

FLETCHER JOSEPH SMITH

DEAD MEN'S MONEY

Joseph Fletcher

Dead Men's Money

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J. S. Fletcher

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CHAPTER I

THE ONE-EYED MAN

The very beginning of this affair, which involved me, before I was aware of it, in as much villainy and wickedness as ever man heard of, was, of course, that spring evening, now ten years ago, whereon I looked out of my mother's front parlour window in the main street of Berwick-upon-Tweed and saw, standing right before the house, a man who had a black patch over his left eye, an old plaid thrown loosely round his shoulders, and in his right hand a stout stick and an old-fashioned carpet-bag. He caught sight of me as I caught sight of him, and he stirred, and made at once for our door. If I had possessed the power of seeing more than the obvious, I should have seen robbery, and murder, and the very devil himself coming in close attendance upon him as he crossed the pavement. But as it was, I saw nothing but a stranger, and I threw open the window and asked the man what he might be wanting.

"Lodgings!" he answered, jerking a thickly made thumb at a paper which my mother had that day set in the transom above the door. "Lodgings! You've lodgings to let for a single gentleman. I'm a single gentleman, and I want lodgings. For a month—maybe more. Money no object. Thorough respectability—on my part. Few needs and modest requirements. Not likely to give trouble. Open the door!"

I went into the passage and opened the door to him. He strode in without as much as a word, and, not waiting for my invitation, lurched heavily—he was a big, heavy-moving fellow—into the parlour, where he set down his bag, his plaid, and his stick, and dropping into an easy chair, gave a sort of groan as he looked at me.

"And what's your name?" he demanded, as if he had all the right in the world to walk into folks' houses and ask his questions. "Whatever it is, you're a likely-looking youngster!"

"My name's Hugh Moneylaws," I answered, thinking it no harm to humour him. "If you want to know about lodgings you must wait till my mother comes in. Just now she's away up the street—she'll be back presently."

"No hurry, my lad," he replied. "None whatever. This is a comfortable anchorage. Quiet. Your mother'll be a widow woman, now?"

"Yes," said I shortly.

"Any more of you—brothers and sisters?" he asked. "Any—aye, of course!—any young children in the house? Because young children is what I cannot abide—except at a distance."

"There's nobody but me and my mother, and a servant lass," I said. "This is a quiet enough house, if that's what you mean."

"Quiet is the word," said he. "Nice, quiet, respectable lodgings. In this town of Berwick. For a month. If not more. As I say, a comfortable anchorage. And time, too!—when you've seen as many queer places as I have in my day, young fellow, you'll know that peace and quiet is meat and drink to an ageing man."

It struck me as I looked at him that he was just the sort of man that you would expect to hear of as having been in queer places—a sort of gnarled and stubbly man, with a wealth of seams and wrinkles about his face and what could be seen of his neck, and much grizzled hair, and an eye—only one being visible—that looked as if it had been on the watch ever since he was born. He was

a fellow of evident great strength and stout muscle, and his hands, which he had clasped in front of him as he sat talking to me, were big enough to go round another man's throat, or to fell a bullock. And as for the rest of his appearance, he had gold rings in his ears, and he wore a great, heavy gold chain across his waistcoat, and was dressed in a new suit of blue serge, somewhat large for him, that he had evidently purchased at a ready-made-clothing shop, not so long before.

My mother came quietly in upon us before I could reply to the stranger's last remark, and I saw at once that he was a man of some politeness and manners, for he got himself up out of his chair and made her a sort of bow, in an old-fashioned way. And without waiting for me, he let his tongue loose on her.

"Servant, ma'am," said he. "You'll be the lady of the house—Mrs. Moneylaws. I'm seeking lodgings, Mrs. Moneylaws, and seeing your paper at the door-light, and your son's face at the window, I came in. Nice, quiet lodgings for a few weeks is what I'm wanting—a bit of plain cooking—no fal-lals. And as for money—no object! Charge me what you like, and I'll pay beforehand, any hand, whatever's convenient."

My mother, a shrewd little woman, who had had a good deal to do since my father died, smiled at the corners of her mouth as she looked the would-be lodger up and down.

"Why, sir," said she. "I like to know who I'm taking in. You're a stranger in the place, I'm thinking."

