



SKELTON'S GUIDE TO  
DOMESTIC POISONS

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# PROLOGUE

December 1928

‘There’s somebody coming up the hill.’

Wilf had been told not to talk. Mary, his mother, shushed him. Still, everybody turned to look down the hill, even the vicar.

Two coppers, Briggs and Emerson, were coming up the lane towards the cemetery, looking as if they’d run all the way from the station in Collingford. They stopped when they got to the grave. Briggs, older and fatter, tried to say something but had no breath left. He nudged Emerson’s elbow.

‘You’ve got to stop,’ Emerson said.

‘What?’

Emerson cleared his throat and said, louder, ‘You’ve got to stop the funeral.’

The vicar looked at the undertaker, who shook his head. He didn’t know what they were talking about either.

Briggs recovered his breath enough to say, 'Perhaps we could have a quiet word.' He took the vicar and the undertaker to one side and they whispered.

Emerson stayed with the mourners. He knew them. Mary Dutton used to come into his dad's shop. Doris, her eldest, was at the same school as his little brother. They nodded embarrassed hellos. Mrs Fellows, Mary Dutton's friend, asked him, 'What's all this about, then?' He said he was ever so sorry, but he wasn't at liberty to say.

The undertaker told the men to put the coffin back on the cart and the vicar braced himself to break the news to Mary.

'This is all very distressing but I'm afraid the police are saying that Dr Willoughby may have made a mistake. There's going to have to be an autopsy.'

'What sort of mistake?'

'I'm sure it's no more than a formality, although I must say that to leave it to the eleventh hour like this shows an inhuman lack of compassion, but rest assured . . .'

Mary wasn't listening. The cart had started back down the hill. She followed it.

'What's going on? What's going on?'

The undertaker turned. 'Somebody's said he was poisoned.'

# CHAPTER ONE

January 1929

On the train into Paddington, Arthur Skelton stared at a picture of himself. It was on page four of the *Daily Mail* being read by the man opposite. The same picture, or variations of it, showing him smiling, serious, standing, walking, had haunted him all weekend, in the *Daily Herald*, the *News of the World*, the *Express*, the *Mirror*, the *Graphic* and the *Sketch*. Bloody things.

His wife, Mila, had teased him remorselessly. For a moment he'd thought she was serious when she suggested getting the children to cut all the photographs out and paste them in a scrapbook. For years she'd said that barristers were people who had wanted to be actors but weren't brave enough to stand up against their parents, and here, she said, was the proof. Her husband, the barrister, was a matinee idol. People in the street recognised him. A

shy young woman had even asked for his autograph at the bacon counter in Mason's. Mila accused him of loving the attention, of being a slave to fame.

'Look at this one. You're posing,' she'd said, brandishing the *News of the World*.

'I am not posing.'

'You've got your distinguished face on.'

'Is it my fault if my face, in repose, can sometimes appear distinguished?'

Mila laughed so much she ended up dancing.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't been so conspicuous, but he was six foot three, with a face like a horse and round glasses with lenses so thick that his eyes filled them like moons. And he had a limp. Even though most of the photographs showed him wearing his barrister's wig, he was still horribly recognisable. Some boys had shouted something at him as he'd walked to the station that morning. Not knowing how to react, he'd waved and grinned. Afterwards he wondered whether they might have been saying something insulting or obscene.

The Dryden case – the cause of it all – was already being called the scandal of 1929 and they weren't yet halfway through January. It was a grubby little tale.

A year earlier, Hannah Dryden, rich and glamorous, had divorced her husband, Maurice Dryden, the popular novelist, on the grounds of adultery and desertion. Maurice's next book, *Mistress of Mayfair*, charted the adventures of Helena, an opium-smoking sex-tigress, in London, Paris, Rome, New York and Marrakesh. When he spoke to the papers about the book, Maurice dropped

heavy hints that Helena's exploits were based closely on those of his ex-wife, Hannah, who sued for defamation and engaged Skelton to represent her in court.

