

UNRAVELLED KNOTS

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UNRAVELLED KNOTS

I

THE MYSTERY OF THE KHAKI TUNIC

§1

I cannot pretend to say how it all happened. I can but relate what occurred, leaving those of my friends who are versed in psychic matters to find a plausible explanation for the fact that on that horrible foggy afternoon I chanced to walk into that blameless teashop at that particular hour.

Now, I had not been inside a teashop for years, and I had almost ceased to think of the Old Man in the Corner—the weird, spook-like creature with the baggy trousers, the huge horn-rimmed spectacles, and the thin claw-like hands that went on fidgeting, fidgeting, fidgeting with a piece of string, tying it with nervy deliberation into innumerable and complicated knots.

And yet, when I walked into that teashop and saw him sitting in the corner by the fire, I was hardly conscious of surprise, but I did not think that he would recognise me. So I sat down at the next table to him, and when I thought that he was most intent on fidgeting with his piece of string, I stole surreptitious glances at him. The years seemed to have passed him by; he was just the same; his face no more wrinkled; his fingers were as agile and restless as they had been when last I saw him twenty years ago.

Then all at once he spoke, just as he used to do, in the same cracked voice with the dry, ironic chuckle.

"One of the most interesting cases it has ever been my good fortune to investigate," he said. I had not realised that he had seen me, and I gave such a startled jump that I spilt half a cup of tea on my frock. With a long, bony finger he was pointing to a copy of the *Express Post*, which lay beside his plate, and almost against my will my eyes wandered to the flaring headline: "The Mystery of the Khaki Tunic."

Then I looked up inquiringly at my pixy-like interlocutor. It never occurred to me to make a conventional little speech about the lapse of time since last we met; for the moment I had the feeling as if I had seen him the day before.

"You are still interested in criminology, then?" I asked.

"More than ever," he replied with a bland smile, "and this case has given me some of the most delightful moments I have ever experienced in connection with my studies. I have watched the police committing one blunder after another, and to-day, when they are completely baffled and the public has started to write letters to the papers about another undetected crime and another criminal at large, I am having the time of my life."

"Of course, you have made up your mind," I retorted with what I felt was withering sarcasm.

"I have arrived at the only possible solution of the mystery," he replied, unperturbed, "and you will do the same when I have put the facts clearly and logically before you. As for the police, let 'em flounder," he went on complacently. "For me it has been an exciting drama to watch from beginning to end. Every one of the characters in it stands out before me like a clear-cut cameo.

"There was Miss Mary Clarke, a quiet, middle-aged woman who rented Hardacres from Lord Foremeere. She had taken the place soon after the Armistice, and ran a poultry farm there on a small scale with the occasional assistance of her brother Arthur, an ex-officer in the East Leicesters, a young man who had an excellent war-record, but who seemed, like so many other young men of his kind, to have fallen into somewhat shiftless and lazy ways since the glorious peace.

"No doubt you know the geography of the place. The halfpenny papers have been full of maps and plans of Hardacres. It is rather a lonely house on the road between Langford and Barchester, about three-quarters of a mile from Meere village. Meere Court is another half-mile or so farther on, the house hidden by clumps of stately trees, above which can be perceived the towers of Barchester Cathedral.

"Very little seems to have been known about Miss Clarke in the neighbourhood; she seemed to be fairly well-to-do and undoubtedly a cut above the village folk, but, equally obviously, she did not belong to the county set. Nor did she encourage visitors, not even the vicar; she seldom went to church, and neither went to parties nor ever asked any one to tea; she did most of her shopping herself, in Meere, and sold her poultry and eggs to Mr. Brook, the local dealer, who served all the best houses for miles around. Every morning at seven o'clock a girl from the village, named Emily Baker, came in to do the housework at Hardacres, and left again after the mid-day dinner. Once a week regularly, Miss Clarke called at Meere Court. Always on a Friday. She walked over in the afternoon, whatever the weather, brought a large basket of eggs with her, and was shown, without ever being kept waiting, straight

into Lady Foremeere's sitting-room. The interview lasted about ten minutes, sometimes more, and then she would be shown out again.

"Mind you," the funny creature went on glibly, and raising a long, pointed finger to emphasise his words, "no one seems to have thought that there was anything mysterious about Miss Clarke. The fact that 'she kept 'erself to 'erself' was not in itself a sign of anything odd about her. People, especially women, in outlying country districts, often lead very self-centred, lonely lives; they arouse a certain amount of curiosity when they first arrive in the neighbourhood, but after a while gossip dies out if it is not fed, and the hermit's estrangement from village life is tacitly accepted.

"On the other hand, Miss Clarke's brother Arthur was exceedingly gregarious. He was a crack tennis player and an excellent dancer, and these two accomplishments procured him his entrée into the best houses in the county—houses which, before the war, when people were more fastidious in the choice of their guests, would no doubt have not been quite so freely opened to him.

