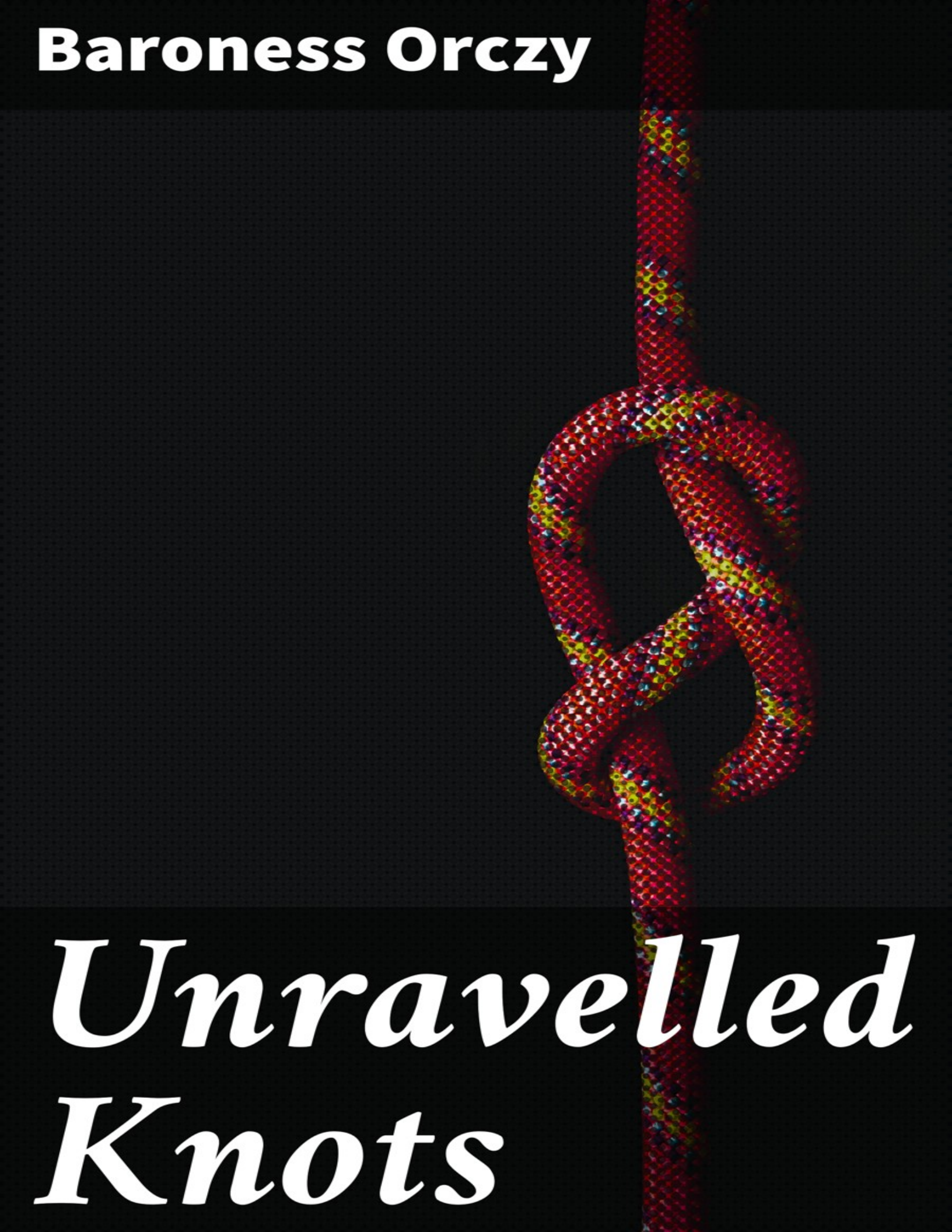
Baroness Orczy



Unravelled Knots

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The Mystery Of The Khaki Tunic

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I cannot pretend to say how it all happened: I can but relate what occurred, leaving those of my friends who are versed in psychic matters to find a plausible explanation for the fact that on that horrible foggy afternoon I chanced to walk into that blameless tea-shop at that particular hour. Now I had not been inside a tea-shop for years and I had practically ceased to think of the Man in the Corner— the weird, spook-like creature with the baggy trousers, the huge horn-rimmed spectacles, and the thin claw-like hands that went on fidgeting, fidgeting, fidgeting, with a piece of string, tying it with nervy deliberation into innumerable and complicated knots.

