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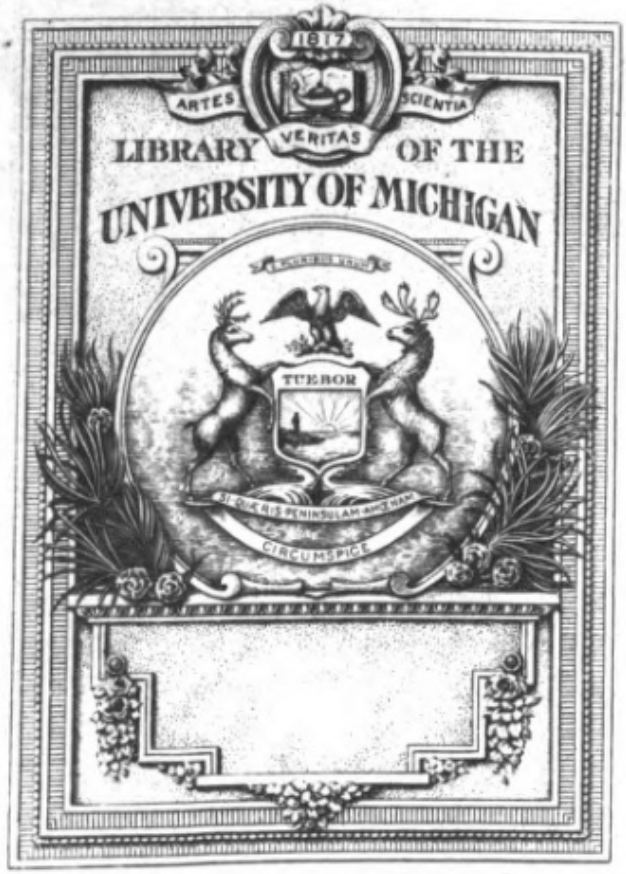


THE GIFT OF
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# A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

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Tracy, Louis

# A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

BY

GORDON HOLMES

TORONTO
McLEOD & ALLEN
PUBLISHERS
1905

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## CHAPTER I

# "LAST SEEN AT VICTORIA!"

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



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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



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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



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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



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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.



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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."



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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 tonight, *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.



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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'



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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."



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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,



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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.



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# CHAPTER II

## INSPECTOR WHITE

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.



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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



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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 imagnied 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.



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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



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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



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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



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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?"



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"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



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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.



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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.



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# CHAPTER III

## THE LADY'S MAID

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



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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



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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.



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"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.

"It was equally indisputable that she was put to death by malice aforethought?"

"Oh, yes. A small iron spike was absolutely wedged into the brain through the hardest part of the skull."

"What was the nature of the injuries that caused death?"

"This piece of iron penetrated the occipital bone at the lowest part, and injured the cerebellum, damaging all the great nerve centres at the base of the brain."

"Would death ensue instantly?"

"Yes. Such a blow would have the effect of a high voltage electric current. Complete paralysis of the nerve centres means death."

"Then I take it that great force must have been used?"

"Not so much, perhaps, as the nature of the wound seems to imply; but considerable — sufficient, at any rate, to break the piece of iron."



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"It was broken, you say? Was it cast-iron?"

"Yes, of good quality. Off some ornament or design, I should imagine. But it snapped off inside the head at the moment of the occurrence."

"Curious, is it not, for a person to be killed in such a manner by such an instrument?"

"I have never before met such a case. Were it not for the way in which the body was jammed beneath a hidden drain-pipe, and the effective means taken to destroy the identity, I should have inclined to the belief that some strange accident had happened. At any rate, the murderer must have committed the crime on the spur of the moment, and seized upon the first weapon to hand."

"You say she was forcibly placed where found?"

"Yes; the workmen's description left no other idea."

"Could not the tide have done this?"

"Hardly. One cannot be quite emphatic, as such odd things do happen. But it seems to be almost impossible for the tide at Putney to pack a body beneath a jutting drain-pipe in such a manner that the waist, or narrowest part, should be beneath the pipe and the body remain securely held."

"Yet it is not so marvellous as the coincidence that this particular drain should need repairs at the precise period when this tragedy happened."

"Quite so. It is exceedingly strange. Are you interested in the case? Have you reason to believe that this poor woman —?"

"I hardly know," broke in the barrister. "I have no data to go upon, but I feel convinced that I shall ultimately establish her identity. You, doctor, can help me much by telling me your surmises in addition to the known facts."



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The medico looked thoughtfully through the window before he exclaimed: "I am certain that the woman found in the Thames came from the upper walks of life. Notwithstanding the disfiguring effects of the water and rough usage, any medical man can rapidly appreciate the caste of his subject. She was, I should say, a woman of wealth and refinement, one who led an orderly, well-regulated life, whose surroundings were normal and healthy."

Bruce thanked his informant and hurried back to London. A telegram to Inspector White preceded him. He had not long reached his Victoria-street chambers when the detective was announced. He soon made known his wishes. "I want you to give me that small piece of iron found in the head of the woman at Putney," he said. "If necessary, I will return it in twenty-four hours."

Mr. White's face showed some little sign of annoyance. "It is against the rules," he began; but Bruce curtly interrupted him.

"Very well, I will make direct application to the Commissioner."

