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About Face

A Lady Lyttle Murder Mystery

By

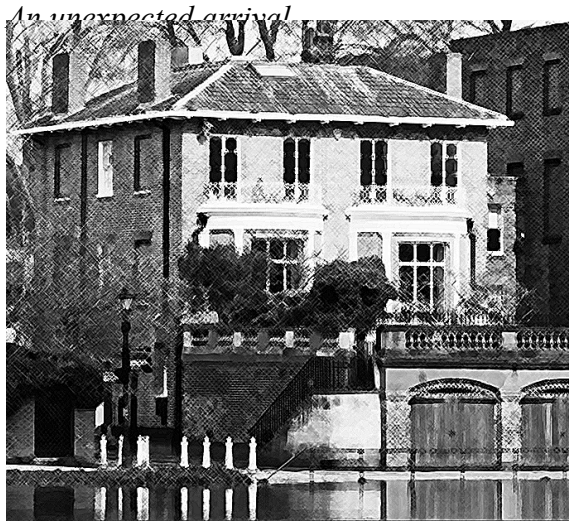
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When unconventional aristocrat Lady Lyttle and her resourceful butler Mr Brooks pull a faceless corpse from the River Thames, they have no way of knowing who the dead man could have been.... nothing that is, apart from his clothes....

A rollercoaster of a story from the Belle Époque of 1903-4 that takes us from London High Society to the plantations of St Lucia, the emerging New Orleans Jazz scene, the bustle of New York and the fabulous house parties of the super-wealthy Rhode Island Set.

Chapter 1

Lady Rosemary Lyttle
St. Helena House, Richmond, London
Sunday August 7th 1904



Nanny always warned me to be careful what you wish for. Just an hour before I encountered the faceless man I was sipping champagne on my terrace and thinking how wonderful it would be if only something would *happen*. The soft breeze from the river below held the rich scents of summer and my elderly black Labrador, Bess, snored loudly under the table, her soft head heavy on my feet. In short, everything was unutterably lovely and I was very, very bored.

The champagne I suppose was not completely lovely; to be honest it was a tad flat. I'd had to open the bottle myself and thought that shaking it vigorously first would help matters. It doesn't, it just encourages the bottle to shoot its cork into the ceiling and spew wine all over the floor. The reason I dared to attempt such a dangerous procedure in the first place was because my servants were having the night off. My butler, Mr Brooks, had expressed the keenest wish to go with his sister Lucy to view the spectacle of the King's fireworks and as Brooks is *such* a good fellow, I thought I should be gracious and allow it. Then the rest of the servants heard of the plan and requested permission to go too. I gave in of course, I always do.

I suppose I should have just gone with them, the whole of London has been in such an absolute fizz of excitement about it for weeks. I wish I had now of course, it would have saved so much bother. The thing is I do *loathe* great heaving crowds of people. One never knows when the mood might turn and there is always the issue of access to a good, clean lavatory. The show celebrates both our controversial new *entente cordiale* with France and the third anniversary of King Edward VII's coronation. I'm not sure about the French, but the last is definitely worth celebrating; after all those years of the old black-draped sourpuss it's wonderful having a jolly regent. It's also rather a miracle that our new sovereign is still alive; he is such a glutton. I saw him last year at the deb ball and he looked like a fat *bratwurst* sausage stuffed into his top hat and tails.

At least the servants didn't have far to travel for the show; the pyrotechnics were being launched from the top of the hill in Richmond Park, which I could see peeping over the bridge just upriver from this very spot. In an attempt not to spend the evening bored and alone I'd suggested that they would all be very welcome to watch the fireworks from the garden here, but Brooks decided that this would not be *proper*, nor perhaps the view quite as good, so here I was with flat bubbly and no one to talk to.

The thought of their excursion reminded me that the anticipated display must be about to begin. Leaving the disappointing wine on the table, I gently extricated my feet from under Bess' substantial weight and, stepping down from the terrace, made my way to the garden's edge. I leant on the cool, stone balustrade and looked down at the murky river lapping and slapping against the wooden doors of the four boathouses. It smelled of mud, rotten leaves and a very slight tang from the distant sea. Despite being the keenest of swimmers I have never once been tempted to fling myself into the Thames; it has always seemed to me to be more of a road than a river.

Notwithstanding the murkiness, it is a pleasure to be by the water. Indeed, the proximity of the house to the Thames was the very reason I chose it eight years ago. *St. Helena House* sat empty for three years before I bought it, but I've been so happy here I believe it must have been waiting for me. Apparently I timed it all rather well; my elderly neighbour, Mr Johnson, told me that before the installation of Richmond Lock some ten years ago the boathouses here were nearly redundant, the river reduced to a stinky trickle at low tide. That must have been most unappealing.

It was partly that, Mr Johnson informed me, which had inspired the previous owners to move away. That, and of course the rumoured dalliance between their youngest daughter and a neighbour's attractive under-gardener. Mr Johnson may look like a retired vicar, but he is always a veritable font of local gossip. This has its uses and I am fond of the old boy, but it does make me wonder what he says about me... *Lady Lyttle, last of the Gloucestershire Lyttles, not a bad looking filly and definitely wealthy, but living alone and unmarried at the age of six and twenty...it is really most irregular, most...*

Just as I was wondering what else he might be saying, the velvet night was ripped apart by the most tremendous racket of explosions, bangs, whizzes and cracks. Bess barked in alarm and galloped off towards the house and I jumped and stumbled into a flowerbed still soggy from the morning's rain. Windmilling my arms furiously I managed not to slip and fall, but the sensation of cold, oozing mud between my toes indicated quite clearly that I had just ruined my favourite pair of cream, satin slippers. Damn and blast it.

