LOUIS TRACY

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

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CHAPTER I

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“LAST SEEN AT VICTORIA!”

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Alice, Lady Dyke, puckered her handsome forehead into a thoughtful frown as she drew aside the window-curtains of her boudoir and tried to look out into the opaque blackness of a November fog in London.

Behind her was cheerfulness—in front uncertainty. Electric lights, a nice fire reflected from gleaming brass, the luxury of carpets and upholstery, formed an alluring contrast to the dull yellow glare of a solitary lamp in the outer obscurity.

But Lady Dyke was a strong-minded woman. There was no trace of doubt in the wrinkled brows and reflective eyes. She held back the curtains with her left hand, buttoning a glove at the wrist with the other. Fog or no fog, she would venture forth, and she was already dressed for the weather in tailor-made costume and winter toque.

She was annoyed, but not disconcerted by the fog. Too long had she allowed herself to take things easily. The future was as murky as the atmosphere; the past was dramatically typified by the pleasant surroundings on which she resolutely turned her back. Lady Dyke was quite determined as to her actions, and a dull November night was a most unlikely agent to restrain her from following the course she had mapped out.

Moving to the light again, she took from her pocket a long, closely written letter. Its details were familiar to her, but her face hardened as she hastily ran through it in order to find a particular passage.

At last she gained her object—to make quite sure of an address. Then she replaced the document, stood undecided for a moment, and touched an electric bell.

“James,” she said, to the answering footman, “I am going out.”

“Yes, milady.”

“Sir Charles is not at home?”

“No, milady.”

“I am going to Richmond—to see Mrs. Talbot. I shall probably not return in time for dinner. Tell Sir Charles not to wait for me.”

“Shall I order the carriage for your ladyship?”

“Will you listen to me and remember what I have said?”

“Yes, milady.”

James ran downstairs, opened the door, bowed as Lady Dyke passed into Portman Square, and then confidentially informed Buttons that “the missus” was in a “rare old wax” about something.

“She nearly jumped down my bloomin’ throat when I asked her if she would have the carriage,” he said.

Her ladyship’s mood did not soften when she drifted from the fixed tenure of Wensley House, Portman Square, into the chaos of Oxford Street and fog at 5.30 on a November evening.

Though not a true “London particular,” the fog was chilly, exasperating, tedious. People bumped against each other

without apology, ’buses crunched through the traffic with deadly precision, pair-horse vans swept around corners with magnificent carelessness.

In the result, Lady Dyke, who meant to walk, as she was somewhat in advance of the time she had fixed on for this very important engagement, took a hansom. In her present mood slight things annoyed her. Usually, the London cab-horse is a thoughtful animal; he refuses to hurry; when he falls he lies contented, secure in the knowledge that for five blissful minutes he will be at complete rest. But this misguided quadruped flew as though oats and meadow-grass awaited him at Victoria Station on the Underground Railway.

He raced down Park Lane, skidded past Hyde Park Corner, and grated the off-wheel of the hansom against the kerb outside the station within eight minutes.

In other words, her ladyship, if she would obey the directions contained in the voluminous letter, was compelled to kill time.

As she stepped from the vehicle and halted beneath a lamp to take a florin from her purse, a tall, ulster-wrapped gentleman, walking rapidly into Victoria Street, caught a glimpse of her face and well-proportioned form.

Instantly his hat was off.

“This is an unexpected pleasure, Lady Dyke. Can I be of any service?”

She bit her lip, not unobserved, but the law of Society forced her features into a bright smile.

“Oh, Mr. Bruce, is it you? I am going to see my sister at Richmond. Isn’t the weather horrid? I shall be so glad if you

will put me into the right train."

Mr. Claude Bruce, barrister and man about town, whose clean-cut features and dark, deep-set eyes made him as readily recognizable, knew that she would have been much better pleased had he passed without greeting. Like the footman, he wondered why she did not drive in her carriage rather than travel by the Underground Railway on such a night. He guessed that she was perturbed—that her voluble explanation was a disguise.

He reflected that he could ill afford any delay in dressing for a distant dinner—that good manners oft entail inconvenience—but of course he said:

"Delighted. Have you any wraps?"

"No, I am just going for a chat, and shall be home early."

