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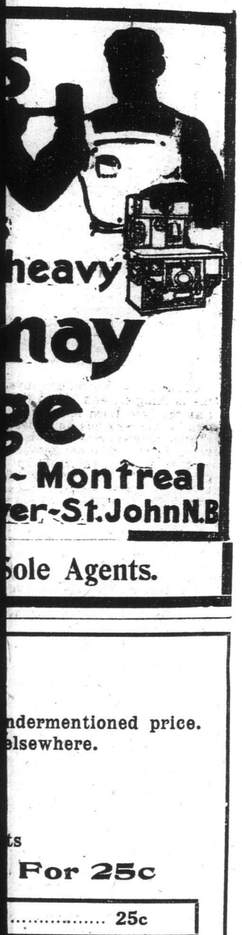

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THE ARNCLIFFE PUZZLE

By Gordon Holmes

Author of A Mysterious Disappearance

CHAPTER V—Continued.

Edith opened the letter in silence. For a moment the sight of the well-remembered handwriting so blurred her eyes with emotion that she could not read a line. Then the words focused into coherence, and, as she realized their import, her face lightened into such happiness that the tears burst forth afresh.

"Oh, Mr. Aingier," she sobbed, "now, indeed, I know that all is well."

"I must say you have a remarkable way of showing it. However, you certainly look more like a residuary legatee than you did five minutes ago. So everything is all right?"

"Look."

She handed him the letter and he, adjusting his glasses, read it aloud as people do whose eyes are not so young as they used to be:

"My Dear Child:

"Forgive an old man for the prank he has played upon you. I was stupid enough to wish to test you, though I might have known that you would follow the nobler course whatever the cost to yourself. You will know ere you read this that I have made you my heiress. I need not tell you to use the wealth entrusted to you wisely and generously; and if unselfishness and purity of heart have their reward on earth I need not wish you happiness. Think kindly sometimes of your old friend.

"ARNCLIFFE."

"A very sensible letter," commented the lawyer, "though I don't know what on earth it means. Still, that doesn't matter. Now I think, for the time being, we had better forget you are so important a personage as Miss Holt of Arncliffe Hall, and then I can give orders which I shall expect to be obeyed. My commands are that you go and bathe those eyes, which are not so bright as I like to see them, and then take a run in the park and try if the wind cannot blow some roses into those pale cheeks."

"Very well, I will, indeed, obey you. But is there anything I can do for you first?"

"No, my dear. It is twelve o'clock now, and at two I must meet Mrs. Aingier at the station. Meanwhile I shall stroll into the village and see if I can come across this Dr. Lester who has so upset everybody."

Edith, far too confused to pay heed to his words, hastened to her room.

In a few minutes Aingier set out briskly, and as luck would have it he encountered the object of his search strolling in the direction of the trout stream, his purpose betrayed by the creel and rod he carried. Well-dressed strangers were not so plentiful in the little Northumberland village that there was much likelihood of a mistake; and although this bronzed rather distinguished-looking individual smacked more of the military man than of the medico, the lawyer accosted him without any misgivings.

"Pardon me, have I the pleasure of addressing Dr. Lester?"

"That is my name," was the smiling answer.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Aingier, and I had the honor to act as the late Lord Arncliffe's legal adviser. I am anxious to consult you as to the circumstances of his lordship's death. I am the more pleased to meet you because I understand you are the gentleman who so successfully carried out certain bacteriological researches in which Lord Arncliffe was deeply interested."

"I never saw Lord Arncliffe in his life," replied the other, "although, in the sense that we corresponded with each other voluminously, we were somewhat intimate some years since. As you are probably aware, he took a keen interest in toxicology; and I have devoted some little attention to that branch of medical science——"

"That is really the point upon which I wished to have your advice," interrupted the lawyer. "You made an examination of Lord Arncliffe's body, did you not?"

"I was certainly present soon after he died," replied Lester, "but I retired almost immediately in favor of his regular medical attendant—who, I may say, treated me with rather scant courtesy."

"Dr. Smalley is an old woman!"

"I should heartily agree with you, were it not contrary to professional etiquette."

"However, you made a grave suggestion as to the cause of Lord Arncliffe's death?"

"My dear sir," rejoined Lester, "you must be aware that neither I nor any other can decide in such a case without a thorough investigation. It merely happened that the very cursory examination I made reveal certain indications which led me to suspect poisoning. It is not impossible that I was mistaken, though I do not think so. Nevertheless, it was my duty to mention my suspicions."

"Then your view is——"

"My view is that my responsibility in the matter is at an end. Dr. Smalley is, I presume, a reputable practitioner. If Lord Arncliffe's relatives are satisfied there is no more to be said. From what I hear, however, it appears to be a case for inquiry. Personally, I have not the least doubt that there will be an inquiry."