"Fifty years since I last clapped eyes on it, ma'am," he answered. "And I was then a youngster of no more than twelve years or so. But as to who and what I am—name of James Gilverthwaite. Late master of as good a ship as ever a man sailed. A quiet, respectable man. No swearer. No drinker—saving in reason and sobriety. And as I say—money no object, and cash down whenever it's wanted. Look here!"

He plunged one of the big hands into a trousers' pocket, and pulled it out again running over with gold. And opening his fingers he extended the gold-laden palm towards us. We were poor folk at that time, and it was a strange sight to us, all that money lying in the man's hand, and he apparently thinking no more of it than if it had been a heap of six-penny pieces.

"Help yourself to whatever'll pay you for a month," he exclaimed. "And don't be afraid—there's a lot more where that came from."

But my mother laughed, and motioned him to put up his money.

"Nay, nay, sir!" said she. "There's no need. And all I'm asking at you is just to know who it is I'm taking in. You'll be having business in the town for a while?"

"Not business in the ordinary sense, ma'am," he answered. "But there's kin of mine lying in more than one graveyard just by, and it's a fancy of my own to take a look at their resting-places, d'ye see, and to wander round the old quarters where they lived. And while I'm doing that, it's a quiet, and respectable, and a comfortable lodging I'm wanting."

I could see that the sentiment in his speech touched my mother, who was fond of visiting graveyards herself, and she turned to Mr. James Gilverthwaite with a nod of acquiescence.

"Well, now, what might you be wanting in the way of accommodation?" she asked, and she began to tell him that he could have that parlour in which they were talking, and the bedchamber immediately above it. I left them arranging their affairs, and went into another room to attend to some of my own, and after a while my mother came there to me. "I've let him the rooms, Hugh," she said, with a note of satisfaction in her voice which told me that the big man was going to pay well for them. "He's a great bear of a man to look at," she went on, "but he seems quiet and civil-spoken. And here's a ticket for a chest of his that he's left up at the railway station, and as he's tired, maybe you'll get somebody yourself to fetch it down for him?"

I went out to a man who lived close by and had a light cart, and sent him up to the station with the ticket for the chest; he was back with it before long, and I had to help him carry it up to Mr. Gilverthwaite's room. And never had I felt or seen a chest like that before, nor had the man who had

fetched it, either. It was made of some very hard and dark wood, and clamped at all the corners with brass, and underneath it there were a couple of bars of iron, and though it was no more than two and a half feet square, it took us all our time to lift it. And when, under Mr. Gilverthwaite's orders, we set it down on a stout stand at the side of his bed, there it remained until—but to say until when would be anticipating.

Now that he was established in our house, the new lodger proved himself all that he had said. He was a quiet, respectable, sober sort of man, giving no trouble and paying down his money without question or murmur every Saturday morning at his breakfast-time. All his days were passed in pretty much the same fashion. After breakfast he would go out—you might see him on the pier, or on the old town walls, or taking a walk across the Border Bridge; now and then we heard of his longer excursions into the country, one side or other of the Tweed. He took his dinner in the evenings, having made a special arrangement with my mother to that effect, and a very hearty eater he was, and fond of good things, which he provided generously for himself; and when that episode of the day's events was over, he would spend an hour or two over the newspapers, of which he was a great reader, in company with his cigar and his glass. And I'll say for him that from first to last he never put anything out, and was always civil and polite, and there was never a Saturday that he did not give the servant-maid a half-crown to buy herself a present.

All the same—we said it to ourselves afterwards, though not at the time—there was an atmosphere of mystery about Mr. Gilverthwaite. He made no acquaintance in the town. He was never seen in even brief conversation with any of the men that hung about the pier, on the walls, or by the shipping. He never visited the inns, nor brought anybody in to drink and smoke with him. And until the last days of his lodging with us he never received a letter.

A letter and the end of things came all at once. His stay had lengthened beyond the month he had first spoken of. It was in the seventh week of his coming that he came home to his dinner one June evening, complaining to my mother of having got a great wetting in a sudden storm that had come on that afternoon while he was away out in the country, and next morning he was in bed with a bad pain in his chest, and not over well able to talk. My mother kept him in his bed and began to doctor him; that day, about noon, came for him the first and only letter he ever had while he was with us—a letter that came in a registered envelope. The servant-maid took it up to him when it was delivered, and she said later that he started a bit when he saw it. But he said nothing about it to my mother during that afternoon, nor indeed to me, specifically, when, later on, he sent for me to go up to his room. All the same, having heard of what he had got, I felt sure that it was because of it that, when I went in to him, he beckoned me first to close the door on us and then to come close to his side as he lay propped on his pillow.