The usual defence in such cases might have been to point out the dissimilarities between the fictional Helena and the real Hannah: age, appearance, background and so on. But, instead of doing that, Maurice Dryden chose the more difficult but far more vindictive course of claiming that Helena was indeed Hannah and the book a true-to-life account of Hannah's supposed debaucheries.

The trial was an Aldwych farce. Maurice's key witnesses were a grubby private detective who claimed to have kept tabs on Hannah over the course of several weeks, a cashiered colonel in a bad wig and Alejandro Zabala, a self-proclaimed Argentinian fencing champion. Worst of all was a French chambermaid who squeaked, simpered and *zut alorsed* her way through elaborate accounts of Hannah's exploits while flirting outrageously with the judge.

All of them had been carefully primed and rehearsed by Maurice Dryden. They told terrific stories. The *Herald* and the *Mail* published every suffering detail. *Woman's Weekly* put Hannah on its front cover and nearly doubled its circulation. The directors of the Tempolux watch company of Luton made a fortune by producing a cheap copy of the rectangular wristwatch that Hannah had allegedly left behind at the Hotel Negresco, in Nice.

Skelton led the prosecution and found the main obstacle he had to overcome was naivety. Although he was a thirty-six-year-old married man with two children, the witness statements frequently alluded to sexual practices of which he was entirely ignorant. His Latin –

*fello, lingua* and so on – led him to make some educated guesses, but French – never his strong subject at school – led him to translate *Maitresse de la Douleur* as ‘Our Lady of the Sorrows’, a misapprehension that was thankfully cleared up before the trial began. Edgar, his clerk, a man much better versed in the ways of the world than he was, helped where he could, although neither of them ever learnt the exact use of the ‘haunted mitten’, nor why the delivery of eight baskets of fresh peaches to a hotel room might be taken as evidence of lewdness. To help, Edgar tracked down, at a specialist bookshop off the Charing Cross Road, a small but useful library on the subject of sexual deviance.

Marie Stopes’ *Married Love* told Skelton that the ‘bodily union’ of a man and woman ‘is the solid nucleus of an immense fabric of interwoven strands reaching to the uttermost ends of the earth; some lighter than the filmiest cobweb, or than the softest waves of music; iridescent with the colours not only of the visible rainbow but of all the invisible glories of the wavelengths of the souls’, but made no mention of the strap-on. The works of Havelock Ellis brought revelations about inversion and autoeroticism, while Krafft-Ebing was good on necrophilia, masochism and satyriasis. A less academic approach to the subject came from Emil Rouxel’s *Daphne, or the Seven Temples of Rapture* which had been bundled into the bag with the other books.

As it turned out, the success of his defence owed more to his naivety – or at least his naive curiosity – than it did to this lewd scholarship. His first little triumph came entirely without preparation when the grubby private detective

claimed, during the depths of a Parisian winter, to have kept a twenty-four-hour vigil standing on the street opposite a hotel in which Hannah was staying. In cross-examination, he claimed to have sustained himself with ‘cold, sweet tea from a half-gallon flask and the occasional nip of brandy’. Then, because it had just occurred to him, Skelton asked, ‘Where did you go to the lavatory?’ The question, and more importantly the detective’s stuttering claim to have held it in (a middle-aged man with half a gallon of tea inside him) for the entire vigil, made the following morning’s headlines.

A second triumph came when the cashiered colonel swore that he was the model for ‘Major Tomkins’, the Lothario who, in the novel, spends seven nights of ecstasy with Helena in a shepherd’s hut on a mountain in Andalusia. Skelton asked what they ate. The colonel first tried to claim they lived off the land but stumbled over technical questions about the flora and fauna of the Sierra Nevada, so hastily invented some sacks of tinned soup and meat. When Skelton idly hoped they remembered to bring a tin opener, the colonel seemed to crumble. He stared at his feet. His wig slipped. Banality had brought his flight of fancy – for a moment he had believed that he could truly have been the passionate Major Tomkins – crashing to earth.