"It was common gossip that Arthur was deeply in love with April St. Jude, Lord Foremeere's beautiful daughter by a previous marriage, but public opinion was unanimous in the assertion that there never could be any question of marriage between an extemporary gentleman without money or property of any kind and the society beauty who had been courted by some of the smartest and richest men in London.

"Nor did Arthur Clarke enjoy the best of reputations in the neighbourhood. He was over-fond of betting and loafing about the public-houses of Barchester. People said, that he might help his sister in the farm more than he did, seeing that he did not appear to

have a sixpence of his own, and that she gave him bed and board, but as he was very good-looking and could make himself very agreeable if he chose, the women, at any rate, smiled at his misdeeds and were content to call Arthur 'rather wild, but not really a bad boy.'

"Then came the tragedy.

"On the twenty-eighth of December last, when Emily Baker came to work as usual, she was rather surprised not to see or hear Miss Clarke moving about the place. As a rule she was out in the yard by the time Emily arrived; the chickens would have had their hot mash and the empty pans would have been left for Emily to wash up. But this morning nothing. In the girl's own words there was a creepy kind of lonely feeling about the house. She knew that Mr. Clarke was not at home. The day before the servants at Meere Court had their annual Christmas party, and Mr. Clarke had been asked to help with the tree and to entertain the children. He had announced his intention of putting up afterwards at the Deanery Hotel for the night, a thing he was rather fond of doing whenever he was asked out to parties and did not know what time he might be able to get away.

"Emily, when she arrived, had found the front door on the latch, as usual, therefore, she reflected, Miss Clarke must have been downstairs and drawn the bolts. But where could she be now? Never, never would she have gone out before feeding her chickens, on such a cold morning, too!

"At this point Emily gave up reflecting, and proceeded to action. She went up to her mistress's room. It was empty, and the bed had not been slept in. Genuinely alarmed now, she ran down

again, her next objective being the parlour. The door was, as usual, locked on the outside, but, contrary to precedent, the key was not in the lock; thinking it had dropped out, the girl searched for it, but in vain, and at one moment, when she moved the small mat which stood before the door of the locked room, she at once became aware of an over-powering smell of gas.

"This proved the death-blow to Emily's fortitude; she took to her heels and ran out of the house and down the road toward the village, nor did she halt until she came to the local police-station, where she gave as coherent an account as she could of the terrible state of things at Hardacres.

"You will remember that when the police broke open the door of the parlour, the first thing they saw was the body of Miss Clarke lying full-length on the floor. The poor woman was quite dead, suffocated by the poisonous fumes of gas which was fully turned on in the old-fashioned chandelier above her head. The one window had been carefully latched, and the thick curtains closely drawn together; the chimney had been stuffed up with newspaper and paper had been thrust into every aperture so as to exclude the slightest possible breath of air. There was a wad of it in the keyhole, and the mat on the landing outside had been carefully arranged against the door with the same sinister object.

"The news spread like wildfire and soon the entire neighbourhood was gloating over a sensation the like of which had not come its way for generations past."

§2

"The London evening papers got hold of the story for their noonday edition," the Old Man in the Corner went on, after a slight

pause, "and I with my passion for the enigmatical and the perplexing, made up my mind then and there to probe the mystery on my own account, because I knew well enough that this was just the sort of case which would send the county police blundering all over the wrong track.

"I arrived at Barchester on the Tuesday, in time for the inquest, but nothing of much importance transpired that day. Medical evidence went to prove that the deceased had first been struck on the back of the head by some heavy instrument, a weighted stick or something of the sort, which had no doubt stunned her, but she actually died of gas poisoning, which she inhaled in large quantities while she was half-conscious. The medical officer went on to say that Miss Clarke must have been dead twelve hours or more when he was called in by the police at about eight o'clock in the morning.

"After this, a couple of neighbours testified to having seen Miss Clarke at her front door at about half-past five the previous evening. It was a very dark night, if you remember, and a thick Scotch mist was falling. When the neighbours went by, Miss Clarke had apparently just introduced a visitor into her house, the gas was alight in the small hall, and they had vaguely perceived the outline of a man or woman, they could not swear which, in a huge coat, standing for a moment immediately behind Miss Clarke; the neighbours also heard Miss Clarke's voice speaking to her visitor, but what she said they could not distinguish. The weather was so atrocious that every one who was abroad that night hurried along without taking much notice of what went on around.

"Evidence of a more or less formal character followed, and the inquest was then adjourned until the Friday, every one going away

with the feeling that sensational developments were already in the air.

"And the developments came tumbling in thick and fast. To begin with, it appears that Arthur Clarke, when first questioned by the police, had made a somewhat lame statement.

