

THE ARNCLIFFE PUZZLE,

BY
GORDON
HOLMES

Author of "A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE."

(Continued.)

"That's it, Alderney. Good cast, sir!"

"Ah, hence the marquis," murmured Lester.

Jones was puzzled again. He laughed, in case there was a lurking joke. The word suggested a circus or a fair to him, but his guest went on:

"And who is Mr. Warren?"

"He's t' agent, Mrs. Warren's son. She's t' housekeeper at t' Hall. A nice lot o' folks gotten him. A bonny agent to be sure! He doesn't know what (cats) frae turnips till they're cooked. By gum! Farmer Brown tell me t' other day—"

Any further gossip was cut short by the rapid clatter of a horse up the village street. The rider, a groom, dismounted in great haste outside a house with a brass plate on the door.

"What's wrong now?" said the landlord. "You're one o' Lord Arncliffe's men. Somebody's ill, I'll be bound, as sure as my name's J. J.!"

Lester, of course, was in a position to hazard a guess on the point, but he said nothing. A consultation between the messenger and a serving maid caused the former to turn away, mopping his head in perplexity. A glass of beer is the usual resource of such a man if his brains are

"His lordship dyin'?" "Swelp me!" gasped under his arm, led his horse toward the "Fisherman's Rest."

"Here's a nice thing!" he cried, in response to Jones's inquiry. "Lord Arncliffe at death's door, an' Dr. Smalley gone off on a round the Lord knows where! What's best to be done—send to Moseley or telegraph to Arncliffe?"

"His lordship dyin'?" "Swelp me!" wasped the innkeeper.

"So Mrs. Warren said. She told me to ride like—well, as fast as I could, for Dr. Smalley, an' now I'm in a fix."

"Did you say mixed ale?" "Was all Jones was able to ask, for he was dazed by the news."

"Can I be of any service?" interposed Lester. "I am a doctor."

"Are you, sir?" cried the groom. "Can you ride?"

"Well, sir, take my mare. It's a gelding to have me. Tell Mrs. Warren how it happened, an' say I am following. I have left word for Dr. Smalley."

"Has Lord Arncliffe had a sudden seizure?" "Is he an old man?"

"He is very old, sir, but, though ailing, he has had nothing like this before."

"Is he stout?"

"Bless you, sir, he's thin as a herring!"

George Lester quickly ran up-stairs, grabbed a small instrument case from his portmanteau, obtained some directions from the groom as to the way to the castle, and was gone before Jones appeared with a brimming tankard.

The inn-keeper had earned his nickname because he could laugh on any pretext. He grinned now ruefully.

"So he's a doctor, is he?" was his comment. "Dang me, I thowt he was a gentleman!"

"Anyhow, he can ride," said the groom. A pleasant country road, a lodge, a well-kept drive through a fine park sheltered by woods glorious in their June beauty, whirled past Lester during that strenuous gallop. The mare was a good one, and her head was turned toward the stables; so not many minutes elapsed ere he was breathlessly asking for Mrs. Warren at the spacious entrance to the fine mansion he had already seen amid the trees.

To avoid delay, he told the footman why he was there, and he was surprised when the man returned, white faced, with a stammering message from Mr. and Mrs. Warren that he was too late. Lord Arncliffe was dead. Yet the footman was obviously staid by the news.

"Take my compliments to Mr. Warren," said Lester with some emphasis, "and tell him that he has arrived at a serious decision. None except a medical man can decide that question."

The passive resistance apparently offered to professional aid was astonishing. It tended to throw George Lester into a critical, if not hostile, frame of mind. A gardener offered to hold his horse, so he advanced a few steps into the wide hall. That Lord Arncliffe, whose name was a household word, was dead, and far-reaching knowledge was evident at a glance. Here were Saracen and old Spanish coats of mail, steel inlaid with gold, shields of Japanese lacquer, bossed with carved dragons in oxidized silver, portraits by Lely and Gainsborough, porcelain from Sevres and Dresden, statues from Pompeii, quaint figures of long-forgotten gods from Southern India. Quaintly varied as were the trappings of hall and splendid old staircase, each object was a gem in itself. Wealth alone could not have gathered such a display. The soul of a collector, the cunning eye of a connoisseur, must have commanded the purse of a millionaire, if the remainder of the house was decked with an artistic hand to match this first sample of its treasures.

