

THE DUFFIELD PEERAGE CASE

BARONESS ORCZY

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I

IT was through the merest coincidence that Skin o' my Tooth got mixed up with this remarkable case, which brought him suddenly into such great prominence before the public, and was really the foundation-stone of his subsequent more fortunate career. In those days it seems very long ago now money was often very tight at the Finsbury Square office; it was spent as soon as earned, for Skin o' my Tooth never learnt its value, principally, I think, because he never exerted himself to earn it. The gentle art of self-advertisement was totally unknown to him, even in its most elementary stages, and had I not made friends with the sub-editor of the Surrey Post, and got him to insert that excellent puff, beginning: "Mr. Patrick Mulligan, the most eminent and learned lawyer on criminal cases, is now in our midst," etc., etc., no doubt the Duffield Peerage Case would have drifted into other far less competent hands, and Heaven only knows what the upshot of it all would have been.

We had gone down to Guildford in connection with the Wingfield Will Case, and finding the sweet little Surrey town peculiarly attractive, Skin o' my Tooth had decided to stay on for a few days, and, under the pretence that he would feel lonely, he insisted on my remaining with him. We had spent a week of delightful idleness, and my chief had devoured a large supply of his favourite French novels, when the murder of Mr. Sibbald Thursby, a noted solicitor of Guildford, threw the whole town into a veritable state of uproar. From the very first the wildest rumours were circulated on the subject of this appalling tragedy, and it became really difficult to sift the real facts from the innumerable surmises and embellishments indulged in by, the imaginative reporter of the Surrey Post. The truth however, as far as I ultimately succeeded in gathering it for the benefit of my chief, who seemed interested in the case, was briefly this:

Mr. Sibbald Thursby had an office where he transacted his business in Guildford High Street, but he lived in a tiny house just outside the town, on the Dorking Road; his household consisting of himself and a man and his wife named Upjohn, who shared the duties of cook, gardener, maid and man of all works between them. On Friday last the Upjohns went upstairs to bed as usual at 9.30 o'clock, leaving their master at work in his study on the ground floor. This room had windows opening out on to the small garden at the back, and a little conservatory leading to it. Mr. Thursby always bolted the windows and locked the conservatory the last thing before going to bed. The Upjohns heard someone knocking at the front door some ten minutes after they went upstairs, but both having already got into bed, they seem to have been too lazy to get up. Whether Mr. Thursby himself let his belated visitor in or not, they could not say, for they heard nothing, and very soon were both sleeping the sleep of the just.

But next morning, when Mrs. Upjohn went into the study, she was horrified to find her master lying on his side across the threshold of the conservatory door; his clothes the clothes he was wearing the night before were covered with blood, his face was obviously that of the dead. Upjohn, summoned by his wife's screams, quickly ran into Guildford for the doctor and the and the police: the former pronounced life to be extinct, Mr. Thursby's

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throat having been cut from ear to ear, obviously with the short, curve-bladed knife found in the conservatory. There had been no time even for a short struggle for his life on the part of the unfortunate solicitor. According to the theory immediately formed by the police, he had been attacked with extraordinary suddenness and fury; practically at the very moment when he was opening the conservatory door in order to let the assassin in. The latter must at once have gripped his victim by the throat, smothering his screams, and only used the knife when the poor man was already senseless. In falling backwards, Thursby had seized the portière curtain and dragged it down with him in his fall, otherwise nothing was disturbed in the room. The windows were found carefully bolted; the lamp even had been extinguished. The few little articles of silver and bits of valuable china in the cabinets were left untouched; the unfortunate man's watch and chain, the loose cash in his pocket, were found intact; and to the police the crime seemed as purposeless as it was mysterious.

