



The Dead Duke, His Secret Wife, and the Missing Corpse: An Extraordinary Edwardian Case of Deception and Intrigue

Piu Marie Eatwell

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One of the most notorious and bizarre mysteries of the Edwardian age, for readers who loved *The Suspicions of Mr. Whicher*.

In 1898, an elderly widow, Anna Maria Druce, came to the British court with an astonishing request. She stood among the overflowing pews of St. Pauls Cathedral claiming that the merchant T. C. Druce, her late father-in-law, had in truth been a secret identity for none other than the deceased and enormously wealthy 5th Duke of Portland. Maintaining her composure amid growing agitation from the clutch of lawyers, journalists, and curious onlookers crowded into the church, Mrs. Druce claimed that Druce had been the duke's alter ego and that the duke had, in 1864, faked the death of his middle-class doppelgänger when he grew tired of the ruse. Mrs. Druce wanted the tomb unlocked and her father-in-law's coffin exhumed, adamant that it would lie empty, proving the falsehood and leaving her son to inherit the vast Portland estate. From that fateful afternoon, the lurid details of the Druce-Portland case spilled forth, seizing the attention of the British public for over a decade.

As the Victoria era gave way to the Edwardian, the rise of sensationalist media blurred every fact into fiction, and family secrets and fluid identities pushed class anxieties to new heights. The 5th Duke of Portland had long been the victim of suspicion and scandalous rumors; an odd man with a fervent penchant for privacy, he lived his days in precisely coordinated isolation in the dilapidated Welbeck Abbey estate. He constructed elaborate underground passageways from one end of his home to the other and communicated with his household staff through letters. T.C. Druce was a similarly mysterious figure and had always remained startlingly evasive about his origins; on his arrival in London he claimed to have "sprung from the clouds."

Drawing from revelations hidden within the Druce family tomb in the chilly confines of Highgate Cemetery, Piu Marie Eatwell recounts one of the most drawn-out sagas of the era in penetrating, gripping detail. From each thwarted investigation and wicked attempt to conceal evidence to the parade of peculiar figures announcing themselves as the rightful heir, Eatwell paints a portentous portrait of England at the dawn of the Edwardian age.

Few tales?be they by Charles Dickens or Wilkie Collins, *The Importance of Being Earnest* or *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*?could surpass the bizarre and deliciously dark twists and turns of the Druce-Portland affair. A mesmerizing tour through the tangled hierarchies of Edwardian England, *The Dead Duke, His Secret Wife, and the Missing Corpse* illuminates the lies, deceit, and hypocrisy practiced by "genteel" society at the time?and their inevitably sordid consequences.

30 illustrations

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