"Private, my lad!" he whispered hoarsely. "There's a word I have for you in private!"

CHAPTER II

THE MIDNIGHT MISSION

Before he said a word more, I knew that Mr. Gilverthwaite was very ill—much worse, I fancied, than my mother had any notion of. It was evidently hard work for him to get his breath, and the veins in his temples and forehead swelled out, big and black, with the effort of talking. He motioned to me to hand him a bottle of some stuff which he had sent for from the chemist, and he took a swig of its contents from the bottle neck before he spoke again. Then he pointed to a chair at the bed-head, close to his pillow.

"My lungs!" he said, a bit more easily. "Mortal bad! Queer thing, a great man like me, but I was always delicate in that way, ever since I was a nipper—strong as a bull in all else. But this word is private. Look here, you're a lawyer's clerk?"

He had known that, of course, for some time—known that I was clerk to a solicitor of the town, and hoping to get my articles, and in due course become a solicitor myself. So there was no need for me to do more than nod in silence.

"And being so," he went on, "you'll be a good hand at keeping a secret very well. Can you keep one for me, now?"

He had put out one of his big hands as he spoke, and had gripped my wrist with it—ill as he was, the grip of his fingers was like steel, and yet I could see that he had no idea that he was doing more than laying his hand on me with the appeal of a sick man.

"It depends what it is, Mr. Gilverthwaite," I answered. "I should like to do anything I can for you."

"You wouldn't do it for nothing," he put in sharply. "I'll make it well worth your while. See here!"

He took his hand away from my wrist, put it under his pillow, and drew out a bank-note, which he unfolded before me.

"Ten pound!" he said. "It's yours, if you'll do a bit of a job for me—in private. Ten pound'll be useful to you. What do you say, now?"

"That it depends on what it is," said I. "I'd be as glad of ten pounds as anybody, but I must know first what I'm expected to do for it."

"It's an easy enough thing to do," he replied. "Only it's got to be done this very night, and I'm laid here, and can't do it. You can do it, without danger, and at little trouble—only—it must be done private."

"You want me to do something that nobody's to know about?" I asked.

"Precisely!" said he. "Nobody! Not even your mother—for even the best of women have tongues."

I hesitated a little—something warned me that there was more in all this than I saw or understood at the moment.

"I'll promise this, Mr. Gilverthwaite," I said presently. "If you'll tell me now what it is you want, I'll keep that a dead secret from anybody for ever. Whether I'll do it or not'll depend on the nature of your communication."

"Well spoken, lad!" he answered, with a feeble laugh. "You've the makings of a good lawyer, anyway. Well, now, it's this—do you know this neighbourhood well?"

"I've never known any other," said I.

"Do you know where Till meets Tweed?" he asked.

"As well as I know my own mother's door!" I answered.

"You know where that old—what do they call it?—chapel, cell, something of that nature, is?" he asked again.

"Aye!—well enough, Mr. Gilverthwaite," I answered him. "Ever since I was in breeches!"

"Well," said he, "if I was my own man, I ought to meet another man near there this very night. And—here I am!"

"You want me to meet this other man?" I asked.

"I'm offering you ten pound if you will," he answered, with a quick look.

"Aye, that is what I'm wanting!"

"To do—what?" I inquired.

"Simple enough," he said. "Nothing to do but to meet him, to give him a word that'll establish what they term your bony fides, and a message from me that I'll have you learn by heart before you go. No more!"

"There's no danger in it?" I asked.

"Not a spice of danger!" he asserted. "Not half as much as you'd find in serving a writ."

"You seem inclined to pay very handsomely for it, all the same," I remarked, still feeling a bit suspicious.

"And for a simple reason," he retorted. "I must have some one to do the job—aye, if it costs twenty pound! Somebody must meet this friend o' mine, and tonight—and why shouldn't you have ten pound as well as another?"

"There's nothing to do but what you say?" I asked.