And yet when I walked into that tea-shop and saw him sitting in the corner by the fire, I was hardly conscious of surprise; but I did not think that he would recognise me. So I sat down at the next table to him, and when I thought that he was most intent on fidgeting with his piece of string, I stole surreptitious glances at him. The last twenty years seemed to have passed him by; he was just the same; his hair was of the same colourless, lank texture and still lay plastered across his bald, pointed cranium, his pale eyes were no paler, his face no more wrinkled, his fingers were just as agile and restless as they had been when I last saw him twenty years ago.

Then all at once he spoke, just as he used to do, in the same cracked voice, with the dry, ironic chuckle.

“One of the most interesting cases it has ever been my good fortune to investigate,” he said.

I had not realised that he had seen me, and I gave such a startled jump that I spilt half a cup of tea on my frock. With a long, bony finger he was pointing to a copy of the *Express Post* which lay beside his plate, and, almost against my will, my eyes wandered to the flaming headline: “The Mystery of the Khaki Tunic.” Then I looked up enquiringly at my pixy-like interlocutor. His watery blue eyes contemplated me through his horn-rimmed spectacles and his thin, colourless lips smiled on me with placid benevolence. It never occurred to me to make a conventional little speech about the lapse of time since last we met; for the moment

I had the feeling as if I had seen him the day before yesterday. “You are still interested in criminology then?” I asked.

“More than ever,” he replied with a bland smile, “and this case has given me some of the most delightful moments I have ever experienced in connection with my studies. I have watched the police committing one blunder after another, and today when they are completely baffled, and the public has started to write letters to the papers about another undetected crime and another criminal at large. I am having the time of my life.”

“Of course you have made up your mind,” I retorted with what I felt was withering sarcasm.

“I have arrived at the only possible solution of the mystery,” he replied unperturbed, “and you will do the

same when I have put the facts clearly and logically before you. As for the police, let ’em flounder,” he went on complacently. “For me it has been an exciting drama, to watch from beginning to end. Every one of the characters in it stands out before me like a clear-cut cameo. There was Miss Mary Clarke, a quiet middle-aged woman who rented ‘Hardacres,’ from Lord Foremeere. She had taken the place soon after the Armistice and ran a poultry farm there on a small scale with the occasional assistance of her brother Arthur, an ex-officer in the East Glebeshires, a young man who had an excellent war record, but who seemed, like so many other young men of his kind, to have fallen into somewhat shiftless and lazy ways since the glorious peace.

“No doubt you know the geography of the place. The halfpenny papers have been full of maps and plans of ‘Hardacres.’ It is rather a lonely house on the road between Langford and Barchester, about three quarters of a mile from Meere village. Meere Court is another half-mile or so further on, the house hidden by clumps of stately trees, above which can be perceived the towers of Barchester Cathedral.

“Very little seems to have been known about Miss Clarke in the neighbourhood; she seemed to be fairly well-to-do and undoubtedly a cut above the village folk; but, equally obviously, she did not belong to the county set. Nor did she encourage visitors, not even the vicar; she seldom went to church, and neither went to parties nor ever asked anyone to tea; she did most of her shopping herself, in Meere, and sold her poultry and eggs to Mr. Brook, the local dealer, who served all the best houses for miles around. Every morning

at seven o’clock a girl from the village named Emily Baker came in to do the housework at ‘Hardacres,’ and left again after the midday dinner. Once a week regularly Miss Clarke called at Meere Court. Always on a Friday. She walked over in the afternoon, whatever the weather, brought a large basket of eggs with her, and was shown without ever being kept waiting, straight into Lady Foremeere’s sitting-room. The interview lasted about ten minutes, sometimes more, and then she would be shown out again.

“Mind you,” the funny creature went on glibly, and raising a, long, pointed finger to emphasise his words, “no one seems to have thought that there was anything mysterious about Miss Clarke. The fact that ‘she kept ’erself to ’erself’ was not in itself a sign of anything odd about her. People, especially women, in outlying country districts, often lead very self-centred lonely lives; they arouse a certain amount of curiosity when they first arrive in the neighbourhood, but after a while gossip dies out, if it is not fed, and the hermit’s estrangements from village life is tacitly accepted.

“On the other hand Miss Clarke’s brother Arthur was exceedingly gregarious. He was a crack tennis player and an excellent dancer, and these two accomplishments procured him the entree into the best houses in the county— houses which, before the war, when people were more fastidious in the choice of their guests, would no doubt have not been quite so freely opened to him.

“It was common gossip that Arthur was deeply in love with April St. Jude, Lord Foremeere’s beautiful daughter by a previous marriage, but public opinion was unanimous in the

assertion that there never could be any question of marriage between an extemporary gentleman without money or property of any kind and the society beauty who had been courted by some of the smartest and richest men in London.

