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A Mysterious Disappearance

By Gordon Holmes

A Great Detective Story

(Continued.)

"At this moment I am unable to say. But the cabman might be of some use."

"The cabman. What cabman?"

"Did I omit that? I ought to have told you that I found the driver of the four-wheeler in which your poor wife was taken, dead or insensible, from Sloane Square to Putney."

"What an extraordinary thing!"

"What is?"

"That you should have forgotten to inform me of such a striking fact.

"Not so. Now that I recollect, I have not had the opportunity. It was impossible to discuss anything else but that forged letter on the last two occasions we met, and it was only a few hours prior to your visit on Monday that I got the cabman's story fully. By the way, do you now see any reason why Jane Harding should have tried to deceive you in such a manner?"

The barrister perceived that Sir Charles was nervous and irritable, so he deemed it a needless strain to enlarge on the history of his discovery of Foxey.

"I am tired of letters, and plots, and mysteries. My life is resolving into one huge note of interrogation. Soon the great question of eternity will dominate all others."

Dyke's mood unfitted him for sustained conversation. Bruce could but pity him, and hope that time would calm his fevered brain, and soothe the unrest that shed this gloom over him.

"Really," said Claude, after a long interval, during which both men sought inspiration from the dancing flames in the fireplace, "really this is too bad of you, Dyke. You showed a marked improvement for a little space, and now you are letting yourself slip back into a state of lonely and unoccupied moping again."

"My thoughts find me both occupation and company," was the despondent reply.

"There is nothing for it," continued Bruce cheerfully, "but a tour round the world. You must start immediately. A complete change of scene and surroundings will soon pull you back to a normal state of mind and health."

"I have been thinking of a long journey for some time past."

The barrister glanced sharply at his friend. The double entente was not lost on him. Dyke was in a depressed and nervous condition. The uncertainty regarding his wife's fate was harassing him unduly and it was with a twinge of conscience that Bruce reflected upon his own eagerness to pursue a quest, which, by very reason of its indefiniteness, attracted him as an intellectual pursuit.

"Look here," he cried, on the spur of the moment, "I have long desired to see the Canadian Pacific route. Will you arrange to start West with me a fortnight hence? We can return when the spirit moves us."

"We will see. We will see. Today I feel unable to decide anything."

"Yes, I know, but the mere fact that you take the resolution will serve to reanimate you."

"It is very good of you, Claude, to trouble so about me. Had you asked me earlier I might have gone stright away. But let it rest for a little while. When I have recovered my spirits somewhat I will come to you to ask you to sail next day, or something of that sort."

Beyoud this the other could not move him.

There was one link in the chain of evidence that would be irrefragable if discovered. Was this "Colonel Montgomery" in any way connected with the house at Putney where the murderer had disposed of the body? If this could be established, the unknown visitor to Raleigh Mansions would experience a good deal of difficulty in clearing himself of suspicion. Bruce was certain that, once the "Colonel" was traced, much would come to light explanatory of Mrs. Hillmer's, and her brother's dread, lest his identity should be discovered.

An inquiry addressed to the house agents to whom possible tenants were referred elicited the information that the present owner, a lady, was prepared to let the house annually or on a lease. They enclosed an order to view, which Bruce retained in case he should happen to need it.

A second letter gave him the address of the lady's solicitors, Messrs. Small & Sharp, Lincoln's Inn.

He called on them as a possible tenant, with a desire to purchase the property outright if his proposal could be entertained.

Mr. Sharp, the partner who dealt with the estate, became very suave when the suggestion reached his ears.

"You will understand, Mr. Bruce, that your request requires some consideration. The rent my client asks is comparatively low, because the house is old-fashioned, but the splendid riparian position of the property, a free-hold acre on the banks of the Thames at Putney, gives it a highly increased future value. Any figure you may have based on a rental calculation would therefore—"

"Not meet the case at all," said the barrister, repressing a smile at the familiar opening move in the game of bargaining.

"Precisely."

"May I ask you who the present owner is?"

"Certainly, the lady's name is Small. In fact, she is my partner's wife. Her father, the late Septimus Childe, purchased the estate some years ago, largely because the house suited his requirements as the head of a successful private school."

"Has the estate changed hands frequently then?"

"Oh, dear, no. Indeed, it is well understood that the Rev. Mr. Childe acquired it more as a friendly transaction than otherwise. The estate is a portion of the separate estate of the late Lady Helen Montgomery, who married Sir William Dyke, father of the present baronet, who perhaps—good gracious, my dear sir, what is the matter?"

Had Bruce been a woman he must have fainted.

As it was, the shock nearly paralyzed him. Sir Charles Dyke!—Montgomery!—The house at Putney the property of his mother! What new terror did not this frightful combination suggest?

Why did his friend conceal from him these most important facts? Why did he pretend ignorance not only of the locality but of his mother's maiden name? Like lightning the remembrance flashed through Bruce's troubled brain that he had only heard of the earlier Lady Dyke as a daughter of the Earl of Tilbury. A suspicion—profoundly horrible—yet convincing— was slowly mastering him, and every second brought further proof not only of its reasonableness, but of its ghastly and inflexible certainty.