At the inquest, which was held on the following Tuesday, a verdict of "Wilful murder against some person or persons unknown" was returned, and the public had perforce to rest satisfied that everything was being done to throw light upon this tragic and awful affair. But gradually a rumour, more persistent and positive, and less vague than others, began to find general credence. The Surrey Post had brought the news that a lady—a stranger to Guildford—had gone to the police to request the return of certain papers which had been in the charge of Mr. Sibbald Thursby, and for which she held a receipt signed by him. Rumour went on to assert that a search was made for these papers, and that they had not been found, but that one of the constables, when he was carefully surveying the room where Mr. Thursby was murdered, had discovered a handful of ashes of burned papers in the grate. Twenty-four hours later, the news had spread throughout England like wildfire that the lady whose papers had so unaccountably disappeared claimed to be the lawful wife of the Earl of Duffield, and that those papers were of paramount importance to the legal aspect of her claim and that of her son.

Skin o' my Tooth had stayed on at Guildford all these days, chiefly because the case interested him from the very first; with his unerring instinct in criminal matters, he had scented a mysterious complication, long before the many rumours anent the lady claimant had taken definite shape.

"I imagine Lord Duffield won't enjoy this washing of all his family linen in public, which seems to me quite inevitable," he said to me one morning, when he had read his Surrey Post.

We had just finished the excellent breakfast provided by the Crown Hotel, and Skin o' my Tooth had suggested the advisability of my running up to town to get him a batch of French novels, when one of the waiters came up to our table, with a great air of importance and mystery, and holding a card upon a salver.

"His Lordship is in his carriage," he murmured with the respect befitting so important an event, "and desires to have a few minutes' interview with Mr. Mulligan."

I glanced at the card, which bore the name "The Earl of Duffield," while Skin o' my Tooth quietly intimated to the waiter that he would see his Lordship in the sitting-room.

Lord Duffield was a stout, florid, jovial-looking man of about fifty, decidedly military and precise in his dress and general bearing, but at the present moment obviously labouring under a strong emotion which he was making vigorous efforts to conceal.

"Mr. Mulligan, I believe," he said.

"That is my name," replied Skin o' my Tooth. "To what can I ascribe the honour of this visit?"

"I read your name in the local papers, Mr. Mulligan, but of course I had heard of you before, in connection with criminal cases. The present instance—but," he added, looking somewhat dubiously at my humble personality, "this gentleman?"

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"My confidential clerk, Lord Duffield. You need have no fear of speaking before him."

Satisfied on that point, Lord Duffield sat down, then he said abruptly

"It is about this murder of Sibbald Thursby. The turn this affair has taken forces me to place the matter, as far as I am concerned, into the hands of a lawyer. Our own family solicitor is too old and has never had any experience of this sort; whereas you "

"I am entirely at your disposal."

"To make the matter clear to you, I shall have to take you back some thirty years, when I, a young subaltern in a Line regiment quartered in Simla, had no prospects of ever inheriting this title and property. When I was barely twenty, I fell in love, like the young fool I was, with a noted beauty of Simla, a Miss Patricia O'Rourke, whose reputation already at that time was none too enviable. After a brief courtship, I married her, in the very teeth of strenuous opposition on the part of all my friends; and less than six months after my marriage I had undoubted proofs that Miss O'Rourke was of more evil character than even Simla had suspected, for at the time she married me she had a husband still living a man named Henry Mitchell, as great a blackguard, I believe, as ever trod the earth.

"Half crazy with grief and the humiliation of it all, I at last succeeded in obtaining sick leave, and soon sailed for England determined, if possible, to turn my back for ever on the woman who had blighted my life, and on the scene of my folly and my shame.

"Well, Mr. Mulligan, I dare say that experience has taught you that grief at twenty is soon forgotten. Within a year of that saddest period of my life, my uncle, the late Earl of Duffield, lost his only son, and I became his heir. He obtained for me an exchange into the Coldstream Guards, and soon after that I married Miss Angela Hutton, the daughter of America's great copper king. The following year my uncle died, I inherited the title and property, and then my son Oswald was born, and I became a widower.