Skelton’s summing-up lasted more than two hours. The *Express*, *Mail* and *Herald* quoted it in full over several pages. The *Illustrated London News*’ account was accompanied by ink and wash drawings, showing Skelton in full flow, stern and dignified. The *Times* described his performance as a ‘masterpiece of forensic eloquence’.

It was not a showy speech. His voice rarely rose from his quiet Yorkshire rumble, the flat vowels making the

grandeur of the defence barrister – and even the judge – seem so much tinsel.

Instead of attacking the defence case, he praised it. Rather than abusing its inconsistencies, he tried his best to make sense of them. He congratulated Maurice Dryden on his literary invention and his cast of witnesses on their ability to tell spellbinding stories. He apologised for his clay-footed pedantry as he exposed the implausibility of those stories and concluded by repeating the lesson that some of those present had clearly failed to learn in childhood – that we must never let our imaginations run away with us.

The jury was gone for no more time than it took to walk to their room, go through the formalities, take an initial vote and walk back. Maurice was found guilty and ordered to pay substantial damages and costs.

Crowds had gathered outside the courtroom. They shouted insults at Maurice and cheered when Hannah Dryden appeared on the steps with Skelton at her side. Skelton lurked in the shadows to allow Mrs Dryden her moment of triumph, but she took his hand and held it aloft, like a boxing referee declaring the winner. She called him ‘Her Latter-Day Galahad’, as if she’d been a damsel in distress and he her gallant saviour.

Then she took a step back and Skelton found himself – God knows what came over him – beaming and bowing like Gerald du Maurier on an opening night at Wyndham’s.

The papers had a field day with the ‘Latter-Day Galahad’ tag. The name Skelton was forgotten. He was ‘Every Gal’s Galahad’. He was the ‘The Knight in Shining Specs’. They did ‘profiles’ of him and turned the ‘facts’ of his life into ‘good copy’.

According to the *Herald*, he was a labourer's son, a slum kid from a back-to-back in Leeds. His mum had hated that. His dad was a foreman at Trevis and Nash, the chemical works. A foreman, not a labourer. Corlton Road was a respectable neighbourhood. Their house had a bit of front garden, a bay window and a tiled step.

The *Express* even went on about his limp – the result of his being born with a displaced hip – and tried to claim it was a war wound when in fact it had made him medically unfit for active service. He'd sent them a stiff letter about that, and they'd published an apology.

Most unsettling of all was the way in which the papers turned his life into a well-crafted story with a beginning, a middle and an end: as if his progress from grammar school to university to the Bar had been executed according to a prearranged plan. It never was. Nothing like it. It was as a series of lurches and accidents conducted in a fog of doubts and worries. He'd never once known what he was doing. Not properly. He'd gone from elementary to grammar. His teachers had gone to a lot of trouble to find him bursaries and scholarships so it would have been ungrateful not to go to Cambridge. He did law because it seemed real. His dad knew what it was. You didn't run into many philosophers or classicists on the Hunslet Road but there was a solicitor's office on Church Street. It never occurred to him that he could – or should – make a choice about these matters, and, even if it had, he wouldn't have had a clue how to go about making it. There was just doing what came next and being glad because it didn't involve sweat or grime.

He found himself wishing he had half the substance

and certainty that the Galahad chap in the paper had. He seemed, somehow, so much more authentic.

The woman standing next to him on the platform at Paddington Underground station was looking at him. Not wanting to be impolite, he smiled and nodded.

‘I know you, don’t I?’ she said.

‘Well, I’m glad one of us does.’

## CHAPTER TWO

‘I don’t know what the problem is,’ Edgar said. ‘It all adds to your prestige, your reputation. Reputation is exactly what you’re supposed to be building; it attracts a better quality of work and much higher fees.’

‘I just wish I could have earned it properly,’ Skelton said.

‘You did earn it properly.’

‘No, I didn’t. It was a squabble between a privileged woman and her vindictive ex-husband. I don’t think there’s much prestige going on there. I’m famous, that’s all. “Prestige” is what politicians and generals have. Asquith and Haig, they’ve got prestige. I’m just famous for a bit of fiddle-faddle, same as – I don’t know – Dolores del Rio.’