"There are no relatives. The matter rests with me. To be frank, Dr. Lester, my personal object in coming to see you was to ask you to say nothing about it for the present. You may feel assured that there will be a full investigation. In fact, Sir Henry Mathieson, the Home Office analyst, arrives tomorrow for that purpose."

"Ah!" murmured the young doctor, thoughtfully. "I should rather like to be present."

"Why, indeed, if Sir Henry has no objection——"

"Oh, Mathieson and I are old friends. I was a pupil of his."

"Then I will let you know. If, as I hope, Lord Arncliffe's death turns out to have been due to natural causes, there need not, of course, be any publicity."

"Well," said Lester, dryly, "as it is current in the village that Lord Arncliffe was poisoned, shot, stabbed, strangled, and blown up with dynamite, I fear there is likely to be some little publicity. It seems to be a matter of common knowledge that he suspected an attempt was being made upon his life."

"But this is terrible!" cried Aingier, almost wringing his hands.

"A mere nine days' wonder," Lester assured him, with that serene philosophy which enables us to bear up so well under other people's troubles.

"Nine days' wonders last about three generations in a village like this," retorted the old solicitor shortly. "Well, I must say good-by now, Dr. Lester, as I have an appointment. I shall, no doubt, have the pleasure of seeing you at the Hall tomorrow."

They had wandered into Arncliffe Park during their conversation, and Lester strolled on unthinkingly, though the the trout stream lay behind him. He was recalling the events of the last twenty-four hours, but, strangely enough the mystery of Lord Arncliffe's death had no place in his thoughts. For him the events of a memorable day all resolved themselves into one picture—a vision from Trianon of old, a vision with hair of ruddy brown with sunshine tangled in it; the eyes a mystery behind a vein of azure crystal; the mouth a love-poem, and the delicate curves of the oval face——

George Lester was, in fact, suffering from a disease not dreamed of in all his bacteriology. The symptoms included an unreasoning but not the less intense hatred of Harry Warren; an earnest (and, of course, unselfish) desire that Miss Holt should not waste her affections on an unworthy object; and a species of mild delirium accompanied by hallucinations, in which Edith appeared as beaming at him across the breakfast table, or waving a smiling farewell as he left her for the day's work at the laboratory. And then a memory of Harry Warren, with his insufferable air of proprietorship, would spoil it all.

Good heavens! what could such a woman find admirable in a clodhopper like that? Almost repulsive in appearance (this, by the way, was unjust, since Warren was well-looking enough, albeit of an animal type), with rather less brains than an ox. And then the grim humor of it all appealed and he reproached himself.

"What an idiotic frame of mind I am in!" he thought, smiling sourly. "I don't know how it is, but I'd give anything for a decent opportunity to punch that fellow's head!"

It was while Lester was giving utterance to this kindly thought that he emerged into an open glade of the wood and found the object of his solicitude thirty paces in front of him, engaged in earnest conversation with Miss Holt.

Warren's voice was raised, though his words were indistinguishable; and there seemed to be something of agitation in the girl's manner. It came to Lester with a sharp pank that here was perhaps a lover's quarrel. For a moment he hesitated. Then he realized that to turn would be a piece of gaucherie worthy of the despised Warren, so he made the best of an awkward situation and went forward.

The vision of Edith Holt pouring out the maternal coffee had grown distressingly shadowy, and his heart had dropped down into his boots, a distance of rather more than a thousand miles. But he greeted the young people pleasantly enough, met Warren's black scowl with a smile of polite indifference, and would have passed on, had not Edith Holt given him a glance so pregnant with entreaty that he constituted himself her faithful knight on the spot. And lo! his heart bounded back those thousand miles and beat bravely in his bosom again. But the craving to assault and batter Warren remained painfuly insistent.

Warren's attitude was not, indeed, calculated to allay that craving. His face flushed with sullen rage. There was open insolence in the baleful gaze he turned upon the interrupter of his tete-a-tete with Miss Holt.

"We seem fated to meet, Miss Holt, and, as usual, I am a trespasser," said Lester gaily. He recked little of Warren's black looks, since Edith's glance told him so plainly that he was welcome.

An inarticulate growl broke from Warren lips. Edith glanced at him in a haughty astonishment that was not less haughty astonishment that was the lessened by the almost uncontrolable passion she saw depicted on his features. Now, indeed, Lester recognized the marquise of the ancien regime. The dainty head took a higher poise; the flower-like mouth hardened, and there was a note of freezing superiority in her voice as she addressed the young man who stood before her like a culprit, still sullen and glowering, yet not daring to meet her eyes.

"I need not detain you any longer, Mr. Warren," she said. "Dr. Lester, there is a gentleman at the Hall, Lord Arncliffe's solicitor, who is very anxious to see you. If you have nothing else to do, will you walk in that direction?"

"Nothing could give me greater pleasure," he replied.

