Valentine Williams

Clubfoot the Avenger

Valentine Williams

Clubfoot the Avenger

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066361419

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Table of Contents

At the risk of straining an old and valued friendship, I have persuaded Major Desmond Okewood and his brother to allow me to set down in narrative form some account of a remarkable series of events that, for reasons sufficiently obvious, have never been fully described.

It is now some eighteen months since Dr. Adolf Grundt, the notorious German Secret Service agent, better known to the British Intelligence Corps as “The Man with the Club Foot,” was last heard of; and there appears to remain no valid grounds why the extraordinary happenings which marked his reappearance in England should not now be related, especially as they were sedulously withheld from the newspapers at the time.

Though Major Desmond Okewood and his brother, Mr. Francis Okewood, played a prominent part in these strange adventures, I have been unable to persuade either of them to tell the story himself. It has therefore fallen to my lot to be the Froissart of this chronicle. I do not fear criticism; for my severest critics have been the brothers themselves. Desmond Okewood, for instance, jibs strongly at what he calls my “incurable love of the dramatic”; while Francis, after reading through my much-censored and revised manuscript, pitched it back at me with the curt remark that the interesting thing about Secret Service yarns is what you are obliged to leave out.

On this plea, then, that in Secret Service matters the whole truth can seldom be told, I would claim indulgence;

and, further, on the score that this narrative has been pieced together from talks, often spasmodic and disjointed, with my two friends in all manner of odd places—the golf links, the tennis court, in the train, the Berkeley grill, the smoke-room of the Senior. Sometimes I questioned; but more often I was a listener when a chance remark, a name read in a newspaper, a face seen in a crowd, started the flow of reminiscence. And so, little by little, I gathered the facts about the reëmergence out of the fire and smoke of the World War of this extraordinary character, who, in his day, wielded only less power in Imperial Germany than the Emperor himself.

In a short span of years immense changes have taken place in Europe. To-day it is a far cry to the times of Dr. Grundt and the “G” Branch of Section Seven of the Prussian Political Police. As head of the ex-Kaiser’s personal Secret Service, “der Stelze,” as the Germans nicknamed him from his crippled foot, was the all-powerful instrument of the anger and suspicion of the capricious and neurotic William II. In Germany his very existence was a mere rumour whispered only in the highest circles; and abroad, except in the innermost ring of the Secret Service, he was quite unknown. In the archives of the French Foreign Office there is, I understand, a dossier dealing with his activities of the time of the Algeciras Conference and, later, on the occasion of King Edward’s meeting with the Czar at Reval.

My friends, the two Okewoods, are reticent on this point; but I make no doubt that they, who originally encompassed the downfall of “der Stelze,” know more about the secret history of his career than any other man living, except the

ex-Emperor himself. Perhaps, now that memoirs are the fashion, from the seclusion of the little property he is known to possess in southern Germany, The Man with the Clubfoot may one day give the world some pages from his career. If he tell the truth—and Desmond Okewood says he is the kind of man who glories in the blackest crimes—his revelations should eclipse the memoirs of Sénart or Vidocq.

I have begun, as a story-teller should, at the beginning and set down the extraordinary circumstances of the first case to engage the attention of my two friends on the reappearance of Dr. Grundt in England. The affair of the purple cabriolet, which the newspapers at the time reported as a case of suicide, was actually the fourth link in the horrifying chain of crimes which marked Dr. Grundt’s campaign of vengeance against the British Secret Service. I have made it my point of departure, however, because it was not until after the mysterious deaths of Sir Wetherby Soukes, Colonel Branxe, and Mr. Fawcett Wilbur that Desmond and Francis Okewood, who had already retired from the Secret Service, were called back to the sphere of their former activity.

CLUBFOOT THE AVENGER

CHAPTER I
THE PURPLE CABRIOLET

Table of Contents

It was a wet night. The rain fell in torrents. The low archway leading into Pump Yard, Saint James's, framed a nocturne of London beneath weeping skies. The street beyond was a shining sheet of wet, the lamps making blurred streaks of yellow on the gleaming surface of the asphalt. Within, on the rough cobbles of the yard, the rain splashed and spurted like a thousand dancing knives.

