrates. Pitcher then expressed his love for Miss Biggs, and that she would have gone away with him if it had not been for her mother. He took it upon himself all responsibility for what had occurred, and hoped no one else would suffer for it. Elvin said he believed Biggs was going away with Pitcher in order to marry him, as they laughed and kissed in the cart, sometimes talking of business and sometimes of love matters. Bensley simply said he was not guilty.

This was the case for the prosecution; and Mr. Browne, in summing up the evidence that he had adduced, contended that the charge had been fully made out, the law being that if a person were carried away against her will, even supposing that marriage took place afterwards, the person who committed the outrage was still liable to be called upon to answer for what he had done. He (Mr. Browne) had been twitted by his learned friend on the other side for not calling the two women at the cottage, or, as he called them, "the good ladies" there. He would ask the jury whether it was likely he would call two women who had assisted at such an outrage as this, one of them being the wife of the prisoner Elvin, and quite ready, when asked by Pitcher, to take a night dress into the bedroom. He did not call them, for the

reason that they were people who would not be more worthy of credence than the prisoner Pitcher, if he could be called to give evidence on oath. As to the conduct of the girl when she was taken away, it, very possibly, was very different to what he (the learned counsel), or the jury might have pursued. He might have fought for his life. But that was not the question. The question for them to consider was whether she was carried away against her will. If she was, nothing that happened afterwards could have excused the offence. That she was carried away by violence was very evident, for what were the facts? It had been conclusively shown that the mother had had her head held down by violence, the young woman was not dressed, showing that she was not ready to receive him, and when the man Seaman was on his way to render assistance, he had his head jammed into a hedge, and the young woman was carried off, violently shrieking "Murder." If this was not sufficient to show that an outrage had been committed, he did not know what was. He, therefore, confidently asked the jury to say that the charge had been fully made out, again reminding them that whatever might occur afterwards would not excuse the case.

Mr. Bulwer, in defence, said his learned friend had reminded the jury that this was a very serious case, and no doubt it was a very serious case as regarded his client, because as he (Mr. Bulwer) had to remind one of his witnesses the possible punishment was fourteen years' penal servitude. He did not introduce that for the purpose of intimidating the jury, but in order to show how important it was they should consider everything before coming to a solemn judgment in this matter. It was a very serious case, supposing the verdict were adverse to his client. Having adverted to the letters that had been read, learned counsel argued that the affectionate terms in which they were written showed the true relationship between the parties. It was obvious to anyone. What was the answer she made to Sergeant Rix at Norwich, who asked her whether she did not expect to go away. The answer she made was, "Not that night." He granted that on being taken to the cart that she cried out, but what was her behavior when she got there. She had admitted that she stood by the side of the cart while Pitcher assisted her into it, and it was not until to-day that she had said Pitcher was assisted by another man. What did she do when in the cart, why she sat on his lap as quietly as possible and allowed him to kiss her. Was this the conduct of a woman who had struggled so violently? Again, on the road to Burgh Apton, it was shown they were hugging and kissing together, talking about his father's property, and other matters. And though they passed a number of cottages and a public-house, not one single cry did she utter. Was this the conduct of a young woman who expected to be ravished? On arriving at the cottage, again, what was the first thing she did, after having her feet washed? Why go to the fire-place where Pitcher was sitting and place herself on his knee. On retiring to the bedroom, they regaled themselves with brandy and water, and she there sat on his knee and kissed him. What was a man to do after that? Why he must be made of more than flesh and blood if he could stand it. [Laughter.] Then they retired to bed, for of course they could not be billing and cooing all night, where it was

shown they were happy and comfortable together. [More laughter.] As to her not pulling up the blinds of the bed-room, she had said that it was because Pitcher would not let her. If she had wished to get away what would have been easier for her than to have pulled them up when Pitcher was out of the room and to call out to passers-by - "Here am I an imprisoned princess, with a man who has ravished me." [Laughter.] Learned counsel then went on to speak of what occurred after the whereabouts of Miss Biggs had been discovered, in the course of which he made some strong animadversions on the conduct of the clergyman of the parish for preaching a sermon on the Sunday previous to the hearing of the case before the Long Stratton magistrates on the Tuesday. They could at once see the position the girl was in with this clergyman about her, and, anxious to make her own case good, had come there to vindicate her character at the expense of the man who loved her dearly. Learned counsel concluded an energetic address, seriously asking the jury whether they on their oaths could say that it had been proved to their satisfaction, in the words of the statute, that this young man with force and violence carried the girl away for the purpose of marrying her. The who secret of the case was the opposition, as he termed it, of "that willful old woman, the mother," who was willing to destroy her daughter's happiness for the sake of her money, and was carrying on the prosecution with a vindictiveness that was a disgrace to her.

Witnesses were about to be called to speak to character, but both his Lordship and the jury thinking it un-necessary, they were not put into the box.