He was admiring a jade vase, embellished with scrollwork in relief, when the rustle of a dress came from a corridor leading into the broad landing of the stairs. Followed by the footman, an elderly woman appeared. Her attire, a black gown of stiff silk, her lace cap, a bunch of shining keys at her waist, the lines in her pale face expressing discipline and order, showed that this could be none other than the housekeeper, Mrs. Warren. Lester, prone to idle musings, wondered if she would object to the dust on his garments, so prim was she, and so sleek and upon the polished oak and the tiled floor of the mansion she ruled.

But her somewhat harsh features softened into a mechanical affability when Lester advanced to meet her. She had been

observing him narrowly as she descended the stairs, and a woman of her position might be expected to sum up a stranger with exceeding accuracy.

"My son did not quite understand the footman's message," she said in measured accents, though her natural emotion was betrayed by the effort to speak without constraint. "Of course we are only too glad that a doctor should see his lordship. May I ask your name, sir?"

"George Lester. Although not practising now, I have recently been medical officer to the Associated Gold-Fields Company on the West Coast of Africa."

"Are you staying in the village?"

She turned to usher him to the upper floor, and the briefly accounted for his presence as they went on together. They traversed a long passage, adorned throughout with rare pictures, ancient arms, and fine china, with here and there a wonderful but cabinet of manuscript table. Pausing at the end of the door on the right, Mrs. Warren stepped aside.

"Lord Arncliffe's bedroom," she whispered. "We brought him here from the library when—when Simpson found him."

Lester asked no questions. The time for explanation was not yet. Some one, seemingly Lord Arncliffe's agent, had spoken of death. Let that all-important verdict be ratified first.

The room was dim. Green blinds shut out the afternoon sun. On a narrow bed lay a diminutive figure, fully dressed. Near a window stood the man with the red gaiters. Near the still form on the bed was a liveried servant, aged and bent, gulping back his grief. Lester almost expected to find Miss Holt there too, but the large room held no other occupant. He noticed, but paid no heed to, the surprised air of the agent when he entered the room.

His first action was to raise the blind of the window nearest the bed. Then he stooped over the shrunken form stretched so stilly on the coverlet. Waistcoat and trousers had been disarranged at the breast. He lifted an eyelid, and a glance sufficed. The cornea was opaque. Though this sign is practically infallible, Lester applied a stethoscope to the region of the heart. He listened intently for a period that must have seemed long to the watchers.

"Yes, he is dead," he said.

There was a pause of tense silence. Even the weeping domestic withheld his sobs. Lester leaned over the bed again. Clearly, his attention was drawn by a slight irritation of the neck and scalp.

"He has been dead for more than an hour," volunteered Mrs. Warren, speaking in the stony, suspicious tone of one who resents, but cannot prevent, an intrusion.

"Has Dr. Smalley been in regular attendance on Lord Arncliffe?" inquired Lester, still examining the dead man's face.

Mrs. Warren answered. "Yes, in a sense," she said. "Dr. Smalley saw him two days ago."

"Did the doctor prescribe any medicine?"

"Lord Arncliffe would not touch any drug or alcoholic stimulant."

"Did he appear to be in his usual health today?"

"Oh, yes. He was at work in the library with Miss Holt until five o'clock. Then, as was his usual habit, she brought him a cup of beef tea and some biscuits, and left him with his papers."

"Did the beef tea and biscuits constitute his last meal?"

"Yes, sir. Simpson went in soon after six. His lordship was lying back in his chair, dead, to all appearance."