Edith instantly turned in the direction of the Hall, but Lester's quick ears told him that the discomfited agent did not move. It required little imagination to picture the malignant glance which followed them. Lester was happy enough to feel rather sorry for him. After all, poor devil! who could blame him for worshipping this divinity?

"Mr. Aingier went into the village in the hope of finding you," said Edith, "but I expect he will return soon."

"As a matter of fact I have only recently left him," confessed Lester. "Nevertheless, I hope you will let me accompany you to the Hall."

Nothing was said of Warren's offensive behavior, but there was necessarily a tacit understanding; and Edith accepted the proffered escort with simple thanks. They talked little: the girl was overwrought, and Lester was tactful enough to realize that she was best left to herself. He took his leave, therefore, directly they came in sight of the house. And, though he parted from her with a strange reluctance, his blood tingled with most unscientific ardor when Edith gave him a grateful little pressure of the hand at parting.

Meanwhile, Harry Warren, nursing a deep wrath, awaited Lester's reappearance. Here was one fallen from the clouds, a possible and most dangerous rival. He meant to declare instant war.

Lester, contrary to his wonted habit, was so oblivious to his surroundings that it was only when he came right upon the other that he awoke from his day-dreams. He had no desire to bandy words with Warren, whose face was a sufficient index of the fact that nothing would please him better than a quarrel. It is all well enough in the abstract to think of punching heads, but a gentleman does not act in that strenuous way unless he is absolutely forced to it. For Miss Holt's sake alone, if for no other reason, a stupid scuffle was to be avoided. Lester therefore nodded politely, and would have passed on, but the other seemed bent on provoking him.

"By this time you ought to be aware that these grounds are private," he said insolently.

"I am quite aware of the fact," rejoined Lester, quietly; "but I presume that Mr. Aingier and Miss Holt have the privilege of admitting their acquaintances."

"And failing them, you come here to spy on your own account?" asked Warren, with a sneer."

"I am rather at a loss to understand you."

"Perhaps you will understand me when I say that if I catch you meddling in what does not concern you again it will be the worse for you."

Lester looked at him curiously. The flushed cheek and slightly thick speech seemed to point to something more potent than mere temper.

"My friend," he said, calmly, "let me tell you that to a man of your build alcohol is absolutely poison."

Warren took a step forward. "Confound you! what do you mean?" he snarled.

"I mean that your neck is like your head—absolutely thick. One of these days you will die of apoplexy if you are not careful."

Lester never showed anger, but his mood was the more benevolent on that account. And he had not forgotten that there were tears in Edith's eyes.

Warren clenched his fists, and his muscles tautened. Yet he did not strike. He had a fair enough share of brute courage, but there was something he did not understand in the cool, unruffled look of his opponent. He was like a wild beast held in check by the power of the human eye; and, with the wild beast's fear of an unknown force, he tried to lash himself into sufficient fury for attack. In his case the effort took the form of a volley of abuse.

Lester half turned away. His action was eloquent of unspoken contempt.

It was enough. The spell of those steady eyes was broken, and with a hoarse cry Warren sprang forward. Lester, seeing what was coming, stepped back lightly. The vicious blow just missed. He countered, with a skill born of many a bout with the gloves.

It seemed, for an instant, that his unexpected reply was only a ward to gain distance, for Warren did not even stagger. But it was only for an instant. Then his knees bent and he collapsed quietly into a limp heap.

Lester smiled grimly, stooped over his adversary, and proceeded to light a cigar. Master Warren would come to his senses in a minute or two, a trifle dazed, but not much the worse. And so it proved. The fallen hero rose to his knees presently. He was not absolutely certain what had happened, but evidently the placid-looking man with the cigar was in some way responsible for his discomfiture.

"You are going to have a very bad headache soon," remarked Lester, cheerfully, "and I rather think you will be sick. If you take my advice you will go home and get to bed. You may apologize for your conduct the next time I see you. Can you walk?"

Warren struggled to his feet. He was very shaken and pale.

"As I said, you may apologize later on," went on Lester. "As you do not seem to be in need of my professional assistance, I will bid you good day."

He walked slowly away, followed by certain assurances as to Warren's future intentions which it is not necessary to repeat. Lester smiled again pleasantly. Reflection, with its unkind candor, had not yet overtaken him.

"Useful blow, that, on the point of the jaw," he murmured. "It doesn't leave any mark; and I should not have liked Edith to have seen him with a black eye. But I am glad I punched his head. It seems to have adjusted matters."

Clearly, George Lester was in an unusual frame of mind. Else why did he think of a girl whom he had seen twice in his life, as "Edith"?

CHAPTER VI.