"I was going to say, Mr. Bruce, that although not strictly in accordance with orders, I will make an exception in your case." And the detective slowly produced the *piece de conviction* from a large pocket-book.

In sober fact, the police officer was somewhat jealous of the clever lawyer, who saw so quickly through complexities that puzzled his slower brain. He was in nowise anxious to help the barrister in his inquiries, though keenly wishful to benefit by his discoveries, and follow out his theories when they were defined with sufficient clearness.

Bruce did not at first take the proffered article.

"Let me understand, Mr. White," he said. "Do you



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object to my presence in this inquiry? Are you going to hinder me or help me? It will save much future misunderstanding if we have this point settled now."

The detective flushed at this direct inquiry. "I will be candid with you, Mr. Bruce. It is true I have been vexed at times when you have overreached me; but I regret it immediately. It is foolish of me to try and solve problems by your methods. Kindly forget my momentary disinclination to hand over the only genuine link in the case."

"In what case?"

"In the case of Lady Dyke's disappearance."

"Ah! Then you think it is in some way connected with the woman found at Putney?"

"I am sure of it. The woman at Putney, whether Lady Dyke herself or not I cannot tell, wore some of her ladyship's clothes. When we have ascertained the means and the manner of the death of the woman buried at Putney we shall not be far from learning what has become of Lady Dyke."

"How have you identified the clothes?"

"I managed to gain the confidence of the lady's maid, who gave evidence at the inquest. She, of course, is quite positive that the body was not that of her mistress, but when I had examined some of Lady Dyke's linen I no longer doubted the fact."

"If you knew all this, how comes it that more did not transpire at the coroner's inquiry?"

"In such affairs an inquest is rather a hindrance to the police. It is better to lull the guilty person or persons into the belief that the crime has passed into oblivion. They know as well as we do that Lady Dyke is buried at Putney. We have failed to establish her identity by the evidence of the husband and servants. The linen and



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clothes, our sole effective testimony, remain in our possession; so, taking everything into consideration, I prefer that matters should remain as they are for the present."

"Really, Mr. White, I congratulate you. You will perhaps pardon me for saying that some of your colleagues do not usually take so sensible a view."

The policeman smiled at the compliment. "I am learning your method, Mr. Bruce," he said.

As he spoke, Smith entered with a note endorsed "Urgent."

It was in the handwriting of Sir Charles Dyke, and even the imperturbable barrister could not resist an exclamation of amazement when he read:

"My Dear Bruce, — My wife's maid has vanished. She has not been near the house for three days. The thing came to my ears owing to gossip amongst the servants. There is something maddening about these occurrences. I really cannot stand any more. Do come to see me, there's a good fellow."

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said the detective. "The blessed girl must have been spirited away a few hours after I saw her. Maybe, Mr. Bruce, we are all wrong. Has she gone to join her mistress?"

"Possibly — in the next world."

Nothing would shake the barrister's belief that Alice, Lady Dyke, was dead.



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# CHAPTER IV

## NO. 61 RALEIGH MANSIONS

REALLY, the maid deserved to have her ears pulled.

People in her walk in life should not ape their betters. Lady Dyke, owing to her position, was entitled to some degree of oddity or mystery in her behavior. But for a lady's maid to so upset the entire household at Wensley House, Portman Square, was intolerable.

Sir Charles became, if possible, more miserable; the butler fumed; the housekeeper said that the girl was always a forward minx, and the footman winked at Buttons, as much as to say that he knew a good deal if he liked to talk.

The police were as greatly baffled by this latter incident as by its predecessor. The movements of the maid were quite unknown. No one could tell definitely when she left the house. Her fellow-servants described the dress she probably wore, as all her other belongings were in her bed-room; but beyond the fact that her name was Jane Harding, and that she had not returned to her home in Lincolnshire, the police could find no further clue.

So, in brief, Jane Harding quickly joined Lady Dyke in the limbo of forgetfulness.

Bruce, however, forgot nothing. Indeed, he rejoiced at this new development.

"The greater the apparent mystery," he communed,



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"the less it is in reality. We now have two tracks to follow. They are both hidden, it is true, but when we find one, it will probably intersect the other."

The new year was a few days old when Bruce made his first step through the bewildering maze which seemed to bar progress on every side. He received a report from the man, a pensioned police-officer, who had conducted a painstaking search into the history and occupation of every inhabitant of Raleigh Mansions.

Two items the barrister fastened on to at once.

"At No. 12, top floor right, entrance by first door on Sloane Square side, is a small flat occupied by a man named Sydney H. Corbett. He passes as an American, but is probably an Englishman who has resided in the United States. He does not mix with other Americans in London, and is of irregular habits. He frequents race meetings and sporting clubs, is reported to belong to a Piccadilly club where high play is the rule, and has no definite occupation. He occasionally visits a lady who lives at No. 61, same mansions, ground floor, and sixth door. They have been heard to quarrel seriously, and the dispute appears always to have concerned money. Corbett went to Monte Carlo early in December. His address there is 'Hotel du Cercle,' and the local post-office has a supply of stamped and addressed envelopes in which to forward his correspondence."

"At No. 61, as already described, resides Mrs. Gwendoline Hillmer. She lives in good style, rents a brougham and a victoria, and is either a wealthy widow or maintained by some one of means. She dresses well, and goes out a good deal to theatres, but otherwise leads a rather lonely life. Her most frequent visitor is, or was, a gentleman who looked like an officer in the Guards, and,



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much less often, the aforesaid Sydney H. Corbett. Her servants, except the maid, live out. The maid, who is a sort of companion, is talkative, but does not know much, or, if she does, will not speak."

