

The Case of the Dog-Biter

A Dixon Hawke Mystery

by unknown Author

Published: 1940



Table of Contents

Introduction



Chapter 1 ...	At Myrtle Lodge.
Chapter 2 ...	The Man with the Whip.
Chapter 3 ...	A Biter Bit!
Chapter 4 ...	„Untoward Circumstances.“
Chapter 5 ...	Gentle Pete!



Introduction

„When a man dies, my dear Hawke,“ said Dr. Wilthorpe, lighting a cigar, „he usually gives up playing the fool, but not so Alderman Wickham.

„He was a mass of contradictions in life,“ proceeded the surgeon, „always saying one thing and doing the opposite. And here’s a mystery for you, Hawke. Alderman Wickham was found dead at his desk in his home at Northall. The fingers of his right hand were holding the stem of a glass in which were still some dregs of whisky.

„A simple test showed that these dregs contained a strong solution of strychnine, which should have produced a much more painful death than appearances suggested had been the ease.

„The post-mortem examination showed advanced heart disease, and no trace of strychnine or any other poison.“

„Wait a minute,“ said Dixon Hawke. „D’you mind saying that all over again?“

„It’s a fact,“ insisted Wilthorpe. „Alderman Wickham was not poisoned by strychnine. So his death pose makes him a liar.“

„What was the cause of death then?“

„A strong emotional shock could have done it. His heart was in a very bad way.“

„But someone must have put the poison in the dregs of whisky,“ broke in Tommy Burke, Hawke’s assistant, who was also present.

Wilthorpe nodded.

„Presumably after Wickham had drunk from the glass—possibly after his death.“

„But what could the object be, sir? It doesn’t make sense.“

„If it made sense, young man, I wouldn’t have wasted my time in coming round here to tell you about it.“ The doctor thoughtfully paced the study floor for a moment.

„There’s a man named Charles Jackson under suspicion. One of Wickham’s ex-employees, and a panel patient of mine incidentally. I wish you’d clear him. He’s had enough worry already. Wife and five kids. Wickham told him his wages weren’t enough to keep such a family, and sacked him. That was Wickham’s way. Jackson called at Ins house during the evening to plead for the return of his job, and there was a row.

„It was no crime if Wickham got over-excited in argument, and I thought maybe you could use your influence and persuade your Scotland Yard friends to leave Jackson alone for the moment, for the sake of his family.“

Chapter 1

At Myrtle Lodge.

Hawke and Tommy were in no need of an excuse for entry to Myrtle Lodge, the home of the late Alderman Wickham. The place was full of people when they arrived.

A short, rotund man with a pointed grey beard informed the visitors that Wickham had called a meeting of the local carnival committee for that day, and most of the members had arrived without knowing of the tragedy.

They were partaking of cake and tea before being sent away.

Hawke crossed into a room with French windows, where he had sighted Inspector Browne, of the C.I.D.

„This is going to be a ticklish job for the coroner,“ declared the inspector. „The fact is that the strychnine in the whisky glass had nothing to do with the death, and therefore, I suppose, need have nothing to do with the inquest. Or need it?“

„The thing to do is to find an explanation of how the strychnine got in the glass,“ said Hawke.

„Also an explanation of the monkey nuts which were found on the carpet,“ supplemented the inspector.

The officer pointed to a heap of broken shells on the mantelpiece.

„The butler informs me that Wickham did not make a habit of eating such nuts. Presumably they were left on the carpet by someone who had called somewhere round the time of Wickham’s death.“

„You’re thinking of this man Jackson?“ queried Hawke, stepping across the room to examine a vase of flower-stems whose heads, for some reason, had been clipped off.

Some of the broken blooms were scattered over the top of the piano, and there were others on the carpet.

„Wickham didn’t stint himself when it came to furnishing,“ said the man from Dover Street, stooping to examine the rich pile carpet.

He pointed to a series of indented lines on it, as though someone had scraped a hobnailed boot over it.

„Somebody has been treating it unkindly,“ he remarked. „Iron-shod boots, do you think, or—“

Hawke looked up quickly at the flower vase, and then stepped out through the French windows, where he spent some moments examining tubbed evergreens and picking up fallen leaves and twigs.

Hawke and Tommy accompanied the inspector to Jackson’s house.

