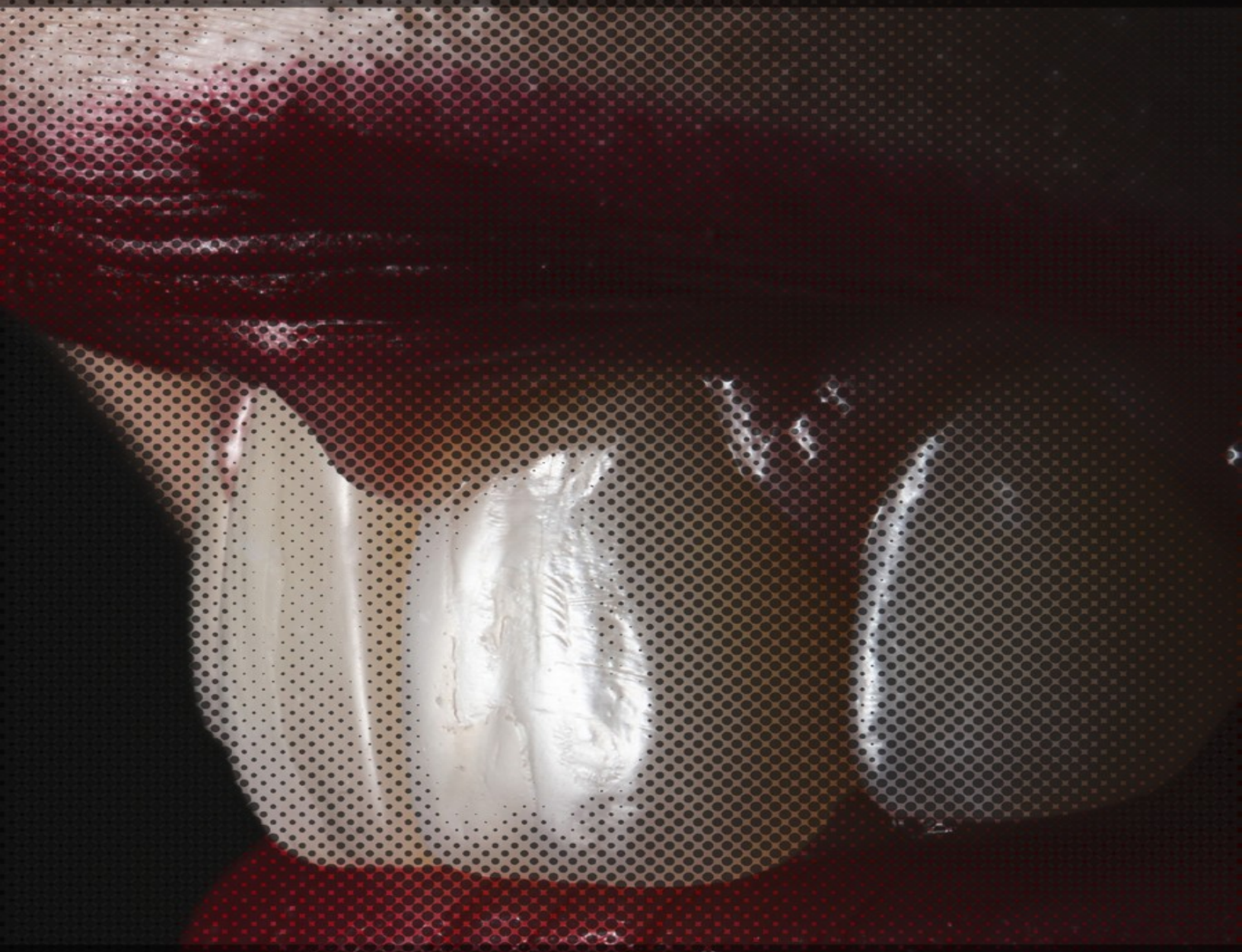
Baroness Orczy



Skin O' My Tooth

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The Murder In Saltashe Woods

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We all called him “Skin o’ my Tooth:” his friends, who were few; his clients, who were many, and I, his confidential clerk, solus— and very proud I am to hold that position. I believe, as a matter of fact, that his enemies— and their name is legion— call him Patrick Mulligan; but to us all who know him as he is, “Skin o’ my Tooth” he always was, from the day that he got a verdict of “Not guilty” out of the jury who tried James Tovey, “the Dartmouth murderer.” Tovey hadn’t many teeth, but it was by the skin of those few molars of his that he escaped the gallows; not thanks to the pleading of his counsel, but all thanks to the evidence collected by Patrick Mulligan, his lawyer.

Of course, Skin o’ my Tooth is not popular among his colleagues; there is much prejudice and petty spite in all professions, and the Law is not exempt from this general rule.

Everyone knows that Skin o’ my Tooth is totally unacquainted with the use of kid gloves. He works for the best of his client; let the other side look to themselves, I say.