“Nor did Arthur Clarke enjoy the best of reputations in the neighbourhood: he was over fond of betting and loafing about the public-houses of Barchester. People said that he might help his sister in the farm more than he did, seeing that he did not appear to have a sixpence of his own, and that she gave him bed and board; but as he was very good looking and could make himself very agreeable if he chose, the women at any rate smiled at his misdeeds and were content to call Arthur ‘rather wild, but not really a bad boy.’

“Then came the tragedy.

“On the twenty-eighth of December last, when Emily Baker came to work as usual, she was rather surprised not to see or hear Miss Clarke moving about the place. As a rule she was out in the yard by the time Emily arrived; the chickens would have had their hot mash and the empty pans would have been left for Emily to wash up. But this morning nothing. In the girl’s own words, there was a creepy kind of lonely feeling about the house. She knew that Mr. Clarke was not at home. The day before the servants at Meere Court had their annual Christmas party, and Mr. Clarke had been asked to help with the tree and to entertain the children. He had announced his intention of putting up afterwards at the Deanery Hotel for the night, a thing he was rather fond of doing whenever he was asked out to

parties, and did not know what time he might be able to get away.

“Emily when she arrived had found the front door on the latch as usual, therefore— she reflected— Miss Clarke must have been downstairs and drawn the bolts; but where could she be now? Never, never would she have gone out before feeding her chickens, on such a cold morning too!

“At this point Emily gave up reflecting and proceeded to action. She went up to her mistress’s room. It was empty and the bed had not been slept in. Genuinely alarmed now, she ran down again, her next objective being the parlour. The door was, as usual, locked on the outside, but, contrary to precedent, the key was not in the lock; thinking it had dropped out, the girl searched for it, but in vain, and at one moment when she moved the small mat which stood before the door of the locked room she at once became aware of an overpowering smell of gas.

“This proved the death-blow to Emily’s fortitude; she took to her heels and ran out of the house and down the road toward the village, nor did she halt until she came to the local police station, where she gave as coherent an account as she could of the terrible state of things at ‘Hardacres.’

“You will remember that when the police broke open the door of the parlour the first thing they saw was the body of Miss Clarke lying full length on the floor. The poor woman was quite dead, suffocated by the poisonous fumes of gas which was fully turned on in the old-fashioned chandelier above her head. The one window had been carefully latched, and the thick curtains closely drawn together; the chimney had been stuffed up with newspaper and paper

had been thrust into every aperture so as to exclude the slightest possible breath of air. There was a wad of it in the keyhole, and the mat on the landing outside had been carefully arranged against the door with the same sinister object.

“It was clearly a deliberate case of murder; the news spread like wildfire and soon the entire neighbourhood was gloating over a sensation the like of which had not come its way for generations past.”

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“The London evening papers got hold of the story for their noonday edition,” the Man in the Corner went on after a slight pause, “and I, with my passion for the enigmatical and the perplexing, made up my mind then and there to probe the mystery on my own account, because I knew well enough that this was just the sort of case which would send the county police blundering all over the wrong track.

“I arrived at Barchester on the Tuesday in time for the inquest, but nothing of much importance transpired that day. Medical evidence went to prove that the deceased had first been struck on the back of the head by some heavy instrument, a weighted stick or something of the sort, which had no doubt stunned her; but she actually died of poisoning by gas which she had inhaled in large quantities while she was half-conscious. The medical officer went on to say that Miss Clarke must have been dead twelve hours or more when he was called in by the police at about eight o’clock in the morning. After this a couple of neighbours

testified to having seen Miss Clarke at her front door at about half-past five the previous evening. It was a very dark night, if you remember, and a thick Scotch mist was falling. When the neighbours went by, Miss Clarke had apparently just introduced a visitor into her house, the gas was alight in the small hall and they had vaguely perceived the outline of a man or woman, they could not swear which, in a huge coat, standing for a moment immediately behind Miss Clarke; the neighbours also heard Miss Clarke's voice speaking to her visitor, but what she said they could not distinguish. The weather was so atrocious that everyone who was abroad that night hurried along without taking much notice of what went on around.

"Evidence of a more or less formal character followed and the inquest was then adjourned until the Friday, everyone going away with the feeling that sensational developments were already in the air.

"And the developments came tumbling in thick and fast, To begin with, it appears that Arthur Clarke, when first questioned by the police, had made a somewhat lame statement.

'"I was asked,' he said, 'to help with the servants' Christmas party at Meere Court. I walked over to Barchester at about three o'clock in the afternoon, with my suitcase, as I was going to spend the night at the Deanery Hotel. I went on to Meere Court soon after half-past three, and stayed until past seven, after which I walked back to the Deanery, had some dinner and went early to bed. I never knew that anything had happened to my sister until the police

telephoned to me soon after eight o’clock the next morning. And,’ he added, ‘that’s all about it.’