I took off both shoes and threw them high over the balustrade into the river. Oblivious to my sad loss, the heartless fireworks continued apace, fizzing and roaring into the sky. Swift silhouettes of rapidly departing birds proved that Bess and I were not alone in our surprise at the tremendous noise, but despite this and the ruined shoes, the visual effect of the fireworks was pleasing. The vivid flashes and delicate tracery of lights lit up the trees of the park and the stone arches of Richmond Bridge to great effect. They reflected prettily in the smooth waters of the sluggish, muddy river, the colours blooming and then fading into darkness. After some minutes of this, one particularly loud rocket exploded with a brilliant white blaze that filled the sky, bright as daylight. It

signalled the end of the show, but also revealed something floating in the water below. Something large. Something, in fact, the exact size and shape of a body.

By habit, I called out at once for Mr Brooks, but remembering the dratted show had enticed away my entire staff I cursed and hopped barefoot along the gravel path back to the house. I paused for a moment, looking down at my muddy feet, then ran down the back stairs to the basement. Quickly locating rubber galoshes, a length of rope and our new, electric torch, I galloped back out to the garden and down the side steps to the towpath next to the boathouses.

It was very dark down by the river and surprisingly cold. After carefully tucking my long skirt up into my bloomers, I gingerly edged my way along the to the very brink of the black water. Shining my torch over the river, I could see nothing except some reeds and a rather startled duck. But then, there, what was that? Just visible in my thin torchlight was the body of a man, face down in the water.

Some females might have chosen to scream or faint decorously at this point, but I pride myself on being made of sterner, more practical stuff. In addition my dress, despite no longer having matching shoes, was a beautiful empire-style satin from *Poiret de Paris* and I had no desire to faint in the mud wearing that. I tucked my skirt up higher into the waistband of my bloomers and stepped out cautiously into the water. It was shockingly cold and the mud sucked hungrily at my galoshes. I shivered, frightened for a moment, then put back my shoulders and lifted my chin. What would Nanny have said if she'd seen me dithering like this? I formed the rope into a loop and threw it towards the body. After several attempts, like a punter at a county fair, I finally snagged my prize. Inch by painful, heavy inch I hauled the body onto the shore. After some panting and very unladylike swearing about protocol-obsessed Butlers and self-regarding servants I regained enough strength to roll it over onto its back.

The fireworks were long gone and the moon covered by clouds so I had nothing but the feeble light of my torch to assist me. Unfortunately it still cast light enough to display the horror. The man was definitely dead and had been for some time, but I'd expected that. What I hadn't expected was that he'd have no face.

Or rather, where there had been a face, there was now nothing but lines of small, precise stitching. The nose and lips had been carefully removed, the eyes and mouth sewn neatly shut. All the facial hair: eyebrows, moustache and beard, had been shaved off. It was absolutely ghastly. The face, if so it could still be called, reminded me of a rag doll awaiting her maker's embroidery silks to create limpid blue eyes and pert rosy mouth.

I felt a cold sickness rising and reached into my pocket for a handkerchief. After several deep breaths, the sweet, grandmotherly scent of lavender on the silk cloth had revived me a little and without looking at the face again, I tenderly laid my handkerchief over it. The perfume was unlikely to revive him, but the removal of that visage from my vision was a great relief.

It was obvious that I could not lift the corpse any further; although determined, I am a small, slight woman and it was far too heavy, even if I could have brought myself into further close contact with that featureless void. To avoid losing the body back into the river's cold embrace, I tied the rope more firmly around its middle and attached the other end to the bollards on the towpath. Panting again slightly from my exertions, I stared down at my unlucky catch. What now? I thought back to my earlier wish for excitement and groaned.

While I had hoped for an unexpected visitor, a live one would have been preferable.

I may have spotted the poor wretch and done my duty by claiming the body from its watery grave, but this was surely only the beginning. The police would of course have to be summoned. When the servants returned they would be questioned and scared half out of their wits. No doubt a salacious report of the incident would appear in *The Daily Express*, maybe even, God forbid, *The Times*. Heavens, it might even end up as the lurid feature in a *Penny Dreadful*. I cursed the corpse at my feet, why had it chosen my house to float past? Why did I have to be the one to spot it? My stuffy neighbours- apart from Mr Johnson who secretly loves a scandal- would certainly not thank me for having brought such infamy to their doorsteps. Most of them are already deeply suspicious of my unconventional household.

For a moment I was tempted to just release the body back into the water like an undersized salmon. Normal people don't have their faces removed; there was some terrible evil behind this crime. Evil that might follow him to my door. I started towards the body, thinking to untie the rope around its middle, but then I noticed the hands. Elegant hands, young, fragile...some poor soul would no doubt be desperately wondering where this boy was. No, I had to finish what I'd started, but it was time for Mr Brooks' assistance; I simply could not face this ordeal without him.