Funny-looking man, too, old Skin o’ my Tooth— fat and rosy and comfortable as an Irish pig, with a face as stodgy as a boiled currant dumpling. His hair, I believe, would be red if he gave it a chance at all, but he wears it cropped so close to his bulky head that he looks bald in some lights. Then, we all know that gentle smile of his, and that trick of casting down his eyes which gives him a look that is best

described by the word “coy;” that trick is always a danger-signal to the other side.

Now, in the case of Edward Kelly, everyone will admit that that young man came nearer being hanged for murder than any of us would care for.

But this is how it all happened.

On Tuesday, September 3rd, Mary Mills and John Craddock— who were walking through the Saltashe Woods— came across the body of a man lying near the pond, in a pool of blood. Mary, of course, screamed, and would have fled; but John, manfully conquering the feeling of sickness which threatened to overcome him too, went up to the body to get a closer view of the face. To his horror he recognised Mr. Jeremiah Whadcoat, a well-known, respectable resident of Pashet. The unfortunate man seemed to John Craddock to be quite dead; still, he thought it best to despatch Mary at once for Doctor Howden, and also to the police-station; whilst he, with really commendable courage, elected to remain beside the body alone.

It appears that about half an hour after Mary had left him, John thought that he detected a slight movement in the rigid body, which he had propped up against his knee, and that the wounded man uttered a scarcely audible sigh and then murmured a few words. The young man bent forward eagerly, striving with all his might to catch what these words might be. According to his subsequent evidence before the coroner’s jury, Mr. Whadcoat then opened his eyes, and murmured quite distinctly—

“The letter... Kelly... Edward... the other.” After that all seemed over, for the face became more rigid and more

ashen in colour than before.

It was past six o’clock before the doctor and the inspector, with two constables and a stretcher from Pashet policestation, appeared upon the scene and relieved John Craddock of his lonely watch. Mr. Whadcoat had not spoken again, and the doctor pronounced life to be extinct. The body was quietly removed to Mr. Whadcoat’s house in Pashet, Mary Mills having already volunteered for the painful task of breaking the news to Miss Amelia, Mr. Whadcoat’s sister, who lived with him.

The unfortunate man was cashier to Messrs. Kelly and Co., the great wine merchants; so Mr. Kelly, of Saltashe Park, also Mr. Edward Kelly, of Wood Cottage, were apprised of the sad event.

At this stage the tragic affair seemed wrapped up in the most profound mystery. Mr. Jeremiah Whadcoat was not known to possess a single enemy, and he certainly was not sufficiently endowed with worldly wealth to tempt the highway robber. So far the police had found nothing on the scene of the crime which could lead to a clue— footsteps of every shape and size leading in every direction, a few empty cartridges here and there; all of which meant nothing, since Saltashe Woods are full of game, and both Mr. Kelly and Mr. Edward Kelly had had shooting parties within the last few days.

The public understood that permission had been obtained from Mr. Kelly to drag the pond, and, not knowing what to think or fear, it awaited the day of the inquest with eager excitement.

I believe that that inquest was one of the most memorable in the annals of a coroner’s court. There was a large crowd, of course, for the little town of Pashet was a mass of seething curiosity.

The expert evidence of Dr. Howden, assisted by the divisional surgeon, was certainly very curious. Both learned gentlemen gave it as their opinion that the deceased met his death through the discharge of small shot fired from a rifle at a distance of not more than a couple of yards. All the shot had lodged close together in the heart, and the flesh round the wound was slightly charred.

The police, on the other hand, had quite a tit-bit of sensation ready for the eager public. They had dragged the pond and had found the carcass of a dog. The beast had evidently been shot with the same rifle which had ended poor Mr. Whadcoat’s days, the divisional surgeon, who had examined the carcass, having pronounced the wound— which was in the side— to be exactly similar in character. A final blow dealt on the animal’s head with the butt-end of the rifle, however, had been the ultimate cause of its death. As the medical officer gave this sensational bit of evidence, a sudden and dead silence fell over all in that crowded court, for it had leaked out earlier in the day that the dead dog found in the pond was “Rags,” Mr. Edward Kelly’s well-known black retriever.

In the midst of that silence, Miss Amelia Whadcoat— the sister of the deceased gentleman— stepped forward, dressed in deep black, and holding a letter, which she handed to the coroner.

“It came under cover, addressed to me,” she explained, “on the Tuesday evening.”

The coroner, half in hesitation, turned the square envelope between his fingers. At last he read aloud—

“To the Coroner and Jury at the inquest, should a fatal accident occur to me this (Tuesday) afternoon, in Saltashe Wood.”

Then he tore open the envelope. Immediately everyone noticed the look of boundless astonishment which spread over his face. There was a moment of breathless silent expectation among the crowd, while Miss Amelia stood quietly with her hands demurely folded over her gingham umbrella and her swollen eyes fixed anxiously upon that letter.