Bruce weighed these statements very carefully. They did not contain any positive facts that promised well for the elucidation of Lady Dyke's visit to the mansions on that fateful November evening, but the absolute colorlessness of the reports concerning the other occupants rendered them quite impossible of individual distinction.

After an hour of puzzled thought the barrister finally decided upon a course of action. He would see Mrs. Gwendoline Hillmer, and trust to luck in the way of discoveries.

A quiet smile lit up his handsome, regular features as he proceeded to array himself in the most fashionable clothes he possessed, paying the utmost attention to every detail in a manner that amazed his valet.

When at last that worthy was despatched to the nearest florist's for a *boutonniere*, he communicated his bewilderment to the hall-porter.

"My guv'nor's going out on the mash," he said confidentially. "I thought he would never look at a woman; but, bless you, Jim, we're all alike. When the day comes we all rush after a petticoat."

It was nearly six o'clock when Bruce walked down Victoria Street. For some reason, he did not call a hansom, and it was almost with a start that he found himself purchasing a ticket to Sloane Square at the Underground Railway office. At this precise hour and place he had last seen Lady Alice on earth. The memory nerved him to his purpose.

A few minutes later he pressed the electric bell of No. 61



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Raleigh Mansions. As he listened to the slight jar of the indicator within, he smiled at the apparent fatuity of his mission.

He had one card, perhaps a weak one, to play, it was true, but he hoped that circumstances might prevent this from being tabled too early in the game.

The door opened, and a youthful housemaid stood before him, the simple wonder in her eyes showing that such visitors were rare.

"Is Mrs. Hillmer at home?" he said.

"I'll see sir, if you give me your name."

"Surely you know whether or not she is at home?"

The girl stammered and blushed at this unexpected query. "Well, sir," she said, "my mistress is in, but I do not know if she can receive any one. She is dressed to go out."

"Ah! that's better. Now, take her my card, and say that while I will not detain her, my business is very important." This with a sweet smile that put the flurried maid entirely at her ease.

The girl withdrew, after hesitating for a moment to decide the important question as to whether or not she should close the door in his face.

Another smile, and she did not.

He was thus free to note the luxurious and tasteful air of the general appointments, for the entrance hall usually reveals much of the characteristics of the inmates. Here was every evidence of refinement and wealth. All the display had not been lavished on the drawing-room.

As he waited, conscious of the fact that his colloquy with the servant had been overheard, a lady crossed from one room to the other at the end of the passage. Her smart but simple dress, and the quick scrutiny she gave



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him, as though discovering his presence accidentally, caused him to believe — rightly, as it transpired — that this was the maid-companion described by his assistant.

Not only had she obviously made her appearance in order to look at him, but the housemaid had carried his message to a different section of the flat.

The girl returned. "My mistress will see you in a few minutes," she said. "Will you kindly step into the dining-room?"

He followed her, sat down in a position where the strong glare of the electric lamps would fall on any one who stood opposite, and waited developments.

The furniture was solid and appropriate, the carpet rich, and the pictures, engravings for the most part, excellent. This pleasant room, warmed by a cheerful fire, impressed Bruce as a place much used by the household. Books and work-baskets were scattered about, and a piano, littered with music, filled a corner. There were a few photographs of persons and places, but he had not time to examine these before the lady of the house entered.

Her appearance, for some reason inexplicable to the barrister himself, took him by surprise. She was tall, graceful, extremely good-looking, and dressed in a style of quiet elegance. Just the sort of woman one would expect to find in such a well-appointed abode, yet more refined in manner than Bruce, from his knowledge of the world, thought he would meet, judging by the hasty inferences drawn from his subordinate's report. She was self-possessed, too. With calm tone, and slightly elevated eyebrows, she said:

"You wish to see me, I understand?"

"Yes. Allow me first to apologize for the hour at which I have called."



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"No apology is necessary. But I am going out. Perhaps you will be good enough not to detain me longer than is absolutely necessary."

She stood between the table and the door. Bruce, who had risen at her entrance, was at the other side of the room. Her words, no less than her attitude, showed that she desired the interview to be brief. But the barrister resolved that he would not be repelled so coolly.

Advancing, with a bow and that fascinating smile of his, he said, pulling forward a chair:

"Won't you be seated?"

The lady looked at him. She saw a man of fine physique and undoubted good breeding. She hesitated. There was no reason to be rude to him, so she sat down.

Claude drew a chair to the other side of the hearthrug, and commenced:

"I have ventured to seek this interview for the purpose of making some inquiries."

"I thought so. Are you a policeman?" The words were blurted out impetuously, a trifle complainingly, but Bruce gave no sign of the interest they had for him.

"Good gracious, no," he cried. "Why should you think that?"

"Because two detectives have been bothering me, and every other person in these mansions, about some mysterious lady who called here two months ago. They don't know where she called, nor will they state her name; as if any one could possibly know anything about it. So I naturally thought you were on the same errand."

"Confound that rascal White," growled he to himself.

But Mrs. Hillmer went on: "If that is not your business, would you mind telling me what it is?"