“But it certainly was not ‘all about it’, because several of the servants at Meere Court who were asked at what time Mr. Clarke went away that night, said that he must have gone very soon after five o’clock. They all finished their tea about that time, and then the gramophone was set going for dancing; they were quite sure that they had not seen Mr. Clarke after that. On the other hand Miss St. Jude said that the servants were mistaken: they were far too deeply engrossed in their own amusements to be at all reliable in their statements. As a matter of fact Mr. Clarke went away, as he said, at about seven o’clock; she herself had danced with him most of the time, and said good night to him in the hall at a few minutes after seven.

“Here was a neat little complication, do you see? A direct conflict of evidence at the very outset of this mysterious case. Can you wonder that amateur detectives already shrugged their shoulders and raised their eyebrows, declaring that the Honourable April St. Jude was obviously in love with Arthur Clarke and was trying to shield him, well knowing that he had something to hide.

“Of course the police themselves were very reticent, but even they could not stop people from gossiping. And gossip, I can assure you, had enough and to spare to feed on. At first, of course, the crime had seemed entirely motiveless. The deceased had not an enemy or, as far as that goes, many acquaintances in the world. In the drawer of the desk, in the parlour, the sum of twenty pounds odd in notes and cash was found, and in a little box by the side of the money

poor Mary Clarke's little bits of jewellery. But twenty-four hours later no one could remain in doubt as to the assassin's purpose. You will remember that on the day following the adjourned inquest there had arrived from the depths of Yorkshire an old sister of the deceased, a respectable spinster, to whom Arthur himself, it seems, had communicated the terrible news. She had come to Barchester for the funeral. This elder Miss Clarke, Euphemia by name, though she could not say much that was informative, did at any rate throw light upon one dark passage in her sister's history.

"'For the past four years,' she told the police, 'my sister had an allowance of £4 a week from a member of the aristocracy. I did not know much about her affairs, but I do know that she had a packet of letters on which she set great store. What these letters were I have not the slightest idea, nor do I know what Mary ultimately did with them. On one occasion, before she was actually settled at "Hardacres," she met me in London and asked me to take care of this packet for her, and she told me then that they were very valuable. I also know that she and my brother Arthur had most heated arguments together on the subject of these letters. Arthur was always wanting her to give them up to him and she always refused. On one occasion she told me that she could, if she wanted, sell that packet of letters for five thousand pounds. "Why on earth don't you?" I asked her. But she replied: "Oh, Arthur would only get the money out of me. It's better as it is."'

"This story, as you may well imagine, gave food enough for gossip; at once a romance was woven of blackmail and

drama of love and passion, whilst the name of a certain great lady in the neighbourhood, to whom Miss Clarke had been in the habit of paying mysterious weekly visits, was already on everybody's lips.

"And then the climax came. By evening it had transpired that in Arthur Clarke's room at 'Hardacres' the police had found an old khaki tunic stuffed away at the bottom of a drawer, and in the pocket of the tunic the key of the locked parlour door. It was an officer's tunic, which had at some time had its buttons and badges taken off; its right sleeve was so torn that it was nearly out of its arm hole; the cuff was all crumpled as if it had been crushed in a damp, hot hand, and there was a small piece of the cloth torn clean out of it. And— I will leave you to guess the importance of this fact— in the tightly-clenched hand of the murdered woman was found the small piece of khaki cloth which corresponded to a hair's breadth with the missing bit in the sleeve of the tunic.

"After that the man in the street shook his head and declared that Arthur Clarke was as good as hung already."

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The Man in the Corner had drawn out of his capacious pocket a fresh piece of string. And now his claw-like fingers started to work on it with feverish intentness. I watched him, fascinated, well knowing that his keen mind was just as busy with the problem of the "Hardacres" mystery as were his hands in the fashioning of some intricate and complicated knot.

“I am not,” he said after a while, “going to give you an elaborate description of the inquest and of the crowds that collected both inside and out of the court room, hoping to get a glimpse of the principal actors in the exciting drama. By now, of course, all those who had talked of the crime being without apparent motive had effectually been silenced. To every amateur detective, as well as to the professional, the murderer and his nefarious object appeared absolutely revealed to the light of day. Every indication, every scrap of evidence collected up to this hour, both direct and circumstantial, pointed to Arthur Clarke as the murderer of his sister. There were the letters, which were alleged to be worth five thousand pounds to the mysterious member of the aristocracy who was paying Miss Clarke a weekly pittance, obviously in order to silence her; there was the strong love motive— the young man in love with the girl far above him in station and wanting to get hold of a large sum of money in order, no doubt, to embark on some profitable business which might help him in his wooing; and there, above all, was the damning bit of khaki cloth in the murdered woman’s hand, and the tunic with the key of the locked door in its pocket found in a drawer in Clarke’s own room. No, indeed, the inquest was not likely to be a dull affair, more especially as no one doubted what the verdict would be, whilst a good many people anticipated that Clarke would at once be arrested on the coroner’s warrant and committed for trial at the next assizes on the capital charge.