On either side of the small square cars were drawn up in two long lines, the overflow from the lock-ups of the garage set all round the yard. At the open door of a plum-coloured cabriolet, his oilskins shining black in the pale rays of a gas-lamp above his head, a policeman stood, peering over the shoulder of a man in a raincoat who was busying himself over something inside the car. Behind him a glistening umbrella almost completely obscured the form of another man who was talking in whispers to a gnome-like figure in overalls, a sack flung over his head and shoulders in protection against the persistent rain.

Presently from the direction of the street came the grating of changing gears, the throb of an engine. Blazing head-lights clove the hazy chiaroscuro of the yard and a car, high-splashed with mud, drove slowly in. It stopped, the hand-brake jarred, and, with a jerk, the headlights were extinguished. A young man in a heavy overcoat laboriously disentangled himself from behind the driving-wheel and

stepped out from under the sopping hood, stretching his legs and stamping his feet as though stiff with cold.

On catching sight of him, the man with the umbrella fussed up. He disclosed a face that was grey with apprehension.

“Whatever do you think has happened, Major Okewood?” he said in a hoarse whisper. “There’s a dead man in the Lancia there!”

He jerked his head backwards in the direction of the cabriolet.

The newcomer, who was vigorously rubbing his numbed hands together, glanced up quickly. He had a lean, clever face with very keen blue eyes and a small dark moustache. Of medium height, he looked as fit as nails.

“What is it, Fink?” he demanded. “A fit or something?”

Fink, who was foreman of the garage, shook his head impressively.

“It’s a suicide. Leastwise, that’s what the doctor says. Poisoned hisself. There’s a bottle on the mat inside the car!”

“Oh!” exclaimed the young man, interested. “Who is it? One of your customers?”

“Never set eyes on him before nor yet the car. He’s a poorly dressed sort of chap. I think he jest crawled in there out of the wet to die!”

“Poor devil!” Okewood remarked. “Who found him?”

“Jake here,” said Fink, indicating the dripping goblin at his side. “He had to open the door of the Lancia to get by, and blessed if he didn’t see a bloke’s boot sticking out from under the rug!”

The gnome, who was one of the washers, eagerly took up the tale.

“It give me a proper turn, I tell yer,” he croaked. “I lifts the rug and there ’e wor, lyin’ acrorst the car! An’ stiff, Mister! Blimey, like a poker, ’e wor! An’ twisted up, too, somethink crool! ’Strewth! ’E might ’a’ bin a ’oop, ’e wor that bent! An’ ’is fyce! Gawd! It wor enough to give a bloke the ’orrors, strite!”

And he wiped his nose abstractedly on the back of his hand.

The young man walked across the yard to the purple car. The doctor had just finished his examination and had stepped back. The torch-lamp on the constable’s belt lit up the interior of the Lancia. Its broad white beam fell upon a figure that was lying half on the floor, half on the seat. The body was bent like a bow. The head was flung so far back that the arched spine scarce touched the broad cushioned seat, and the body rested on the head and the heels. The arms were stretched stiffly out, the hands half closed.

As the old washer had said, the face was, indeed, terrible. The glazed eyes, half open, were seared with fear, but, in hideous contrast, the mouth was twisted up into a leery, fatuous grin. He was a middle-aged man, inclining to corpulence, with a clean-shaven face and high cheek-bones, very black eyebrows, and jet-black hair cut *en brosse*. He was wearing a long drab overcoat which, hanging open, disclosed beneath it a shabby blue jacket and a pair of old khaki trousers.

“Strychnine!” said the doctor—he held up a small medicine bottle, empty and without a label. “That grin is

very characteristic. The *risus sardonicus*, we call it. And the muscles are as hard as a board. He's been dead for hours, I should say. When did the car come in?"