"I was asked,' he said, 'to help with the servants' Christmas party at Meere Court. I walked over to Barchester at about three o'clock in the afternoon, with my suit-case, as I was going to spend the night at the Deanery Hotel. I went on to Meere Court soon after half-past three, and stayed until past seven; after which I walked back to the Deanery, had some dinner, and went early to bed. I never knew that anything had happened to my sister until the police telephoned to me soon after eight o'clock the next morning. And,' he added, 'that's all about it!'

"But it certainly was not 'all about it,' because several of the servants at Meere Court who were asked at what time Mr. Clarke went away that night, said that he must have gone very soon after five o'clock. They all finished their tea about that time, and then the gramophone was set going for dancing; they were quite sure that they had not seen Mr. Clarke after that.

"On the other hand, Miss St. Jude said that the servants were mistaken; they were far too deeply engrossed in their own amusements to be at all reliable in their statements. As a matter of fact, Mr. Clarke went away, as he said, at about seven o'clock; she herself had danced with him most of the time, and said good-night to him in the hall at a few minutes after seven.

"Here was a neat little complication, do you see—a direct conflict of evidence at the very outset of this mysterious case. Can

you wonder that amateur detectives already shrugged their shoulders and raised their eyebrows, declaring that the Hon. April St. Jude was obviously in love with Arthur Clarke, and was trying to shield him, well knowing that he had something to hide.

"Of course the police themselves were very reticent, but even they could not keep people from gossiping. And gossip, I can assure you, had enough and to spare to feed on. At first, of course, the crime had seemed entirely motiveless. The deceased had not an enemy, or, as far as that goes, many acquaintances in the world. In the drawer of the desk, in the parlour, the sum of twenty pounds odd in notes and cash were found, and in a little box by the side of the money poor Mary Clarke's little bits of jewellery.

"But twenty-four hours later no one could remain in doubt as to the assassin's purpose. You will remember that on the day following the adjourned inquest there had arrived from the depths of Yorkshire an old sister of the deceased, a respectable spinster, to whom Arthur himself, it seems, had communicated the terrible news. She had come to Barchester for the funeral. This elder Miss Clarke, Euphemia by name, though she could not say much that was informative, did, at any rate, throw light upon one dark passage in her sister's history.

"'For the past four years,' she told the police, 'my sister had an allowance of four pounds a week from a member of the aristocracy. I did not know much about her affairs, but I do know that she had a packet of letters on which she set great store. What these letters were I have not the slightest idea, nor do I know what Mary ultimately did with them. On one occasion, before she was actually settled at Hardacres, she met me in London and asked me to take care of this packet for her, and she told me then that they were very

valuable. I also know that she and my brother Arthur had most heated arguments together on the subject of these letters. Arthur was always wanting her to give them up to him, and she always refused. On one occasion she told me that she could, if she wanted, sell that packet of letters for five thousand pounds. "Why on earth don't you?" I asked her. But she replied: "Oh, Arthur would only get the money out of me! It's better as it is."

"This story, as you may well imagine, gave food enough for gossip; at once a romance was woven of blackmail and drama of love and passion, whilst the name of a certain great lady in the neighbourhood, to whom Miss Clarke had been in the habit of paying mysterious weekly visits, already was on everybody's lips.

"And then the climax came. By evening it had transpired that in Arthur Clarke's room at Hardacres, the detectives had found an old khaki tunic stuffed away at the bottom of a drawer, and in the pocket of the tunic the key of the locked parlour door. It was an officer's tunic, which had at some time had its buttons and badges taken off; its right sleeve was so torn that it was nearly out at its armhole; the cuff was all crumpled, as if it had been crushed in a damp, hot hand, and there was a small piece of the cloth torn clean out of it. And I will leave you to guess the importance of this fact—in the tightly-clenched hand of the murdered woman was found the small piece of khaki cloth which corresponded to a hair's-breadth with the missing bit in the sleeve of the tunic.

"After that the man in the street shook his head and declared that Arthur Clarke was as good as hung already."

The Old Man in the Corner had drawn out of his capacious pocket a fresh piece of string. And now his claw-like fingers started to work on it with feverish intentness. I watched him, fascinated, well knowing that his keen mind was just as busy with the Hardacres mystery as were his hands in the fashioning of some intricate and complicated knot.