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Now Bruce's alert brain had been actively engaged during the last few seconds. This woman was not the clever, specious adventuress he had half expected to meet. It seemed more than ever unlikely that she could have any knowledge of Lady Dyke or the causes that led to her disappearance. He was tempted to frame some excuse and take his departure. But the certainty that his missing friend had visited Raleigh Mansions, and the necessity there was for exploiting every line of inquiry, impelled him to adopt this last resource.

"It is not concerning a missing lady, but concerning a missing gentleman that I have come to see you."

The shot went home.

Why, for the life of him, he could not tell, but his companion was manifestly disturbed at his words.

"Oh," she said.

Then, after a little pause: "May I ask his name?"

"Certainly. He is known as Mr. Sydney H. Corbett."

She gave a slight gasp.

"Why do you put it in that way? Is not that his right name?"

"I have reason to believe it is not."

Mrs. Hillmer was so obviously distressed that Bruce inwardly reviled himself for causing her so much unnecessary suffering. In all probability, the source of her emotion had not the remotest bearing upon his quest.

Then came the pertinent query, after a glance at his card, which she still held in her hand:

"Who are you, Mr. — Mr. Claude Bruce?"

"I am a member of the Bar, of the Inner Temple. My chambers are No. 7 Paper Buildings, and my private residence is given there."

"And why are you interested in Mr. Sydney Corbett?"



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"Ah, in that respect I am at this moment unable to enlighten you."

"Unable, or unwilling?"

He indulged in a quiet piece of fencing:

"Really, Mrs. Hillmer," he said, "I am not here as in any sense hostile to you. I merely want some detailed information with regard to this gentleman, information which you may be able to give me. That is all."

All this time he knew that the woman was scrutinizing him narrowly — trying to weigh him up as it were, not because she feared him, but rather to discover the true motive of his presence.

Personally, he had never faced a more difficult task than this make-believe investigation. He could have laughed at the apparent want of connection between Lady Dyke's ill-fated visit to Raleigh Mansions and this worrying of a beautiful, pleasant-mannered woman, who was surely neither a principal nor an accomplice in a ghastly crime.

"Well, I suppose I may consider myself in the hands of counsel. Tell me what it is you want to know!" Mrs. Hillmer pouted, with the air of a child about to undergo a scolding.

"Are you acquainted with Mr. Corbett's present address?" he said.

"No. I have neither seen him nor heard from him since early in November."

"Can you be more precise about the period?"

"Yes, perhaps." She arose, took from a drawer in the sideboard a packet of bills — receipted, he observed — searched through them and found the document she sought. "I purchased a few articles about that time," she explained, "and the account for them is dated November 15. I had not seen my —" She blushed, became confused,



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laughed a little, and went on. "I had not seen Mr. Corbett for at least a week before that date — say November 8th or 9th."

Lady Dyke disappeared on the evening of the 6th!

Bruce swallowed his astonishment at the odd coincidence of dates, for he said, with an encouraging laugh, "Out with it, Mrs. Hillmer. You were about to describe Mr. Corbett correctly when you recollected yourself."

Mrs. Hillmer, still coloring and becoming saucily cheerful, cried, "Why should I trouble myself when you, of course, know all that I can tell you, and probably more? He is my brother, and a pretty tiresome sort of relation, too."

"I am obliged for your confidence. In return, I am free to state that your brother is now in the South of France."

"As you are here, Mr. Bruce," she said, "I may as well get some advice gratis. Can people writ him in the South of France? Can they ask me to pay his debts?"

"Under ordinary circumstances they can do neither. Certainly not the latter."

"I hope not. But they sometimes come very near to it, as I know to my cost."

"Indeed! How?"

Mrs. Hillmer hesitated. Her smile was a trifle scornful, and her color rose again as she answered: "People are not averse to taking advantage of circumstances. I have had some experience of this trait in debt-collectors already. But they must be careful. You, as a legal man, must know that demands urged on account of personal reasons may come very near to levying blackmail."

"Surely, Mrs. Hillmer, you do not suspect me of being



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a dun. Perish the thought! You could never be in debt to me."

"Very nice of you. Don't you represent those people on Leadenhall Street, then?"

"What people?"

"Messrs. Dodge & Co."

"No; why do you ask?"

"Because my brother entered into what he called a 'deal' with them. He underwrote some shares in a South African mine, as a nominal affair, he told me, and now they want him to pay for them because the company is not supported by the public."

"No, I do not represent Dodge & Co."

"Is there something else then? Whom do you represent?"

"To be as precise as permissible, I may say that my inquiries in no sense affect financial matters."

"What then?"

"Well, there is a woman in the case."

Mrs. Hillmer was evidently both relieved and interested.

"No, you don't say," she said. "Tell me all about it. I never knew Bertie to be much taken up with the fair sex. I am all curiosity. Who is she?"

He did not take advantage of the mention of a name which in no way stood for Sydney. Besides, perhaps the initial stood for Herbert. He resolved to try another tack.

Glancing at his watch he said: "It is nearly seven o'clock. I have already detained you an unconscionable time. You were going out. Permit me to call again, and we can discuss matters at leisure."

He rose, and the lady sighed: "You were just beginning to be entertaining. I was only going to dine at a restaurant. I am quite tired of being alone."



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Was it a hint? He would see. "Are you dining by yourself, then, Mrs. Hillmer?"

