

# THE GREAT LINTON MYSTERY.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE CASE STATED.

"Well, here's my place of business. You'll know me when you want me."

"Third floor—Pierce and Pierce. Who is the other Pierce, Bob?"

"My partner."

"One of the mysterious unknown who have figured as 'Go' in former enterprises, I suspect. What are you now?"

Mr. Pierce dropped his voice and murmured in his friend's ear—

"Private inquiry agents, if you please."

"A private inquiry agent—you? Ho, ho. You don't mind my laughing?"

"Not at all—I'm tolerably injured to it; but I should like to know where the point of the joke is."

"Hang it, Bob, one can understand your being an agent for coals, sewing-machines, mineral-waters, knife-cleaners, or being even a theatrical agent; but it's past comprehension how a man like you could think of being a private inquirer—something between a plain-clothes policeman and an earwig! Certainly you might make any number of private inquiries without leading any one to suspect that you were employed for that purpose; for to tell you the truth, Pierce, you look more like an alderman than a spy."

"I should prefer to be an alderman; but circumstances give me no choice in the matter. A moneyless man must do something for his living, unfortunately. No one would have me for a clerk if he had any business principles whatever; I can't constitute myself director of a flourishing company; and I have not sufficient cash to open a chandler's shop. Here I have a snug little office at five shillings a week where I can sit and read my newspaper without the slightest worry or interruption."

"But suppose any one is rash enough to employ you in a case that requires active investigation?"

"I shall sit in my office and read my newspaper."

"But your case?—for I know you well enough to believe that you would deceive nobody."

"Except in the way of business."

"I mean nobody who employed you. Well, how would you act fairly to him and sit eternally in your office with your everlasting newspaper?"

"Oh, the eavesdropping, the poking and prying part of the business is conducted by the other Pierce!"

"Then you really have a partner?"

"Undoubtedly; and, if you ask me the origin of my partner's species, I should answer, without the slightest hesitation—ferrets. To a man like me, who loves peace and quiet beyond most things, who loves to read his newspaper without being bothered, and to come and go and do just what he pleases without question or interference, it would be, as you may imagine, a great blessing to be intrusted with an investigation that should occupy a restless inquisitive partner wholly."

"Undoubtedly. Is there any hope of your getting such employment for him?"

"I think there is. By-the-by, I must put my pipe out. I expect my client—client, my boy!—at ten, and it won't do to be caught gossiping in the street with a pipe in my mouth. Come up into my office if you have nothing better to do for a quarter of an hour, and I'll give you an outline of the case—it's a rather curious one. But you must put your pipe out, you know."

Mr. Pierce went up to his office on the third floor, followed by his friend; and when he had put on a pair of easy slippers, and both were seated, he said—

"We will begin at the beginning; read that."

He handed a letter taken from a bun-

dlo which he had brought out of the capacious pocket of his coat. The communication, written in a feminine hand, ran as follows—

"Having seen your advertisement in the morning papers, I should be glad to know upon what terms you undertake investigations. Address 'Anon., Post-office, Walham Green.'"

"I replied, saying that our terms depend upon the nature of the work and the amount of it to be done, and at the same time requested that she—our client is a lady—would call upon me or lay her case as clearly as possible before me in a letter. Two days later I received this." Mr. Pierce handed his friend a second letter.

"The following is the statement of facts you require. As I am unacquainted with any person who has had transactions with you, and wish to commit myself to nothing at this stage of our negotiations, I have given imaginary names to the persons concerned."

"At the age of twenty-six my daughter married a person of title and considerable wealth. For the first two years my daughter lived in London and at her husband's country-seat. I have no reason to think that my child was ill-used during this time, although her husband was a man of the world, with a temper at times sardonic, at times violent, as I had on more than one occasion to remark. At the end of two years Sir Charles went abroad, taking my daughter with him; and I have letters to prove that he was at this time unreasonably suspicious, exacting and self-willed. They were abroad twelve months, and then returned to England, but not to London. In express opposition to my daughter's wish and my entreaties, Sir Charles gave up his town-house and insisted upon residing in the country, where my daughter suffered physically and mentally. The house was old, and in the winter, damp, and the society was unbearable. My daughter had been used to indulgence, to life, and the excitement of the season. I can produce forty-three letters, written to me in the space of a year, to show that Sir Charles treated his wife with absolute barbarity. He would not listen to her wishes; nor, I may add, would he listen to my prayers. Indeed his behaviour to me became so intolerable that my visits at his house became shorter and more remote every time, until they finally ceased altogether. My daughter however did not fail to correspond regularly, and in the following year, the fourth of her married life, she complained bitterly of her husband's neglect and of the surveillance under which she was placed in his absence. It was clear to me that my daughter could not exist in this deplorable condition, and that either she would put an end to her life or leave her husband. She had begged me to procure a legal separation, but my solicitor informed me that this was impracticable. In the autumn of the fourth year my daughter disappeared. The fact was made known to me through Sir Charles's solicitor. A boat taken from the boat-house was found upset below the weir, but no trace of my daughter could be discovered. No one believed that she had committed suicide, for she had taken with her a maidservant and all her jewels. It was concluded that she had crossed the river and then suffered it to go down with the current. This was my own conclusion. After this, I naturally expected to see my daughter, or at least to receive a message or letter from her. But no message came; and I then began to suspect the truth. My suspicions were verified in the spring. In February I was summoned to —, where a quantity of hair, some fragments of clothing, and some jewellery were shown me. I identi-