His Lordship, in commencing his summing up, said that the three prisoners at the bar were indicted, one of them for committing an offence, and the others for aiding and abetting him in the Committal of an offence, which, happily, very seldom came under the consideration of any court or jury. Although he (his Lordship) had for some eight years been connected with the administration of the criminal law of the country he did not remember more than one or two such cases having been brought to trial. It was as well at the outset that the jury should thoroughly understand the precise nature of the evidence on which the prisoners were charged. They had nothing to do there with any question of social impropriety. They had not to ask themselves whether it was right or wrong - although such a question might probably be easily answered. The important question for them to consider was the probabilities of the conduct of the woman and the conduct of Pitcher, as bearing upon the offence with which he was charged. The law of England had at all times been extremely careful in guarding the liberty of the subject, and especially in the case of women. The statute under which the persons at the bar were indicted, was as follows, "Whosoever shall by force take away, or detain against her will, any woman, at any age, with intent to marry or carnally know her." The most serious and important words for them to consider were - "against her will," and it was their duty as a jury to judge the time within which these words might be applied, always bearing in mind that if they arrived at the conclusion that she was taken away against her will in the first instance,

nothing that occurred afterwards between herself and Pitcher could purge the latter of the offence. His Lordship then went through the evidence, especially commenting on the question asked by Mrs. Biggs to her daughter, as to whether she was going back with her or with Pitcher, and the reply made by the daughter when asked by Rix as to whether she expected to be taken away. He also adverted to the fact of her not calling out on the way to Burghapton, though driven a distance of twelve miles. In order to arrive at the right conclusion, the jury must take into consideration the conduct of the girl before and at the time she was taken away (bearing in mind also the views of the mother on the matter), and her conduct subsequently when she became a free agent, and had an opportunity of making use of her will. Throughout the whole of their examination they must bear distinctly in mind the proposition he had before laid down that no subsequent conduct could purge the offence, if committed. What they had to inquire was whether the girl's after conduct - looking at all the circumstances, especially those connected with the latter portion of it - showed that she was a consenting party to what took place and that she was not detained against her will. In conclusion his Lordship remarked that the question they had to decide was whether Pitcher was guilty or not guilty, and if they found him guilty, whether he was guilty of the abduction of the girl against her will in order to marry her, or whether they found him guilty of her abduction from motives of lucre. They must also say whether the other prisoners, Elvin and Bensley, were guilty of assisting in the removal of the girl against her will.

The jury retired to consider their verdict at a quarter to seven o'clock. After an absence of a quarter of an hour, they again returned to court.

The Clerk of Arraignment - Gentlemen, have you agreed upon your verdict?

The Foreman - We have.

The Clerk of Arraignment - Do you find James Pitcher guilty or not guilty?

The Foreman - Not guilty.

The Clerk of Arraignment - And that is your verdict respecting the prisoners Elvin and Bensley?

The Foreman - Yes.

Loud applause followed the delivery of the verdict, which, however, was instantly suppressed. The prisoners were thereupon ordered to be discharged. Upon getting outside, Pitcher received quite an ovation, and was followed for some distance by a large crowd, cheering him most enthusiastically.

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The above article's length was over 3 ½ columns in the Norfolk News so was a considerable news story!

Whilst watching true life crime programmes on television it would be prudent to wonder if the whole truth is ever known about a crime. The report above does not really answer the questions, "Did Harriet Ann Biggs intend to run away from her mother to be with James Pitcher?", "Was Harriet's mother afraid she would lose her allowance?", "Who was Harriet afraid of most, her mother or Pitcher?", and others.

Was Pitcher innocent or guilty?

Some newspapers which carried stories about the Tharston abduction:

- The Ipswich Journal - Saturday, 7th February, 1880 - Page 7
- Hampshire Telegraph and Naval Chronicle - Saturday, 7th February, 1880 - Page 8
- The Bury and Norwich Post - Tuesday, 10th February, 1880 - Page 6
- Liverpool Mercury - Wednesday, 11th February, 1880 - Page 7
- The Morning Post, Greater London - Thursday, 12th February, 1880 - Page 7
- The Bristol Mercury - Thursday, 12th February, 1880 - Page 2
- The Bristol Mercury - Saturday, 14th February, 1880 - Page 15
- The Lancashire Gazette - Saturday, 14th February, 1880 - Page 2
- Reynold's Newspaper, Greater London - Sunday, 15th February, 1880 - Page 5
- The Bury and Norwich Post - Tuesday, 17th February, 1880 - Page 7
- The Ipswich Journal - Saturday, February 28th, 1880 - Page 5
- The Ipswich Journal - Saturday, July 10th, 1880 - Page 7
- The Norwich Mercury - 7th August, 1880 - Page 6
- The Ipswich Journal - Saturday, August 7th, 1880 - Page 10
- Thetford & Watton Times - 28th February, 1880 - Page 3
- The Observer, Greater London - Sunday, 8th August, 1880 - Page 5
- The Bury and Norwich Post - Tuesday, August 10th, 1880 - Page 7
- The Newcastle Weekly Courant - Friday, 13th August, 1880 - Page 5
- The Yorkshire Herald - Saturday, 7th August, 1880 - Page 5
- The Standard, Greater London - Saturday, 20th November, 1880 - Page 7

The list above is far from all the newspapers that carried this story but does show that this was extensively reported. You can see from the places of publication that the story achieved national interest as well as local.



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