If, for example, I say that had I been in Constitution Square on the third of June 1953, I would have been well-placed to observe a figure similar to that of Queen Elizabeth II waving from the balcony of Buckingham Palace after her coronation, I do not positively assert that such a figure did wave from the balcony, but simply that if one had - and certainly, the day before, Coronation Day, a figure, so similar to that of the young queen that everyone present took it to be hers, did indeed wave from that balcony - I would have been perfectly placed to observe the event. The argument will appear still clearer if I give one further example, and say that if I had been a deputy harbour-master of New York City harbour in 19--., I would have been (health and duty-rosters permitting) exceptionally well-placed to observe the arrival of the 'Titanic' on her maiden voyage from Southampton; here the argument depends on no tricksiness with the word 'similar' - it is unlikely, indeed, that there ever was a ship 'similar' to the 'Titanic', for what ocean-liner of similar design and tonnage ever struck an iceberg and sank on its maiden voyage? Nor does it depend on any careful use of the indefinite article, 'a' and not 'the' bird, for there was only one 'Titanic'. But it is evidently not much if at all weakened by the fact that the 'Titanic' never did reach New York - had it arrived, I say, I would very likely have seen it do so.

To be brief, then, so as not to detain the impatient reader longer than necessary, the matter appears to stand as follows. If Captain Hodges had actually existed, and had not been introduced merely as a narrative convenience; if he had been positioned in the vicinity of the five-bar gate; if it had been a good deal lighter than it was (I mean the evening - the weight of the gate is immaterial); if the captain had been so well-concealed as to escape the notice of the bird (though it will be noticed that the darker the night, the greater the chance of his remaining unobserved, but the lesser the chance of his observing the bird himself) if a bird had emerged out of the sky, floated down, and alighted on the finger-post; if such a bird had been 'similar' to the one seen earlier in the neighbourhood of the farmhouse; if the bird 'seen' earlier had actually existed, and not been simply an invention of the imaginative observer, peering through the farmhouse-window; if the imaginative observer herself (I see her as a woman) had existed, and had not also been introduced as a narrative convenience; if she had indeed been peering into the farmhouse at just the appropriate moment; if the bird, when it perched on the finger-post, had been recognised by the captain as 'similar' to the one he would have been able to observe (given certain additional conditions) had he been, twenty minutes earlier, in the barn loft; if he had not only 'been able' to observe it then, but had actually observed it; if he had managed to cover the distance from the barn to the gate (which involved clambering down a rickety wooden ladder, with two of its rungs missing, as well as running, at his advanced age and in pitch darkness, across an undulating and enclosed terrain) in less than twenty minutes, leaving himself adequate time to conceal himself in the hedgerow; then he 'would have been' most favourably placed to observe the arrival of a small bird, 'similar' to the one he had seen earlier, whose species remains as yet unidentified. But whether or not he would actually have observed it depends of course on a number of further conditions, including whether or not he would have been too exhausted after his cross-country dash to avoid panting so loudly as to alarm the bird, and whether or not he happened to be looking in the right direction, and so on, but none of these factors affect the question of how favourably placed he would have been.

No sooner had the bird alighted on the finger-post and slowly folded its wings, than, with an equal lack of haste, it unfolded them again and ...
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