He bought her a first-class ticket, noting as an odd coincidence that it bore the number of the year, 1903, descended to the barrier, found that the next train for Richmond passed through in ten minutes, fumed inwardly for an instant, explained his presence to the ticket-collector, and paced the platform with his companion.

Having condemned the fog, and the last play, and the latest book, they were momentarily silent.

The newspaper placards on Smith & Son's bookstall announced that a "Great Society Scandal" was on the tapis. "The Duke in the Box" formed a telling line, and the eyes of both people chanced on it simultaneously.

Thought the woman: "He is a man of the world, and an experienced lawyer. Shall I tell him?"

Thought the man: "She wants to take me into her confidence, and I am too busy to be worried by some small

family squabble."

Said she: "Are you much occupied at the Courts just now, Mr. Bruce?"

"No," he replied; "not exactly. My practice is more consultive than active. Many people seek my advice about matters of little interest, never thinking that they would best serve their ends by acting decisively and promptly themselves."

Lady Dyke set her lips. She could be both prompt and decisive. She resolved to keep her troubles, whatever they were, locked in the secrecy of her own heart, and when she next spoke of some trivial topic the barrister knew that he had been spared a recital.

He regretted it afterwards.

At any other moment in his full and useful life he would have encouraged her rather than the reverse. Even now, a few seconds too late, he was sorry. He strove to bring her back to the verge of explanations, but failed, for her ladyship was a proud, self-reliant personage—one who would never dream of risking a rebuff.

A train came, with "Richmond" staring at them from the smoke and steam of the engine.

"Good-bye!" he said.

"Good-bye!"

"Shall I see you again soon?"

"I fear not. It is probable that I shall leave for the South of France quite early."

And she was gone. Her companion rushed to the street, and almost ran to his Victoria Street chambers. It was six

o’clock. He had to dress and drive all the way to Hampstead for dinner at 7.30.

At ten minutes past nine Sir Charles Dyke entered Wensley House. A handsome, quiet, gentlemanly man was Sir Charles. He was rich—a Guardsman until the baronetcy devolved upon him, a popular figure in Society, esteemed a trifle fast prior to his marriage, but sobered down by the cares of a great estate and a vast fortune.

His wife and he were not well-matched in disposition.

She was too earnest, too prim, for the easy-going baronet. He respected her, that was all. A man of his nature found it impossible to realize that the depths of passion are frequently coated over with ice. Their union was irreproachable, like their marriage settlements; but there are more features in matrimony than can be disposed of by broad seals and legal phrases.

Unfortunately, they were childless, and were thus deprived of the one great bond which unites when others may fail.

Sir Charles was hurried, if not flurried. His boots were muddy and his clothes splashed by the mire of passing vehicles.

“I fear I am very late for dinner,” he said to the footman who took his hat and overcoat. “But I shall not be five minutes in dressing. Tell her ladyship—”

“Milady is not at home, Sir Charles.”

“Not at home!”

“Milady went out at half-past five, saying that she was going to Richmond to see Lady Edith Talbot, and that you

were not to wait dinner if she was late in returning."

Sir Charles was surprised. He looked steadily at the man as he said:

"Are you quite sure of her ladyship's orders?"

"Quite sure, Sir Charles."

"Did she drive?"

"No, Sir Charles. She would not order the carriage when I suggested it."

The baronet, somewhat perplexed, hesitated a moment. Then he appeared to dismiss the matter as hardly worth discussion, saying, as he went up stairs:

"Dinner almost immediately, James."

During the solitary meal he was preoccupied, but ate more than usual, in the butler's judgment. Finding his own company distasteful, he discussed the November Handicap with the butler, and ultimately sent for an evening paper.

Opening it, the first words that caught his eye were, "Murder in the West End." He read the paragraph, the record of some tragic orgy, and turned to the butler.

"A lot of these beastly crimes have occurred recently, Thompson."

"Yes, Sir Charles. There's bin three since the beginning of the month."

After a pause. "Did you hear that her ladyship had gone to Richmond?"

"Yes, Sir Charles."

"Do you know how she went?"

"No, Sir Charles."

"I wanted to see her to-night, *very* particularly. Order the brougham in ten minutes. I am going to the Travellers' Club.

I shall be home soon—say eleven o’clock—when her ladyship arrives.”