"Round about five o'clock, George said," the foreman replied. "A young fellow brought it. Said he'd be back later to fetch it away. My word! He'll get a nasty jar when he turns up!"

"Have you any idea who the dead man is?" Okewood asked the doctor.

"Some down-and-out!" replied the latter, dusting his knees. "There was a letter in his pocket addressed to the coroner. The usual thing. Walking the streets all day, no money, decided to end it all. And everything removed that could betray his identity. Seeing that he used strychnine he might be a colleague of mine come to grief. Somehow, for all his rags, he doesn't quite look like a tramp!"

He bent forward into the car again and sniffed audibly.

"It's funny," he said. "There's a curious odour in the car I can't quite place. It certainly isn't strychnine."

Okewood, who had been scanning the body very closely, had already detected the curious penetrating odour that yet hung about the interior of the cabriolet, something sweet, yet faintly chemical withal.

But now heavy footsteps echoed from under the archway.

"It's George back," said Fink, looking up. "He nipped across to the police station."

George, who was one of the mechanics, bareheaded, his hair shining with wet, was accompanied by a well-set-up young man with a trim blond moustache, who wore a black bowler hat and a heavy overcoat. He had about him that

curious air, a mixture of extreme self-reliance and rigorous reserve, which marks the plain-clothes man in every land.

“Good-evening, O’Malley!” said Okewood as the young detective came face to face with him.

The newcomer stared sharply at the speaker.

“God bless my soul!” he exclaimed. “If it isn’t Major Desmond Okewood! Are you on this job, too, Major? They told me you had retired!”

“So I have, O’Malley!” Desmond replied. “No more Secret Service for me! I heard that you had gone back to the C.I.D. after you were demobbed from the Intelligence. I’ve only blundered into this by accident. I’ve just come up from Essex in my car. This is where I garage it when I’m in town . . .”

O’Malley plucked open the door of the Lancia and began to examine the dead man. The detective asked a few questions of the doctor, read and took charge of the letter found in the pocket of the deceased, and made some notes in a black book. Then he beckoned to Desmond.

“Anything funny struck you about this chap, Major?” he asked in an undertone.

Desmond looked at O’Malley questioningly.

“Why do you ask that?” he said.

“Because,” O’Malley replied, “for a tramp who has walked the streets all day, it doesn’t strike me that his trousers are very muddy. His boots are dirty, and the bottoms of his trousers are wet. But they’re not *splashed*. Look at mine after walking only across from the station!”

He showed a spray of mud stains above the turn-up of his blue serge trousers.

“And see here!” he added. He bent down and undid the dead man’s overcoat. Beneath it jacket and waistcoat were open and the unbuttoned shirt showed a glimpse of clean white skin.

“That’s not the skin of a tramp!” the detective declared.

Again Desmond Okewood gave the young man one of his enigmatic looks. Then he turned to the doctor.

“When a man dies of strychnine poisoning,” he said, “death is preceded by the most appalling convulsions, I believe?”

“Quite right!” the doctor assented, blinking through his *pince-nez*.

“One would, therefore, look for some signs of a struggle,” Desmond continued, “especially in a confined space like this. But see for yourself! The body lies stiffly stretched out, the feet on the floor, the top of the head touching the back of the hood, the shoulders all but clear of the seat. Not even the mat on the floor is disturbed.”

“Very singular, I must admit,” observed the doctor.

“The man who found the body says it was covered up with the rug. Isn’t that right, Jake?”

“Quite right, sir,” chanted the washer. “Covered up ’e wor, ’cept for ’is foot as stuck art!”

“It strikes me as odd,” remarked Desmond mildly, “that, in such ghastly convulsions as strychnine poisoning produces, this man had sufficient presence of mind to arrange the rug neatly over himself”—he paused and looked round his audience—“in such a way as to delay discovery of the body as long as possible!”

“By George!” said O’Malley excitedly—he was young enough to be still enthusiastic—“you mean to say you think he was brought here dead!”