"I hardly know. I may bring my maid."

Claude now made up his mind. "May I venture," he said, "after such an informal introduction, to ask you to dine with me at the Prince's Restaurant, and afterwards, perhaps, to look in at the Jollity Theatre?"

The lady was unfeignedly pleased. She arranged to call for him in her brougham within twenty minutes, and Bruce hurried off to Victoria Street in a hansom to dress for this unexpected branch of the detective business.

When he told his valet to telephone to the restaurant and the theatre respectively for a reserved table and a couple of stalls, that worthy chuckled.

When his master entered a brougham in which was seated a fur-wrapped lady, the valet grinned broadly. "I knew it," he said. "The guv'nor's on the mash. Now, who would ever have thought it of him?"



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# CHAPTER V

## AT THE JOLLITY THEATRE

By tacit consent, Claude and his fair companion dropped for the hour the roles of inquisitor and witness.

They were both excellent talkers, they were mutually interested, and there was in their present escapade a spice of that romance not so lacking in the humdrum life of London as is generally supposed to be the case.

Bruce did not ask himself what tangible result he expected from this quaint outcome of his visit to Sloane Square. It was too soon yet. He must trust to the vagaries of chance to elucidate many things now hidden. Meanwhile a good dinner, a bright theatre, and the society of a smart, nice-looking woman, were more than tolerable substitutes for progress.

As a partial explanation of his somewhat eccentric behavior, he volunteered a lively account of a recent *cause celebre*, in which he had taken a part, but the details of which had been rigidly kept from the public. He more than hinted that Mr. Sydney Corbett had figured prominently in the affair; and Mrs. Hillmer laughed with unrestrained mirth at the unwonted appearance of her brother in the character of a Lothario.

"Tell me," said Bruce confidentially, when a couple of glasses of Moët '89 had consolidated friendly relations, "what sort of a fellow in this brother of yours?"



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"Not in any sense a bad boy, but a trifle wild. He will not live an ordinary life, and at times he has been hard pressed to live at all. As a matter of fact, it is this scrape he blundered into with Messrs. Dodge & Co. that induced him to masquerade temporarily under an assumed name."

"Then what is his real name?"

"Ah, now you are pumping me again. I refuse to tell."

"But there are generally serious reasons when a man disguises himself in such fashion."

"The reason he gave me was that he dreaded being writted for liability regarding the shares I mentioned to you. It was good enough. Now you come with this story of meddling with somebody else's wife. Surely this is an additional reason. I supplied him with funds until we quarrelled, and then he went off in a huff."

"What did you quarrel about.?"

"That concerns me only." Mrs. Hillmer was so emphatic that Bruce dropped the subject.

When they drove to the theatre Mrs. Hillmer, on alighting at the entrance, said to her coachman, "You may return home now, and bring Dobson to meet me at 11.15."

"May I venture to inquire who Dobson is?" said Claude.

"Certainly. Dobson is my maid."

This woman puzzled him the more he saw of her. He was now quite positive that she lived on the fringe of Society. Her status was, at the best, dubious. Yet he had never heard of her before, nor met her in public. None of his friends were known to her, and she mentioned no one beyond those popular personages who are *connu* of all the world. She was obviously wealthy and refined, with more than a spice of unconventionality. At times,



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too, beneath her habitual expressions of lively and vivacious interest, there was a touch of melancholy.

For an instant her face grew sad when her eyes rested on a typical family party of father, mother, and two girls who occupied seats in the row of stalls directly in front of her.

For some reason Bruce felt sorry for Mrs. Hillmer. He regretted that the exigencies of his quest forced him to make her his dupe, and he resolved that, if by any chance her scapegrace brother were concerned in Lady Dyke's death, Mrs. Hillmer should, if possible, be spared personal humiliation or disgrace.

Indeed, he had formed such a favorable opinion of her that he had made up his mind to conduct his future investigations without causing her to assist involuntarily in putting a halter around her relative's neck.

Nevertheless, it was impossible to avoid getting some further information, as the lady herself paved the way for it. Her comments betrayed such an accurate acquaintance with the technique of the stage that he said to her, "You must have acted a good deal?"

"No," she said, "not very much. But I was stage struck when young."

"But you have not appeared in public?"

"Yes, some six years ago. I worked so hard that I fell ill, and then — then I got married."

"Do you go out much to theatres, nowadays?"

"Very little. It is lonely by oneself, and there are so few plays worth seeing."

Bruce wondered why she insisted so strongly upon the isolation of her existence. In his new-found sympathy he forebore to question, and she continued:

"When I do visit a theatre I amuse myself mostly by



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silent criticism of the actors and actresses. Not that I could do better than many of them, or half so well, but it passes the time."

"I hope you do not regard killing time as your main occupation?"

"It is so, I fear, however hard I may strive otherwise." And again that shadow of regret darkened the fair face.

Some one in front turned round and glared at them angrily, for the famous comedian, Mr. Prospect Ricks, was singing his deservedly famous song, "It was all because I buttoned up her boots," so the conversation dropped for the moment.

Claude focussed his opera-glasses on the stage. While his eyes wandered idly over the pretty faces and shapely limbs of the coryphées his brain was busy piecing together all that he had heard. The odd coincidence of the dates of Lady Dyke's murder and the speedy departure of the self-styled Sydney Corbett for the Riviera would require a good deal of explanation by the latter gentleman.