The Adjourned Inquest

There was an atmosphere of subdued activity, of hushed expectancy, in and about Arncliffe Hall. Near the main entrance groups of villagers discussed the situation in whispers, or listened, open-mouthed, to the astounding theories of local oracles. Each minute swelled the number of morbid curiosity-mongers. For twelve good men and true were to inquire into the circumstances surrounding Lord Arncliffe's death, and the place was all agog with excitement.

Harry Warren, indeed, made strenuous efforts to disperse the crowds which invaded the sacred precincts of the Hall. Nevertheless, though tenants to whom quarter-day was a period of humiliation shrank away from the presence of the dreaded agent, they only vanished from one spot to gather more thickly in another.

Joshua Perkins, cobbler and village Hampden, was in no small degree responsible for this contumacy. He pointed out that at an open court the rights of all were equal; and his spirited references to wealthy drones who passed their time lolling in carriages received the usual enthusiastic approval of certain gentlemen who passed their time lolling in public houses.

As a matter of fact, the question of admitting the general public, as distinct from any local magnates who might choose to be present, had already been decided by P. C. Fox, who, as sole representative of law and order in Arncliffe, naturally had charge of such arrangements. This intelligent officer realized that the circumstances of the inquest being held at the Hall called for the exercise of discretion, and he had made up his mind to exclude all who did not attain to a certain standard of respectability. What that standard was it is not necessary to mention, but it was not unconnected with a desire on the part of P. C. Fox to lay up an honorable competency for his declining years.

The inquest, adjourned a week previously, after the hearing of formal evidence of identification, was the inevitable corollary of the post-mortem examination—an examination from which Dr. Smalley, whose presence had been invited as a matter of professional courtesy, emerged nervous and crestfallen, while Lester and Sir Henry Mathieson exhibited, in contradistinction, the bland, decorous cheerful satisfaction of the scientist who has lighted upon an unusually interesting exhibition of some rare phenomenon which he thoroughly understands.

The time arrived for the resumption of the inquiry; and the jury, looking more like condemned criminals than men who were to sit in judgment, shuffled into their places. There was, however, one exception to the general air of dejection. The unabashed Perkins was appointed foreman, and he intended to justify the liquid refreshment he had received and hoped to receive from his appreciative fellow-villagers.

For convenience, the proceedings were held in the library, and the unwonted scene offered ample scope to the reporters—impressionists from the great dailies—who would describe the glint of sunshine athwart the Coroner's desk in a column and the story of Lord Arncliffe's death in a phrase.

Mrs. Warren, the essence of dignified bereavement; her son, flushed with the effort to appear at ease; Edith Holt, tremulous, but smiling wistful gratitude for the sympathy of Aingier and his wife; these were the chief personages present, and, for a background, the huddled servants and gaping yokels. There were, too, the doctors and a granite-faced man from Scotland Yard, but these last, impassive and apparently indifferent, added no touch of human interest to the scene.

The Coroner briefly recapitulated the formal evidence taken at the previous sitting, and then recalled Simpson, the valet, who had deposed to finding Lord Arncliffe in his study.

"When did you last see Lord Arncliffe alive?" asked the Coroner.

"At five in the afternoon, sir."

"He did not appear to be unwell?"

"No sir. He asked for his beef tea, and I went to the kitchen for it, but found that Miss Holt had already fetched it."

"Did Miss Holt usually give Lord Arncliffe his beef tea?"

"Yes, sir. I went back and just met her taking it in. She had been into the laboratory for some of his lordship's papers."

"Very well. Now, Mr. Simpson, you have been in Lord Arncliffe's employment for a very long period, have you not?"

"Thirty-eight years, sir. And a better master——"

"Quite so. Tell me, have you ever had reason to suppose that there was any one who bore a grudge against his lordship—in short, that he had an enemy?"

"No sir," said the man, positively, "in all the years I served Lord Arncliffe, I don't believe he ever harmed so much as a fly. But I know he was poisoned, and I'll never forgive myself for not believing him when he told me so."

"Ah! he told you so. Please explain the circumstances to the jury as well as you can remember them."

"Well, sir, it was just after one of his lordship's fainting fits, and he said to me: 'Simpson,' said he, 'I'm being murdered!' Of course I was a bit taken aback, but I thought his mind was wandering a little, though he was a wonderfully intelligent gentleman, for all his age, and I tried to speak cheerfully like. 'Not a bit of it,' I told him. 'Your Lordship will live to be a hundred yet, if you only do as Dr. Smalley tells you.'"

"And what did Lord Arncliffe reply?" asked the Coroner.

Dr. Smalley coughed modestly.

"If you will excuse me for using such language about a gentleman above my station, sir," answered Simpson, "his lordship replied that Dr. Smalley was a confounded old fool!"

With one exception, everybody tittered. The Coroner busied himself with some imaginary notes for a moment, and then continued his examination of the witness.

"Did Lord Arncliffe persist in his assertion that an attempt was being made to kill him?"