Without replying Desmond turned again to the open door of the car. He took the policeman’s lamp and turned it on the distorted features of the dead man, the jet-black eyebrows and hair.

“Do you see anything on the right ear?” he asked.

“Yes,” O’Malley replied. “Looks like soap or something!”

Desmond nodded.

“It is soap,” he said, “shaving soap,” and opened his hand in the beam of the light. Two or three tiny blond curls and a number of short ends of blond hair lay in the palm.

“I found these down the dead man’s collar,” he explained. “So you see, O’Malley, that your first impression that there is ‘something funny’ about this tramp was perfectly correct!”

But the detective only looked at him in a puzzled way. Desmond pushed him forward to the open door of the car.

“Sniff, man!” he cried.

“Rum sort o’ smell!” said O’Malley, “but I don’t see . . .”

“Hair dye!” exclaimed Desmond.

In a flash the young detective whipped round.

“Then you mean . . .” he began.

“I mean that this dead man is not a tramp, but a person of some social standing; that in life he was not dark and clean-shaven, but fair with a blond moustache or, more probably, a blond beard, and that he did not crawl into this car to die, but was brought here dead in the Lancia. You can assume, if you like, that he shaved himself, dyed his hair,

and dressed up as a tramp before taking poison, in order to conceal his identity, but you cannot assume that he killed himself here in this car. Someone brought the body here; therefore there was collusion in his suicide . . . if it *was* suicide . . .”

O’Malley pushed his hat back from his brow and scratched his head.

“Murder, eh?” he remarked, addressing no one in particular.

A light footstep sounded on the cobbles behind the group, and a voice said:

“You’ve got my car back, then?”

CHAPTER II
ENTER MISS VERA SLADE

Table of Contents

The two men turned about as a young girl, bareheaded, in a long ermine coat, slipped between them and laid her hand on the door of the Lancia. She was a dainty creature, very fashionably dressed, and little cloth-of-silver shoes peeped out from beneath the fringe of her white satin gown. Before they could stop her, she had pulled the car door wide. She gave one glance inside the cabriolet; then, with a little cry, she reeled back. Desmond Okewood caught her in his arms.

"It's . . . it's horrible!" she gasped. "What . . . who is that inside my car?"

A large policeman now lumbered up, panting.

"It's Miss Vera Slade," he said to O'Malley, indicating the girl with a fat thumb. "She come into the station this afternoon and reported as how her Lancia had been stolen while she was having her lunch at the Oracle Club in Piccadilly. After you'd left to come here," he added, turning to O'Malley, "the sergeant on duty noticed that the number of the missing car was the same as that of the Lancia here—the mechanic as fetched you reported the number, you know. So the sergeant sent round to Curzon Street at once to get Miss Slade. And here she is . . ."

"You identify this car as yours, then?" O'Malley asked the girl.

"Of course it's mine!" she replied with spirit. "I left it outside the Oracle Club whilst I was lunching there to-day.

When I came out, it had disappeared. I first thought that Mr. Törnedahl had taken it . . .”

“Mr. Törnedahl?” repeated O’Malley.

“Yes. The man I had lunching with me. Towards the end of lunch he was called away and was absent for some time—for about a quarter of an hour. When he came back to the table, he said he had been called away urgently on business and would I mind if he didn’t wait for coffee. And with that he went off. I had my coffee and wrote a couple of letters, and on going outside found that my car had gone.”

“I suppose this Mr. Törnedahl didn’t say anything about taking your car, did he, Miss?” O’Malley asked.

“Oh, no!” she replied positively.

“Do you know why he left you at lunch?”

“A page came and said a gentleman was asking for him.”

“Who was it, do you know?”

“No!”

“And did you see Mr. Törnedahl again?”

“I didn’t expect to. He was going to Paris this evening on his way back to Sweden.”

“I see. Now about the car. Did the club people notice anybody suspicious hanging round?”