True, it was not the barrister's habit to jump at conclusions. There might be a perfectly valid motive for the journey. If the man did not desire his whereabouts to be known, why did he leave his address at the post-office?

And, then, what possible reason could Lady Dyke have in visiting him voluntarily and secretly at his chambers in Raleigh Mansions? This virtuous and high-principled lady could have nothing in common with a careless adventurer, taking the most lenient view of his sister's description of him. And as Bruce's subtle brain strove vainly to match the queer fragments of the puzzle, his keen eyes roved over the stage in aimless activity.

Suddenly they paused. His power of vision and mental



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analysis were alike inadequate to the new and startling fact which had obtruded itself, unasked and unsought for, upon his sight.

Among the least prominent of the chorus girls, posturing and moving with the stiffness and visible anxiety of the novice, who is not yet accustomed to the glare of the footlights upon undraped limbs, was one in whose every gesture Bruce took an absorbing interest.

He was endowed in full measure with that prime requisite in the detection of criminals, an unusually good memory for faces, together with the artistic faculty of catching the true expression.

Hence it was that, after the whirl of a dancing chorus had for a few seconds brought this particular member of the company close to the proscenium, Bruce became quite sure of having developed at least one branch of his inquiry within measurable distance of its conclusion.

The girl on the stage was Jane Harding, Lady Dyke's maid.

When her features first flashed upon his conscious gaze he could hardly credit the discovery. But each instant of prolonged scrutiny placed the fact beyond doubt. Not even the make-up and the elaborate wig could conceal the contour of her pretty if insipid face, and a slight trick she had of drooping the left eyelid when thinking confirmed him in his belief.

So astounded was he at this sequel to his visit to the theatre, that he utilized every opportunity of a full stage to examine still further the appearance and style of this strange apparition.

When the curtain fell and Jane Harding had vanished, he was brought back to actuality by Mrs. Hillmer's voice.

"Fie, Mr. Bruce. You are taking altogether too much



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notice of one of the fair ladies in front. Which one is it? The tall standard bearer or the little girl who pirouettes so gracefully?"

"Neither, I assure you. I was taken up by wondering how a young woman manages to secure employment in a theatre for the first time."

"I think I can tell you. Influence goes a long way. Talent occasionally counts. Then, a well-known agent may, for a nominal fee, get an opening for a handsome, well-built girl who has taken lessons from either himself or some of his friends in dancing or singing, or both."

"Is such a thing possible for a domestic servant?"

"It all depends upon the domestic servant's circle of acquaintances. As a rule, I should say not. A theatre like this requires a higher average of intelligence."

This, and more, Bruce well knew, but he was only making conversation, while he thought intently, almost fiercely, upon the latest phase of his strange quest.

During the third act he devoted more time to Mrs. Hillmer. If that sprightly dame were a little astonished at the celerity with which he conducted her to her carriage and the waiting Dobson, it was banished by the nice way in which he thanked her for the pleasure she had conferred.

"The enjoyment has been mostly on my side," she cried, as he stood near the window of her brougham. "Come to see me again soon."

He bowed, and would have said something if an imperious policeman had not ordered the coachman to make way for the next vehicle. So Mrs. Hillmer was whisked into the traffic.

From force of habit, he glanced casually at the crowd struggling through the exit of the theatre, and he caught sight of Mr. White, who, too late, averted his round eyes



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and strove to shield his portly form in the portico of a neighboring restaurant.

He did not want to be bothered by the detective just then. He lit a cigarette, and Mr. White slid off quietly into the stream of traffic, finally crossing the road and jumping on to a Charing Cross 'bus.

"So," said Claude to himself, "White has been watching Raleigh Mansions, and watching me too. 'Pon my honor, I shouldn't wonder if he suspected me of the murder! I'm glad I saw him just now. For the next couple of hours I wish to be free from his interference."

Waiting a few moments to make sure that White had not detailed an aide-de-camp to continue the surveillance, he buttoned his overcoat to the chin, tilted his hat forward, and strolled round to the stage door of the Jollity Theatre.



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# CHAPTER VI

## MISS MARIE LE MARCHANT

THE uncertain rays of a weak lamp, struggling through panes dulled by dirt and black letters, cast a fitful light about the precincts of the stage-door.

Elderly women and broken-down men, slovenly and unkempt, kept furtive guard over the exit, waiting for the particular "super" to come forth who would propose the expected adjournment to a favorite public-house. Some smart broughams, a four-wheeler, and a few hansoms, formed a close line along the pavement, which was soon crowded with the hundred odd hangers-on of a theatre — scene-shifters, gasmen, limelight men, members of the orchestra, dressers, and attendants — mingling with the small stream of artistes constantly pouring out into the cold night after a casual inquiry for letters at the office of the doorkeeper.

This being a fashionable place of amusement there were not wanting several representatives of the gilded youth, some obviously ginger-bread or "unleavened" imitations, others callow specimens of the genuine article.

Bruce paid little heed to them as they impudently peered beneath each broad-leafed and high-feathered hat to discover the charmer honored by their chivalrous attentions.

Yet the presence of this brigade of light-headed cavaliers



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helped the barrister far more than he could have foreseen or even hoped.