"In the meanwhile, Miss O'Rourke, or Mrs. Mitchell, had disappeared from Simla. No one knew where she had gone to; some of my friends thought that she was dead.

"I was obliged to tell you all this, Mr. Mulligan," resumed Lord Duffield after a slight pause, "so that you may better understand my position at the present moment. Remember that I have been during all these years under the firm impression that my marriage with Patricia O'Rourke was an illegal one, and that our son born of that union was not legitimate. I had what I considered ample proofs that Henry Mitchell was alive at the time that she married me. When I taxed her with the crime of bigamy, she not only not deny it, but calmly told me to go my way if I liked. Now, after thirty years she has once more appeared upon the arena of my life. Not only that, but she has come forward with a claim a strong claim for herself and her son. She has obtained affidavits, sworn to by people of unimpeachable position testifying to the death of Henry Mitchell in Teheran where he had settled down in business three clear days before her marriage to me.

"After thirty years?" commented Skin o' my Tooth in astonishment.

"She went to see Sibbald Thursby, who, as you know, perhaps, was the most noted lawyer in Guildford. He was a very old and very intimate friend of mine. She put all the facts before him and showed him all her papers. He came and told me himself that the affidavits were perfectly en règle, duly signed and witnessed by the British Consul in Teheran; one had been sworn by Dr. Smollett, a leading English medical man, who attended on Henry Mitchell in his last illness."

"But why thirty years?"

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"Well, it appears that she had all along been morally convinced that Henry Mitchell had died before our marriage; but she had lost trace of him for some months, and had been unable to obtain the necessary proofs to convince me of his death. However, when I left her, she resolutely set to work to obtain these proofs; but by the time she had succeeded, some years had elapsed, and she also had lost sight of me. She did not know that Lieutenant Adrian Payton had become the Earl of Duffield, you see. A mere accident revealed this fact to her, and, immediately realising her duty to her son, she then set sail for England."

"Mr. Thursby, I understand, as a lawyer, thought well of the lady's claim?"

"He thought that there could be no two opinions on the subject."

"There usually are, though, in law," said Skin o' my Tooth, with a smile.

"Yes! And you may be sure that I did not mean to allow my son Oswald to lose his rights and become nameless without a struggle. But Sibbald Thursby had shown me the affidavits which my wife I suppose I must call her that had given in his charge, and I am bound to confess that her case seemed remarkably clear. Still, I meant to fight to the bitter end then "

"Then? And now?"

"Now? Have you forgotten what has happened? Sibbald Thursby has been murdered, and those same papers have been stolen or destroyed."

"According to you, by whom?" asked Skin o' my Tooth quietly.

"Ah! Heaven only knows! Look at me, Mr. Mulligan. Am I capable of such a crime? And yet public opinion has already built a veritable scaffolding of base insinuations against me and my son Oswald. My wife has gathered round her a veritable army of partisans; the London papers utter scarcely veiled accusations, and the people of this county cut me in the street."

"But what about your son, Viscount Dottridge, I mean?"

"What about him, Mr. Mulligan? I tell you there is an infamous conspiracy against him. He went out on the afternoon preceding Sibbald Thursby's death to pay a visit to some friends about twenty miles the other side of Guildford. He was on his bicycle, and rode home late in the evening. Just outside Guildford his tyre punctured badly; he was still five miles from Duffield, so he elected to have that puncture mended in the town sooner than walk his machine home. He left his bicycle at Rashleigh's, in the High Street, then thought he would kill time by having a chat with Sibbald Thursby. He went round to "The Cottage." It was then a little before ten. He knocked at the front door, but receiving no answer, he went away again and went for a stroll in the lanes until his machine was mended. He called for it at Rashleigh's at a quarter past ten; it was then ready, and he rode home."

"Yes. And ?"

"And while he stood for a moment irresolute upon Sibbald Thursby's doorstep, a couple of workmen saw him, and have informed the police of this fact. If you have read the local paper this morning, Mr. Mulligan, you will have noticed that they announce 'Sensational Developments in the Guildford Mystery.' That sensation will be, I take it, that my son Oswald will be accused of having murdered Sibbald Thursby, in order to destroy the papers which would have robbed him of his inheritance."