At last the coroner, turning to the jury, said—

“Gentlemen, this letter is addressed to you as well as to myself. I am, therefore, bound to acquaint you of its contents; but I must, of course, warn you not to allow your minds to be unduly influenced, however strange these few words may seem to you. The letter is dated from Ivy Lodge, Pashet, Tuesday, September 3rd, and signed ‘Jeremiah Whadcoat.’ It says:

‘Mr. Coroner and Gentlemen of the Jury,— I beg to inform you that on this day, at 2.30 p.m., I am starting to walk to Saltashe, there to see Mr. Kerhoet and Mr. Kelly on important business. Mr. Edward Kelly has desired me to meet him by the pond in Saltashe Woods, on my way. He knows of the business which takes me to Saltashe. He and I had a violent quarrel at the office on the subject last night, and he has every reason for wishing that I should never speak of it to

Mr. Kelly and to Mr. Kerhoet. Last night he threatened to knock me down. If any serious accident happen to me, let Mr. Edward Kelly account for his actions.’”

A deadly silence followed, and then a muttered curse from somewhere among the crowd.

“This is damnable!”

And Mr. Edward Kelly, young, good-looking, but, at this moment, as pale as death, pushed his way forward among the spectators.

He wanted to speak, but the coroner waved him aside in his most official manner, while Miss Amelia Whadcoat demurely concluded her evidence. Personally, she knew nothing of her brother’s quarrel with Mr. Edward Kelly. She did not even know that he was going to Saltashe Woods on that fatal afternoon. Then she retired, and Mr. Edward Kelly was called.

Questioned by the coroner, he admitted the quarrel spoken of by the deceased, admitted meeting him by the pond in Saltashe Woods, but emphatically denied having the slightest ill-feeling against “Old Whadcoat,” as he called him, and, above all, having the faintest desire for wishing to silence him for ever.

“The whole thing is a ghastly mistake or a weird joke,” he declared firmly.

“But the quarrel?” persisted the coroner.

“I don’t deny it,” retorted the young man. “It was the result of a preposterous accusation old Whadcoat saw fit to level against me.”

“But why should you meet him clandestinely in the Woods?”

“It was not a clandestine meeting. I knew that he intended walking to Saltashe from Pashet through the Woods; a road from my house cuts the direction which he would be bound to follow, exactly at right angles. I wished to speak to him, and it saved me a journey all the way to Pashet, or him one down to my house. I met him at half-past three. We had about fifteen minutes talk; then I left him and went back home.”

“What was he doing when you left him?” asked the coroner, with distinct sarcasm.

“He had sat down on a tree stump and was smoking his pipe.”

“You had your gun with you, of course, on this expedition through the Woods?”

“I seldom go out without my gun this time of year.”

“Quite so,” assented the coroner grimly. “But what about your dog, who was found with its head battered in, close to the very spot where lay the body of the deceased?”

“Poor old Rags strayed away that morning. I did not see him at all that day. He certainly was not with me when I went to meet old Whadcoat.”

The rapidly spoken questions and answers had been listened to by the public and the jury with breathless interest. No one uttered a sound, but all were watching that the handsome young man, who seemed, with every word he uttered, to incriminate himself more and more. The quarrel, the assignation, the gun he was carrying; he denied nothing but he did protest his innocence with all his might.

One or two people had heard the report of a gun whilst walking on one or other of the roads that skirt Saltashe

Woods, but their evidence as to the precise hour was unfortunately rather vague. Reports of guns in Saltashe Woods were very frequent, and no one had taken particular notice. On the other hand, the only witness who had seen Mr. Edward Kelly entering the wood was not ready to swear whether he had his dog with him or not.

Though it had been fully expected ever since Jeremiah Whadcoat's posthumous epistle had been read, the verdict of "Wilful murder against Edward St. John Kelly" found the whole population of Pashet positively aghast. Brother of Mr. Kelly, of Saltashe Park, the accused was one of the most popular figures in this part of Hertfordshire. When his subsequent arrest became generally known in London, as well as in his own county, horror, amazement, and incredulity were quite universal.

2

The day after that memorable inquest and sensational arrest— namely, on the Saturday, I arrived at our dingy old office in Finsbury Square at about twelve o'clock, after I had seen to some business at Somerset House for my esteemed employer.

I found Skin o' my Tooth curled up in his arm-chair before a small fire— as the day was wet and cold— just like a great fat and frowsy dog. He waited until I had given him a full report of what I had been doing, then he said to me—

"I have just had a visit from Mr. Kelly, of Saltashe Park."

I was not astonished. That case of murder in the Saltashe Woods was just one of those which inevitably drifted into the hands of Skin o' my Tooth. Though the whole aspect of it

was remarkably clear, instinctively one scented a mystery somewhere.

“I suppose, sir, that it was on Mr. Edward Kelly’s behalf?”

“Your penetration, Muggins, my boy, surpasses human understanding.”

(My name is Alexander Stanislaus Mullins, but Skin o’ my Tooth will have his little joke).

“You are going to undertake the case, sir?”