‘Dolores del Rio is very good,’ Edgar said. ‘Have you seen *Ramona*?’

‘I’m being serious.’

‘I bet she makes a great deal more money than either of them.’

‘I don’t care about money.’

‘Liar.’

Edgar was a dapper, barrel-chested man with a voice that had been compared to that of an outraged duchess. The voice, along with the clothes and the manners, had been carefully acquired and curated for he, like Skelton, was a bootstraps boy, in his case from Stepney. At thirteen, he’d been making a good living in juvenile crime. The police nabbed him, but he argued his case so coherently in court that the magistrate took a shine to him and fixed him up with an errand boy’s job at a chambers in Lincoln’s Inn. By the time he was eighteen, he was a junior clerk for a ‘local’ in Birmingham. He returned to London just after the war as a senior and became the *genius loci* of 8 Foxton Row, Skelton’s chambers: a calming presence smelling of new suits and pencil shavings.

He and Skelton sat on the easy chairs in chambers, one either side of the low table. Edgar was examining the morning’s *Daily Sketch*.

‘The resemblance to Dolores del Rio is actually quite striking.’ He held up the paper to show yet another awful picture. Skelton remembered it being taken. The photographer had poked the camera into his face and he, because it’s what you do when people poke cameras in your face, had grinned.

‘D’you think they’ve painted extra teeth in?’ Skelton asked.

‘There does seem an unnatural number of them.’

‘They’re not really that long, are they? It’s the angle.’

‘Anyway, you are already reaping the rewards.’

The lads, as well as the morning tea, had brought in two hefty document boxes.

‘Six cases from Birmingham alone.’

Edgar still had good contacts with Birmingham solicitors and had tipped them off that the Dryden case would thrust his chief into the limelight.

‘Three from William Allen, two from Simons and Tinniswood, and one from somebody I’ve never heard of. They all know your star is rising. They’re eager to secure your services before you become too important and too expensive. Although, having said that . . .’ With a flourish, Edgar lifted a thick file from one of the document boxes, ‘I give you . . . *The Matlock and Ripley Textile Bank versus The Imperial Bauxite Trading Company*. I’ve had a word with William Allen’s managing clerk, and he did not balk at the suggestion of a thousand guineas.’

The fee was five times Skelton’s previous best. Six months earlier, he’d got rid of his old Austin and bought a Wolseley 12-32 saloon for £425. At the time, it had felt like an unwarranted extravagance.

He untied the ribbons and turned the pages of *The Matlock and Ripley Textile Bank versus The Imperial Bauxite Trading Company* brief. The word ‘debentures’ seemed to crop up five or six times on every page. It made him think of false teeth. He’d never had a head for business law. The doubts began to clamour. Wouldn’t they be expecting somebody far better than him for their moneys? Was he worth that much?

‘The other big one is *Rex versus Dutton*,’ Edgar said.

‘Should I have heard of it?’ Skelton asked.

‘Mary Dutton, the Collingford Poisoner. The *Daily Herald* has been making a dreadful stink about it for the last week or so. Here . . .’

Edgar had shoved that morning’s *Herald* in the document box. He passed it over.

‘Defendant’s a woman in her thirties, Mary Dutton. Six children. Husband, Ted Dutton, ran a smallholding. Sheep mostly. Some chickens. Ted died, supposedly of gastroenteritis, at the end of last year. The funeral was interrupted, just before the body was interred, by two jolly policemen because allegations had been made that the man had been poisoned and thus the body must be removed for autopsy. The pathologist found substantial amounts of arsenic administered in small doses over a period, possibly of months. Police searched the house, found rat poison containing arsenic hidden in Mary Dutton’s pantry. She told the police, and various friends and neighbours have confirmed, that the husband regularly beat her and the children, and generally treated them with immeasurable cruelty. The coroner’s court found enough evidence of wilful murder to have Mary arrested and charged. So, means, motive and opportunity. Bang to rights. But the *Herald’s* convinced she’s innocent.’