Wickham had been in the upholstery and furniture-making business, and Jackson had been employed in one of his two warehouses.

Jackson was a diffident little man, and he gave his visitors a fervent assurance that he had neither scattered peanut shells over Wickham’s carpet nor put poison in his whisky glass.

„I was only there a few minutes,“ said Jackson. „Mr. Wickham was annoyed at me callin’, and ‘e sort of ‘ustled me out. ‘E said I must find better employment, as my wage wasn’t enough to keep a family of five on.“

„It didn’t occur to him to give you an increase?“ queried Hawke.

„Well, you see, ‘e explained that a job only ‘as a certain economic value, an’ if he was to pay more than what that worked out to, ‘e’d be givin’ me charity, which I shouldn’t wish.

„I asked ‘im if he couldn’t take me on again just temp’ry, but ‘e said ‘e couldn’t ‘ear of it. ‘E d engaged a young feller in my place who was just married.

„I’m dead against slums,‘ he said. ›You know of my work for slum clearance. And my views on people who have large families on inadequate incomes arc very strong. I’m afraid I have no use for your kind. Good-night.‘ That was in ‘is private study, with the French winders. They was open, an’ ‘e shows me out that way. I goes down the path and out through the back gate.“

„What time was that?“ asked Hawke.

„Bout ten. It was getting dark. When I got to the gate I saw the light switched on. I looks round and sees ‘im sittin’ at ‘is desk pourin’ ‘isself out a glass of whisky.“

„Thanks,“ said Hawke. „I don’t think we need bother you any more. If there’s anything I can do to help you get your job back—“

„Oh, no,“ said the man, brightening. „I got fixed up. Different work to what I bin doin’, but it’s all right. Mr. Wickham’s brother offered me the job. Rough carpentry at ‘is boarding kennels over at Ditchley.“

„Wickham’s brother?“

„Yes. Mr. Arnold Wickham.“ Jackson chuckled nervously for a moment.

„Peculiar sort of chap, Mr. Arnold Wickham is, but they say ‘e’s easy to get on with, once you know ‘im. Tall, thin, fierce-lookin’. Swears a lot. ‘E called ‘ere and told me ‘e’d heard ‘is brother ‘ad given me the push, and ‘e could give me a job at ‘is place. This mornin’ ‘e called. I start to-morrer.“

Hawke was frowning thoughtfully at his informant.

„Alderman Wickham was on his own when you called last night?“

„Yes. I didn’t see nobody else there.“

„And this Mr. Arnold Wickham, your new employer? How often do you see him?“

„Oh, not very often. ‘E’s a sleepin’ partner in the Alderman’s business. Funny chap, as I say. Didn’t seem to think a lot of ‘is elder brother. Different as chalk an’ cheese they was.“

Chapter 2

The Man with the Whip.

Jackson’s view of Arnold Wickham was confirmed, on their return to Myrtle Lodge, by members of the party there.

The rotund, bearded gentleman spoke of him as „somewhat eccentric,“ and others exchanged doubtful glances when he was referred to.

„A trifle—er—wild and irresponsible,“ said one woman. „Poor Aiderman Wickham had a lot of trouble with him. He’s—er—difficult to reason with. One might almost describe him as—well—peculiar.“

„Does he wear riding-breeches and leather leggings?“ was Hawke’s odd query.

„That’s the man,“ was the answer.

„Carries a dog-whip?“

„Yes, you’ve seen him all right. He’s never without the dog-whip.“
The lady turned to talk to someone else.

„Have you seen him, Hawke?“ queried the surprised inspector.

„No, but I’m going to.“

„How did you know about his appearance?“ queried Tommy, as he drove his employer towards Ditchley.

„What else do you expect of a professional dog-breeder?“ said Hawke smiling.

Chapter 3

A Biter Bit!

Ditchley was a little-known village some twenty miles away, and they found Arnold Wickham’s place after some difficulty.

Further indications of Wickham’s „peculiarity“ were conveyed in the heavy humour of a police sergeant who directed them to the Wickham Kennels.

„Arnold Wickham?“ said the officer, in answer to Hawke’s query. „Yes, of course, I know him. Who doesn’t round these parts? He’s the man who bites dogs. Take that lane on your left.“ It was growing dark when they reached the kennels.