The baronet was driven to and from the club by his own coachman, but on returning to Wensley House was told that his wife was still absent.

“No telegram or message?”

“No, Sir Charles.”

“I suppose she will stay with her sister all night, and I shall have a note in the morning to say so. Just like a woman. Now if I did that, James, there would be no end of a row. Anxiety, and that sort of thing. Call me at 8.30.”

An hour later Sir Charles Dyke left the library and went to bed.

At breakfast next morning the master of the house rapidly scanned the letters near his plate for the expected missive from his wife. There was none.

A maid was waiting. He sent her to call the butler.

“Look here, Thompson,” he cried, “her ladyship has not written. Don’t you think I had better wire? It’s curious, to say the least, going off to Richmond in this fashion, in a beastly fog, too.”

Thompson was puzzled. He had examined the letters an hour earlier. But he agreed that a telegram was the thing.

Sir Charles wrote: “Expected to hear from you. Will you be home to lunch? Want to see you about some hunters”; and addressed it to his wife at her sister’s residence.

“There,” he said, turning to his coffee and sole. “That will fetch her. We are off to Leicestershire next week, Thompson. By the way, I am going to a sale at Tattersall’s. Send a groom there with her ladyship’s answer when it comes.”

He had not been long at the sale yard when a servant arrived with a telegram.

“Ah, the post-office people are quick this morning,” he said, smiling. He opened the envelope and read:

“Want to see you at once.—DICK.”

He was so surprised by the unexpected nature of the message that he read the words aloud mechanically. But he soon understood, and smiled again.

“Go back quickly,” he said to the man, “and tell Thompson to send along the next telegram.”

A consignment of Waterford hunters was being sold at the time, and the baronet was checking the animals’ descriptions on the catalogue, when he was cheerily addressed:

“Hallo, Dyke, preparing for the shires, eh?”

Wheeling round, the baronet shook hands with Claude Bruce.

“Yes—that is, I am looking out for a couple of nice-mannered ones for my wife. I have six eating their heads off at Market Harborough now.”

Bruce hesitated. “Will Lady Dyke hunt this season?” he asked.

“Well, hardly that. But she likes to dodge about the lanes with the parson and the doctor.”

“I only inquired because she told me last night that she would probably winter in the South of France.”

“Told you—last night—South of France!” Sir Charles Dyke positively gasped in his amazement.

“Why, yes. I met her at Victoria. She was going to Richmond to see her sister, she said.”

“I am jolly glad to hear it.”

“Glad! Why?”

“Because I have not seen her myself since yesterday morning. She went off mysteriously, late in the afternoon, leaving a message with the servants. Naturally I am glad to hear from you that she got into the train all right.”

“I put her in the carriage myself. Have you not heard from her?”

“No. I wired this morning, and expect an answer at any moment. But what is this about the South of France? We go to Leicestershire next week.”

“I can’t say, of course. Your wife seemed to be a little upset about something. She only mentioned her intention casually—in fact, when I asked if we would meet soon.”

The other laughed, a little oddly in the opinion of his astute observer, and dismissed the matter by the remark that the expected message from his wife would soon clear the slight mystery attending her movements during the past eighteen hours.

The two men set themselves to the congenial task of criticizing the horses trotting up and down the straw-covered track, and Sir Charles had purchased a nice half-bred animal for forty guineas when his groom again saluted him.

“Please, sir,” said the man, “here’s another telegram, and Thompson told me to ask if it was the right one.”

Sir Charles frowned at the interruption—a second horse of a suitable character was even then under the hammer—

but he tore open the envelope. At once his agitation became so marked that Bruce cried:

"Good heavens, Dyke, what is it? No bad news, I hope?"

The other, by a strong effort, regained his self-control.

"No, no," he stammered; "it is all right, all right. She has gone somewhere else. See. This is from her sister, Mrs. Talbot. Still, I wish Alice would consider my natural anxiety a little."

Bruce read:

> "I opened your message. Alice not here. I have not seen her for over a week. What do you mean by wire? Am coming to town at once.—EDITH."

The baronet's pale face and strained voice betrayed the significance of the thought underlying the simple question.

"What do you make of it, Claude?"

Bruce, too, was very grave. "The thing looks queer," he said; "though the explanation may be trifling. Come, I will help you. Let us reach your house. It is the natural centre for inquiries."

