

The Case of Vincent Pyrwhit

By Barry Pain

The death of Vincent Pyrwhit, JP, of Ellerdon House, in the county of Buckinghamshire, would in the ordinary way have received no more attention than the death of any other simple country gentleman. The circumstances of his death, however, though now long since forgotten, were sensational, and attracted some notice at the time. It was one of those cases which is easily forgotten within a year, except just in the locality where it occurred. The most sensational circumstances of the case never came before the public at all. I give them here simply and plainly. The psychical people may make what they like of them,

Pyrwhit himself was a very ordinary country gentleman, a good fellow, but in no way brilliant. He was devoted to his wife, who was some fifteen years younger than himself, and remarkably beautiful. She was quite a good woman, but she had her faults. She was fond of admiration, and she was an abominable flirt. She misled men very cleverly, and was then sincerely angry with them for having been misled. Her husband never troubled his head about these flirtations, being assured quite rightly that she was a good woman. He was not jealous; she, on the other hand was possessed of a jealousy amounting almost to insanity. This might have caused trouble if he had ever provided her with the slightest basis on which her jealousy could work, but he never did. With the exception of his wife, women bored him. I believe she did once or twice try to make a scene for some preposterous reason which was no reason at all; but nothing serious came of it, and there was never a real quarrel between them.

On the death of his wife, after a prolonged illness, Pyrwhit wrote and asked me to come down to Ellerdon for the funeral, and to remain at least a few days with him. He would be quite alone, and I was his oldest friend. I hate attending funerals, but I *was* his oldest friend, and I was, moreover, a distant relation of his wife. I had no choice and I went down.

There were many visitors in the house for the funeral, which took place in the village churchyard, but they left immediately afterwards. The air of heavy gloom which had hung over the house seemed to lift a little. The servants (servants are always emotional) continued to break down at intervals, noticeably Pyrwhit's man, Williams, but Pyrwhit himself was self-possessed. He spoke of his wife with great affection and regret, but still he could speak of her and not unsteadily. At dinner he also spoke of one or two other subjects, of politics and of his duties as a magistrate, and of course he made the requisite fuss about his gratitude to me for coming down to Ellerdon at that time. After dinner we sat in the library, a room well and expensively furnished, but without the least attempt at taste. There were a few oil paintings on the walls, a presentation portrait of himself and a landscape or two—all more or less bad, as far as I remember. He had eaten next to nothing at dinner, but he had drunk a good deal; the wine, however, did not seem to have the least effect upon him. I had got the conversation definitely off the subject of his wife when I made a blunder. I noticed an Erichsen's extension standing on his writing-table. I said:

'I didn't know that telephones had penetrated into the villages yet.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I believe they are common enough now. I had that one fitted up during my wife's illness to communicate with her bedroom on the floor above us on the other side of the house.'

At that moment the bell of the telephone rang sharply.

We both looked at each other. I said with the stupid affectation of calmness one always puts on when one is a little bit frightened:

‘Probably a servant in that room wishes to speak to you.’

He got up, walked over to the machine, and swung the green cord towards me. The end of it was loose.

‘I had it disconnected this morning,’ he said; ‘also the door of that room is locked, and no one can possibly be in it.’

He had turned the colour of grey blotting-paper; so probably had I.

The bell rang again—a prolonged, rattling ring.

‘Are you going to answer it?’ I said.

‘I am not,’ he answered firmly.

‘Then,’ I said, ‘I shall answer it myself. It is some stupid trick, a joke not in the best of taste, for which you will probably have to sack one or other of your domestics.’

‘My servants,’ he answered, ‘would not have done that. Besides, don’t you see it is impossible? The instrument is disconnected.’

‘The bell rang all the same. I shall try it.’

I picked up the receiver.

‘Are you there?’ I called.

The voice which answered me was unmistakably the rather high staccato voice of Mrs Pyrwhit.

‘I want you,’ it said, ‘to tell my husband that he will be with me tomorrow.’

I still listened. Nothing more was said.

I repeated, ‘Are you there?’ and still there was no answer.

I turned to Pyrwhit.

‘There is no one there,’ I said. ‘Possibly there is thunder in the air affecting the bell in some mysterious way. There must be some simple explanation, and I’ll find it all out tomorrow’

He went to bed early that night. All the following day I was with him. We rode together, and I expected an accident every minute, but none happened. All the evening I expected him to turn suddenly faint and ill, but that also did not happen. When at about ten o’clock he excused himself and said goodnight, I felt distinctly relieved. He went up to his room and rang for Williams.

The rest is, of course, well known. The servant’s reason had broken down, possibly the immediate cause being the death of Mrs Pyrwhit. On entering his master’s bedroom, without the least hesitation, he raised a loaded revolver which he carried in his hand, and shot Pyrwhit through the heart. I believe the case is mentioned in some of the textbooks on homicidal mania.