Hawke opened a wire-frame gate and led the way along a muddy path until he reached a group of wooden sheds, from where he sighted a brick bungalow, almost hidden from view by trees and shrubs.

Their progress towards this was heralded by the barking of dogs within the sheds and on other parts of the estate.

A deep-toned growl greeted them as they reached the bungalow, and Hawke hesitated for a moment on coming face- to-face with a large bull mastiff.

The beast seemed to conclude, from his hesitancy, that he was there for no good purpose, and hurled itself straight at him.

Tommy jumped aside with a startled cry, and the next moment he saw his chief standing with his back to an ivy-clad wall, exerting all his strength to keep the huge, snapping jaws away from his face.

He had both hands on the animal’s throat, but it strained nearer with a succession of thrusts, growling savagely the while.

Tommy shouted for assistance, and he turned to see that the rear door of the bungalow stood open, and that a man in a khaki shirt and riding-breeches was watching the scene somberly, with a curious lack of concern.

„Hey, you!“ shouted Tommy. „Call that thing off. It’ll tear him to pieces.“

The man jerked his head to flick back a lock of hair which had hung down over his left eye, glared at Tommy for a moment, and then said something in a scarcely audible voice.

The effect on the dog was striking. It sprang away from Hawke and stood cowed.

„Didn’t I tell you, Pete,“ said the man, his lean face working with anger, „that you don’t have to bite people without my permission? How d’you like being pounced on and bitten when you don’t expect it, eh?“

His next action was astonishing. He flung himself down on all fours, and crawled crabwise towards the animal, growling the while.

„I'll bite you, you brute!“ he muttered.

The mastiff winced and yelped as the man fastened his teeth in its flank.

Then, as he swung round and stared into its face, it snuffled and licked him generously.

„Let that be a lesson to you, you ruffian,“ said the man, chuckling and fondling its ears as he sprang upright.

He seemed in no way anxious to satisfy the astounded callers that, he was simply a person with a boyish sense of fun and not a lunatic.

„That's the way to train dogs,“ he said, eyeing Hawke truculently from head to foot. „Bite 'em!“

He slashed the ground with a flexible-handled leather dog-whip.

„Are you Mr. Arnold Wickham?“ queried Hawke.

„Yes. You a lawyer or something?“

„No.“

„Then watch out you don't annoy me in any way, or I shall let Pete take a bite out of you. Have a peanut,“ he added surprisingly, digging a handful from his jacket-pocket. „No? Well, I will. I like 'em—always carry some.“

Cracking a shell between his fingers, he turned and led the way indoors.

Hawke and Tommy, after an exchange of questioning glances, followed him.

Chapter 4

„Untoward Circumstances.“

Within the brightly-lit and well-furnished sitting-room Hawke handed over his card. It had an electric effect on the man.

„A detective!“ he shouted in an oddly gleeful manner. „You're investigating the circumstances of my brother's death, eh? Now sit down there at the table and let's listen to your deductions. Was he murdered? He ought to have been, of course, but the point is, was he?“

Hawke eyed the man in momentary surprise.

„What makes you think he may have been murdered?“ asked Hawke. „No one, apart from the doctor, the police inspector, and myself, is aware of any untoward circumstances—“

Arnold Wickham threw back his head and laughed.

„Then there are untoward circumstances?“ he roared. „I knew there would be,“ he went on, thumping the table with his clenched fist. Then, standing up, he continued:

„The public weal, my friends, has always been my first care. I think I may claim I have always stood for uplift. Feed the minds of the working classes. It's much cheaper than feeding their bodies.“

He sat down abruptly at the table again and screwed up his face.

„That was my big brother,“ he said. „A past master in the art of bigotry. An enemy of freedom. A slave-driver, and a mealy-mouthed hypocrite.“ Arnold Wickham paused for a moment.

„Well?“ he demanded. „Is there any reason why such a gentleman as that shouldn't be—but tell me your deductions.“

„There’s nothing very remarkable to tell,“ said Hawke. „It became apparent to me that someone had been standing inside that room, and outside on the porch flicking a whip. There were marks of the lash on the carpet, flower heads had been flipped off, and the shrubbery had been slashed.“

„That’s very good. Then you heard of me, eh?“

„Yes. As you have obviously been in that room since it was last tidied up, which means you must have been there at about the time of your brother’s death, some sort of explanation is called for from you.“

Wickham nodded vigorously.