“I am going to get Edward Kelly out of the hole his own stupidity has placed him in.”

“It will be by the skin of his teeth if you do, sir, the evidence against him is positively crushing,” I muttered.

“A miss is as good as a mile, where the hangman’s rope is concerned, Muggins. But you had better call a hansom; we can go down to Pashet this afternoon. Edward Kelly is out on bail, and Mr. Kelly tells me that I shall find him at Wood Cottage. I must get out of him the history of his quarrel with the murdered man.”

“Mr. Kelly did not know it?”

“Well, anyway, he seemed to think it best that the accused should tell me his own version of it. In any case, both Mr. Kelly and his wife are devoured with anxiety about this brother, who seems to have been a bit of a scapegrace all his life.”

There was no time to say more then, as we found that, by hurrying, we could catch the 1.05 p.m. train to Pashet. We found Mr. Edward Kelly at Wood Cottage, a pretty little house on the outskirts of Saltashe Woods. He had been told of our likely visit by his brother. He certainly looked terribly ill and like a man overweighted by fate and circumstances.

But he did protest his innocence, loudly and emphatically.

“I am the victim of the most damnable circumstances, Mr. Mulligan,” he said; “but I swear to you that I am incapable of such a horrible deed.”

“I always take it for granted, Mr. Kelly,” said Skin o’ my Tooth blandly, “that my client is innocent. If the reverse is the case, I prefer not to know it. But you have to appear before the magistrate on Monday. I must get a certain amount of evidence on your behalf, in order to obtain the remand I want. So will you try and tell me, as concisely and as clearly as possible, what passed between you and Mr. Whadcoat the day before the murder? I understand that there was a quarrel.”

“Old Whadcoat saw fit to accuse me of certain defalcations in the firm’s banking account, of which I was totally innocent,” began Mr. Edward Kelly quietly. “As you know, my brother and I are agents in England for M. de Kerhoet’s champagne. Whadcoat was our cashier and book-keeper. Twice a year we pay over into M. de Kerhoet’s bank in Paris the money derived from the sale of his wines, after deducting our commission. In the meanwhile, we have jointly the full control of the money— that is to say, all cheques paid to the firm have to be endorsed by us both, and all cheques drawn on the firm must bear both our signatures.

“It was just a month before the half-yearly settlement of accounts. Whadcoat, it appears, went down to the bank, got the cancelled cheques, and discovered that some £10,000, the whole of the credit balance due next month to M. de

Kerhoet, had been drawn out of the bank, the amounts not having been debited in the books.

“To my intense amazement, he showed me these cheques, and then and there accused me of having forged my brother’s name and appropriated the firm’s money to my own use. You see, he knew of certain unavowed extravagances of mine which had often landed me in financial difficulties more or less serious, and which are the real cause of my being forced to live in Wood Cottage whilst my brother can keep up a fine establishment at Saltashe Park. But the accusation was preposterous, and I was furious with him. I looked at the cheques. My signature certainly was perfectly imitated, that of my brother perhaps a little less so. They were ‘bearer’ cheques, made out in a replica of old Whadcoat’s handwriting to ‘M. de Kerhoet,’ and endorsed at the back in a small, pointed, foreign hand.

“Old Whadcoat persisted in his accusations, and very high words ensued between us. I believe I did threaten to knock him down if he did not shut up. Anyway, he told me that he would go over the next afternoon to Saltashe Park to expose me before my brother and M. de Kerhoet, who was staying there on a visit to England for the shooting.

“I left him then, meaning to go myself that same evening to Saltashe Park and see my brother about it; but on my journey home, certain curious suspicions with regard to old Whadcoat himself crept up in my mind, and then and there I determined to try and see him again and to talk the matter over more dispassionately with him, in what I thought would be his own interests. My intention was to make, of course, my brother acquainted with the whole matter at once, but

to leave M. de Kerhoet out of the question for the present; so I wired to Whadcoat in the morning to make the assignation which has proved such a terrible mistake."

Edward Kelly added that he left Jeremiah Whadcoat, after his interview with him by the pond, in as excited a frame of mind as before. Fearing that his own handwriting on the cheques might entail serious consequences to himself, nothing would do but M. de Kerhoet as well as Mr. Kelly must, be told of the whole thing immediately.

"When I left him," concluded the young man, "he was sitting on a tree stump by the pond, smoking his pipe and I walked away towards Wood Cottage."

"Do you know what became of the cheques?" asked Skin o' my Tooth.

"Old Whadcoat had them in his pocket when I left him. I conclude, as there has been no mention of them by the police, that they have not been found."

There was so much simplicity and straight forwardness in Edward Kelly's narrative that I, for one, was ready to believe every word of it. But Skin o' my Tooth's face was inscrutable. He sat in a low chair with his hands folded before him, his eyes shut and a general air of polite imbecility about his whole unwieldy person. I could see that our client was viewing him with a certain amount of irritability.

"Well, Mr. Mulligan?" he said at last, with nervous impatience.