"Of which crime you assert that he is innocent. Pray do not misunderstand me. Mine is at present an open mind; I have only followed the case very superficially. Since you have honoured me with your confidence, I will, of

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course, go very fully into the matter. Your position from a legal point of view is secure for the moment. Failing the proofs that Henry Mitchell was dead at the time of your marriage with Miss Patricia O'Rourke, your proofs that he only died after the marriage hold good and make your position unassailable. In that way, the murderer of Mr. Sibbald Thursby has certainly done you or, rather, your son a good turn, for the lady may perhaps never succeed in getting her proofs together again. Teheran is such a long way off, and the creditable English witnesses are probably dead or dispersed by now. But, of course, there is public opinion, and no doubt you yourself cannot estimate at the present moment how far it will force your hand."

Lord Duffield groaned.

"At present," he said, "I only seem to care about the danger to my son Oswald."

"Quite so; and if you will allow me, I will now at once see the detective-inspector in charge of the case, and you may rest assured that everything that can be done, will be done to throw daylight upon these unfortunate events."

Lord Duffield seemed as if he would like to prolong the interview. He looked to me as if he had something on his mind which he could not bring himself to tell, even to his lawyer. Skin o' my Tooth, with his keen insight, also noted the struggle, I am sure, for he waited silently for a moment or two. However, after a brief pause, Lord Duffield rose, shook hands with my chief, nodded to me, and with a few parting instructions he finally left the room.

II.

I DON'T suppose that even Lord Duffield realised how very strong public opinion was already against him in this matter. The lady's small blame to her had made it her business to let the whole town know the full history of her case, and I must say that, as it now stood, it did not redound to the credit of the noble lord and his son. The detective-inspector, on whom Skin o' my Tooth called that same afternoon, was quite convinced that Lord Duffield and his son had planned and executed the destruction of the documents. The murder, he admitted, might not have been intended, but merely committed as an act of self-defence, when the noble thieves had found their friend awake and alert, instead of in bed, as they had supposed. There was no doubt that Viscount Dottridge was seen to loiter round "The Cottage" at about ten o'clock at night. The Upjohns were firm in their statement that they had heard a noise at the front door at about that time. The theory of the police was that the young man had then gone round to the garden and tried conservatory door; Mr. Thursby, hearing a noise, had gone to see what the noise was, and was probably gripped by the throat before he could utter a scream.

"Personally, Mr. Mulligan, I have very little doubt that his Lordship was in this game, somehow," concluded the detective-inspector at the end of our interview with him; but I think you will agree with me that the position is remarkably difficult. What in the world am I to do? Duty is duty, and there must not be one law for the rich and another for the poor. The matter can't be hushed up now. Lady Duffield's small blame to her — had made it her business to let the whole town know the full history of her case, and I must say that, as it now stood, it did not redound to the credit of the noble lord and his son. The detective-inspector, on whom Skin o' my Tooth called that same afternoon, was quite convinced that Lord Duffield and his son had planned and executed the destruction of the documents. The murder, he admitted, might not have been intended, but merely committed as an act of self-defence, when the noble thieves had found their friend awake and alert, instead of in bed, as they had supposed. There was no doubt that Viscount Dottridge was seen to loiter round "The Cottage" at about ten o'clock at night. The Upjohns were firm in their statement that they had heard a noise at the front door at about that time. The theory of the police was that the young man had then gone round to the garden and tried conservatory door; Mr. Thursby, hearing a noise, had gone to see what the noise was, and was probably gripped by the throat before he could utter a scream.

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"Certainly not," replied Skin o' my Tooth; "and you have put the matter in a nutshell. As you say, it would be far better if the lady vacated the place and left you a free hand to hush up the scandal or not, according to the discretion of your chiefs."