fied them at once as belonging to my dear daughter. These remains, with others unrecognisable, had been discovered under water in repairing the empty boat-house. I saw at once that Sir Charles had murdered his wife, and at the inquest I produced my child's letters, and described fully the barbarous treatment to which he had subjected her. He made no denial of my charges, he offered no explanation of the way by which his wife had come by her death, and he was committed to take his trial at the assizes. The prosecution was shamefully lenient to Sir Charles. Instead of representing my child as the blameless and suffering angel she was, the Queen's Counsel tacitly admitted that she had misconducted herself and given Sir Charles ample cause to regret his marriage. My solicitor tried to convince me that this course was unavoidable, since, supposing Sir Charles to be in his senses, a motive for the murder must be admitted; he further added that no jury would hang a man of title on presumptive evidence, and that the utmost the Crown could do was to cast strong suspicion on Sir Charles and debar him from holding an honorable position in society for the future. My letters were scarcely referred to, and in the witness-box I was grossly insulted. No direct evidence against Sir Charles was found; and it was merely suggested that, having followed his wife to the boat-house, he had there, tempted by opportunity, or provoked by her refusal to return with him to the house, thrust her into the water and suffered her to drown. The jury returned a verdict of 'Not Guilty'—here Mr. Pierce's friend gave a grunt of approval. "But," the letter concluded, "I am thoroughly convinced that this verdict could not have been returned had a searching inquiry been made into Sir Charles's relations with the servants, who were undoubtedly bribed to withhold evidence. It is this investigation which I will have made if the cost of making it is within my means."

"She doesn't say what became of the maidservant who left with her daughter."

"Oh, she disappeared—with the major part of her mistress's jewels!"

"Just what I expected. Of course she did it."

"Don't be hasty; you haven't heard the other side. I wrote to my client, asking for particulars as to Sir Charles's defence. Here's her reply."

Mr. Pierce's friend read—

"The counsel for the defense charged my daughter with insobriety and a clandestine acquaintances with James Barton, Sir Charles's discharged valet, who is said to have been at the same time secretly courting my daughter's maid. With regard to insobriety, our family doctor declared that it was a disease which should have elicited her husband's sympathy and pity rather than his malevolent anger. As to the clandestine acquaintance I do not believe one word of it."

"Do you believe a word of it, Bob?"

"Oh, it was proved at the trial!"

"How do you know that?"

Mr. Pierce chuckled quietly.

"My correspondent's vanity did it," said he. "You can see she is as proud as a peacock, and could not conceal the fact that she had married her daughter to a man of title. My partner at once recollected the case of a baronet being tried for murder, and that of a boat being found at the foot of a weir. A few hours spent with a file of newspapers put us in possession of all the particulars my client mentions, and many others she had passed over. It was proved that the lady was afflicted with dipsomania before her marriage, and that the fact had been carefully concealed by her mother—it was on this point that the lady received the gross insults in the witness-box of which she complains in her letter. It was proved that her husband was compelled to withdraw her from society, and that he took her abroad by the advice of a physician with the hope of curing her."

It was proved that she grew worse instead of better, and had to be put under paid keepers. It was proved that she eluded their vigilance and carried on a clandestine acquaintance with Sir Charles's valet, who was dismissed on that account. It was proved that the lady's maid was at the same time secretly courted by this man-servant. It was proved that on the day before the lady's death she received through her maid a letter from the discharged man-servant; and it was proved that the man and the maid were together, and took the train to London on the morning after the lady's flight from her husband's house, and that they carried a box which they would not trust to the man who took their portmanteau from the hotel to the station."

"Oh, the case doesn't admit of doubt! Your client must be mad to think of overturning a verdict based upon such evidence as that."

"I dare say she is mad," said Mr. Pierce, with another chuckle. "I see her position pretty clearly. She marries her daughter to a baronet, and becomes at once a kind of Triton among her middle-class minnows. Then comes this revelation, which covers her daughter with disgrace, and her also, and all through her own precious cleverness at the inquest. But for her evidence, there would have been a simple verdict of 'Found drowned,' in all probability. To save his wife's name from disgrace, Sir Charles said nothing about her propensities or this unpleasant acquaintance with his valet until he was compelled to do so."

"That shows he was a gentleman. Of course, if you take up this case, you can't expect to prove Sir Charles guilty."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"What! You think he is guilty?"

"Of complicity perhaps."

"But there's not a tittle of evidence against him."

"There it is. You may fairly doubt the justice of any verdict that is returned for want of evidence on the other side. Ha!"

A gong upon the door in the outer office sounded, and Mr. Pierce rose from his chair.

"There's my client," said he. "You must go."

"I wish you luck, Bob. Good-bye!"

## CHAPTER II.

### THE INTERVIEW.

Mr. Pierce closed the door of the outer office upon his friend, and turned to the lady who waited by the little mahogany counter.

"Ah, this is the office of Messrs. Pierce and Pierce, I believe?" she said.

"It is, ma'am. My name is Pierce."

"Ah, indeed!" She unfolded a pair of gold-rimmed glasses, and, holding them with great delicacy a few inches from her eyes, examined Mr. Pierce with the cool audacity of a very superior super-genteel person; whilst he, with his knuckle on the little counter, looked over the top of his glasses at her with the stolidity of a phlegmatic man.

She was well dressed, tall, very erect, and about fifty. Her features might have served Mr. du Maurier as a model for his duchess. They were features with a good deal of character in them—unpleasant character, as it seemed to Mr. Pierce. She spoke with severe distinctness, and, having spoken, drew back her lips tightly upon her perfect teeth, giving to her face the semblance of a smile which seemed much at variance with the expression of her eyes, for her eyebrows were raised in pained astonishment, and she looked anything but pleased with the aspect of Mr. Pierce.

In truth, his appearance was enough to disappoint any one about to intrust him with an enterprise requiring shrewdness and quick address. He was large and heavy, with the patient ox-like expression of an unsuccessful man. There was a slippish air about him, and a distinct at-