‘On what grounds?’

‘Mostly, her photograph.’

The photograph was on the front page of the *Herald*.

‘She looks like Lillian Gish,’ Skelton said.

‘Doesn’t she just? Del Rio and Gish, together at last.’

‘Looking like a film star isn’t a line of defence that’s been tested in a court of law as yet, but I’ve no doubt it’d play well with a jury,’ Skelton said.

‘Of course it would. Lillian Gish could not commit murder. Marlene Dietrich, Gloria Swanson, Anna May Wong, on the other hand, any one of them could have poisoned a husband. Louise Brooks probably keeps a jar of strychnine in her handbag just on the off chance of waking up married.’

‘Where is Collingford?’

‘A small town that can’t make up its mind whether or not it’s a part of Birmingham.’

Skelton glanced at the *Herald*. The headline was as big as, if not bigger than, the ones they’d given to the Dryden case. It didn’t surprise him. Arsenic was the craze of the moment. A couple of months earlier, there had been reports of a midwife in Hungary who’d been selling arsenic-tainted jams and preserves to women who needed to get rid of husbands, lovers and overbearing male relatives. Thirty-eight corpses had so far emerged in an area about the size of Wiltshire.

This was followed by tales of an American beauty who travelled from town to town marrying in haste, taking out huge life insurance policies and administering bootleg liquor mixed with arsenic.

And now, at last, the British had an arsenic killer all of their own. And she looked like Lillian Gish.

‘Where did the police get the tip-off that he’d been poisoned?’

‘The woman who laid him out spotted keratoses on his hands and feet.’

‘Remind me.’

‘A sort of blackening of the hands you get with arsenic poisoning.’

‘Why hadn’t the doctor spotted this?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And the laying-out woman reported it to the police?’

‘Yes, but not until the day of the funeral.’

‘Why did she wait so long?’

‘I don’t know; perhaps she was shy.’

‘So, the police stopped the funeral, sent the body away for autopsy and arrested the wife as soon as they had the results.’

Edgar nodded.

‘No other suspects?’

‘The *Herald* claims that Mary Dutton was subjected to a thirteen-hour interrogation without food or water.’

‘Thirteen hours?’

‘I know. Inhuman. The difficulty is that the deceased’s late father was himself a policeman.’

‘On the local force?’

‘A much-loved inspector on the local force.’

‘When did he die?’

‘Two or three years ago. She killed their favourite boss’s son, so they weren’t inclined to be gentle. The *Herald* has compared them to Chicago cops – third degree, bright light in the eyes, lead-lined coshes. The *Mail* profoundly disagrees, of course, on the grounds that our boys in blue are the bravest and most scrupulous men who’ve ever drawn breath and would never mistreat a lady. The *Mail* and *Express* both think that the *Herald* should be charged with contempt for publishing details likely to prejudice a pending trial, but with both of them it’s sour grapes because the *Herald* gleaned the dirty details before they did.’

‘How dirty are the details?’

‘Nothing Marie Stopes or Havelock Ellis would be

interested in – except the husband once tied her to the bed and left her there all day.’

‘Why?’

‘He was afraid she’d run away. He also beat her with fists, sticks and kitchen utensils; made a pile of the children’s bedclothes, soaked them in petrol and set them on fire; and frequently threatened her with a razor and a hatchet.’

‘Love’s young dream.’

Skelton glanced at the brief, then wandered over to the window and saw Clarendon-Gow, Head of Chambers, turn into Foxton Row.

‘He’s always ever so nicely turned out, isn’t he?’ Skelton said.

Edgar joined him at the window.

‘Clarendon-Gow?’

‘Yes.’

‘He has a valet.’

‘Should I get a valet?’

‘Good ones are terribly hard to come by. I expect Mr Clarendon-Gow inherited his.’

‘Have you got a valet?’

‘I have a sponge, an electric iron and a knack for folding.’

‘You do your own ironing?’

‘If I trusted Mrs Westing with it, I’d look like a ragamuffin.’