"Yes sir. He said he would be a dead man within a fortnight."

"You did not mention this matter to anybody?"

"No, sir. His lordship forbade me to do so. He told me that nothing could save him, and he did not want to be bothered."

"But it was your duty to take some steps."

"I did not think for a moment it was true, but, in any case, I knew my place better than to interfere with his lordship's wishes."

"Very well," said the Coroner, wearily; "you can stand down." He knew the hopelessness of arguing with a witness of this stamp.

"Just hold on a moment," interrupted Perkins, the foreman. "Did you notice anything strange in the young lady's manner when she brought in his lordship's beef tea? Did she seem upset?"

"No, not then——"

"Has Miss Holt appeared to be upset at any time recently?" asked the Coroner, quickly.

"Well, sir," said Simpson, with some reluctance, "I thought she had been crying when I went in earlier in the day. And his lordship certainly spoke rather sharper than usual."

Edith, listening tensely, went deathly pale, and leaned forward as though eager not to miss a word. The fickle attention of the spectators was instantly concentrated on her. This callous scrutiny in itself was sufficient to deepen the agitation of a young girl suddenly placed in so trying a position. But, in reality, she was oblivious to the glances leveled at her, and one person at least, the detective from Scotland Yard, noted the fact.

"You say Lord Arncliffe spoke sharply," continued the Coroner. "Can you tell me the substance of his conversation?"

"Why, sir, I was taking his lordship a letter, and Miss Edith—I'd scorn to listen, but the door was on the jar—said something about not letting a young life be ruined because of one false step. Then his lordship said: 'It's three hundred pounds now; next time it will be three thousand.'"

"And what did Miss Holt reply?"

"I didn't hear any more, sir. I knocked at the door and went in. It was then I noticed that the young lady seemed a bit upset."

"And that was all?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, gentlemen," said the Coroner. "I propose to call the medical evidence, as I understand one of the witnesses is anxious to return to London. Sir Henry Mathieson!"

The Home Office expert stepped forward, the embodiment of that frock-coated urbanity which regards poor human clay as a mere adjunct of the laboratory. At this juncture, Inspector Hobson, the officer sent to Arncliffe by the Scotland Yard authorities, slipped quietly out of the room, taking Mr. Aingier with him. He did not return until the evidence of the expert was nearly finished.

"I believe, Sir Henry, you conducted the post-mortem examination of Lord Arncliffe's body?" commenced the Coroner.

"That is so."

"Have you formed any opinion as to the cause of his lordship's death?"

"Yes; he unquestionably died of arsenical poisoning."

"And can you tell us, approximately, when the poison was administered?"

"I don't know," said Sir Henry, bluntly. "I found altogether twelve grains of arsenious acid in the abdominal viscera. Of that quantity the stomach contained nearly two grains, which were unabsorbed, and no doubt had been recently administered. In addition, there were rather more than four grains in the brain, and the latter fact proves conclusively that some considerable time elapsed between the first and last doses."

"Arsenic is a cumulative poison, is it not?"

"Yes, but the quantities I have mentioned are absolutely preposterous. Arsenic is not, comparatively speaking, a rapid poison, but four grains alone would kill a man before a quarter of that amount found its way to his brain."

"Then what is your conclusion, Sir Henry?"

"I have reached none, excepting that death was due to arsenical poisoning. As you are no doubt aware, arsenic is highly irritant in its effects; we expect to find definite indications even in the case of a slight overdose. But Lord Arncliffe exhibited few of the usual signs, and none of them in a marked degree. In fact, I must confess myself at a loss to account for this exceptional absence of the ordinary symptons."

Sir Henry Mathieson could afford to admit ignorance. That is one of the privileges of real knowledge. He retired, and Lester, taking his place, described how he had been called to see Lord Arncliffe, and how the slight irritation of neck and scalp had led him to suspect arsenical poisoning.

"I should like to add," he said, with a generosity which the fussy local practitioner scarcely deserved, "that had I been in regular attendance on Lord Arncliffe, and thus without an open mind on the point, these indications might possibly have escaped me. Lord Arncliffe was suffering from a form of heart disease which must inevitably have had a fatal termination at some early date. Under the circumstances, the very suddenness of his death pointed to natural causes."

"I presume, Dr. Lester, that you are in accord with Sir Henry Mathieson?"

"Entirely. Perhaps I should mention that Lord Arncliffe was extremely emaciated. He was naturally a man of spare build, but Dr. Smalley tells me that the loss of flesh since he examined him about a month ago is remarkable."

"Is that a condition you would expect in a case of slow poisoning by arsenic?"

"Certainly; but the quantity of arsenic found in the body is not compatible with the theory of slow poisoning, nor are the other symptoms nearly so definite as they should be. I am afraid I can offer no suggestion, excepting that Lord Arncliffe was poisoned by arsenic, administered in some form not at present known to medical science."