They hailed a hansom and whirled off to Portman Square. They did not say much. Each man felt that the affair might not end so happily and satisfactorily as he hoped.

CHAPTER II

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INSPECTOR WHITE

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Lady Dyke had disappeared.

Whether dead or alive, and if alive, whether detained by force or absent of her own unfettered volition, this handsome and well-known leader of Society had vanished utterly from the moment when Claude Bruce placed her in a first-class carriage of a Metropolitan Richmond train at Victoria Station.

At first her husband and relatives hoped against hope that some extraordinary tissue of events had contributed to the building up of a mystery which would prove to be no mystery.

Yet the days fled, and there was no trace of her whereabouts.

At the outset, the inquiry was confined to the circle of friends and relatives. Telegrams and letters in every possible direction suggested by this comparatively restricted field showed conclusively that not only had Lady Dyke not been seen, but no one had the slightest clue to the motives which might induce her to leave her home purposely.

So far as her distracted husband could ascertain, she did not owe a penny in the world. She was a rich woman in her own right, and her banking account was in perfect order.

She was a woman of the domestic temperament, always in close touch with her family, and those who knew her best scouted the notion of any petty intrigue which would move her, by fear or passion, to abandon all she held dear.

The stricken baronet confided the search only to his friend Bruce. He brokenly admitted that he had not sufficiently appreciated his wife while she was with him.

“She was of a superior order to me, Claude,” he said. “I am hardly a home bird. Her ideals were lofty and humanitarian. Too often I was out of sympathy with her, and laughed at her notions. But, believe me, we never had the shadow of a serious dispute. Perhaps I went my own way a little selfishly, but at the time, I thought that she, on her part, was somewhat straight-laced. I appreciate her merits when it is too late.”

“But you must not assume even yet that she is dead.” The barrister was certain that some day the mystery would be elucidated.

“She is. I feel that. I shall never see her on earth again.”

“Oh, nonsense, Dyke. Far more remarkable occurrences have been satisfactorily cleared up.”

“It is very good of you, old chap, to take this cheering view. Only, you see, I know my wife’s character so well. She would die a hundred times if it were possible rather than cause the misery to her people and myself which, if living, she knows must ensue from this terrible uncertainty as to her fate.”

“Scotland Yard is still sanguine.” This good-natured friend was evidently making a conversation.

“Oh, naturally. But something tells me that my wife is dead, whether by accident or design it is impossible to say. The police will cling to the belief that she is in hiding in order to conceal their own inability to find her.”

“A highly probable theory. Are your servants to be trusted?”

“Y—es. They have all been with us some years. Why do you ask?”

“Because I am anxious that nothing of this should get into the papers. I have caused paragraphs to be inserted in the fashionable intelligence columns that Lady Dyke has gone to visit some friends in the Midlands. For her own sake, if she be living, it is best to choke scandal at its source.”

“Well, Bruce, I leave everything to you. Make such arrangements as you think fit.”

The barrister’s mobile face softened with pity as he looked at his afflicted friend.

In four days Sir Charles Dyke had aged many years in appearance. No one who was acquainted with him in the past would have imagined that the loss of his wife could so affect him.

“I have done all that was possible, yet it is very little,” said Bruce, after a pause. “You are aware that I am supposed to be an adept at solving curious or criminal investigations of an unusual class. But in this case, partly, I suspect, because I myself am the last person who, to our common knowledge, saw Lady Dyke alive on Tuesday night, I am faced by a dead wall of impenetrable fact, through which my intellect cannot pierce. Yet I am sure that some day this wretched business will be intelligible. I will find her if living; I will find her murderer if she be dead.”

Not often did Claude Bruce allow his words to so betray his thoughts.

Both men were absorbed by the thrilling sensations of the moment, and they were positively startled when a servant suddenly announced:

“Inspector White, of Scotland Yard.”

A short, thick-set man entered. He was absolutely round in every part. His sturdy, rotund frame was supported on stout, well-moulded legs. His bullet head, with close-cropped hair, gave a suggestion of strength to his rounded face, and a pair of small bright eyes looked suspiciously on the world from beneath well-arched eyebrows.

Two personalities more dissimilar than those of Claude Bruce and Inspector White could hardly be brought together in the same room. People who are fond of tracing resemblances to animals in human beings would liken the one to a grey-hound, the other to a bull-dog.