“But though we all knew that the inquest would not be dull, yet we were not prepared for the surprises which were

in store for us, and which will render that inquest a memorable one in the annals of criminal investigation. To begin with we already knew that Arthur Clarke had now the assistance of Mr. Markham, one of the leading solicitors of Barchester, in his difficult position. Acting on that gentleman's advice Clarke had amplified the statement which he had originally made as to his movements on the fatal afternoon. This amplified statement he now reiterated on oath, and though frankly no one believed him, we were bound to admit that if he could substantiate it, an extraordinary complication would arise, which though it might not eventually clear him altogether, in the minds of thinking people, would at any rate give him the benefit of the doubt. What he now stated was in substance this:

"'The servants at Meere Court,' he said, 'are quite right when they say that I left the party soon after five o'clock. I was rather tired, and after a last dance with Miss St. Jude I went upstairs to pay my respects to Lady Foremeere. Her ladyship, however, kept me talking for some considerable time on one subject and then another, until, to my astonishment, I saw that it was close on seven o'clock, when I hastily took my leave. While I was looking for my coat in the hall I remember that Lord Foremeere came out of the smoking-room and asked me if I knew whether the party downstairs had broken up. "These things are such a bore," he said, "but I will see if I can get one of them to come up and show you out." I told his lordship not to trouble; however, he rang the bell, and presently the butler, Spinks, came through from the servants' quarters, and his lordship then went upstairs I think. A minute or two later Miss St.

Jude came, also from the servants' quarters; she sent Spinks away telling him that she would look after me; we then talked together for a few moments and then I said good night and went straight back to the hotel.'

"Now we had already learned from both the hall-porter and the head-waiter at the Deanery that Mr. Clarke was back at the hotel soon after seven o'clock, that he had his dinner in the restaurant at half-past, and that after spending an hour or so in the lounge after dinner he went up to his room and did not go out again until the following morning. Therefore all that was needed now was a confirmatory statement from Lady Foremeere to prove Arthur Clarke's innocence, because in that case every hour of his time would be accounted for, from half-past three onwards, whilst Miss Clarke was actually seen alive by two neighbours when she introduced a visitor into her house at half-past five.

"The question would then resolve itself into, who was that visitor? leaving the more important one of the khaki tunic a baffling mystery, rather than a damning evidence.

"The entire court room was on the tiptoe of expectation when Lady Foremeere was formally called. I can assure you that the ubiquitous pin could have been heard to drop during the brief moment's silence when the elegant society woman stood up and disposed her exquisite sable cape about her shoulders and then swore to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

"She answered the coroner's questions in a dear, audible voice, and never wavered in her assertions. She said that her step-daughter had come up to her boudoir and asked

her if she would see Mr. Arthur Clarke for a few moments; he had something very important to say to her.

“‘I was rather surprised at the strange request,’ Lady Foremeere continued with utmost composure, ‘and suggested that Mr. Clarke should make his important communication to Lord Foremeere, but my step-daughter insisted and to please her I agreed. I thought that I would get my husband to be present at this mysterious interview, but his lordship was having a short rest in the smoking-room, so on second consideration I decided not to disturb him. A minute or two later Mr.— er— Clarke presented himself and at once I realised that he had had too much to drink. He talked wildly about his desire to marry Miss St. Jude and very excitedly about some compromising letters which he alleged were in his possession and which he threatened to show to Lord Foremeere, if I did not at once give him so many thousand pounds. Naturally I ordered him out of the place, but he wouldn’t go for a long time; he got more and more incoherent and excited and it was not until I threatened to fetch Lord Foremeere immediately that he sobered down and finally I went away. He had been in my room about half an hour.’

“‘About half an hour?’” was the coroner’s earnest comment on this amazing piece of evidence, ‘but Mr. Clarke said that when he left your ladyship it was close on seven.’

‘“Mr.— er— Clarke is in error,’ her ladyship asserted firmly. ‘The clock had just struck half-past five when I succeeded in ridding myself of him.’

“You can easily imagine how great was the excitement at this moment and how intensified it became when Lord

Foremeere gave evidence in his turn and further confused the issues. He began by corroborating Arthur Clarke's statement about his having spoken to him in the hall at seven o'clock. It was almost unbelievable! Everybody gasped and the coroner almost gave a jump:

"'But her ladyship has just told us,' he said, 'that Clarke left her at half-past five!'