The evidence of Dr. Smalley opened up fresh ground. He dealt lightly with his own failure to detect the presence of poison, but he had a great deal to say about the foibles and eccentricities of the deceased peer.

"He was a most difficult patient," he said. "Although I visited him frequently, he had a strong objection to discussing the state of his health, and, under no circumstances, would he take medicine in any form."

"Was he, of late years, what you would describe as a mentally vigorous man?"

"He was a man of high intellect and considerable attainments, and, in one sense, I should say his powers were retained to the last. But his conduct in respect to the alleged poisoning points strongly, in my opinion, to mental derangement. We have the extraordinary codicil to his will, and on top of that he imparts his suspicions—to three persons. I understand—under a strict pledge of secrecy—all the time, mark you, without taking any steps for his protection and without seeking medical assistance. If we are to accept the evidence of the valet as to his lordship's estimate of my abilities," added Dr. Smalley with some bitterness, "it may account for his omission to make me acquainted with his suspicions, but one would surely expect him to seek some advice."

"Will you allow me to say, Mr. Coroner," interposed Lester, "that Dr. Smalley's general deductions are such as most medical men will indorse. But Lord Arncliffe was one of the greatest authorities on poison, and eminently qualified to deal with his own condition. I do not think there is the shadow of a doubt that he knew the nature of the poison from which he was suffering, and that he was perfectly aware no earthly skill could avail him."

"Is there no antidote?"

"I know of none to arsenic, except the stomach pump," answered Lester, with decision. "When once a fatal dose has been absorbed into the system, the patient is doomed, and although certain drugs—magnesia, hydrated sesquioxide of iron, and the like—are often exhibited as a forlorn hope, I have never known them do any good."

Lester retired, with an apology for his interruption, and Dr. Smalley, rather ruffled at this fresh instance of what he considered the younger man's interference, continued his evidence.

"Are we to assume, Dr. Smalley, that you consider it probable Lord Arncliffe was responsible for his own death?"

"I consider it highly probable. We have just been reminded of his attainments as a toxicologist, and I think you will agree with me that such studies are highly dangerous to a layman. Even from the little I have seen of his laboratory, I should imagine it contains sufficient poisons to destroy countless thousands of people. He may have taken some fatal draft by accident; he may have experimented upon himself with some newly discovered solution of arsenic. But his semi-mysterious references to an attempt upon his life certainly suggest the purposeless cunning of a deranged mind."

With this dignified pronouncement, Dr. Smalley stepped down, fairly well satisfied with himself, all things considered.

It was now the turn of Edith. As she moved forward to the witness-stand there was a little buzz of excitement.

CHAPTER VII.

Some Disquieting Revelations

It was common knowledge that Lord Arncliffe had made her his heiress, and there are no conceivable circumstances under which a beautiful woman with forty thousand a year is not an object of interest.

"Sweet young creature!" murmured women with marriageable sons.

"Peroxide of hydrogen, my dear!" whispered the mother of three hopeless daughters. "I expect her hair is nearly black at the roots."

Edith took her place with quiet dignity. Her cheeks remained colorless, and the fear that had come upon her when Simpson spoke of the conversation he had overheard still gripped her heart. But unconscious pride of blood kept her head erect, freed her voice from tremor, and gave her courage to return, at least with her eyes, the smile of kindly encouragement which met her as she passed close to Lester.

"I believe, Miss Holt, you acted as private secretary to the late Lord Arncliffe?" was the first query.

"Yes."

"How long were you employed in that capacity?"

"In the full sense, only about four years, but I have assisted him with his papers ever since he undertook my guardianship ten years ago."

"Then I presume you became Lord Arncliffe's amanuensis merely as a matter of what might be termed family arrangement?"

"Not at all. I owed my later education to him, but I had my living to earn, and, as I had some experience of his methods, he was good enough to engage me. Lord Arncliffe showed me unvarying kindness, and did not treat me as a servant; but he had strict ideas of business."

"You did not, then, regard yourself in the light of his heiress?"

"No. Such a thought never entered my mind. Lord Arncliffe had always impressed upon me that I must consider myself dependent on my own exertions."

"Now, Miss Holt, you have heard the evidence of the witness Simpson that you gave Lord Arncliffe his beef tea on the day of his death. Is that correct?"

"Yes; and it is also correct that I went into the laboratory on my way back for a book Lord Arncliffe wanted."

"Was the beef tea ever out of your possession from the time the cook handed it to you until you brought it to Lord Arncliffe?"

"I am not sure. I could not find the book I was looking for, and I went to ask Lord Arncliffe where he had put it; but I cannot say whether I left the beef tea in the laboratory. If I did, it was not for more than a minute."

"Did Lord Arncliffe ever mention to you his belief that he was being poisoned?"

