Baroness Orczy

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338088307

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The man in the corner was watching me over the top of his great bone-rimmed spectacles.

“Well?” he asked, after a little while.

“Well?” I repeated with some acerbity. I had been wondering for the last ten minutes how many more knots he would manage to make in that same bit of string, before he actually started undoing them again.

“Do I fidget you?” he asked apologetically, whilst his long bony fingers buried themselves, string, knots, and all, into the capacious pockets of his magnificent tweed ulster.

“Yes, that is another awful tragedy,” he said quietly, after a while. “Lady doctors are having a pretty bad time of it just now.”

This was only his usual habit of speaking in response to my thoughts. There was no doubt that at the present moment my mind was filled with that extraordinary mystery which was setting all Scotland Yard by the ears, and had completely thrown into the shade the sad story of Miss Hickman’s tragic fate.

The Daily Telegraph had printed two columns headed “Murder or Suicide?” on the subject of the mysterious death of Miss Elliott, matron of the Convalescent Home, in Suffolk Avenue— and I must confess that a more profound and bewildering mystery had never been set before our able detective department.

“It has puzzled them this time, and no mistake,” said the man in the corner, with one of his most gruesome chuckles,

“but I dare say the public is quite satisfied that there is no solution to be found, since the police have found none.”

“Can you find one?” I retorted with withering sarcasm.

“Oh, my solution would only be sneered at,” he replied. “It is far too simple— and yet how logical! There was Miss Elliott, a good-looking, youngish, ladylike woman, fully qualified in the medical profession and in charge of the Convalescent Home in Suffolk Avenue, which is a private institution largely patronized by the benevolent.

“For some time, already, there had appeared vague comments and rumours in various papers, that the extensive charitable contributions did not all go towards the upkeep of the Home. But, as is usual in institutions of that sort, the public was not allowed to know anything very definite, and contributions continued to flow in, whilst the Honorary Treasurer of the great Convalescent Home kept up his beautiful house in Hamilton Terrace, in a style which would not have shamed a peer of the realm.

“That is how matters stood, when on 2nd November last the morning papers contained the brief announcement that at a quarter past midnight two workmen walking along Blomfield Road, Maida Vale, suddenly came across the body of a young lady, lying on her face, close to the wooden steps of the narrow footbridge which at this point crosses the canal.

“This part of Maida Vale is, as you know, very lonely at all times, but at night it is usually quite deserted. Blomfield Road, with its row of small houses and bits of front gardens, faces the canal, and beyond the footbridge is continued in a series of small riverside wharves, which is practically

unknown ground to the average Londoner. The footbridge itself, with steps at right angles and high wooden parapet, would offer excellent shelter at all hours of the night for any nefarious deed.

“It was within its shadows that the men had found the body, and to their credit, be it said, they behaved like good and dutiful citizens— one of them went off in search of the police, whilst the other remained beside the corpse.

“From papers and books found upon her person, it was soon ascertained that the deceased was Miss Elliott, the young matron of the Suffolk Avenue Convalescent Home; and as she was very popular in her profession and had a great many friends, the terrible tragedy caused a sensation, all the more acute as very quickly the rumour gained ground that the unfortunate young woman had taken her own life in a most gruesome and mysterious manner.

“Preliminary medical and police investigation had revealed the fact that Miss Elliott had died through a deep and scientifically administered gash in the throat, whilst the surgical knife with which the deadly wound was inflicted still lay tightly grasped in her clenched hand.”

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The man in the corner, ever conscious of any effect he produced upon my excited imagination, had paused for a while, giving me time, as it were, to co-ordinate in my mind the few simple facts he had put before me. I had no wish to make a remark, knowing of old that my one chance of

getting the whole of his interesting argument was to offer neither comment nor contradiction.

“When a young, good-looking woman in the heyday of her success in an interesting profession,” he began at last, “is alleged to have committed suicide, the outside public immediately want to know the reason why she did such a thing, and a kind of freemasonic, amateur detective work goes on, which generally brings a few important truths to light. Thus, in the case of Miss Elliott, certain facts had begun to leak out, even before the inquest, with its many sensational developments. Rumours concerning the internal administration, or rather maladministration of the Home began to take more definite form.