"'That, no doubt, is accurate,' Lord Foremeere rejoined in his stiff, prim manner, 'since her ladyship said so. All I know is that I was asleep in front of the fire in the smoking-room when I heard a loud bang issuing from the hall. I went to see what it was and there I certainly saw Clarke. He was just coming through the glass door which divides the outside vestibule from the hall, and he appeared to me to have come straight out of the wet and to have left his hat and coat in the outer vestibule.'

"'But,' the coroner insisted, 'what made your lordship think that he had come from outside?'

"'Well, for one thing his face and hands were quite wet and he was wiping them with his handkerchief when I first caught sight of him. His boots too were wet and so were the edges of his trousers, and then, as I said, he was coming into the hall from the outer vestibule, and it was the banging of the front door which had roused me.'

"'And the hour then was?'

"'The clock had not long since struck seven. But my butler will be able to confirm this.'

"And Spinks the butler did confirm this portion of his lordship's statement, though he could say nothing about Mr. Clarke's boots being wet; nor did he help Mr. Clarke on with

his coat and hat, or open the door for him. Miss St. Jude had practically followed Spinks into the hall, and had at once dismissed him, saying she would look after Mr. Clarke. His lordship in the meanwhile had gone upstairs and Spinks went back into the servants' hall.

"Of course Miss St. Jude was called. You remember that she had previously stated that Clarke had only left the party at about seven o'clock, that she herself had danced with him most of the time until then, and finally said goodbye to him in the hall. But as this statement was not even corroborated by Clarke's own assertions and entirely contradicted by both Lord and Lady Foremeere's evidence, she was fortunately advised not to repeat it on oath. But she hotly denied the suggestion that Clarke had come in from outside when she said goodbye to him in the hall. She saw him put on his hat and coat and they were quite dry. But nobody felt that her evidence was of any value because she would naturally do her utmost to help her sweetheart.

"Finally, one of the most interesting moments in that memorable enquiry was reached when Lady Foremeere was recalled and asked to state what she knew of Miss Clarke's antecedents.

"'Very little,' she replied. 'I only knew her in France when she worked under me in a hospital. I was very ill at one time and she nursed me devotedly; ever since that I helped her financially as much as I could.'

"'You made her a weekly allowance?' her ladyship was asked.

"'Not exactly,' she replied. 'I just bought her eggs and poultry at a higher figure than she would get from any one

else.’

“‘Do you know anything about some letters that she thought were so valuable?’

“‘Oh, yes!’ the lady replied with a kindly smile. ‘Mary had a collection of autograph letters which she had collected whilst she was nursing in France. Among them were some by august, and others by very distinguished personages. She had the idea that these were extraordinarily valuable.’

“‘Do you know what became of those letters?’

“‘No,’ her ladyship replied,’ I do not know.’

“‘But there were other letters, were there not?’ the coroner insisted, ‘in which you yourself were interested? The ones Mr. Clarke spoke to you about?’

“‘They existed only in Mr. Clarke’s imagination, I fancy,’ Lady Foremeere replied; ‘but he was in such a highly excited state that afternoon that I really could not quite make out what it was that he desired to sell to me.’

“Lady Foremeere spoke very quietly and very simply, without a single note of spite or acerbity in her soft, musical voice. One felt that she was stating quite simple facts that rather bored her, but to which she did not attach any importance. And later on when Miss Euphemia Clarke retold the story of the packet of letters and of the quarrels which the deceased and her brother had about them, and when the damning evidence of the khaki tunic stood out like an avenging Nemesis pointing at the unfortunate young man, those in court who had imagination saw— positively saw— the hangman’s rope tightening around his neck.

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“And yet the verdict was one of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown,” I said, after a slight pause, waiting for the funny creature to take up his narrative again.

“Yes,” he replied, “Arthur Clarke has been cleared of every suspicion. He left the court a free man. His innocence was proved beyond question through what everyone thought was the most damnatory piece of evidence against him— the evidence of the khaki tunic. The khaki tunic exonerated Arthur Clarke as completely as the most skilful defender could do. Because if did not fit him. Arthur Clarke was a rather heavy, full grown, broad-shouldered man, the khaki tunic would only fit a slim lad of eighteen. Clarke had admitted the tunic was his, but he had never thought of examining it, and certainly not of trying it on. It was Miss St. Jude who thought of that. Trust a woman in love for getting an inspiration.