"Well, sir," replied Skin o' my Tooth, "it strikes me that what with your quarrel with the deceased, the assignation in the Woods, his posthumous denunciation of you as his

assassin, and his dying words, we have about as complete a case as we could wish.”

“Sir—”

“In all cases of this sort, my dear sir,” continued Skin o’ my Tooth quietly, “the great thing is to keep absolutely cool. If you are innocent— remember, I do not doubt it for a moment— then I will bring that crime home to its perpetrator. Justice never miscarries— at least, when I have guidance of it in my hands.”

It would be impossible to render the tone of supreme conceit with which Skin o’ my Tooth made this last assertion; but it had the desired effect, for Edward Kelly brightened up visibly as he said—

“I have implicit faith in you, Mr. Mulligan. When shall I see you again?”

“On Monday, before the magistrate. I can get that remand for you, I think, and then we shall have a free hand. Now we had better get along; I want to have a quiet think over this affair.”

3

On the Monday, Edward Kelly was formally charged before the beak; and I must say that when I then heard the formidable array of circumstantial evidence which the police had collected against our client, I sadly began to fear that not even by the skin of his teeth would Edward Kelly escape from the awful hole in which he was literally wallowing. However, Skin o’ my Tooth hammered away at the police evidence with regard to the dog. The prosecution made a great point of the fact that Mr. Whadcoat and Rags had been killed by the same rifle and at the same time and place, and

the one point in Edward Kelly's favour was that neither his servants at Wood Cottage, nor the witness who saw him enter the wood, could swear that the dog was with him on that day. On the strength of that, and for the purpose of collecting further evidence with regard to the dog, Skin o' my Tooth finally succeeded in obtaining a remand until the following Friday.

Personally, I thought that there was quite sufficient evidence for hanging any man, without the testimony of the dead dog, but I am quite aware that my opinion counts for very little.

"Now, Muggins," said Skin o' my Tooth to me later in the day, "the fun is about to begin. You go down to Coutts's this afternoon and find out all about those cheques which caused the quarrel, and by whom they were presented. Don't mix the police up in our affairs, whatever you do. If there is anything you can't manage, get Fairburn to help you; he is discretion itself and hates the regular force. Beyond that, try and work alone."

I had done more difficult jobs than that before now, and Skin o' my Tooth knows he can rely on me. I left him curled up in an arm-chair with a French novel in his hand and started on my quest. I got to Coutts's just before closing time, saw the chief cashier and explained my errand and its importance to him, asking for his kind help in the matter. He was courteous in the extreme, and within a few moments I had ascertained from him that cheques on Kelly and Co.'s account, perfectly en règle, and made out to "E. de Kerhoet, or Bearer," had been cashed on certain dates which he gave me. They were in each instance presented by a

commissionaire in uniform, who brought a card—”M. Edouard de Kerhoet,” with “Please give bearer amount in £5 notes,” scribbled in pencil in the same handwriting as the endorsement on the cheques.

“The amounts varied between £1,200 and £3,000,” continued the cashier, still referring to his book. “Being ‘bearer’ cheques, and signed in the usual manner, we had no occasion to doubt them, and of course we cashed them. The first cheque was drawn on July 3rd, and the last on August 29th.”

The cashier added one more detail which fairly staggered me— namely, that the commissionaire wore a cap with “Kelly and Co.” embroidered upon it. If necessary, there were plenty of cashiers and clerks at the bank who could identify him. He was a tall man of marked foreign appearance, with heavy black hair, beard and moustache cut very trim. On one occasion when he left, he dropped a bit of paper which contained the name “Van Wort, Turf Commission Agent, Flushing, Holland.”

I thanked the cashier and took my leave.

When I got back to the office, I found Skin o’ my Tooth placidly sleeping in his big arm-chair. I had had a hard day and was dead tired, and for the moment when I saw him there, looking so fat, so pink, and so comfortable, well— I have a great respect for him, but I really felt quite angry.

However, I told him what I had done.

“Capital! Capital, Muggins!” he ejaculated languidly. “But, by Jove! that’s a clever rascal. That touch about the name on the cap is peculiarly happy and daring. It completely allayed the suspicions of the cashiers at Coutts’s. Now,

listen, Muggins," he added, with that sudden, quick-changing mood of his which in a moment transformed him from the lazy, apathetic Irish lawyer to the weird human bloodhound who scents the track. "That foreign commissionaire is a disguise, of course; the cap hides the edge of the wig and shades the brow, the black beard and moustache conceal the mouth and chin, the foreign accent disguises the voice. We may take it, therefore, that the thief and his ambassador are one and the same person— a man, moreover, well known at Coutts's, since disguise was necessary. Do you follow me, Muggins? And remember, the motive is there. The man who defrauded Kelly and Co. is the same who murdered Whadcoat later on. Whadcoat was effectually silenced, the tell-tale cheques have evidently been destroyed. There would have been silence and mystery over the whole scandal, until the defalcations could be made good, but for Whadcoat's letter to the coroner and his dying words: 'The letter... Kelly... Edward... the other...'"