“That its finances had been in a very shaky condition for some time was known to all those who were interested in its welfare. What was not so universally known was that few hospitals had had more munificent donations and subscriptions showered upon them in recent years, and yet it was openly spoken of by all the nurses that Miss Elliott had on more than one occasion petitioned for actual necessities for the patients— necessities which were denied to her on the plea of necessary economy.

“The Convalescent Home was, as sometimes happens in institutions of this sort, under the control of a committee of benevolent and fashionable people who understood nothing about business, and less still about the management of a hospital. Dr Kinnaird, president of the institution, was a young, eminently successful consultant; he had recently married the daughter of a peer, who had boundless ambitions for herself and her husband.

“Dr Kinnaird, by adding the prestige of his name to the Home, no doubt felt that he had done enough for its welfare. Against that, Dr Stapylton, honorary secretary and treasurer of the Home, threw himself heart and soul into the work connected with it, and gave a great deal of his time to it. All subscriptions and donations went, of course, through his hands, the benevolent and fashionable committee being only too willing to shift all their financial responsibilities on to his willing shoulders. He was a very popular man in society— a bachelor with a magnificent house in Hamilton Terrace, where he entertained the more eminent and fashionable clique in his own profession.

“It was the evening papers, however, which contained the most sensational development of this tragic case. It appears that on the Saturday afternoon Mary Dawson, one of the nurses in the Home, was going to the house surgeon’s office with a message from the head nurse, when her attention was suddenly arrested in one of the passages by the sound of loud voices proceeding from one of the rooms. She paused to listen for a moment, and at once recognized the voices of Miss Elliott and of Dr Stapylton, the honorary treasurer and chairman of committee.

“The subject of conversation was evidently that of the eternal question of finance. Miss Elliott spoke very indignantly, and Nurse Dawson caught the words:

“‘Surely you must agree with me that Dr Kinnaird ought to be informed at once.’

“Dr Stapylton’s voice in reply seems to have been at first bitingly sarcastic, then threatening. Dawson heard nothing more after that, and went on to deliver her message. On her

way back she stopped in the passage again, and tried to listen. This time it seemed to her as if she could hear the sound of someone crying bitterly, and Dr Stapylton's voice speaking very gently.

"'You may be right, Nellie,' he was saying. 'At any rate, wait a few days before telling Kinnaird. You know what he is — he'll make a frightful fuss and —'

"Whereupon Miss Elliott interrupted him.

"'It isn't fair to Dr Kinnaird to keep him in ignorance any longer. Whoever the thief may be it is your duty or mine to expose him, and if necessary bring him to justice.'

"There was a good deal of discussion at the time, if you remember, as to whether Nurse Dawson had overheard and repeated this speech accurately: whether, in point of fact, Miss Elliott had used the words '*or* mine' or '*and* mine'. You see the neat little point, don't you?" continued the man in the corner. "The little word 'and' would imply that she considered herself at one with Dr Stapylton in the matter, but 'or' would mean that she was resolved to act alone if he refused to join her in unmasking the thief.

"All these facts, as I remarked before, had leaked out, as such facts have a way of doing. No wonder, therefore, that on the day fixed for the inquest the coroner's court was filled to overflowing, both with the public— ever eager for new sensations— and with the many friends of the deceased lady, among whom young medical students of both sexes and nurses in uniform were most conspicuous.

"I was there early, and therefore had a good seat, from which I could comfortably watch the various actors in the drama about to be performed. People who seemed to be in

the know pointed out various personages to one another, and it was a matter of note that, in spite of professional engagements, the members of the staff of the Convalescent Home were present in full force and stayed on almost the whole time. The personages who chiefly arrested my attention were, firstly, Dr Kinnaird, a good-looking Irishman of about forty, and president of the institution; also Dr Earnshaw, a rising young consultant, with boundless belief in himself written all over his pleasant rubicund countenance.

“The expert medical evidence was once again thoroughly gone into. There was absolutely no doubt that Miss Elliott had died from having her throat cut with the surgical knife which was found grasped in her right hand. There were absolutely no signs of a personal struggle in the immediate vicinity of the body, and rigid examination proved that there was no other mark of violence upon the body; there was nothing, therefore, to prove that the poor girl had not committed suicide in a moment of mental aberration or of great personal grief.