Yet they were both masters in the art of detecting crime —the barrister subtle, analytic, introspective; the policeman direct, pertinacious, self-confident. Bruce lost all interest in a case when the hidden trail was laid bare. Mr. White regarded investigation as so many hours on duty until his man was transported or hanged.

The detective was well acquainted with his unprofessional colleague, and had already met Sir Charles in the early stages of his present quest.

“I have an important clue,” he said, smiling with assurance.

“What is it?” The baronet was for the moment aroused from his despondent lethargy.

“Her ladyship did not go to Richmond on Tuesday night.”

Inspector White did not wait for Bruce to speak, but the barrister nodded with the air of one who knew already that Lady Dyke had not gone to Richmond.

Mr. White continued. “Thanks to Mr. Bruce’s remembrance of the number of the ticket, we traced it at

once in the clearing office. It was given up at Sloan Square immediately after the Richmond train passed through."

Bruce nodded again. He was obstinately silent, so the detective questioned him directly.

"By this means the inquiry is narrowed to a locality. Eh, Mr. Bruce?"

"Yes," said the barrister, turning to poke the fire.

Mr. White was sure that his acuteness was displeasing to his clever rival. He smiled complacently, and went on:

"The ticket-collector remembers her quite well, as the giving up of a Richmond ticket was unusual at this station. She passed straight out into the square, and from that point we lost sight of her."

"You do, Mr. White?" said Bruce.

"Well, sir, it is a great thing to have localized her movements at that hour, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is. To save time I may tell you that Lady Dyke returned to the station, entered the refreshment room, ordered a glass of wine, which she hardly touched, sat down, and waited some fifteen minutes. Then she quitted the room, crossed the square, asked a news-vendor where Raleigh Mansions were, and gave him sixpence for the information."

His hearers were astounded.

"Heavens, Claude, how did you learn all this?" cried the baronet.

"Thus far, it was simplicity itself. On Wednesday evening when no news could be obtained from your relatives, I started from Victoria, intending to call at every station until I found the place where she left the train. The railway

clearing officer was too slow, Mr. White. Naturally, the hours being identical in the same week, the first ticket-collector I spoke to gave me the desired clue. The rest was a mere matter of steady inquiry."

"Then you are the man whom the police are now searching for?" blurted out the detective.

"From the railway official's description? Possibly. Pray, Mr. White, let me see the details of my appearance as circulated through the force. It would be interesting."

The inspector was saved from further indiscretions by Sir Charles Dyke's plaintive question:

"Why did you not tell me these things sooner, Claude?"

"What good was there in torturing you? All that I have ascertained is the A B C of our search. We are at a loss for the motive of your wife's disappearance. Victoria, Sloane Square, or Richmond—does it matter which? My belief is that she intended to go to Richmond that night. Why, otherwise, should she make to the footman and myself the same unvarying statement? Perhaps she did go there?"

"But these houses, Raleigh Mansions. What of them?"

"Ah, there we may be forwarded a stage. But there are six main entrances and no hall porters. There are twelve flats at each number, seventy-two in all, and all occupied. That means seventy-two separate inquiries into the history and attributes of a vastly larger number of persons, in order to find some possible connection with Lady Dyke and her purposely concealed visit. She may have remained in one of those flats five minutes. She may be in one of them yet. Anyhow, I have taken the necessary steps to obtain the fullest knowledge of the inhabitants of Raleigh Mansions."

“Scotland Yard appears to be an unnecessary institution, Mr. Bruce,” snapped the detective.

“By no means. It is most useful to me once I have discovered a criminal. And it amuses me.”

“Listen, Claude, and you, Mr. White,” pleaded the baronet. “I implore you to keep me informed in future of developments in your search. The knowledge that progress is being made will sustain me. Promise, I ask you.”

“I promise readily enough,” answered Bruce. “I only stipulate that you prepare yourself for many disappointments. Even a highly skilled detective like Inspector White will admit that the failures are more frequent than the successes.”

“True enough, sir. But I must be going, gentlemen.” Mr. White was determined to work the new vein of Raleigh Mansions thoroughly before even his superiors were aware of its significance in the hunt for her lost ladyship.

When the detective went out there was silence for some time. Dyke was the first to speak.