"He had taken—the beef tea, but only one biscuit," said Simpson, brokenly. George Lester assumed that the man was the trusted attendant of the deceased peer.

"Can you let me see the vessel that contained the beef tea?"

Mrs. Warren hesitated. The question was unexpected. Then she said: "Simpson, go and bring the tray from the table, if it is still in the library."

The servant, faithful to his training, at once recovered his self-possession when given an order. He left the room. No word was received until he returned with the message: A housemaid took the things to the kitchen, ma'am.

"You heard this gentleman's request. Ask if they have gone to the scullery," said Mrs. Warren sharply. Lester, listening, recalled his fleeting thought about the dust. Not even the tragedy of her master's sudden death could deprive the housekeeper of her authoritative air. Yet she spoke as if her social rank was far above her son's. When she uttered a command there could be no disputing it.

Simpson came back quickly. Meanwhile, Lester had neared again into both eyes of the dead man, and had tested the rigidity of the arm.

The servant carried a tray containing a silver biscuit box, a small covered jug, and a cup and saucer.

"Lester glanced at the various articles. They have been washed," he commented.

"Yes, sir. A house in order."

"Well," admitted Mrs. Warren, "that is so, of course. I thought that in the excitement of his lordship's seizure the maids might not have been so prompt. But do you think the beef tea was warmed?"

"No, Dr. Lester?" He was prepared by the same cook who had made it for several years almost without exception.

"It is hard to say," was the non-committal answer.

"Dr. Smalley believed his lordship's heart was affected. He told me so many a time," growled Harry Warren.

"I am sure of it," said Lester. "No doubt Lord Arncliffe suffered from occasional sickness, perhaps fainting fits."

"Not that I know of," replied Warren.

"Oh yes, he did!" broke in Simpson. "I told you, Mrs. Warren, didn't I, ma'am?"

"Certainly." Dr. Smalley was anxious about these symptoms, though they were very slight and far from frequent. Lord Arncliffe was sensitive about such matters, so they were never discussed.

There was a knock at the door. A tubby, baldheaded little man, balancing gold-rimmed pince nez on his nose, with drops of perspiration glistening on his forehead, entered precipitately.

"Bless my soul! what is this I hear?" he cried.

"I am grieved to tell you that his lordship is dead, Dr. Smalley," said Mrs. Warren in her quiet well-bred way. "This gentleman is Dr. Lester, who, fortunately, met one of the grooms near your house in the village."

Dr. Smalley nodded with marked coolness. In such wide did interlopers pry into a new practice!

But Lester paid no heed to his fellow-practitioner's hauteur. He waited until Dr. Smalley had concluded an examination on his own part. Then he touched the village doctor's arm.

"Will you oblige me by coming into the corridor a moment?" he asked.

"There's nothing—" began the other stilly.

"Exactly. I only wish a word in private with you."

"Pooh! Why this air of mystery, my good sir? Lord Arncliffe died from acute reorganization. I have warned him repeatedly."

Lester was nettled by the little man's absurd introduction of professional rivalry into the affair. Yet his demeanor was untroubled.

"I am an utter stranger in Arncliffe," he explained. "Even his lordship's name was unknown to me before today. Therefore—"

"Precisely, my dear sir. Lord Arncliffe's illness and its end conclusion are entirely within my province."

Dr. Smalley placed his hands behind his back and glared at Lester defiantly. More than once had he frightened away possible competitors by similar tactics. There was nothing else for it; Lester must speak openly.

"I was going to tell you," he said with cold distinctness, "that Lord Arncliffe's heart failure was not due to natural causes. It arose from the administration of arsenic in one of its many forms. Lord Arncliffe has been poisoned!"

CHAPTER II.

LORD ARNCLIFFE CONTINUES THE DISPUTE.

"Poisoned?" cried Harry Warren, with the loud roar of a man asked to credit the incredible.

"Poisoned!" echoed his mother, gazing affrightedly at Lester. Her thin face blanched and she clutched at the steel chain which held the bunch of jangling keys as though the suggestion conveyed a sinister imputation against her household management.