Mrs Westing was Edgar’s landlady. He’d never married.

‘Mrs Bartram does mine. She’s not very skilled.’

‘I did wonder whether the rumpled look was how trousers were being worn these days.’

‘How many children did you say she has?’ Skelton asked.

‘The poison woman? Six.’

‘Terrorised by Dad, then Mum dragged off to prison. Was this before Christmas?’

‘She was arrested two days after Boxing Day.’

‘Doesn’t bear thinking about. Any evidence of adultery?’

‘None suspected or alleged. The husband, by all accounts, treated the wife so abominably because he was a brute. No other reason. The *Herald* is making an immense hoo-ha out of the failure of the law to deal with such acts of marital brutality, demanding sweeping and immediate changes. Do you know a man called Norman Bearcroft?’

‘No. Should I?’

‘He’s the local Labour Party candidate for Birmingham East, which includes Collingford. He’s taken up the cudgels in Mary Dutton’s defence.’

‘He’s convinced she’s innocent?’

‘He’s convinced the *Herald* thinks she’s innocent, and he knows a lot of his constituents read the *Herald*, and he knows there’s a general election coming up this year and the Tory incumbent has got a very slim majority. So, he’s started a defence fund to buy poor Mary Dutton the best legal representation available. Which obviously is you, the “Latter-Day Galahad”.’

‘Don’t ever say those words.’

‘It’s going to be a landmark case. Win it and we’ll have people queuing up in Foxton Row all desperate for Mr Skelton to take their brief, and every brief they beg you to take will be marked at a thousand guineas. Silk for you by the time you’re forty. The only drawback is that the whole thing’s a complete mare’s nest.’

‘The case?’

‘Yes.’

‘A complete mare’s nest?’

‘Yes.’

‘In what way?’

‘This is what will happen. Norman Bearcroft has persuaded hundreds of people to chip in sixpences and shillings to pay for the best legal representation money can buy. You’re it. You’ll do your best, of course, but there’s a formidable case to answer. Means, motive, opportunity all sewn up. And when Mary Dutton is found guilty, all those people who paid their sixpences and shillings, they’ll feel cheated. They’ll blame you. They’ll throw cabbages. All the prestige you earned on the Dryden case will go down the drain. It takes a long time to build a reputation. Terrible thing to squander it.’

‘And what if I win?’

Edgar pulled a face.

Skelton turned back to the front of the brief to read the name of the solicitor who had prepared it. ‘Critchlow and Benedict. Who are Critchlow and Benedict?’

‘No idea. I thought I knew all the Birmingham men. The address isn’t even in town. It’s in Yardley.’

‘Where’s Yardley?’

‘East Birmingham. I went there once. On a tram. There’s nothing wrong with it. Perfectly ordinary sort of place. But you wouldn’t want to be a solicitor there. Not if you had any spirit in you. People might pop in from time to time for a chat about voidable dispositions or the meaning of statutory trusts, but you’d never get near a juicy murder. The brief is absolutely useless. No indication at all of a possible line of defence.’

‘So why has Bearcroft hired him? Why not William Allen? Or even Aubrey Duncan.’ Aubrey Duncan was the top criminal solicitor in London. ‘Why Yardley?’

'I've no idea. As I said, the whole thing's a complete mare's nest and we should have nothing to do with it.'

Skelton filled his pipe and lit it. 'We're up Birmingham way next week, aren't we?'

'On Tuesday. The dog case.'

A wealthy Great Dane owner from Solihull was being sued by a Pekingese owner who claimed that the Great Dane had attacked and killed her Peke. She had hired Skelton to defend the dog. To make the case go away, Edgar had asked for two hundred and fifty guineas, got it and wished he'd asked for more.

'Do you think we could find time, while we're up there, to see Messrs Critchlow and Benedict?'

'If you're sure it's not a waste of time.'

'Just to look into it.'

'Oh dear,' Edgar said.

'What?'

'The look on your face.'

'What?'

'You've started caring again. You know what I said about caring.'