It was clear from this interview that the detective–inspector did not know how to act. Torn between his respect for the title and position of the Earl of Duffield, and his own sense of duty in view of the many proofs in favour of Viscount Dottridae's guilt, he was certainly inclined to wait, at any rate until public opinion literally forced the hand of his chiefs.

But in the meanwhile, Skin o' my Tooth had announced to me his intention of seeing the lady who seemed to be the real centre of the many tragic events of the past few days.

We walked round to the "Duffield Arms," where we understood that she was staying, and two minutes later we were shown into the private sitting– room which she occupied at the hotel.

I must say that I looked with some interest at the woman round whom such exciting events seemed to have gathered. Though she must have been nearly fifty years of age certainly, there was even now a wonderful amount of fascination about her entire personality, and a power of magic in her blue eyes. Her son, whom she introduced to us as Viscount Dottridge, was with her when we came into the room, and it was quite impossible not to be struck immediately with the distinct resemblance which he bore to his father. Legally or not, this young man was undoubtedly the son of the Earl of Duffield — Nature had taken special care to prove that fact, at any rate; and my sympathies immediately went out to him and to his beautiful mother, for there was no doubt that Luck had treated them very roughly.

She received my chief very graciously, and, bidding him be seated, she listened with a smile to what I may term the presentation of his credentials.

"I am Lord Duffield's legal adviser in this matter," he said; "but I think I may safely say that I am the friend of both parties. Whilst I serve my client to the best of my ability, I have every desire — believe me — to be of service to you and to your son."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I have been a fool, Mr. Mulligan," she said. "I ought never to have parted with those papers. Now I fear that no one can help me."

"Surely you are wrong. There is no reason why the lost papers should not be replaced. It certainly may take some years and ——"

"Money," she interrupted impatiently, "which I have not got. Those who murdered Mr. Thursby and stole the papers knew what they were about. They have left me absolutely helpless; and even if the perpetrator of the dastardly outrage were punished with the full rigour of the law, I should still see my son ousted from his rights."

"Would you mind telling me the exact contents of the papers you considered most valuable to the furtherance of your cause?"

I thought she looked at him a little suspiciously then; but evidently reassured by his genial smile, she said —

"There were two sworn statements made — one by a Dr. Smollett, who was a well–known English doctor in Teheran, the other by an English nurse named Dawson; both these persons were with Henry Mitchell at the time of his death, and remembered all the circumstances connected with it. Dr. Smollett is dead now. As for the nurse, I have lost sight of her for ten years; it is very doubtful if I could ever trace her."

"But surely these statements were made before the resident British Consul at Teheran?"

"Oh, yes! of course they were. Sir William Courteen was Consul at the time. He subsequently became Governor of the Gold Coast, and died, if you remember, some three years ago."

"Fate has indeed dealt harshly with you," murmured Skin o' my Tooth with genuine sympathy.

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"To tell you the truth, it never struck me at first that Lord Duffield would contest my just rights. When I understood that Mr. Thursby was a personal friend of my husband's, I left my papers in his hands, thinking that no doubt he would show them to Lord Duffield, who, feeling the unimpeachable justice of my claim, would resign himself to the inevitable and give willingly to my son, and his, what, after all, is his due."

"That being a very unlikely contingency now, Lady Duffield, might I ask you what you intend to do?"

"Failing my rights, Mr. Mulligan, which I suppose from what you say will now never be granted to me, I can always fall back on that barren enjoyment — revenge. Yes, revenge!" she added with sudden vehemence. "He would deprive me of my position and leave my son nameless? I tell you, Mr. Mulligan, that with Heaven's help I will so rouse public feeling against him that, when his son has been hanged for the murder of Sibbald Thursby, he in his turn will have to flee this country as a pariah and an outcast, for no honest man henceforth will shake him by the hand."

She had spoken with so much vindictive fury that I felt a cold shiver creeping down my back. Skin o'my Tooth, smiling blandly, was obviously smitten by the fire of her magnificent blue eyes.