“Of course, it was strange that she should have chosen this curious mode of taking her own life. She had access to all kinds of poisons, amongst which her medical knowledge could prompt her to choose the least painful and most efficacious ones. Therefore, to have walked out on a Sunday night to a wretched and unfrequented spot, and there committed suicide in that grim fashion seemed almost the work of a mad woman. And yet the evidence of her family and friends all tended to prove that Miss Elliott was a peculiarly sane, large-minded, and happy individual.

“However, the suicide theory was at this stage of the proceedings taken as being absolutely established, and when Police Constable Fiske came forward to give his evidence no one in the court was prepared for a statement which suddenly revealed this case to be as mysterious as it was tragic.

“Fiske’s story was this: close upon midnight on that memorable Sunday night he was walking down Blomfield Road along the side of the canal and towards the footbridge, when he overtook a lady and gentleman who were walking in the same direction as himself. He turned to look at them, and noticed that the gentleman was in evening dress and wore a high hat, and that the lady was crying.

“Blomfield Road is at best very badly lighted, especially on the side next to the canal, where there are no lamps at all. Fiske, however, was prepared to swear positively that the lady was the deceased. As for the gentleman, he might know him again or he might not.

“Fiske then crossed the footbridge, and walked on towards the Harrow Road. As he did so, he heard St Mary Magdalen’s church clock chime the hour of midnight. It was a quarter of an hour after that that the body of the unfortunate girl was found, and clasping in her hand the knife with which that awful deed had been done. By whom? Was it really by her own self? But if so, why did not that man in evening dress who had last seen her alive come forward and throw some light upon this fast thickening veil of mystery?

“It was Mr James Elliott, brother of the deceased, however, who first mentioned a name then in open court,

which has ever since in the minds of everyone been associated with Miss Elliott's tragic fate.

"He was speaking in answer to a question of the coroner's anent his sister's disposition and recent frame of mind.

"'She was always extremely cheerful,' he said, 'but recently had been peculiarly bright and happy. I understood from her that this was because she believed that a man for whom she had a great regard was also very much attached to her, and meant to ask her to be his wife.'

"'And do you know who this man was?' asked the coroner.

"'Oh yes,' replied Mr Elliott, 'it was Dr Stapylton.'

"Everyone had expected that name, of course, for everyone remembered Nurse Dawson's story, yet when it came, there crept over all those present an indescribable feeling that something terrible was impending.

"'Is Dr Stapylton here?'

"But Dr Stapylton had sent an excuse. A professional case of the utmost urgency had kept him at a patient's bedside. But Dr Kinnaird, the president of the institution, came forward.

"Questioned by the coroner, Dr Kinnaird, however, who evidently had a great regard for his colleague, repudiated any idea that the funds of the institution had ever been tampered with by the Treasurer.

"'The very suggestion of such a thing,' he said, 'was an outrage upon one of the most brilliant men in the profession.'

“He further added that, although he knew that Dr Stapylton thought very highly of Miss Elliott, he did not think that there was any actual engagement, and most decidedly he (Dr Kinnaird) had heard nothing of any disagreement between them.

“‘Then did Dr Stapylton never tell you that Miss Elliott had often chafed under the extraordinary economy practised in the richly endowed Home?’ asked the coroner again.

“‘No,’ replied Dr Kinnaird.

“‘Was not that rather strange reticence?’

“‘Certainly not. I am only the Honorary President of the institution— Stapylton has chief control of its finances.’

“‘Ah!’ remarked the coroner blandly.

“However, it was clearly no business of his at this moment to enter into the financial affairs of the Home. His duty at this point was to try and find out if Dr Stapylton and the man in evening dress were one and the same person.

“The men who found the body testified to the hour: a quarter past midnight. As Fiske had seen the unfortunate girl alive a little before twelve, she must have been murdered or had committed suicide between midnight and a quarter past. But there was something more to come.

“How strange and dramatic it all was!” continued the man in the corner, with a bland smile, altogether out of keeping with the poignancy of his narrative; “all these people in that crowded court trying to reconstruct the last chapter of that bright young matron’s life and then— but I must not anticipate.