"Yes, several times within the last month. But his state of health was very low, and I really thought it was a delusion brought on by constant study of works dealing with toxicology. He seemed so positive, however, that I begged him to consult Dr. Smalley, but he said—he said——"

Edith hesitated in some confusion, and her pale lips parted into the ghost of a smile. Dr. Smalley, by some strange instinct conscious of impending calamity, wiped the perspiration from his brow, while a ripple of laughter went round the room.

"Go on, Miss Holt, go on," said the Coroner, encouragingly.

"He said that—that he himself knew more about the subject than any doctor."

Smalley recovered his self-possession. The crisis had passed.

Miss Holt was obviously keeping something back, but the Coroner was merciful. "And, as he insisted that I should not speak of what he had told me, there was nothing more to be done," she added.

"But did you not think it your duty to take some steps in so serious a matter?"

"Lord Arncliffe would never have tolerated disobedience. Moreover, I did not regard it seriously. Had I done so I should, of course, have disregarded his prohibition."

"Do you think Lord Arncliffe was a man to commit suicide?"

"No, most decidedly not. He regarded self-destruction as a cowardly act under any circumstances. Nor do I imagine that he poisoned himself accidentally. He was always most scrupulously careful in handling poisons."

"Did anybody except Lord Arncliffe have access to the various poisons in his laboratory?"

"Only myself. All the drugs were kept under lock and key, and no servant, excepting Simpson, was allowed to enter the laboratory."

"But how came you to have access to all these poisons?"

Edith opened her eyes in astonishment. "I assisted Lord Arncliffe in his experiments," she explained. "I have done so for years. You must remember he was working for the good of humanity."

The girl saw nothing extraordinary in this, but in the eyes of the jury—hopelessly thick-headed, as Coroner's juries often are—it made her a potential murderess at once. Perkins, the foreman, rubbed his hands. He intended to figure prominently in the public eye presently.

"I do not think we need trouble you any further, Miss Holt," said the Coroner.

"I presume, gentlemen," to the jury, "you have no questions to ask the witness?"

"Oh, yes, we have, begging your pardon," broke in Perkins, offensively. "We should like to know what the young lady and the old gentleman was quarrelin' about afore his lordship died."

"I certainly was not quarreling with Lord Arncliffe, then or at any other time," said Edith, haughtily. She did not flinch, but it was patent that she was agitated to a far greater degree than the occasion seemed to warrant.

The Coroner saw that she was overwrought, and decided to give her some little time to recover herself. "Well, gentlemen," he said, "I think we had better adjourn for luncheon now. No doubt, when the court reassembles, Miss Holt will explain any doubtful points to your satisfaction."

Edith retired to a private room with Mr. and Mrs. Aingier. When the solicitor's wife gave her a sympathetic squeeze of the arm, she promptly burst into tears.

"There, there, my dear!" said Mrs. Aingier soothingly.

Probably none but a woman knows precisely what "There, there!" means, but the formula appears to have a mysterious efficiency.

"Don't cry, my child," entreated the old lawyer. "Confound it! What does that idiot of a juryman, mean by bothering you with his absurd questions? Things are coming to a pretty pass if you are to be badgered on account of an eavesdropping servant."

"I would not mind, Mr. Aingier, if it were only that," murmured Edith, tearfully; "but what Simpson says is true. I was discussing a very private matter with Lord Arncliffe—a matter which I must keep secret at any sacrifice."

"Well, my dear young lady, you are not compelled to tell your private affairs to a Coroner's jury, though, of course, secrecy often makes a mountain out of what is probably only a mole-hill. But what is this wonderful matter? Don't you think you had better let me judge what is best?"

Edith shook her head. "I am sorry," she faltered. "Don't think me ungrateful—you are so kind and good that I would tell you instantly if it only concerned myself. But the secret is not my own."

The solicitor was disappointed, even somewhat hurt. A man who has kept inviolable for years whole cupboards' full of other people's family skeletons does not like his clients to withhold confidences. But he was mainly concerned because he foresaw that Edith's reticence would be productive of illimitable gossip.

However, he pursued the subject no further. Edith, under the combined influence of cheerful conversation and a glass of wine, which her friends insisted she should take, became more composed. When the court reassembled she was calm enough at least, outwardly.

The Coroner, with a rather puzzled expression, was studying a slip of paper which had been handed to him by the London detective. But he spoke encouragingly enough to Edith.

"I hope, Miss Holt, we shall not have to detain you long. The witness Simpson has deposed that on the day of Lord Arncliffe's death he heard his lordship addressing you in tones rather at variance with his usual manner. As anything bearing on the mental condition of the deceased is important, the jury would like to hear from you exactly what took place."

The question was skilfully put. Edith began to think she had absurdly exaggerated the ordeal before her. But shrewd old Mr. Aingier metaphorically tore his hair; he knew that such suavity boded ill for a witness.