"Nothing—not a thing!" he affirmed.

"And the time?" I said. "And the word—for surety?"

"Eleven o'clock is the time," he answered. "Eleven—an hour before midnight. And as for the word—get you to the place and wait about a bit, and if you see nobody there, say out loud, 'From James Gilverthwaite as is sick and can't come himself'; and when the man appears, as he will, say—aye!—say 'Panama,' my lad, and he'll understand in a jiffy!"

"Eleven o'clock—Panama," said I. "And—the message?"

"Aye!" he answered, "the message. Just this, then: 'James Gilverthwaite is laid by for a day or two, and you'll bide quiet in the place you know of till you hear from him.' That's all. And—how will you get out there, now?—it's a goodish way."

"I have a bicycle," I answered, and at his question a thought struck me. "How did you intend to get out there yourself, Mr. Gilverthwaite?" I asked. "That far—and at that time of night?"

"Aye!" he said. "Just so—but I'd ha' done it easy enough, my lad—if I hadn't been laid here. I'd ha' gone out by the last train to the nighest station, and it being summer I'd ha' shifted for myself somehow during the rest of the night—I'm used to night work. But—that's neither here nor there. You'll go? And—private?"

"I'll go—and privately," I answered him. "Make yourself easy."

"And not a word to your mother?" he asked anxiously.

"Just so," I replied. "Leave it to me."

He looked vastly relieved at that, and after assuring him that I had the message by heart I left his chamber and went downstairs. After all, it was no great task that he had put on me. I had often stayed until very late at the office, where I had the privilege of reading law-books at nights, and it was an easy business to mention to my mother that I wouldn't be in that night so very early. That part of my contract with the sick man upstairs I could keep well enough, in letter and spirit—all the same, I was not going out along Tweed-side at that hour of the night without some safeguard, and though I would tell no one of what my business for Mr. Gilverthwaite precisely amounted to, I would tell one person where it would take me, in case anything untoward happened and I had to be looked for. That person was the proper one for a lad to go to under the circumstances—my sweetheart, Maisie Dunlop.

And here I'll take you into confidence and say that at that time Maisie and I had been sweethearting a good two years, and were as certain of each other as if the two had been twelve. I doubt if there was such another old-fashioned couple as we were anywhere else in the British Islands, for already we were as much bound up in each other as if we had been married half a lifetime, and there was not an affair of mine that I did not tell her of, nor had she a secret that she did not share with me. But then, to be sure, we had been neighbours all our lives, for her father, Andrew Dunlop, kept a grocer's shop not fifty yards from our house, and she and I had been playmates ever since our school-days, and had fallen to sober and serious love as soon as we arrived at what we at any rate called years of discretion—which means that I was nineteen, and she seventeen, when we first spoke definitely about getting married. And two years had gone by since then, and one reason why I had no objection to earning Mr. Gilverthwaite's ten pounds was that Maisie and I meant to wed as soon as my salary was lifted to three pounds a week, as it soon was to be, and we were saving money for our furnishing—and ten pounds, of course, would be a nice help.

So presently I went along the street to Dunlop's and called Maisie out, and we went down to the walls by the river mouth, which was a regular evening performance of ours. And in a quiet corner, where there was a seat on which we often sat whispering together of our future, I told her that I had to do a piece of business for our lodger that night and that the precise nature of it was a secret which I must not let out even to her.

"But here's this much in it, Maisie," I went on, taking care that there was no one near us that could catch a word of what I was saying; "I can tell you where the spot is that I'm to do the business at, for a fine lonely spot it is to be in at the time of night I'm to be there—an hour before midnight, and the place is that old ruin that's close by where Till meets Tweed—you know it well enough yourself."

I felt her shiver a bit at that, and I knew what it was that was in her mind, for Maisie was a girl of imagination, and the mention of a lonely place like that, to be visited at such an hour, set it working.

"Yon's a queer man, that lodger of your mother's, Hughie," she said. "And it's a strange time and place you're talking of. I hope nothing'll come to you in the way of mischance."

"Oh, it's nothing, nothing at all!" I hastened to say. "If you knew it all, you'd see it's a very ordinary business that this man can't do himself, being kept to his bed. But all the same, there's naught like taking precautions beforehand, and so I'll tell you what we'll do. I should be back in town soon after twelve, and I'll give a tap at your window as I pass it, and then you'll know all's right."