“When she was called at the end of the day to affirm the statements which she had previously made to the police and realised that these statements of hers were actually in contradiction with Clarke’s own assertions, she worked herself up into at state bordering on hysteria, in the midst of which she caught sight of the khaki tunic on the coroner’s table. Of course she, like every one else in the neighbourhood, knew all about the tunic, but when April St. Jude actually saw it with her own eyes and realised what its existence meant to her sweetheart she gave a wild shriek.

“‘I’ll not believe it,’ she cried, ‘I’ll not believe it. It can’t be. It is not Arthur’s tunic at all.’ Then her eyes dilated, her

voice sank to a hoarse whisper, and with a trembling hand she pointed at the tunic: ‘Why,’ she murmured, ‘it is so small, so small! Arthur! Where is Arthur! Why does he not show them all that he never could have worn that tunic?’

“Proverbially there is but a narrow dividing line between tragedy and farce: while some people shuddered and gasped and men literally held their breath, marvelling what would happen next, quite a number of women fell into hysterical giggling. Of course you remember what happened. The papers have told you all about it. Arthur Clarke was made to try on the khaki tunic and he could not even get his arms into the sleeves. Under no circumstances could he ever have worn that particular tunic. It was several sizes too small for him. Then he examined it closely and recognised it as one he wore in his school O.T.C when he was a lad. When he was originally confronted with it, he explained he was so upset, so genuinely terrified at the consequences of certain follies which he undoubtedly had committed, that he could hardly see out of his eyes. The tunic was shown to him and he had admitted that it was his, for he had quite a collection of old tunics which he had always kept. But for the moment he had quite forgotten about the one which he had worn more than eight years ago at school.

“And so the khaki tunic, instead of condemning Clarke had entirely cleared him, for it now became quite evident that the miscreant who had committed the dastardly murder had added this hideous act to his greater crime, and deliberately set to work to fasten the guilt on an innocent man. He had gone up to Clarke’s room, opened the

wardrobe, picked up a likely garment, no doubt tearing a piece of cloth out of it whilst so doing, and thus getting the fiendish idea of inserting that piece of khaki between the fingers of the murdered woman. Finally, after locking the parlour door, he put the key in the pocket of the tunic and stuffed the latter in the bottom of a drawer.

“It was a clever and cruel trick which well nigh succeeded in hanging an innocent man. As it is, it has enveloped the affair in an almost impenetrable mystery. I say ‘almost’ because I know who killed Miss Clarke, even though the public has thrown out an erroneous conjecture. ‘It was Lady Foremeere,’ they say, ‘who killed Miss Clarke.’ But at once comes the question:

‘How could she?’ And the query: ‘When?’ Arthur Clarke says he was with her until seven, and after that hour there were several members of her household who waited upon her, notably her maid who it seems came up to dress her at about that time, and she and Lord Foremeere sat down to dinner as usual at eight o’clock.

“That there had been one or two dark passages in Lady Foremeere’s life, prior to her marriage four years ago, and that Miss Clarke was murdered for the sake of letters which were in some way connected with her ladyship were the only actual undisputable facts in that mysterious case. That it was not Arthur Clarke who killed his sister has been indubitably proved; that a great deal of the evidence was contradictory every one has admitted. And if the police does not act on certain suggestions which I have made to them, the ‘Hardacres’ murder will remain a mystery to the public to the end of time.

“‘And what are these suggestions?’ I asked, without the slightest vestige of irony, for, much against my will, the man’s personality exercised a curious fascination over me.

“To keep an eye on Lord Foremeere,” the funny creature replied with his dry chuckle, “and see when and how he finally disposes of a wet coat, a dripping hat and soaked boots which he has succeeded in keeping concealed somewhere in the smoking-room, away from the prying eyes even of his own valet.”

“‘You mean—?’ I asked, with an involuntary gasp.

“Yes,” he replied. “I mean that it was Lord Foremeere who murdered Miss Clarke for the sake of those letters which apparently contained matter that was highly compromising to his wife. Everything to my mind points to him as the murderer. Whether he knew all along of the existence of the compromising letters, or whether he first knew of this through the conversation between her ladyship and Clarke the day of the servants’ party, it is impossible to say; certain it is that he did overhear that conversation and that he made up his mind to end the impossible situation then and there, and to put a stop once and for all to any further attempt at blackmail. It was easy enough for him on that day to pass in and out of the house unperceived. No doubt his primary object in going to ‘Hardacres’ was to purchase the letters from Miss Clarke, money down; perhaps she proved obstinate, perhaps he merely thought that dead men tell no tales. This we shall never know. After the hideous deed, which must have revolted his otherwise fastidious senses, he must have become conscious of an overwhelming hatred for the man who had, as it were,

pushed him into crime, and my belief is that the elaborate *mise en scene* of the khaki tunic, and the circumstantial lie that when he came out of the smoking-room Arthur Clarke had obviously just come in from outside was invented not so much with the object of averting any suspicion from himself as with the passionate desire to be revenged on Clarke.