"Simpson hnas reported our conversation correctly," Edith answered. "Lord Arncliffe and I had merely reopened the discussion of some private business upon which we had a difference of opinion. Lord Arncliffe was at all times rather impatient of opposition, and no doubt he spoke more sharply than was his wont."

"May I ask the nature of that business? You are not, of course, compelled to answer the question if you do not wish to do so."

"The business was purely of a private nature."

"There was some reference to a sum of three hundred pounds. Was that an item of the business under discussion?"

"Yes, admitted Edith, faintly, lifting startled eyes to the Coroner. The moment she was dreading had come at last.

"Lord Aingier had lent—perhaps I should say given—me three hundred pounds some little time previously."

"For what purpose did he give you this money?"

"That, sir, is my business." The "marquise" spirit was beginning to assert itself.

Mr. Aingier rose to his feet with well-simulated indignation. "Surely, sir," he protested, "it is not extraordinary that Lord Arncliffe should give so paltry a sum as three hundred pounds to the lady he had chosen to inherit his vast wealth??"

"Not at all, Mr. Aingier," returned the Coroner. "Nevertheless, we must remember that he took pains to prevent Miss Holt from anticipating any such conclusion. I presume, Miss Holt, Lord Arncliffe was not in the habit of giving you such amounts of money?"

"No."

"Nor anything approaching such an amount?"

"No. I had my salary, sixty pounds a year, and Lord Arncliffe occasionally gave me a check for ten or fifteen pounds. I had to entertain such guests as visited him, and it was his wish that I should dress suitably. The three hundred pounds were given at my earnest request. I required the money urgently, and Lord Arncliffe was the only person to whom I could turn."

"Very well. I have here a canceled check of Lord Arncliffe's for three hundred pounds, dated six weeks before he died. Would this represent the payment to you?"

A more skilful hand than the Coroner's revealed itself. Detective-Sergeant Hobson was beginning to move.

"Yes."

"You collected the amount personally from the Alnwick branch of the Great Northern Bank?"

"Yes."

"All in gold?"

"Yes; I required it in gold." She was all spirit now. Those myosotis blue eyes had a glint of steel in them.

"A rather cumbersome method. I should imagine," commented the Coroner. He had been friendly disposed hitherto, but he began to feel nettled at the haughty indifference which had taken the place of maiden timidity.

"If you are suggesting that I asked for gold so that the money could not be traced," she said disdainfully, "I can only say that each attendant at the bank is acquainted with me."

The weather-cock sympathies of the crowd instantly veered towards Edith.

The Coroner, rather at a loss, pretended to busy himself with his papers, and a murmur of comment relieved the tension of the audience.

"She has soon acquired the forty-thousand-a-year manner!" was the common thought.

Yet each complacent critic asked: "Why did she, then, a poor girl, want so much money?"

Edith's examination might have reached an abrupt conclusion, had not the watchful Hobson sent the Coroner another note. The official tones became ominously suave again.

"Pray do not misunderstand me, Miss Holt, I mentioned the matter because I understand that on another occasion you cashed a check of Lord Arncliffe's for two hundred and fifty pounds, which was also paid in gold."

"Yes. It was distributed by Lord Arncliffe to relieve the winter distress in the district, and I fetched the money because Mr. Warren, the agent, was suffering from a riding accident."

"So the bank officials would not think this second application for a large sum of gold in any way strange?"

"I have not considered the possibility of the bank people presuming to comment upon any act of mine."

"No doubt. The signature of the check is presumably that of Lord Arncliffe; but the amount was filled in by yourself, was it not?"

Steel was striking flint now, and the sparks were flying.

Aingier had thought it wise that Edith should avoid the least appearance of concealment; but he thought it high time to protest.

"If your object is to prove that the check for three hundred pounds was improperly obtained by Miss Holt," he said severely, "I shall strongly advise her not to answer any further questions. You must be perfectly aware, sir, that such a line of cross-examination as you have pursued should have been preceded by a caution."

The Coroner felt the injury inflicted by so public a rebuke. Much as he would have liked to assert the dignity of the court, policy dictated an attitude of conciliation. The lawyer was a mighty power in the country and could make things extremely unpleasant if he so listed.

"I fear I have expressed myself badly if I have given so unfortunate an impression," said the Coroner. "However, I will not trouble Miss Holt further; and I trust she will pardon me if in the performance of a public duty I have caused her any pain."

Edith bowed and returned to her seat by Mrs. Aingier. In a sense the ordeal was a tonic. The scornful indignation excited by the Coroner's masked battery of innuendo was a far healthier emotion than the chilling fear which had possessed her before. Her indignation was nothing, however, to that of Lester, who had more than once endeavored to estimate what would be the penalty of throwing the King's representative out of the window.

The remaining evidence was of little importance. After Mrs.