“One more witness was to be heard— one whom the police, with a totally unconscious sense of what is dramatic, had reserved for the last. This was Dr Earnshaw, one of the staff of the Convalescent Home. His evidence was very short, but of deeply momentous import. He explained that he had consulting rooms in Weymouth Street, but resided in Westbourne Square. On Sunday, 1st November, he had been dining out in Maida Vale, and returning home a little before midnight saw a woman standing close by the steps of the footbridge in the Blomfield Road.

“‘I had been coming down Formosa Street and had not specially taken notice of her, when just as I reached the corner of Blomfield Road, she was joined by a man in evening dress and high hat. Then I crossed the road, and recognized both Miss Elliott and —’

“The young doctor paused, almost as if hesitating before the enormity of what he was about to say, whilst the excitement in court became almost painful.

“‘And —?’ urged the coroner.

“‘And Dr Stapylton,’ said Dr Earnshaw at last, almost under his breath.

“‘You are quite sure?’ asked the coroner.

“‘Absolutely positive. I spoke to them both, and they spoke to me.’

“‘What did you say?’

“‘Oh, the usual, “Hello, Staplyton!” to which he replied, “Hello!” I then said “Good night” to them both, and Miss Elliott also said “Good night.” I saw her face more clearly then, and thought that she looked very tearful and unhappy,

and Stapylton looked ill-tempered. I wondered why they had chosen that unhallowed spot for a midnight walk.’

“‘And you say the hour was —?’ asked the coroner.

“‘Ten minutes to twelve. I looked at my watch as I crossed the footbridge, and had heard a quarter to twelve strike five minutes before.’

“Then it was that the coroner adjourned the inquest. Dr Stapylton’s attendance had become absolutely imperative. According to Dr Earnshaw’s testimony, he had been with deceased certainly a quarter of an hour before she met her terrible death. Fiske had seen them together ten minutes later; she was then crying bitterly. There was as yet no actual charge against the fashionable and rich doctor, but already the ghostly bird of suspicion had touched him with its ugly wing.”

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“As for the next day,” continued the man in the corner after a slight pause, “I can assure you that there was not a square foot of standing room in the coroner’s court for the adjourned inquest. It was timed for eleven a.m., and at six o’clock on that cold winter’s morning the pavement outside the court was already crowded. As for me, I always manage to get a front seat, and I did on that occasion, too. I fancy that I was the first among the general public to note Dr Stapylton as he entered the room accompanied by his solicitor, and by Dr Kinnaird, with whom he was chatting very cheerfully and pleasantly.

“Mind you, I am a great admirer of the medical profession, and I think a clever and successful doctor usually has a most delightful air about him— the consciousness of great and good work done with profit to himself— which is quite unique and quite admirable.

“Dr Stapylton had that air even to a greater extent than his colleague, and from the affectionate way in which Dr Kinnaird finally shook him by the hand, it was quite clear that the respected chief of the Convalescent Home, at any rate, refused to harbour any suspicion of the integrity of its Treasurer.

“Well, I must not weary you by dwelling on the unimportant details of this momentous inquest. Constable Fiske, who was asked to identify the gentleman in evening dress whom he had seen with the deceased at a few minutes before twelve, failed to recognize Dr Stapylton very positively: pressed very closely, he finally refused to swear either way. Against that, Dr Earnshaw repeated, clearly and categorically, looking his colleague straight in the face the while, the damnatory evidence he had given the day before.

“‘I saw Dr Stapylton, I spoke to him, and he spoke to me,’ he repeated most emphatically.

“Everyone in that court was watching Dr Stapylton’s face, which wore an air of supreme nonchalance, even of contempt, but certainly neither of guilt nor of fear.

“Of course, by that time *I* had fully made up my mind as to where the hitch lay in this extraordinary mystery; but no one else had, and everyone held their breath as Dr Stapylton quietly stepped into the box, and after a few preliminary questions the coroner asked him very abruptly:

“‘You were in the company of the deceased a few minutes before she died, Dr Stapylton?’

“‘Pardon me,’ replied the latter quietly, ‘I last saw Miss Elliott alive on Saturday afternoon, just before I went home from my work.’

“This calm reply, delivered without a tremor, positively made everyone gasp. For the moment coroner and jury were alike staggered.