That would be an easy enough thing to manage, for Maisie's room, where she slept with a younger sister, was on the ground floor of her father's house in a wing that butted on to the street, and I could knock at the pane as I passed by. Yet still she seemed uneasy, and I hastened to say what—not even then knowing her quite as well as I did later—I thought would comfort her in any fears she had. "It's a very easy job, Maisie," I said; "and the ten pounds'll go a long way in buying that furniture we're always talking about."

She started worse than before when I said that and gripped the hand that I had round her waist.

"Hughie!" she exclaimed. "He'll not be giving you ten pounds for a bit of a ride like that! Oh, now I'm sure there's danger in it! What would a man be paying ten pounds for to anybody just to take a message? Don't go, Hughie! What do you know of yon man except that he's a stranger that never speaks to a soul in the place, and wanders about like he was spying things? And I would liefer go without chair or table, pot or pan, than that you should be running risks in a lonesome place like that, and at that time, with nobody near if you should be needing help. Don't go!"

"You're misunderstanding," said I. "It's a plain and easy thing—I've nothing to do but ride there and back. And as for the ten pounds, it's just this way: yon Mr. Gilverthwaite has more money than he knows what to do with. He carries sovereigns in his pockets like they were sixpenny pieces! Ten pounds is no more to him than ten pennies to us. And we've had the man in our house seven weeks now, and there's nobody could say an ill word of him."

"It's not so much him," she answered. "It's what you may meet—there!"

For you've got to meet—somebody. You're going, then?"

"I've given my word, Maisie," I said. "And you'll see there'll be no harm, and I'll give you a tap at the window as I pass your house coming back. And we'll do grand things with that ten pounds, too."

"I'll never close my eyes till I hear you, then," she replied. "And I'll not be satisfied with any tap, neither. If you give one, I'll draw the blind an inch, and make sure it's yourself, Hughie."

We settled it at that, with a kiss that was meant on my part to be one of reassurance, and presently we parted, and I went off to get my bicycle in readiness for the ride.

CHAPTER III

THE RED STAIN

It was just half-past nine by the town clocks when I rode out across the old Border Bridge and turned up the first climb of the road that runs alongside the railway in the direction of Tillmouth Park, which was, of course, my first objective. A hot, close night it was—there had been thunder hanging about all day, and folk had expected it to break at any minute, but up to this it had not come, and the air was thick and oppressive. I was running with sweat before I had ridden two miles along the road, and my head ached with the heaviness of the air, that seemed to press on me till I was like to be stifled. Under ordinary circumstances nothing would have taken me out on such a night. But the circumstances were not ordinary, for it was the first time I had ever had the chance of earning ten pounds by doing what appeared to be a very simple errand; and though I was well enough inclined to be neighbourly to Mr. Gilverthwaite, it was certainly his money that was my chief inducement in going on his business at a time when all decent folk should be in their beds. And for this first part of my journey my thoughts ran on that money, and on what Maisie and I would do with it when it was safely in my pocket. We had already bought the beginnings of our furnishing, and had them stored in an unused warehouse at the back of her father's premises; with Mr. Gilverthwaite's bank-note, lying there snugly in waiting for me, we should be able to make considerable additions to our stock, and the wedding-day would come nearer.

But from these anticipations I presently began to think about the undertaking on which I was now fairly engaged. When I came to consider it, it seemed a queer affair. As I understood it, it amounted to this:—Here was Mr. Gilverthwaite, a man that was a stranger in Berwick, and who appeared to have plenty of money and no business, suddenly getting a letter which asked him to meet a man, near midnight, and in about as lonely a spot as you could select out of the whole district. Why at such a place, and at such an hour? And why was this meeting of so much importance that Mr. Gilverthwaite, being unable to keep the appointment himself, must pay as much as ten pounds to another person to keep it for him? What I had said to Maisie about Mr. Gilverthwaite having so much money that ten pounds was no more to him than ten pence to me was, of course, all nonsense, said just to quieten her fears and suspicions—I knew well enough, having seen a bit of the world in a solicitor's office for the past six years, that even millionaires don't throw their money about as if pounds were empty peascods. No! Mr. Gilverthwaite was giving me that money because he thought that I, as a lawyer's clerk, would see the thing in its right light as a secret and an important business, and hold my tongue about it. And see it as a secret business I did—for what else could it be that would make two men meet near an old ruin at midnight, when in a town where, at any rate, one of them was a stranger, and the other probably just as much so, they could have met by broad day at a more convenient trysting-place without anybody having the least concern in their doings? There was strange and subtle mystery in all this, and the thinking and pondering it over led me before long to wondering about its first natural consequence—who and what was the man I was now on my way to meet, and where on earth could he be coming from to keep a tryst at a place like that, and at that hour?