He paused suddenly and seemed lost in thought, then he muttered—

"It's that confounded dog I can't quite make out!... Did Edward Kelly, after all..."

It was that great "after all!" which had puzzled me all along. "Was Edward Kelly guilty, after all?" I had asked myself that question a hundred times a day. Then, as I was silent— lost in conjectures over this extraordinary, seemingly impenetrable mystery— he suddenly jumped up and shouted—

"By Jove! I've got it, Muggins! 'The other.' What a fool I have been! Go to bed, boy; I want a rest too. Tomorrow will

be time enough to think about ‘the other.’”

4

From that moment Skin o’ my Tooth was a transformed being. He always is when he has got a case “well in hand,” as he calls it. He certainly possesses a weird faculty for following up the trail of blood. Once he holds what he believes to be a clue, his whole appearance changes; his great, fat body seems, as it were, to crouch together ready for a spring and there is a wild quiver about his nostrils which palpably suggests the bloodhound, only his eyes remain inscrutably hidden beneath their thick fleshy lids.

It was twelve o’clock the next day when our train steamed into Pashet station. We had a fly from there and drove down to Saltashe Park, the lordly country seat of Mr. Kelly.

At the door, Skin o’ my Tooth asked for the master of the house; but hearing that he was out, he requested that his card might be taken in to Mrs. Kelly. The next moment we were ushered into a luxuriously furnished library, full of books and flowers, and with deep mullioned windows opening out upon a Queen Anne terrace.

The mistress of the house, an exceedingly beautiful woman, received us with every mark of eagerness and cordiality.

She welcomed us— or, rather, my esteemed employer— most effusively; and when we were all seated, she asked many questions about Mr. Edward Kelly, to which Skin o’ my Tooth replied as often as she allowed him to get a word in.

“Oh, Mr. Mulligan,” she said finally, “I am so glad that you asked to see me. I have been positively ill and devoured

with anxiety about my brother-in-law. My husband thinks that I upset myself and only get hopelessly wretched if I read about it all in the papers, so he won't allow me to see one now; but, I assure you, the uncertainty is killing me, as I feel sure that Mr. Kelly is trying to comfort me and to make Edward's case appear more hopeful than it is."

Skin o' my Tooth gravely shook his head. "It could not very well be more hopeless," he said.

"You can't mean that?" she said, while tears gathered in her eyes. "He is innocent, Mr. Mulligan. I swear he is innocent. You don't know him. He never would do anything so vile."

"I quite believe that, my dear lady; but unfortunately circumstances are terribly against him. Even his dead dog, Rags, speaks in dumb eloquence in his master's condemnation."

"Rags!" she exclaimed in astonishment, "what can the poor doggie have to do with this awful tragedy? Poor old thing! it lost its way the very morning that the terrible catastrophe occurred. M. de Kerhoet was staying here that day, and I had taken him for a drive to Hitching before luncheon. On the way home I saw Rags in the road, looking very sorry for himself. I took him in the carriage with me and brought him home."

Skin o' my Tooth looked politely interested, but I hardly liked to breathe; it seemed to me that a fellow creature's life was even now hanging in the balance.

"Rags knew us all here just as well as it did its own master," continued Mrs. Kelly, "and when my husband went

out with his gun in the afternoon, Rags followed him, whilst M. de Kerhoet and I went on to a garden-party."

"And what happened to Rags after that?" asked Skin o' my Tooth.

"To tell you the truth, the awful tragedy I heard of that afternoon drove poor Rags out of my mind; then the next day, I am thankful to say, M. de Kerhoet left us and went back to Paris. I did hear something about the poor dog being drowned in the pond; he was a shocking rover, and really more trouble than pleasure to his master."

Mrs. Kelly was sitting with her back to the great mullioned windows; she could not, therefore, see her husband, who seemed to have just walked across the terrace and to have paused a moment, with his hand on the open window, before entering the room. Whether he had heard what his wife was saying, I did not know, certain it is that his face looked very white and set.

"I remember now," continued Mrs. Kelly innocently, "seeing my husband put away Rags' collar the other day in his bureau. I dare say Edward will be glad to have it later on, when all this horrid business is over. You must tell him that we have got it quite safe."

I all but uttered an exclamation then. It seemed too horrible to bear this young wife so hopelessly and innocently denouncing her own husband with every word she uttered. I looked up at the motionless figure still standing in the window. Skin o' my Tooth, who sat immediately facing it, seemed to make an almost imperceptible sign of warning. Mr. Kelly then retired as silently as he had come.

Two minutes later he entered the room by the door. He seemed absolutely calm and collected, and held out his hand to Skin o’ my Tooth, who took it without the slightest hesitation; then Mr. Kelly turned to his wife and said quietly —

“You will forgive me, won’t you, dear, if I take Mr. Mulligan into my study? There are one or two points I want to discuss with him over a cigar.”