“Think it over,” the Man in the Corner concluded, as he stuffed his beloved bit of string into his capacious pocket; “time, opportunity, motive, all are in favour of my theory, so do not be surprised if the early editions of tomorrow’s evening papers contain the final sensation in this interesting case.”

He was gone before I could say another word, and all that I saw of him was his spook-like figure disappearing through the swing door. There was no one now in the place, so a moment or two later I too paid my bill and went away.

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The Man in the Corner proved to be right in the end. At eleven o’clock the next morning the street corners were full of newspaper placards with the flaring headlines: “Sudden death of Lord Foremeere.” It was reported that on the previous evening his lordship was examining a new automatic which he had just bought and explaining the mechanism to his valet. At one moment he actually made the remark: “It is all right, it isn’t loaded,” but apparently there was one cartridge left in one of the chambers. His lordship, it seems, was looking straight down the barrel and his finger must accidentally have touched the trigger;

anyway, according to the valet’s story, there was a sudden explosion, and Lord Foremeere fell, shot right between the eyes.

The verdict at the inquest was of course one of accidental death, the coroner and jury expressing the greatest possible sympathy with Lady Foremeere and Miss St. Jude. It was only subsequently that one or two facts came to light which appeared obscure and unimportant to the man in the street, but which for me, in the light of my conversation with the Man in the Corner, bore earnest significance.

It seems that an hour or two before the accident, the chief superintendent of police had called with two constables at Meere Court and was closeted for a considerable time with Lord Foremeere in the smoking-room. And Spinks, the butler, who subsequently let the three men out, noticed that one of the constables was carrying a coat and a hat, which Spinks knew were old ones belonging to his lordship.

Then I knew that the funny creature in the loud check tweeds and baggy trousers had found the true solution of the ‘Hardacres’ mystery.

Oh, and you wish to know what was the sequel to the pretty love story between April St. Jude and Arthur Clarke. Well, you know, she married Amos Rottenberg, the New York banker last year, and Clarke runs a successful garage now somewhere in the North. A kind friend must have lent him the capital wherewith to make a start. I can make a shrewd guess who that kind friend was.

The Mystery Of The Ingres Masterpiece

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I did not see the Man in the Corner for several weeks after that strange meeting in the blameless tea-shop. The exigencies of my work kept me busy, and somehow the sensational suicide of Lord Foremeere which had appeared like the logical sequence of the spook-like creature's deductions, had left a painful impression on my mind. Entirely illogically, I admit, I felt that the Man in the Corner had had something to do with the tragedy.

But when in March of that year we were all thrilled by the mystery of the valuable Ingres picture, and wherever one went one heard conjectures and explanations of that extraordinary case, my thoughts very naturally reverted to the funny creature and his bit of string, and I found myself often wondering what his explanation of what seemed a truly impenetrable mystery could possibly be.

The facts certainly were very puzzling in themselves. When first I was deputed by the *Express Post* to put them clearly and succinctly before its readers, I found the task strangely difficult; this, for the simple reason that I myself could not see daylight through it all, and often did I stand in front of the admirable reproduction which I possess of the Ingres "La Fiancee" wondering if those smiling lips would not presently speak and tell me how an original and exquisite

picture could possibly have been in two different places at one and the same time.

For that, in truth, was the depth of the puzzle. We will, if you please, call the original owners of the picture the Duke and Duchess Paul de Rochechouart. That, of course, is not their name, but, as you all know what they really are, it matters not what I call them for the purpose of recording their singular adventure.

His Grace had early in life married a Swedish lady of great talent and singular beauty. She was an artist of no mean order, having exhibited pictures of merit both at the Paris Salon and at the Royal Academy in London; she was also an accomplished musician, and had published one or two very charming volumes of poetry.

The Duke and his wife were devoted to one another; they lived for the greater part of the year at their beautiful chateau on the Oise, not far from Chantilly, and here they entertained a great deal, more after the homely and hospitable manner of English country houses than in the more formal foreign fashion. Here, too, they had collected some rare furniture, tapestries, and objects of art and vertu, amongst which certain highly-prized pictures of the French School of the Nineteenth Century.

The war, we may imagine, left the Duc de Rochechouart and his charming wife a good deal poorer, as it left most other people in France, and soon it became known amongst the art dealers of London, Paris and New York that they had decided to sell one or two of their most valuable pictures; foremost amongst these was the celebrated “La Fiancee” by Ingres.