"I am not," he said after a while, "going to give you an elaborate description of the inquest and of the crowds that collected both inside and out of the court-room, hoping to get a glimpse of the principal actors in the exciting drama. By now, of course, all those who had talked of the crime being without apparent motive had effectually been silenced. To every amateur detective, as well as to the professional, the murderer and his nefarious object appeared absolutely revealed to the light of day. Every indication, every scrap of evidence collected up to this hour, both direct and circumstantial, pointed to Arthur Clarke as the murderer of his sister. There were the letters, which were alleged to be worth five thousand pounds, to the mysterious member of the aristocracy who was paying Miss Clarke a weekly pittance, obviously in order to silence her; there was the strong love motive—the young man in love with the girl far above him in station and wanting to get hold of a large sum of money, no doubt, to embark on some profitable business which might help him in his wooing; and there, above all, was the damning bit of khaki cloth in the murdered woman's hand, and the tunic with the key of the locked door in its pocket found in a drawer in Clarke's own room.

"No, indeed, the inquest was not likely to be a dull affair, more especially as no one doubted what the verdict would be, whilst a good many people anticipated that Clarke would at once be

arrested on the coroner's warrant and committed for trial at the next assizes on the capital charge.

"But though we all knew that the inquest would not be dull, yet we were not prepared for the surprises which were in store for us, and which will render that inquest a memorable one in the annals of criminal investigation. To begin with we already knew that Arthur Clarke had now the assistance of Mr. Markham, one of the leading solicitors of Barchester, in his difficult position. Acting on that gentleman's advice Clarke had amplified the statement which he had originally made as to his movements on the fatal afternoon. This amplified statement he now reiterated on oath, and though frankly no one believed him, we were bound to admit that if he could substantiate it, an extraordinary complication would arise, which though it might not eventually clear him altogether, in the minds of thinking people, would at any rate give him the benefit of the doubt. What he now stated was in substance this:

"The servants at Meere Court,' he said, 'are quite right when they say that I left the party soon after five o'clock. I was rather tired, and after a last dance with Miss St. Jude, I went upstairs to pay my respects to Lady Foremeere. Her ladyship, however, kept me talking for some considerable time on one subject and another, until, to my astonishment, I saw that it was close on seven o'clock, when I hastily took my leave.

"While I was looking for my coat in the hall, I remember that Lord Foremeere came out of the smoking-room and asked me if I knew whether the party downstairs had broken up. "These things are such a bore," he said, "but I will see if I can get one of them to come up and show you out." I told his lordship not to trouble. However, he rang the bell, and presently the butler, Spinks, came

through from the servants' quarters, and his lordship then went upstairs, I think. A minute or two later Miss St. Jude came, also from the servants' quarters; she sent Spinks away, telling him that she would look after me; we talked together for a few moments, and then I said good-night, and went straight back to the hotel.'

"Now we had already learned from both the hall-porter and the head waiter at the Deanery that Mr. Clarke was back at the hotel soon after seven o'clock, that he had his dinner in the restaurant at half-past, and that after spending an hour or so in the lounge after dinner, he went up to his room, and did not go out again until the following morning. Therefore, all that was needed now was a confirmatory statement from Lady Foremeere to prove Arthur Clarke's innocence, because in that case every hour of his time would be accounted for, from half-past three onwards, whilst Miss Clarke was actually seen alive by two neighbours when she introduced a visitor into her house at half-past five.

"The question would then resolve itself into, Who was that visitor? leaving the more important one of the khaki tunic as a baffling mystery, rather than as damning evidence.

"The entire courtroom was on the tiptoe of expectation when Lady Foremeere was formally called. I can assure you that the ubiquitous pin could have been heard to drop during the brief moment's silence when the elegant Society woman stood up and disposed her exquisite sable cape about her shoulders and then swore to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

"She answered the coroner's questions in a clear, audible voice, and never wavered in her assertions. She said that her step-daughter had come up to her boudoir and asked her if she would

see Mr. Arthur Clarke for a few moments; he had something very important to say to her.

"I was rather surprised at the strange request,' Lady Foremeere continued with the utmost composure, 'and suggested that Mr. Clarke should make his important communication to Lord Foremeere, but my step-daughter insisted, and to please her I agreed. I thought that I would get my husband to be present at this mysterious interview, but his lordship was having a short rest in the smoking-room, so on second consideration I decided not to disturb him.

"A minute or two later, Mr.—er—Clarke presented himself, and at once I realised that he had had too much to drink. He talked wildly about his desire to marry Miss St. Jude, and very excitedly about some compromising letters which he alleged were in his possession, and which he threatened to show to Lord Foremeere if I did not at once give him so many thousand pounds. Naturally, I ordered him out of the place. But he wouldn't go for a long time; he got more and more incoherent and excited, and it was not until I threatened to fetch Lord Foremeere immediately that he sobered down and finally went away. He had been in my room about half an hour.'

"About half an hour?' was the coroner's earnest comment on this amazing piece of evidence, 'But Mr. Clarke said that when he left your ladyship it was close on seven.'

"Mr.—er—Clarke is in error,' her ladyship asserted firmly. 'The clock had just struck half-past five when I succeeded in ridding myself of him.'

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