And Dr. Smalley became angry indeed. "Stuff and nonsense!" he almost shouted. "How dare you come here, sir, and make such ridiculous statements? His lordship has been my patient for years. There is not the slightest ground for your opinion. It is grotesque and untenable. It amounts to a positive outrage. I absolutely refuse to accept it."

Lester looked on the enraged little man straight in the eyes. The wrathful obstinacy he found therein would have amused him under different conditions. As it was, he declined the threatened argument.

"I have warned you, and I consider that my duty ends there," he said quietly. "I came to Arncliffe in search of peace. Believe me, I have no wish to be drawn into a distasteful controversy."

But Dr. Smalley was not to be pacified. "You seem to forget, sir," he vociferated, "that your idiotic charge contains a grave reflection on my treatment of his lordship, and implies either that he was killed himself or that some member of his household has committed murder. Let me tell you so."

Lester waved a deprecating hand to stay the torrent of words. He went out, closing the door behind him. None of the others offered to stay his departure. It was only natural that they should take Dr. Smalley's view of the dispute.

At the door, he told the waiting gardener to lead the horse to the stables. Dr. Smalley's gig was standing there, too. For the second time within an hour he walked slowly back to the village.

Half-way he met the groom, who seemed to be surprised.

"Is his lordship better, sir?" inquired the man.

"He is dead," was the answer. Ere the groom could gurgel forth his amazement, Lester asked him if he had seen Dr. Smalley.

"No, sir," he replied.

"Then the doctor must have heard of Lord Arncliffe's illness from some other source; he is at the Hall now."

"He may have come into the park by the West Lodge, sir. It is possible he drove through on his way home. But for goodness' sake, sir, what did his lordship die of?"

Dr. Smalley has been in attendance on your master for years. He will assign the cause of death," was the guarded answer. If Lester could help it, no hint of a difference between doctors should pass beyond the confines of the dimly lighted room where lay the mortal remains of the owner of Arncliffe.

Before he reached the "Fisherman's Rest," he had made up his mind to pursue a definite course. His assumption that Lord Arncliffe had been poisoned, either by design or accident, rested on no firmer basis than a guess, a reasonable guess, it is true, but without the essential warrant of thorough investigation. Perhaps he was mistaken. An old man, possibly somewhat eccentric in his ways, and with dogmatic views on food and medicine, might easily have acquired symptoms calculated to deceive the eye of even an experienced investigator like George Lester.

The village doctor did not know that his imaginary rival was one of the most eminent toxicologists of the day. Passing out of Edinburgh University, after taking the highest honors in materia medica and chemistry, Lester was at once appointed lecturer in the first of these sciences; but no sooner had he laid the foundations of a most successful career than he immersed his future in research at a special appointment on the staff of a West African exploration company. In reality he enhanced his reputation. His studies in plant and insect poison, carried on in the Ashanti bush, earned him a world-wide reputation. Before he was thirty he was famous.

Such credentials do not render a man humbugous in the least. Only he who climbs the tree of knowledge can tell how very much he each upward step, and George Lester, the brilliant investigator, honored by his own government, a recognized authority in the medical schools of the Continent, was in a curiously humble frame of mind as he entered the village.

He already regretted the momentary resentment of Dr. Smalley's pompous air which induced him to utter the drastic opinion. The little doctor might have been profoundly amazed were he able to read Lester's thoughts at that moment. Conviction was rapidly yielding to doubt. There was some chance that, ere night fell the author of "Toxic Analyses" would seek the fiery-eyed Smalley and apologize to him.

But the circumstances which conspire against human happiness wing their unseen flight from the most unlikely quarters. "Jolly Jim" Jones noted only for his laugh and his taste in beer, was the unconscious agent who quickened a lulled suspicion into fresh activity.