Again the lawyer's voice reached his ears, dully and tin, as though it penetrated through a wall.

"Surely you feel ill? Let me get some brandy."

"No—no," murmured the barrister. "It is but a momentary faintness. I—I think I will go out into the fresh air. Are you—quite sure—that Mr. Childe bought the property from Lady Helen Montgomery's trustees?"

"Quite sure. If you wait a few moments I will show you the title deeds."

"No, thank you. I will call again. Pray excuse me."

Somehow Bruce crossed the quiet square of the Inn, and plunged into the turmoil of the street. Amid the bustle of Holborn he had a curious sensation of safety. The fiend so suddenly installed in his consciousness was less busy here suggesting strange and maddening thoughts.

Why— why—why—fifty questions beat against the barrier of agonized negation he strove to set up, but the noise of the traffic made the attack confused. Each incautious bump against a passer-by silenced a demand, each heavy crunch of a 'bus on the gravel-strewed roadway temporarily silenced a doubt.

He was so unmanned that he felt almost on the verge of tears. He absolutely dared not attempt to reason out the fearful alternative which had so fiercely thrust itself upon him.

At last he became vaguely aware that people were staring at him. Fearful lest some acquaintance should recognize and accost him he hailed a hansom and drove to Victoria Street.

All the way the heavy beat of the horse's feet served to distract his thoughts He forced himself to count the quick paces, and tried hard to accommodate the numerals of two or more syllables to the rapidity of the animal's trot. He failed in this, but in the failure found relief.

Nevertheless, though the horse was willing and the driver eager to oblige a fare who gave a "good" address, the time seemed interminable until the cab stopped in front of his door.

Once arrived there, he slowly ascended the stairs to his own flat, told Smith to pay the cabman half-a-crown and to admit no one, and threw himself into a chair.

At last he was face to face with the troublous demon who possessed him in Lincoln's Inn, struggled with him through the crowd, and travelled with him in the hansom. Phyllis Browne should have her answer sooner than he expected.

The man who murdered Lady Dyke was her own husband.

"Oh, heavens!" moaned Bruce, as he swayed restlessly to and fro in his chair, "is it possible?"

He sat there for hours. Smith entered, turned on the lights and suggested tea, but received an impatient dismissal.

After another long interval Smith appeared again, to announce that Mr. White had called.

"Did you not say I was out?" said Claude, his hollow tones and haggard air startling his faithful servitor considerably.

"Yes, sir—oh yes, sir. But that's no use with Mr. White. 'E said as 'ow e were sure you were in."

"Ask him to oblige me by coming again—tomorrow. I am very ill. I really cannot see him."

Smith left the room only to return and say: "Mr. White says, sir, 'is business is of the hutmost himportance. 'Ee can't leave it; and 'e says you will be very sorry afterwards if you don't see 'im now."

(To be Continued.)

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Fashion Hint for Times Readers

AN AFTERNOON FROCK FOR PALM BEACH.

At the American Riveria now it is warm enough to fare abroad without a wrap and many exquisite costumes are to be seen during the afternoon visiting hours. This frock of verry pink satin opens in front over a tucked panel and bands of the tucking form the little sleeves. Undersleeves of chiffon match a deep yoke and this chiffon is in a cream shade, blending with the pinkish tinge of the satin. The big hat of berry red straw, faced with moire silk in a darker shade and banked with plumes and aigrettes, completes a very elegant toilette for calling wear.

HOW ST. PATRICK'S DAY WILL BE OBSERVED IN ST. JOHN

Members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and Hibernian Cadets Will Attend Service in the Morning—Reception and Dramatic Performances the Evening Attractions.

All over the world, tomorrow, wherever there are Irishman the little spring of Shamrock will be in evidence and the sons of Erin's isle will commemorate St. Patrick's Day.

In St. John there will be a parade to the Cathedral in the morning, and in the evening the A. O. H. will hold a reception and dance in their hall and dramatic entertainments will be held in various parts of the city and in Fairville by several Roman Catholic societies.

The parade to the Cathedral in the morning is expected to be of a very interesting character. Headed by the City Cornet Band the Hibernian Knights, in their attractive uniforms, the members of the A. O. H. in black clothes, and the A. O. H. Cadets in their natty uniforms of khaki and green, will leave the hall on Union street and march to the Cathedral, where a special sermon, appropriate to the day, will be preached by Rev. W. Duke. His Lordship Bishop Casey will be present in the sanctuary.

The At Home in the evening will be quite an elaborate affair. Speeches will be delivered and with an orchestra present an excellent programme is promised.

"The Shamrock and the Rose" is the title of the drama to be presented in the Nickel Theatre, in the, evening by the Dramatic Club of the Young Men's Society of St. Joseph. The members have been actively at work and a very interesting performance is promised. At a dress rehearsal held on Sunday everything passed off without a hitch.

The cast of characters for the play is as follows:

John Desmond, an Outlaw Patriot.. .. .. .