At last the ex-lady's maid appeared, dressed in a showy winter costume and jaunty toque. She was on very friendly terms with two older girls, on whom the stage had set its ineffaceable seal, and the reason was soon apparent.

"Come along," she cried, her words being evidently intended to have an effect on others in the throng less favored than those whom she addressed; "let us get into a hansom and go to Scott's for supper. Here, cabby!"

She was on the step of a hansom when a tall, good-looking boy, faultlessly dressed, and with something of Sandhurst or Woolwich in his carriage, darted forward.

"Hello, Millie," he said to one of Jane Harding's companions. "How are you? A couple of fellows have come up with me for the night. Let's all go and have something to eat at the Duke's," thereby indicating a well-known club usually patronized by higher class artistes than this trio.

After a series of introductions by Christian names, among which Bruce failed to catch the word "Jane," the party went off in three hansoms, a pair in each.

Claude was not a member of the "Duke's," though he had often been there. But there was a man close at hand who was a member of everything in London that in any way pertained to things theatrical. Every one knew Billy Sadler and Billy Sadler knew every one. A brief run in a cab to a theatre, a restaurant, and another restaurant, revealed the large-hearted Billy, drinking a whisky and soda and relating to a friend, with great gusto and much gesticulation, the very latest quarrel between the stage-manager and the leading lady. He hailed Claude with enthusiasm.



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"'Pon my soul, Bruce, old chap, haven't seen you for an age. Where have you bin? An' what's the little game now?"

Mr. Sadler was fully aware of the barrister's penchant for investigating mysteries. The two had often foregathered in the past.

Are you "busy"? said Bruce.

"Not a bit. By-bye, Jack. See you at luncheon to-morrow at the Gorgonzola. Well, what is it?"

"I want you to come with me to the 'Duke's.' There's a young lady there I'm interested in."

Billy squeezed round in the hansom, which was now bowling across a corner of Trafalgar Square.

"You," he cried. "After a girl! Is she in the profession? Is mamma frightened about her angel? The correct figure for a breach just now, my boy, is five thou'."

"Oh, it's nothing serious. I will tell you all about it when matters have cleared a bit. It is a mere item in a really big story. But, here we are. Take me straight to the supper-room."

As they entered the comfortable, brightly lit club the strains of a band came pleasantly to their ears, and in a minute they were installed at a corner table in the splendid room devoted to the most cheery of all gatherings — a Bohemian meal when the labors of the night are past.

Bruce soon marked his quarry. Jane Harding was in great form — eating, drinking, and talking at the same time.

"Who is that, Billy?" he said, indicating the girl.

Sadler carefully balanced his *pince-nez* on his well-defined nose, gazed, and laughed: "Goodness knows. She's a new-comer, and not much at the best. Do you know where she carries a banner?"



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"At the Jollity."

"Oh! then here's our man" — for a Mephistophelian gentleman was passing at the moment. "Say, Rosenheim, who's the new coryphée over there?"

Mephistopheles halted, looked at Jane and laughed, too. "Her name is Miss Marie le Marchant; but as she happened to be born in London she pronounces it Mahrie Lee Mahshuns, with the accent on the 'Mahs.' Anything else you would like to know?"

"Yes, I'm stuck on her! Where did you pick her up?"

"She's a housemaid, or something of the sort. Came into money. Wants to knock 'em on the stige. The rest is easy."

"Has she been with you long?" put in Claude, as their informant was the under-manager of the Jollity.

Mr. Rosenheim glanced at him. Sadler, he knew, had no interest in the girl, and the barrister did not quite possess the juvenile appearance that warranted such solicitude.

"She joined us just before Christmas. What's up? Is she really worth a lot of 'oof?"

"I should imagine not," laughed Bruce; and Mr. Rosenheim joined another group.

Supper ended, Marie and Millie, and eke Flossie, attended by their swains, discussed coffee and cognac in the *foyer*.

Chance separated Miss le Marchant, as she may now be known, momentarily from the others, and Bruce darted forward.

"Good-evening," he said. "I am delighted to meet you here."

The girl recognized him instantly. She would have denied her identity, but her nerve failed her before those



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steadfast, penetrating eyes. Moreover, it was not an ill thing for such a well-bred, well-dressed man to acknowledge her so openly.

"Good-evening, Mr. Bruce," she said, with a smile of assurance, though her voice faltered a little.

He resolved to make the situation easy.

"We have not met for such a long time," he said; "and I am simply dying to have a talk with you. I am sure your friends will pardon me if I carry you off for five minutes to a quiet corner."

With a simper, Miss le Marchant took his proffered arm, and they went off to an unoccupied table.

"Now, Jane Harding," said he, with some degree of sternness in his manner, "be good enough to explain to me why you are passing under a false name, and the reasons which led you to leave Sir Charles Dyke's house in such a particularly disagreeable way."

"Disagreeable? I only left in a hurry. Who had any right to stop me?"

"No one, in a sense, except that Sir Charles Dyke may feel inclined to prosecute you."

"For what, Mr. Bruce?"

This emancipated servant girl was not such a simpleton as she looked. It was necessary to frighten her and at the same time to force her to admit the facts with reference to her sensational flight from Wensley House.

"You must know," he said, "that Sir Charles Dyke can proceed against you in the County Court to recover wages in lieu of notice, and this would be far from pleasant for you in your new surroundings."