“‘But we have two witnesses here who saw you in the company of the deceased within a few minutes of twelve o’clock on the Sunday night!’ the coroner managed to gasp out at last.

“‘Pardon me,’ again interposed the doctor, ‘these witnesses were mistaken.’

“‘Mistaken!’

“I think everyone would have shouted out the word in boundless astonishment had they dared to do so.

“‘Dr Earnshaw was mistaken,’ reiterated Dr Stapylton quietly. ‘He neither saw me nor did he speak to me.’

“‘You can substantiate that, of course?’ queried the coroner.

“‘Pardon me,’ once more said the doctor, with utmost calm, ‘it is surely Dr Earnshaw who should substantiate *his* statement.’

“‘There is Constable Fiske’s corroborative evidence for that,’ retorted the coroner, somewhat nettled.

“‘Hardly, I think. You see, the constable states that he saw a gentleman in evening dress, etc., talking to the deceased at a minute or two before twelve o’clock, and that when he heard the clock of St Mary Magdalen chime the

hour of midnight he was just walking away from the footbridge. Now, just as that very church clock was chiming that hour, I was stepping into a cab at the corner of Harrow Road, not a hundred yards *in front* of Constable Fiske.'

"'You swear to that?' queried the coroner in amazement.

"'I can easily prove it,' said Dr Stapylton. 'The cabman who drove me from there to my club is here and can corroborate my statement.'

"And amidst boundless excitement, John Smith, a hansom-cab driver, stated that he was hailed in the Harrow Road by the last witness, who told him to drive to the Royal Clinical Club, in Mardon Street. Just as he started off, St Mary Magdalen's Church, close by, struck the hour of midnight.

"At that very moment, if you remember, Constable Fiske had just crossed the footbridge, and was walking towards the Harrow Road, and he was quite sure (for he was closely questioned afterwards) that no one overtook him from behind. Now there would be no way of getting from one side of the canal to the other at this point except over that footbridge; the nearest bridge is fully two hundred yards further down the Blomfield Road. The girl was alive a minute *before* the constable crossed the footbridge, and it would have been absolutely impossible for anyone to have murdered a girl, placed the knife in her hand, run a couple of hundred yards to the next bridge and another three hundred to the corner of Harrow Road, all in the space of three minutes.

"This alibi, therefore, absolutely cleared Dr Stapylton from any suspicion of having murdered Miss Elliott. And yet,

looking on that man as he sat there, calm, cool and contemptuous, no one could have had the slightest doubt but that he was lying— lying when he said he had not seen Miss Elliott that evening; lying when he denied Dr Earnshaw's statement; lying when he professed himself ignorant of the poor girl's fate.

"Dr Earnshaw repeated his statement with the same emphasis, but it was one man's word against another's, and as Dr Stapylton was so glaringly innocent of the actual murder, there seemed no valid reason at all why he should have denied having seen her that night, and the point was allowed to drop. As for Nurse Dawson's story of his alleged quarrel with Miss Elliott on the Saturday night, Dr Stapylton again had a simple and logical explanation.

"'People who listen at keyholes,' he said quietly, 'are apt to hear only fragments of conversation, and often mistake ordinary loud voices for quarrels. As a matter of fact, Miss Elliott and I were discussing the dismissal of certain nurses from the Home, whom she deemed incompetent. Nurse Dawson was among that number. She desired their immediate dismissal, and I tried to pacify her. That was the subject of my conversation with the deceased lady. I can swear to every word of it.'"

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The man in the corner had long ceased speaking and was placing quietly before me a number of photographs. One by one I saw the series of faces which had been watched so

eagerly in the coroner's court that memorable afternoon by an excited crowd.

"So the fate of poor Miss Elliott has remained wrapt in mystery?" I said thoughtfully at last.

"To everyone," rejoined the funny creature, "except to me."

"Ah! What is your theory, then?"

"A simple one, dear lady; so simple that it really amazes me that no one, not even you, my faithful pupil, ever thought of it."

"It may be so simple that it becomes idiotic," I retorted with lofty disdain.

"Well, that may be. Shall I at any rate try to make it clear?"

"If you like."