However, before I had covered three parts of that outward journey, I was to meet another man who, all unknown to me, was to come into this truly extraordinary series of events in which I, with no will of my own, was just beginning—all unawares—to be mixed up. Taking it roughly, and as the crow flies, it is a distance of some nine or ten miles from Berwick town to Twizel Bridge on the Till, whereat I was to turn off from the main road and take another, a by-lane, that would lead me down by the old ruin, close by which Till and Tweed meet. Hot as the night was, and unpleasant for riding,

I had plenty and to spare of time in hand, and when I came to the cross-ways between Norham and Grindon, I got off my machine and sat down on the bank at the roadside to rest a bit before going further. It was a quiet and a very lonely spot that; for three miles or more I had not met a soul along the road, and there being next to nothing in the way of village or farmstead between me and Cornhill, I did not expect to meet one in the next stages of my journey. But as I sat there on the bank, under a thick hedge, my bicycle lying at my side, I heard steps coming along the road in the gloom—swift, sure steps, as of a man who walks fast, and puts his feet firmly down as with determination to get somewhere as soon as he may. And hearing that—and to this day I have often wondered what made me do it—I off with my cap, and laid it over the bicycle-lamp, and myself sat as still as any of the wee creatures that were doubtless lying behind me in the hedge.

The steps came from the direction in which I was bound. There was a bit of a dip in the road just there: they came steadily, strongly, up it. And presently—for this was the height of June, when the nights are never really dark—the figure of a man came over the ridge of the dip, and showed itself plain against a piece of grey sky that was framed by the fingers of the pines and firs on either side of the way. A strongly-built figure it was, and, as I said before, the man put his feet, evidently well shod, firmly and swiftly down, and with this alternate sound came the steady and equally swift tapping of an iron-shod stick. Whoever this night-traveller was, it was certain he was making his way somewhere without losing any time in the business.

The man came close by me and my cover, seeing nothing, and at a few yards' distance stopped dead. I knew why. He had come to the cross-roads, and it was evident from his movements that he was puzzled and uncertain. He went to the corners of each way: it seemed to me that he was seeking for a guide-post. But, as I knew very well, there was no guide-post at any corner, and presently he came to the middle of the roads again and stood, looking this way and that, as if still in a dubious mood. And then I heard a crackling and rustling as of stiff paper—he was never more than a dozen yards from me all the time,—and in another minute there was a spurt up of bluish flame, and I saw that the man had turned on the light of an electric pocket-torch and was shining it on a map which he had unfolded and shaken out, and was holding in his right hand.

At this point I profited by a lesson which had been dinned into my ears a good many times since boyhood. Andrew Dunlop, Maisie's father, was one of those men who are uncommonly fond of lecturing young folk in season and out of season. He would get a lot of us, boys and girls, together in his parlour at such times as he was not behind the counter and give us admonitions on what he called the practical things of life. And one of his favourite precepts—especially addressed to us boys—was "Cultivate your powers of observation." This advice fitted in very well with the affairs of the career I had mapped out for myself—a solicitor should naturally be an observant man, and I had made steady effort to do as Andrew Dunlop counselled. Therefore it was with a keenly observant eye that I, all unseen, watched the man with his electric torch and his map, and it did not escape my notice that the hand which held the map was short of the two middle fingers. But of the rest of him, except that he was a tallish, well-made man, dressed in—as far as I could see things—a gentlemanlike fashion in grey tweeds, I could see nothing. I never caught one glimpse of his face, for all the time that he stood there it was in shadow.