"I think," he said, "you will reconsider your very severe mandate."

"Never."

"Surely, if my client realised that you had certain undoubted claim upon him — I only speak without prejudice; but you have a son, and revenge, though sweet, might not prove very useful in his career."

"I never looked upon it in that light," she said coldly, and rising from her chair, as if she wished to end the interview.

"You would not care to name a figure?" suggested Skin o' my Tooth insinuatingly — "without prejudice _____"

For the first time during the interview she turned to her son and seemed to consult him with a look, but he shook his head very energetically.

"Not now," she said to Skin o' my Tooth, and then, with a charming smile, she intimated that she wished the interview to cease.

"You will, in any case, always find me at your service," concluded my chief blandly, as we finally took our leave.

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III.

AS the days wore on, the mystery the Guildford tragedy seemed to deepen more and more. We had another interview with Lord Duffield, at which his son — the only son he would acknowledge — was present, and I must say that seeing those two men, typical of the English, country-bred, but high-born gentlemen, it was almost impossible to conceive that they could lend their hand to the dastardly murder of an old friend. Skin o' my Tooth had received overtures on the part of the claimants, who seemed to have finally realised that revenge was but sorry pleasure, and expressed themselves ready to accept a monetary compromise in return for their permanent residence out of England.

To my intense astonishment Lord Duffield fell in readily with this arrangement, which, after all, was nothing but a bribe, and first gave me the idea that perhaps he and his son had something on their conscience. It is quite certain that a constrained feeling seemed to exist between father and son. Undoubtedly I often caught Lord Dottridge casting furtive glances at his father, and once or twice Lord Duffield looked long and searchingly at his son, then sighed and turned his head away.

I don't pretend to any deep insight into human nature, but it certainly struck me that these two men had begun almost to suspect one another. And no wonder! Who else but they had any interest in destroying the papers which would have made good the cause of the claimants? And I had seen the detective-inspector that morning, and knew that the police, forced into it by public opinion, egged on by the claimants, and convinced that they held sufficient proofs, had at last decided to apply for a warrant for the arrest of Viscount Dottridge.

That same afternoon Skin o' my Tooth at last obtained leave to go over "The Cottage." The police — who always resent outside interference in such matters — had so far on some pretext or other, always refused permission. But my chief was on his mettle. Lord Duffield had promised him £10,000 if he succeeded in elucidating the mystery and in averting the disgrace which threatened him and his son. To-day, at last, Skin o' my Tooth was able, not only to make a vigorous effort towards obtaining that substantial reward, but also to indulge his passion for ferreting out the mysteries which lurk around a crime. I don't think I ever remember seeing his weird faculties more fully in evidence than over the elucidation of the Guildford tragedy — that faculty which literally made him feel the criminal before he held any clue to his guilt.

The late Mr. Sibbald Thursby had been buried the day after the inquest, but in his house everything had been left just as it was the night of the appalling tragedy. The Upjohns had gone, refusing to sleep another night in a place where so terrible a murder had been committed, and as we let ourselves in by the front door our footsteps echoed weirdly within the deserted house. We were accompanied by two constables who, however, took but little interest in Skin o' my Tooth's wild ramblings through the tiny garden, the conservatory, and the study. It seemed as if he expected the ground to give him the final key to the mystery, of which he already had studied the lock; he was walking along with his eyes glued to the floor, his hands buried in the capacious pockets of his ill-fitting coat, and every now and then I could hear him muttering to himself —

"There must be a bit, only a bit — there always is."

Then at last he seemed to have found what he wanted, for he darted forward towards a fine large palm, all dead and dry now for want of water, which stood in an ornamental pot close to the grate. Inside the pot, and covered with dust and mud, there glimmered a piece of paper. Skin o' my Tooth seized it as if it had been a most precious piece of jewellery; then furtively he thrust it in his pocket, and signed to me to hold my tongue, as the constables had just come into the room.