Although genuinely sorry to hear that the Earl was dead, Jones soon recovered his wonted buoyancy and proceeded to entertain his guest with reminiscences of the deceased peer.

"By gum! said he, 'I thowt his lordship had live till he wur a hundred. He wur hard as nails, tuff as a bit o' seasoned yak.' (Anghee, oak.) 'An' he wur a clever owd bird, too. He knew comat about everything. One day he claffed me wi' more ways o' housin' spirits than I'd ever heard tell of afore. Gosh! he med me roar.'"

And Jones showed how he roared. "Another time," he went on, after regaining his breath, "his lordship walked around my bit o' garden, an' he nearly skered me into a fit. By gum! he said as how o' honey could be poisoned by bees feedin' on rhododendrons and hembane or water dropwort mistaken for pansies. As for mushrooms, he called 'em sike neams I've niver had one o' t' house since."

Lester suddenly found the garrulous landlord's talk exceedingly interesting. "Did Lord Arncliffe really show much knowledge of poisons?" he asked.

"Poisons!" repeated Jones, grinning widely. (To be continued.)

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HOUSEHOLD RECIPES

Little Savory Potato Cakes—Twelve

tablespoonfuls of floury potatoes, eight

tablespoonfuls of white flour, two table-

spoonfuls of grated cheese, one table-

spoonful of cream, the yolks of two eggs,

one teaspoonful of baking powder, salt and

cayenne to taste. Boil the potatoes and

rub through a fine sieve. Add the butter,

flour, cheese, baking powder and season-

ing and blend thoroughly. Mix into a

light dough with the cream and the yolks

of the eggs. Roll out about half an inch

thick, cut into little rounds and brush

over with the beaten egg. Bake in a

butter quick oven until a nice brown.

Split in two, butter and sprinkle with a

very little finely chopped parsley.

Egg Savories—Pass the yolks of three

or four hard boiled eggs through a sieve

and pound them with an ounce of butter

and a tablespoonful of grated cheese. Season

with celery salt, pepper and a little

cayenne. Add a teaspoonful of warm

butter. When it is hot, spread in some

triangular-shaped pieces of toasted bread.

Heat carefully in the oven and serve

sprinkled with chopped parsley.

Indian Toast—Take all the bones and

the skin from the remains of some cook-

ed, smoked haddock. Weigh four ounces

(this is sufficient to cover six pieces of

toast) and pound it in a bowl with a des-

sertspoonful of fresh butter. Then add a

teaspoonful of mustard, a teaspoonful

of curry powder and a few drops of vine-

gar. Pass the fish through a wire sieve

and make it hot in a small saucepan con-

taining about a teaspoonful of warm but-

ter. Have ready some carefully toasted

pieces of bread of medium size, mix the

crust. Place a little heap of the prepared

fish on them. Then sprinkle over this

some hard boiled white of egg which has

been passed through a sieve, and after

placing in the oven for a minute, send

to the table topped by a stuffed olive.

Tomato Rankins—Cut some ripe toma-

toes of medium size in half. Remove the

seeds and the hard portion from the middle

and place fruit on a sieve to drain for

about an hour. Put a tablespoonful of

soft breadcrumbs into a small saucepan,

pour in just enough milk to cover and let

it cook very gently, stirring frequently

until a stiff paste is formed. Then turn

the paste into a basin, add a tablespoonful

of butter and the yolks of two eggs, beat-

ing one into the ingredients before adding

the second. When the eggs are mixed,

stir in three tablespoonfuls of grated cheese

and season with celery salt, pepper and a

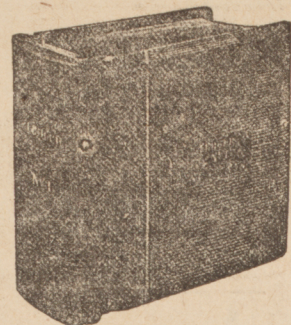
little grated nutmeg. Add a pinch of salt

to the white of the eggs and whisk them

to a very stiff froth. Fill the hollow

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