The girl opened her clear eyes and looked at the detective.

“They wouldn’t, you know,” she answered. “The police won’t let you leave a car unattended in Piccadilly, so we park our cars in a side street at the back.”

“Who is this Mr. Törnedahl?”

“He’s a timber merchant, a Swede. I met him abroad.”

“What’s he like in appearance?” Desmond asked suddenly.

“A fair man,” the girl replied, “with very blue eyes and a blond beard, a typical Scandinavian . . .”

The two men exchanged glances.

“When did this car come in?” demanded O’Malley, excitedly, addressing Fink.

George, the mechanic, was thrust forward. About half-past five, was his answer to the detective’s question. A young man in a dark suit had brought it. He seemed to be in a great hurry. He backed the cabriolet into a place in the line and made off hastily, saying he would be back before midnight to fetch the car away. He was a fairish sort of chap, rather foreign-looking. He had a long scar on his cheek, high up, near the right eye.

“Was he alone?” O’Malley asked.

“Yes!” said George.

But here Jake intervened. Coming back from tea, it appears, he had met the young man passing under the archway. He had seen him join a man outside and go off with him.

“What was this man like?” was O’Malley’s question.

“A biggish sort o’ chap, ’e wor,” replied the washer vaguely, “an’ went with a bit of a limp!”

Anything more precise than this the most persistent cross-examination of the old man failed to elicit.

There was a pause. The rain poured pitilessly down. Mournfully the twelve strokes of midnight were hammered out from the steeple of Saint James’s Church.

Presently Desmond turned to the girl, who was sheltering beneath Fink's umbrella.

"That dead man in your car," he said diffidently, "do you recognize him?"

The girl shuddered.

"Why, no!" she said. "How should I?".

"I don't want to frighten you," the young man resumed, "but I think you ought to look again."

He took the policeman's lamp and opened the car door. With awe-struck eyes the girl approached slowly. She glanced quickly within, then turned away her head.

"He looks so dreadful," she said. "No, no! I don't know him!"

"You're quite sure?" queried the other.

"Absolutely!" said she.

O'Malley was about to speak when he felt a foot firmly press his. Desmond Okewood was looking at him.

"I think we need not detain Miss Slade any longer," he observed. "If one of your men could get her a taxi . . ."

A taxi was procured and they helped her in.

"I shall hope to see you again in the morning, Miss!" said O'Malley as he closed the door.

When the cab had rattled out of the yard, he turned to Desmond.

"Why did you tread on my foot just now?" he demanded.

"Never force an identification, O'Malley!" Desmond replied with his winning smile.

"I see!" remarked the young detective. "Well, I must be getting back to the station to see about having him"—he jerked his head toward the Lancia—"removed. I want to call

in at the Oracle Club on my way, late as it is. Are you coming along with me, Major?”

Desmond Okewood laughed and shook his head.

“Not on your life!” he retorted. “I’m out of the game for good . . .”

Little did he realize when, on those jesting words, they parted, that, on the contrary, within twenty-four hours Desmond Okewood, late of the Secret Service, would have resumed his old career.

He slept that night at the flat in Saint James’s Street, which he had kept on since his marriage as a *pied-à-terre* in town. His wife, with the Okewood son and heir, was in Lancashire on a visit to her father, and Desmond had come up from a brief week-end with his brother, Francis, in Essex, to resume his duties at the War Office.

At five minutes to eight on the following morning the telephone beside his bed rang deafeningly. At eight o’clock, very cross and sleepy, he put his ear to the burbling receiver. At a minute past eight he was sitting bolt upright in bed, alert and eager, listening to a well-known voice that came to him over the wire.

It was the Chief who summoned him. When the head of the Secret Service summons, there is nothing for it but to obey. About three-quarters of an hour later, accordingly, Desmond Okewood entered the little office, skyed at the top of a lofty building near Whitehall, and once more saw the strong, familiar profile silhouetted against the long window that framed the broad panorama of river bathed in the morning sunshine.