After this short episode, Skin o' my Tooth expressed himself satisfied with all he had seen, and together we returned to the hotel.

Once alone in the privacy of our sitting-room, he took the dirty piece of treasure from his pocket, carefully knocked the dust out of it, and then spread it out smoothly before him on the table.

"You mayn't think it, Muggins," he said, but this piece of dirty paper is worth an earldom and a good many other things besides, including the life of a man, who without this wee scrap would very probably have ended on the gallows. It is also worth £10,000 to me."

Eagerly I looked over his shoulder. The scrap of paper was about the size of my hand, and had obviously been torn off another larger sheet. The words I could decipher were: ". . . ry Mitchell . . . anuary 22nd, 1871 . . . my

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presence," and lower down, what was evidently a signature written in a different hand, ". . . nor Dawson."

"And what is it, sir?" I asked.

"What an ass you are, Muggins!" he said impatiently. "Can't you see that this is all that is left of one of the affidavits which proved that Henry Mitchell died on the 22nd of January, 1871, or three days before Adrian Payton married Patricia O'Rourke? The signature is that of the nurse Dawson, who swore this particular affidavit."

"But it's no use in this state, is it, sir?"

"Oh, yes, Muggins. An affidavit is always useful, even in this condition. You look out a train for me. Early to-morrow morning I am going up to town with this scrap of paper."

He would not tell me anything more then, and the next morning he went up to town and stayed away all day. I saw the detective-inspector in the afternoon, who told me that the warrant for the arrest of Lord Dottridge was actually out, but that he had had a wire in the morning from Scotland Yard "to await further instructions."

"I fancy," he added with a grin, "that Mr. Mulligan has not deserved his nickname this time. He can't get Lord Dottridge out of this hole, not even by the skin of his teeth."

In the evening, however, Skin o' my Tooth came home, dead tired and triumphant. I met him at the station, and together we immediately proceeded to the police-station.

"I have been waiting to see you, Mr. Mulligan," said the inspector. "We cannot delay any longer, and to-night we must execute the warrant against Lord Dottridge."

"You can throw that warrant into the fire, inspector," replied Skin o' my Tooth quietly, "and to-morrow you can apply for another. You'll have to be pretty quick, too, as I fancy your game smells a rat already and may yet slip through your fingers;"

"What do you mean?"

"Only this. When you kindly allowed me to view the scene of the interesting murder case you have had on hand, it was my good fortune to come across this interesting document."

And Skin o' my Tooth once more carefully unfolded that dirty scrap of paper on which he had set such store.

What in the world is this?" asked the inspector.

"That is the very question put to me under the same circumstances by my clerk, Mr. Alexander Stanislaus Mullins. The paper, inspector, is all that is left of one of the affidavits which were to prove the legality of certain claims made by a charming lady and her son. You will notice the signature, '. . . nor Dawson.' I may tell you that the lady in question had lost sight since ten years of nurse Dawson, who attended upon her husband in his last illness. This illness occurred thirty years ago. We have no official knowledge as to when this affidavit was filed, beyond the fact that it was more than years ago; but if you will examine very carefully the paper on which it was written, you will notice a remarkably interesting fact."

And Skin o' my Tooth held up that dirty scrap of paper against the lamp, allowing the light to show through it. In the extreme corner, the water-mark, "C. Sons," became clearly visible.

"Looking through the list of English paper-makers," continued my chief, quietly pointing at this with his thick finger, "I came across the name of Clitheroe and Sons, of 29, Tooley Street, London. This afternoon I interviewed the manager of that firm, who informed me that the lettering of the water-mark in this particular bit of paper indicated that it was manufactured by Clitheroe and Sons in 1899."

"I don't understand," gasped the inspector, staring with all his might first at the dirty bit of paper and then at the unwieldy, bulky figure of Skin o' my Tooth, as he quietly revealed the key to the mystery which had so long puzzled the astute detective.