“Oh! I’ll run away,” she said gaily. “I must dress for luncheon. You’ll stay, won’t you, Mr. Mulligan? No? I am so sorry! Well, good-bye; and mind you bring better news next time.”

She was gone, and we three men were left alone. I offered to leave the room, but Mr. Kelly motioned me to stay.

“The servants would wonder,” he said icily, “and it really does not matter.”

Then he turned to Skin o’ my Tooth and said quietly—

“I suppose that you came here today for the express purpose of setting a trap for my wife; and she fell into it, poor soul! not knowing that she was damning her own husband. Of course, you did your duty by your client. Now, what is your next move?”

“To place Mrs. Kelly in the witness-box on my client’s behalf, and make her repeat the story she told us today,” replied Skin o’ my Tooth with equal calm.

“And after that?”

“After that, you must look to yourself, Mr. Kelly. I am not a detective, and you know best whether you have anything to fear when once the attention of the police is directed upon yourself. I shall obtain Mr. Edward Kelly’s discharge

tomorrow, of course. Backed by Mrs. Kelly's testimony, and, if need be, that of Mr. Kerhoet, in Paris, I can now prove that the dog could not have been shot by my client, since it was following you on the afternoon that the murder was committed. Since the chief point in the theory of the prosecution lies in the fact that Mr. Whadcoat and the dog were shot on the same day and with the same rifle, and seeing that the animal's collar was known to be in your possession the day following the crime, my client is absolutely sure to obtain a full discharge and to be allowed to leave the court without a stain upon his character."

Mr. Kelly had listened to Skin o' my Tooth's quiet explanation without betraying the slightest emotion; then he said—

"Thank you, Mr. Mulligan. I think I quite understand the situation. Personally, I feel that it is entirely for the best; life under certain conditions become abominable torture, and I have no strength left with which to combat fate. I did kill old Whadcoat in a moment of unreasoning fear, just as I killed Rags because he made too much noise; but, by Heaven! I had no intention to kill the old man, and I certainly would never have allowed my brother to suffer seriously under an unjust accusation. I firmly believed that justice could not miscarry; and while I thought that you were sharp enough to save him, I also reckoned that I had been clever enough to shield myself from every side."

He paused a moment and then continued; just like a man who for a long time has been burdened with a secret and is suddenly made almost happy by confiding it to a stranger.

“I had had many losses on the turf,” he said, “and had made my loses good by defrauding our firm. It was a long and laborious plan, very carefully laid; but I was always clever with my pen, and my brother’s signature and Whadcoat’s writing were easy enough to imitate. Then, one day, I found an old uniform in the cellar at the office— my father used to keep a commissionaire when he had the business. It was about my size and gave me the idea for the disguise. It all worked right, and I knew that I could make my defalcations good at the bank very soon. It was a positive thunderbolt when, on the Tuesday morning, I received a letter from old Whadcoat, telling me that he was coming over to Saltashe that afternoon to see M. de Kerhoet and myself about a terrible discovery which he had just made. I knew he would walk through the Woods, and I found him sitting near the pond, smoking, alone. I only meant to persuade him to hold his tongue and say nothing to M. de Kerhoet for the present. But he was obstinate; he guessed that I was guilty; he threatened me with disclosure, like the fool he was, and I had to kill him… in self-defence.”

Somehow, although he undoubtedly was a great criminal, I could not help sympathising with this man. The beautiful house we were in, all the luxury and comfort with which he was outwardly surrounded, seemed such terrible mockery beside the moral tortures he must have endured. I was quite glad when he had finished speaking, and Skin o’ my Tooth was able presently to take his leave.

Only a few hours later, the evening papers were full of the sensational suicide of Mr. Kelly in his Library at Saltashe Park. Almost at the same time that this astonishing news

was published in the Press, the authorities at Scotland Yard had received a written confession, signed by Mr. Kelly, in which he confessed to having caused the death of Mr. Jeremiah Whadcoat in Saltashe Woods, by the accidental discharge of his gun.

A little frightened at first of any complications that might arise, he had said nothing about the accident at the time; then, when his own brother became implicated in the tragedy, and he felt how terrible his own position would be if he now made a tardy confession, the matter began to prey upon his mind until it became so unhinged that he sought, in death, solace from his mental agony.

“That man was a genius,” was Skin o’ my Tooth’s comment upon this confession. “Strange that he should have lost his nerve at the last, for I feel sure that the crime would never have been brought absolutely home to him; at any rate, I could have got him off. What do you think, Muggins?”

And I quite agreed with Skin o’ my Tooth.

The Case Of The Sicilian Prince

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I doubt whether full credit was given to Skin o’ my Tooth for the solution of that mysterious incident in the Saltashe Woods, which he— and no one else— brought about. Personally, I firmly believe that Kelly, of Saltashe Park, would have allowed his brother to hang, sooner than confess, if Skin o’ my Tooth had not succeeded in absolutely cornering him. Now, in the case of the Sicilian Prince, no one could deny— but perhaps I had better say how it all happened.