“Have you formed any sort of theory, even a wildly speculative one?” he asked.

“No; none whatever. The utter absence of motive is the most puzzling element of the whole situation.”

“Whom can my wife have known at Raleigh Mansions? What sort of places are they?”

“Quite fashionable, but not too expensive. The absence of elevators and doorkeepers cheapens them. I am sorry now that I mentioned them to White.”

“Why?”

“He will disturb every one of the residents by injudicious inquiries. Each housemaid who opens a door will be to him a suspicious individual, each butcher’s boy an accomplice, each tenant a principal in the abduction of your wife. If I have a theory of any sort, it is that the first reliable news will come from Richmond. There cannot be the slightest doubt that she was going there on Tuesday night.”

“It will be very odd if you should prove to be right,” said Sir Charles.

Again they were interrupted by the footman, this time the bearer of a telegram, which he handed to his master.

The latter opened it and read:

> “What is the matter? Are you ill? I certainly am angry.—Dick.”

He frowned with real annoyance, crumpling up the message and throwing it in the fire.

“People bothering one at such a time,” he growled.

Soon afterwards Bruce left him.

True to the barrister’s prophecy, Inspector White made life miserable to the denizens of Raleigh Mansions. He visited them at all hours, and, in some instances, several times. Although, in accordance with his instructions, he never mentioned Lady Dyke’s name, he so pestered the occupants with questions concerning a lady of her general appearance that half-a-dozen residents wrote complaining letters to the company which owned the mansions, and the secretary lodged a protest at Scotland Yard.

Respectable citizens object to detectives prowling about, particularly when they insinuate questions concerning

indefinite ladies in tailor-made dresses and fur toques.

At the end of a week Mr. White was nonplussed, and even Claude Bruce confessed that his more carefully conducted inquiries had yielded no result.

Towards the end of the month a sensational turn was given to events. The body of a woman, terribly disfigured from long immersion in the water and other causes, was found in the Thames at Putney.

It had been discovered under peculiar circumstances. A drain pipe emptying into the river beneath the surface was moved by reason of some sanitary alterations, and the workmen intrusted with the task were horrified at finding a corpse tightly wedged beneath it.

Official examination revealed that although the body had been in the water fully three weeks, the cause of death was not drowning. The woman had been murdered beyond a shadow of a doubt. A sharp iron spike was driven into her brain with such force that a portion of it had broken off, and remained imbedded in the skull.

If this were not sufficient, there were other convincing proofs of foul play.

Although her skirt and coat were of poor quality, her linen was of a class that could only be worn by some one who paid as much for a single under-garment as most women do for a good costume; but there were no laundry marks, such as usual, upon it.

On the feet were a pair of strong walking boots, bearing the stamped address of a fashionable boot-maker in the West End. Among a list of customers to whom the

tradesman supplied footgear of this size and character appeared the name of Lady Dyke.

Not very convincing testimony, but sufficient to bring Sir Charles to the Putney mortuary in the endeavor to identify the remains as those of his missing wife.

In this he utterly failed.

Not only was this poor misshapen lump of distorted humanity wholly unlike Lady Alice, but the color of her hair was different.

Her ladyship's maid called to identify the linen—even the police admitted the outer clothes were not Lady Dyke's—was so upset at the repulsive nature of her task that she went into hysterics, protesting loudly that it could not be her mistress she was looking at.

Bruce differed from both of them. He quietly urged Sir Charles to consider the fact that a great many ladies give a helping hand to Nature in the matter of hair tints. The chemical action of water would—

The baronet nearly lost his temper.

"Really, Bruce, you carry your theories too far," he cried. "My wife had none of these vanities. I am sure this is not she. The mere thought that such a thing could be possible makes me ill. Let us get away, quick."

So a coroner's jury found an open verdict, and the poor unknown was buried in a pauper's grave.

The newspapers dismissed the incident with a couple of paragraphs, though the iron spike planted in the skull afforded good material for a telling headline, and within a couple of days the affair was forgotten.

But Claude Bruce, barrister and amateur detective, was quite sure in his own mind that the nameless woman was Alice, Lady Dyke.

He was so certain—though identification of the body was impossible—that he bitterly resented the scant attention given the matter by the authorities, and he swore solemnly that he would not rest until he had discovered her destroyer and brought the wretch to the bar of justice.