"For this I think the best way would be, if you were to follow me through what transpired before the inquest. But first tell me, what do you think of Dr Earnshaw's statement?"

"Well," I replied, "a good many people thought that it was he who murdered Miss Elliott, and that his story of meeting Dr Stapylton with her was a lie from beginning to end."

"Impossible!" he retorted, making an elaborate knot in his bit of string. "Dr Earnshaw's friends, with whom he had been dining that night, swore that he was *not* in evening dress, nor wore a high hat. And on that point— the evening dress, and the hat— Constable Fiske was most positive."

"Then Dr Earnshaw was mistaken, and it was not Dr Stapylton he met."

“Impossible!” he shrieked, whilst another knot went to join its fellows. “He spoke to Dr Stapylton, and Dr Stapylton spoke to him.”

“Very well, then,” I argued; “why should Dr Stapylton tell a lie about it? He had such a conclusive alibi that there could be no object in his making a false statement about that.”

“No object!” shrieked the excited creature. “Why, don’t you *see* that he had to tell the lie in order to set police, coroner, and jury by the ears, because he did not wish it to be even remotely hinted at, that the man whom Dr Earnshaw saw with Miss Elliott, and the man whom Constable Fiske saw with her ten minutes later, were *two different persons*?”

“Two different persons!” I ejaculated.

“Ay! two confederates in this villainy. No one has ever attempted to deny the truth of the shaky finances of the Home; no one has really denied that Miss Elliott suspected certain defalcations and was trying to force the hands of the Honorary Treasurer towards a full enquiry. That the Honorary Treasurer knew where all the money went to was pretty clear all along— his magnificent house in Hamilton Terrace fully testifies to that. That the President of the institution was a party to these defalcations and largely profited by them I for one am equally convinced.”

“Dr Kinnaird?” I ejaculated in amazement.

“Ay, Dr Kinnaird. Do you mean to tell me that he alone among the entire staff of that Home was ignorant of those defalcations? Impossible! And if he knew of them, and did

neither enquire into them nor attempt to stop them, then he must have been a party to them. Do you admit that?”

“Yes, I admit that,” I replied.

“Very well, then. The rest is quite simple; those two men, unworthy to bear the noble appellation of doctor, must for years have quietly stolen the money subscribed by the benevolent for the Home, and converted it to their own use: then, they suddenly find themselves face to face with immediate discovery in the shape of a young girl determined to unmask the systematic frauds of the past few years. That meant exposure, disgrace, ruin for them both, and they determine to be rid of her.

“Under the pretence of an evening walk, her so-called lover entices her to a lonely and suitable spot; his confederate is close by, hidden in the shadows, ready to give his assistance if the girl struggles and screams. But suddenly Dr Earnshaw appears. He recognizes Stapylton and challenges him. For a moment the villains are nonplussed, then Kinnaird— the cleverer of the two— steps forward, greets the two lovers unconcernedly, and after two minutes’ conversation casually reminds Stapylton of an appointment the latter is presumed to have at a club in St James’s Street.

“The latter understands and takes the hint, takes a quick farewell of the girl, leaving her in his friend’s charge, then, as fast as he can, goes off, presently takes a cab, leaving his friend to do the deed, whilst the alibi he can prove, coupled with Dr Earnshaw’s statement, was sure to bewilder and mislead the police and the public.

“Thus it was that though Dr Earnshaw saw and recognized Dr Stapylton, Constable Fiske saw Dr Kinnaird, whom he did *not* recognize, on whom no suspicion had fallen, and whose name had never been coupled with that of Miss Elliott. When Constable Fiske had turned his back, Kinnaird murdered the girl and went off quietly, whilst Dr Stapylton, on whom all suspicions were bound to fasten sooner or later, was able to prove the most perfect alibi ever concocted.

“One day I feel certain that the frauds at the Home will be discovered, and then who knows what else may see the light?

“Think of it all quietly when I am gone, and tomorrow when we meet tell me whether if *I* am wrong what is *your* explanation of this extraordinary mystery.”

Before I could reply he had gone, and I was left wondering, gazing at the photographs of two good-looking, highly respectable and respected men, whom an animated scarecrow had just boldly accused of committing one of the most dastardly crimes ever recorded in our annals.