"Yes, I know that. But why should Sir Charles Dyke, or you, or any other gentleman, want to destroy a poor girl's prospects in that fashion?"



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"Surely, you must feel that some explanation is due to us for your extraordinary behavior?"

"No, I don't feel a bit like it."

"But why did you go away?"

"To suit myself."

"Could you not have given notice? Why was it necessary to create a further scandal in addition to the disappearance of your unfortunate mistress?"

"I am sorry for that. It was thoughtless, I admit. If I had to act over again I should have done differently. But what does it matter now?"

"It matters this much — that the police must be informed of your existence, as they are searching for you, believing that you are in some way mixed up with Lady Dyke's death.

The girl started violently, and she flushed, rather with anger than alarm, Bruce thought, as he watched her narrowly.

"The police, indeed," she snorted; "what have the police to do with me? A nice thing you're saying, Mr. Bruce."

"I am merely telling you the naked truth."

"All right. Tell them. I don't care a pin for them or you. Have you anything else to say, because I wish to join my friends?"

The girl's language and attitude mystified him more than any preceding feature of this remarkable investigation. She was, of course, far better educated than he had imagined, and the difference between the hysterical witness at the coroner's inquiry and this pert, self-possessed young woman was phenomenal.

Rather than risk an open rupture, the barrister temporized. "If you are anxious to quarrel with me, by all



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means do so," he said; "but that was not my motive in speaking to you here to-night."

Miss le Marchant shot a suspicious glance at him. "Then what was your motive," she said.

"Chiefly to reassure my friend, your former master, concerning you; and, perhaps, to learn the cause of your very strange conduct."

"Why should Sir Charles bother his head about me?"

"As I have told you. Because of the coincidence between your departure and Lady —"

"Oh yes, I know that." Then she added testily: "I *was* a fool not to manage differently."

"So you refuse me an explanation?"

"No, I don't. I have no reason to do so. I came in for some money, and as I have longed all my life to be an actress I could not wait an hour, a moment, before I — before I —"

"Before you tried to gratify your impulse."

"Yes, that is what I wanted to say."

"But why not at least have written to Sir Charles, telling him of your intentions?"

The fair Marie was silent for a moment. The question confused her. "I hardly know," she replied.

"Will you write to him now?"

"I don't see why I should."

"Indeed. Not even when it was you who gave some of your mistress's underclothing to Mr. White, by which means he was able to identify the body found at Putney as that of Lady Dyke?"

"Mr. White told you that, did he?"

"He did."

"Then you had better get him to give you all further



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information, Mr. Bruce, as not another word will you get out of me."

She bounced up, fiery red, pluming herself for the fray.

"Will you not communicate with Sir Charles?" he said, utterly baffled by Miss le Marchant's uncompromising attitude.

"Perhaps I will and perhaps I won't. Mr. White, indeed!" And she ran off to join her friends.

The barrister drove quietly homewards. This was his summary of the evening's events: "I have found two women. When I know all about them I shall be able to lay my hand on the person who killed Lady Dyke."



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# CHAPTER VII

## IN THE CITY

MESSRS. DODGE & Co., of Leadenhall Street, possessed business premises of greater pretensions than Bruce had pictured to himself from Mrs. Hillmer's description of their transactions with her brother.

Not only were their offices commodious and well situated, but a liberal display of gold lettering, intermingled with official brass plates marking the registering offices of many companies, gave evidence of some degree of importance — whether fictitious or otherwise Bruce could not determine, as he scrutinized the exterior of the building on the following morning.

Moreover, workmen were even then busy in substituting the title "Dodge, Son & Co., Ltd.," for "Messrs. Dodge & Company," the suggestive nature of the latter designation having perhaps proved a stumbling-block in the way of the guileless investor.

When the barrister entered the office, a busy place, a hive of many clerks, and adorned with gigantic maps of the Rand, West Australia, Cripple Creek, and Klondike, he asked for "Mr. Dodge."

His card procured him ready admission. He was shown into an elaborately upholstered apartment of considerable size. At the farther end, seated in front of a gorgeous American desk, was a young man who ostenta-



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tiously finished a letter and then motioned the barrister to a seat.

Bruce was curious on the question of the age of the head of the firm.

"Are you Mr. Dodge, or the son?" he said, with the utmost gravity.

The other was taken back by this unexpected method of opening the conversation. It annoyed him.

"I am the representative of the firm, sir, and fully able to deal with your business, whatever it may be," he replied.

"No doubt. But it will simplify matters if I know exactly to whom I am addressing myself."

After an uneasy shuffling in his seat — he could not guess what this keen-faced, earnest-eyed lawyer might want — the representative of Messrs. Dodge, Son & Co. (Limited) explained that he was Dodge, and the name of the firm had been adopted for general purposes.

"Then there is no 'son,' I take it."

"Yes, there is, sir," — this with a snort of anger.

"How old is he?"

"What the Dickens has that got to do with it? Will you kindly tell me what you want, sir, as my time is fully occupied?"

"Just now I want to know how old the 'son' is?"

This calm persistence irritated Mr. Dodge beyond endurance.

"Three years, confound you, and his sister is four months. Can I oblige you with any more details concerning my family affairs?"

Having purposely raised this man to boiling point by this harmless method of examination, Claude tackled the real business in hand. He was quite sure that a financial sharper in a temper was far more likely to blurt out the



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