CHAPTER III

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THE LADY'S MAID

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The first difficulty experienced by the barrister in his self-imposed task was the element of mystery purposely contributed by Lady Dyke herself. To a man of his quick perception, sharpened and clarified by his legal training, it was easy to arrive at the positive facts underlying the trivial incidents of his meeting with the missing lady at Victoria Station.

Briefly stated, his summary was this: Lady Dyke intended to go to Richmond at a later hour than that at which his unexpected presence had caused her to set out. She had resolved upon a secret visit to some one who lived in Raleigh Mansions, Sloane Square—some person whom she knew so slightly as to be unacquainted with the exact address, and, as the result of this visit, she desired subsequently to see her sister at Richmond.

Sir Charles Dyke was apparently in no way concerned with her movements, nor had she thought fit to consult him, beyond the mere politeness of announcing her probable absence from home at the dinner hour.

To one of Bruce’s analytical powers the problem would be more simple were it, in a popular sense, more complex. In these days, it is a strange thing for a woman of assured position in society to be suddenly spirited out of the world without leaving trace or sign. He approached his inquiry with less certainty, owing to Lady Dyke’s own negative admissions, than if she had been swallowed up by an earthquake, and he were asked to determine her fate by inference and deduction.

It must be remembered that he was sure she was dead—murdered, and that her body had been lodged by human agents beneath an old drain-pipe at Putney.

What possible motive could any one have in so foully killing a beautiful, high-minded, and charming woman, whose whole life was known to her associates, whom the breath of scandal had never touched?

The key of the mystery might be found at Raleigh Mansions, but Bruce decided that this branch of his quest could wait until other transient features were cleared up.

He practically opened the campaign of investigation at Putney. Mild weather had permitted the workmen to conclude their operations the day before the barrister reached the spot where the body had been found—that is to say, some forty-eight hours after he had resolved neither to pause nor deviate in his search until the truth was laid bare.

A large house, untenanted, occupied the bank, a house with solid front facing the road, and a lawn running from the drawing-room windows to the river. Down the right side of the grounds the boundary was sharply marked by a narrow lane, probably a disused ferry road, and access to this thoroughfare was obtained from the lawn by a garden gate.

A newly marked seam in the roadway showed the line of the drainage work, and Bruce did not glance at the point where the pipe entered the Thames, as the structural features here were recent.

He went to the office of the contractor who had carried out the alterations. An elderly foreman readily answered his questions.

“Yes, sir. I was in charge of the men who were on the job. It was an easy business. Just an outlet for rain from the road. An old-fashioned affair; been there thirty or forty years, I should think; all the pipes were crumbling away.”

“Why were the repairs effected at this moment?”

“Well, sir, the house was empty quite a while. You see it used to be a school, a place where young gents were prepared for the army. It was closed about a year ago, and it isn’t everybody as wants so many bedrooms. I do hear as how the new tenant has sixteen children.”

“The incoming people have not yet arrived?”

“No, sir.”

“Can you tell me the name of the schoolmaster?”

“Oh, yes. When I was younger I have done a lot of carpenter’s work for him. He was the Reverend Septimus Childe.”

Bruce made a note of the name, and next sought the local police-inspector.

“No, nothing fresh,” said the latter, in reply to a query concerning the woman “found drowned.”

“I suppose these things are soon lost sight of?” said Bruce casually.

“Sometimes they are, and sometimes they aren’t. It’s wonderful occasionally how a matter gets cleared up after years. Of course we keep all the records of a case, so that the affair can be looked into if anything turns up.”

“Ah, that brings me to the most important object of my visit. A small piece of iron was found imbedded in the woman’s skull.”

The inspector smiled as he admitted the fact.

“May I see it? I want either the loan of it for a brief period, or an exact model.”

Again the policeman grinned.

“I don’t mind telling you that you are too late, sir.”

“Too late! How too late?”

“It’s been gone to Scotland Yard for the best part of a week.”

So others besides the barrister thought that the Putney incident required more attention than had been bestowed upon it.

Bruce concluded his round by a visit to the surgeon who gave evidence at the inquest.

The doctor had no manner of doubt that the woman had been murdered before being placed in the water, the state of the lungs being proof positive on that point.