"Yet it is very simple," he said, with one of his bland smiles. "Personally, I had suspected it all along, from the moment that I first saw Lord Duffield and his son, and realised that they had — if I may so express it — not the brains to carry out so daring, a crime successfully. Had that very amiable, but not otherwise brilliant, young man committed that murder, believe me, he would have left plenty of evidence of his guilt. The fact that you yourself, in spite of your acumen, had been unable to really bring the crime home to him, showed me that a cleverer head than his, and a subtler mind, had been at work: but until you favoured me with a permission to view "The Cottage," I had not a single indication on which to work. When I first saw the lady, I realised that hers might have been the head; my instinct told me that her son's was the hand; but there seemed such a total lack of motive, the whole theory seemed so topsy-turvy, that I hesitated even to follow it up. Then you courteously allowed me to view the scene on which the crime itself was committed. At once the fact struck me very forcibly that whoever

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had come on that fateful night to steal the affidavits knew where to lay his hand on them. Nothing in the room or in the desk had been disturbed, and yet obviously the murderer would turn down lamp as low as possible immediately his nefarious deed was done, lest the light from windows should reveal his presence. Then, again, you know, no doubt as well as I do, how seldom it is that a murderer does not leave a single trace or clue behind him. That is most fortunate in the cause of justice, otherwise many crimes would remain unpunished. I reckoned in this instance that a man after committing what I presupposed would be his first crime, would necessarily have his nerves very much on the jar. His hand, presumably, would shake, and in tearing up the papers by the very much subdued light of the lamp, and in the presence, of his victim lying dead on the door it is impossible, I say, that some scrap should not have escaped his trembling hands — you know how paper flutters — and lodged itself momentarily out of sight, ready to reappear as a damning witness against him."

The inspector was silent. I could see that he was hanging breathless upon Skin o' my Tooth's lips. And I, too, saw it all now before me, even before my chief gave us the final explanation of his unanswerable logic.

"In ascertaining the fact that this paper was manufactured two years ago, whilst purporting to have been written on and signed more than ten years previously, it became clear to me that the affidavits setting forth Miss Patricia O'Rourke's, alias Mrs. Henry Mitchell's, claim were a pack of forgeries. From this conclusion to the understanding of her clever plan was but a quick mental problem. After all, it was simple enough. Having forged the documents, she entrusted them to Sibbald Thursby. Then her son chose his opportunity, the best he could find, to steal and destroy them. After that she hoped so to rouse public indignation against Lord Duffield by openly accusing him of the theft that he would either throw up the sponge altogether and recognise her rights, or at worst pay her a handsome compensation to clear out of the country and leave him alone. Remember, she all but succeeded. You yourself suggested this alternative as the simplest solution of the difficulty, and Lord Duffield was quite ready to fall in with these views."

"But as it is," suggested the inspector at last, "do you think we shall be able to bring the crime home to these people? They seem to have been very clever."

"You could bring the accusation of forgery and fraud undoubtedly home to her. You might succeed in proving the murder against her son, but I don't think that you will get a chance of doing either."

"Why not?"

"I think you will find your birds flown already."

"That would be tantamount to an acknowledgment of guilt, and then we could overtake them wherever they may have fled."

"It certainly is an acknowledgment of guilt, as you say," concluded Skin o' my Tooth, rising from his chair and stretching his great, loose limbs; "but personally, I do not think that you will overtake them if they have succeeded in making good their escape."

Skin o' my Tooth's prophecy proved to be correct. The detective-inspector, I think, has remained convinced to this day that my esteemed employer was not altogether innocent in the matter of the escape of Mrs. Henry Mitchell and her son from the clutches of the law. They had left for London that very evening, and thence had gone to Dover, where all trace of them had ostensibly vanished. I believe that their lucky escape from justice cost Lord Duffield a pretty penny, but, of course, he felt that enough family dirty linen had been washed in public, and he was willing to pay a good sum to save even an illegitimate son from the gallows.