„Yes, sure! I killed him. You must now take me away and have me hanged, because I really did kill him.“

„How?“ asked the criminologist, without any show of excitement.

„Well, you see, it was like this. I hadn’t any say in the running of the business, but I was frequently hearing of hardships inflicted by my brother, and I used to give myself the pleasure, from time to time, of calling on him and telling him he was a rat. D’you follow?

„I was there when that fellow Jackson was shown in. I stood just outside amongst the shrubs, and heard the conversation. Made my blood boil. He treated Jackson like dirt instead of like a human being.

„I stepped inside the room after Jackson had stepped out, and stood back against the wall, registering contempt.

„After I’d reminded my brother of the filthy way he treated his employees and his tenants, I was infuriated to find it taking no effect. He just sat there complacently, with a kind of reproving, forgiving, big-brother smile on his face.

„I just had to take that smile off his face somehow, Mr. Hawke, or I’d have exploded.

„I had a bottle in my pocket containing a solution of strychnine. I’m a qualified vet, you know, and the stuff was for medicinal purposes.

„Pulling it out of my pocket, I showed it to him.

„There,‘ I said, ‘that’ll spoil your amusement. Strychnine—in your whisky. Can you taste it yet? Wait a minute. Wait till you feel the pains. It’ll tear the heart out of you.‘“

„But you hadn’t put any in his whisky?“ queried Hawke quickly.

„No. Of course I hadn’t. It was bluff. I wanted to throw a scare into him, and I succeeded, by thunder!

„He jumped up from his chair, went white, and then collapsed.

„I took one look at him and then went off to fetch Dr. Wilthorpe, who lives just across the road.

„As I approached the doctor’s gate, he came rushing out, and he was shouting to his wife behind him as he came. ‘It’s Wickham,’ he shouted. ‘His butler’s just telephoned.‘

„So I walked quietly back and stood on the porch, watching him as he made his examination.“

An agonised look appeared in Arnold Wickham’s eyes, and he clenched his knuckles.

„When I heard him tell the butler that my brother was dead,“ he said, „I accused myself of being his murderer. I’d killed him by the power of suggestion. That strychnine was as good as there.

„Don’t you understand, man? I had as good as poisoned him with strychnine!

„It was right that I should bear the full responsibility of having poisoned him, wasn't it? I've always done what I considered right all my life. Never shirked the consequences.

„So, as soon as the others had left the room, I slipped in and tipped some of the stuff into the dregs of my late brother's whisky. It was, of course, just a material triviality that was necessary in order to bring the thing down to the level of a jury's understanding.“

Hawke shook his head.

„I'm afraid the world's much more stupid than you think,“ he said.

„What? Do you mean I shan't be hanged for what I've done?“

„You won't even be prosecuted,“ said Hawke. „The coroner might give you a bit of a choking off for being hysterical, but that's all that will happen.“

Chapter 5

Gentle Pete!

Arnold Wickham seemed to be quite despondent when Hawke was leaving.

„Perhaps I can make up for my sins by giving the staff a better deal in future,“ he said.

„I'm sure you will,“ said Hawke. The detective staggered back as the mastiff bounded at him again.

This time the gloomy Wickham did not call it to order.

„Go on, Pete,“ he said. „He denies a fellow his right to be hanged. Bite his head off.“

The dog had Hawke down, and, to Tommy's intense alarm, appeared to be carrying out this instruction.

Wickham stood by, smiling faintly. That smile seemed sadly out of place to Tommy until he realised the truth.

Hawke struggled to his feet, rubbing his face with a handkerchief and patting the dog on the head.

„His tongue seems to be about a yard long,“ he said. „He licked all round the inside of my collar, nearly down as far as my shoulder-blades. I confess I was alarmed at first.“

„Pete never hurt anybody in his life,“ said Wickham. „Wish I could say the same.“

„The punishment he's handing himself in the form of self-reproach,“ said Hawke, on the way back, „fits the crime all right. But I hope he doesn't overdo it.

„Overlooking his posing and his extravagant behaviour at times, I feel that the world has need of many more people like him, and far fewer like, say, that bunch of seedcake nibblers at Myrtle Lodge.“