The Swanborough tragedy was filling all London and provincial papers with its gruesome mysteries. Early on Tuesday morning, March 18th, the body of a man, shockingly mutilated, was found on the level crossing, just below the Swanborough station of the London and North-Western Railway. It is always difficult to dwell on the grim details which are the usual accompaniment to this type of drama; suffice it to say, in this instance, that the body was found lying straight along the metals, so that the passing express had gone clean over the trunk and face. What mutilation the train had left unaccomplished had been completed by the sparks from the engine. The face was unrecognizable, the hair had been singed, the flesh on hands and neck had been charred. The peculiar position of the body, so carefully laid down, with the feet pointing towards Swanborough station, and the head towards Bletchley, disposed of any theory of accident that may at first have suggested itself. Moreover, some articles of clothing— a coat and waistcoat— were subsequently found

lying in a field close by. It was clearly either a case of murder— the unfortunate man having, presumably, been rendered unconscious and then placed on the metals— or one of deliberate suicide.

The grim tragedy immediately assumed the appearance of complete mystery. Though Swanborough is but a tiny, straggling village, and this part of Buckinghamshire but scantily populated, no one seemed to have missed a relative or friend, or to recognize the clothes that were found lying in the field nor those that were upon the mutilated body. The police had published a description of these clothes and articles, and of the body, as far as this could be done. The unfortunate man seemed to be about thirty-five years of age, five feet nine inches in height, and of slight build. He was evidently in the habit of wearing a green silk shade over one eye, for one was found lying on the ground quite close to the head; the right forearm showed a very recent wound caused by the burning of some acid— probably vitriol.

The people of Swanborough, however, in spite of the horrible gruesomeness of the tragedy, seemed to take very little interest in the elucidation of its mysteries; perhaps, too, they had the average English yokel’s horror of having anything to do with the police. Be that as it may, it was not until the following day that a more enlightened or more enterprising villager bethought himself of walking to the police station and informing the inspector there that “maybe the murdered man was Mrs. Stockton’s lodger.”

It appears that Mrs. Stockton, who rented a small cottage not far from the railway, had had a lodger on and off for the

past six months. No one in the village had ever seen him; if he ever went outside the cottage, he must have done so at nights; but young Stockton had sometimes talked to the neighbours about his mother's lodger. He was a foreigner, he said, "and no end of a swell," with a name no decent body could pronounce, as it was about half a yard long. He was certainly very odd in his ways, for he used to go away quite suddenly and not come home for a week or so on end. Mrs. Stockton never knew where he went to; and then he would turn up again, mostly in the very early mornings.

Life in rural districts is wonderfully self-centred; still, the police thought it odd that this tardy information did not come from Mrs. Stockton herself or from her son, if, indeed, her lodger were missing just now. The detective-inspector immediately went down to the cottage. Finding the door locked, and getting no answer to his repeated knocks, he forced his way in, followed by two constables.

Parlour and kitchen were empty, but up on the floor above, in one of the three little bedrooms, the men found the unfortunate woman lying in bed with her throat cut. There was no sign or trace anywhere of young Stockton.

The mystery, of course, had deepened more and more. Nothing in the cottage seemed to have been touched; there were even a couple of sovereigns and some silver lying in a money-box. So far it appeared that two purposeless and shocking murders had been committed probably within a few moments of each other, as Mrs. Stockton had evidently been dead a good many hours. The detective-inspector instituted immediate inquiries in the neighbourhood on the subject of young Stockton, who certainly had unaccountably

disappeared. It seems that he was a platelayer by trade, lately in the employ of the North-Western Railway, but recently dismissed owing to ill-conduct.

A description of the missing man was telegraphed to every police and railway station in the kingdom, but so far not a trace of him had been found. The theory of the police was that he had boarded the very train which had mangled the body of his victim, and then dropped off it again a good deal farther down the line. Whether he had murdered the “foreign swell” for purposes of robbery, and killed his mother in order to get rid of an inconvenient witness, was, of course, a mere matter of conjecture; certain it is that he had vanished, almost as if the earth had swallowed him up.

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From the first, Skin o’ my Tooth was greatly interested in the Swanborough tragedy. The enigmatic personality of one of the victims, the veil of complete mystery which the murderer had succeeded in throwing over his crime, the “foreign swell” who lived in the English cottage, all appealed to my chief’s love for what was dramatic and mysterious.

It was on the afternoon of the 20th, just after I had come in with the evening papers, that there was a timid rap at the outer office door. I went to open it, and, to my amazement, saw before me the daintiest vision that had ever graced our fusty old office in Finsbury Square. I had never seen such a lovely young girl. She could not have been more than seventeen or eighteen, and she was exquisitely dressed in something soft and black, and wore the daintiest pair of shoes I had ever set eyes on. She asked me if she could speak to Mr. Mulligan immediately. It was such an unusual