He did not stay there long either. The light of the electric torch was suddenly switched off; I heard the crackling of the map again as he folded it up and pocketed it. And just as suddenly he was once more on the move, taking the by-way up to the north, which, as I knew well, led to Norham, and—if he was going far—over the Tweed to Ladykirk. He went away at the same quick pace; but the surface in that by-way was not as hard and ringing as that of the main road, and before long the sound of his steps died away into silence, and the hot, oppressive night became as still as ever.

I presently mounted my bicycle again and rode forward on my last stage, and having crossed Twizel Bridge, turned down the lane to the old ruin close by where Till runs into Tweed. It was now as dark as ever it would be that night, and the thunderclouds which hung all over the valley

deepened the gloom. Gloomy and dark the spot indeed was where I was to meet the man of whom Mr. Gilverthwaite had spoken. By the light of my bicycle lamp I saw that it was just turned eleven when I reached the spot; but so far as I could judge there was no man there to meet anybody. And remembering what I had been bidden to do, I spoke out loud.

"From James Gilverthwaite, who is sick, and can't come himself," I repeated. And then, getting no immediate response, I spoke the password in just as loud a voice. But there was no response to that either, and for the instant I thought how ridiculous it was to stand there and say Panama to nobody.

I made it out that the man had not yet come, and I was wheeling my bicycle to the side of the lane, there to place it against the hedge and to sit down myself, when the glancing light of the lamp fell on a great red stain that had spread itself, and was still spreading, over the sandy ground in front of me. And I knew on the instant that this was the stain of blood, and I do not think I was surprised when, advancing a step or two further, I saw, lying in the roadside grass at my feet, the still figure and white face of a man who, I knew with a sure and certain instinct, was not only dead but had been cruelly murdered.

CHAPTER IV

THE MURDERED MAN

There may be folk in the world to whom the finding of a dead man, lying grim and stark by the roadside, with the blood freshly run from it and making ugly patches of crimson on the grass and the gravel, would be an ordinary thing; but to me that had never seen blood let in violence, except in such matters as a bout of fisticuffs at school, it was the biggest thing that had ever happened, and I stood staring down at the white face as if I should never look at anything else as long as I lived. I remember all about that scene and that moment as freshly now as if the affair had happened last night. The dead man lying in the crushed grass—his arms thrown out helplessly on either side of him—the gloom of the trees all around—the murmuring of the waters, where Till was pouring its sluggish flood into the more active swirl and rush of the Tweed—the hot, oppressive air of the night—and the blood on the dry road—all that was what, at Mr. Gilverthwaite's bidding, I had ridden out from Berwick to find in that lonely spot.

But I knew, of course, that James Gilverthwaite himself had not foreseen this affair, nor thought that I should find a murdered man. And as I at last drew breath, and lifted myself up a little from staring at the corpse, a great many thoughts rushed into my head, and began to tumble about over each other. Was this the man Mr. Gilverthwaite meant me to meet? Would Mr. Gilverthwaite have been murdered, too, if he had come there in person? And had the man been murdered for the sake of robbery? But I answered that last question as soon as I asked it, and in the negative, for the light of my lamp showed a fine, heavy gold watch-chain festooned across the man's waistcoat—if murderously inclined thieves had been at him, they were not like to have left that. Then I wondered if I had disturbed the murderers—it was fixed in me from the beginning that there must have been more than one in at this dreadful game—and if they were still lurking about and watching me from the brushwood; and I made an effort, and bent down and touched one of the nerveless hands. It was stiffened already, and I knew then that the man had been dead some time.

And I knew another thing in that moment: poor Maisie, lying awake to listen for the tap at her window, so that she might get up and peep round the corner of her blind to assure herself that her Hughie was alive and safe, would have to lie quaking and speculating through the dark hours of that night, for here was work that was going to keep me busied till day broke. I set to it there and then, leaving the man just as I had found him, and hastening back in the direction of the main road. As luck would have it, I heard voices of men on Twizel Bridge, and ran right on the local police-sergeant and a constable, who had met there in the course of their night rounds. I knew them both, the sergeant being one Chisholm, and the constable a man named Turndale, and they knew me well enough from having seen me in the court at Berwick; and it was with open-mouthed surprise that they listened to what I had to tell them. Presently we were all three round the dead man, and this time there was the light of three lamps on his face and on the gouts of blood that were all about him, and Chisholm clicked his tongue sharply at what he saw.

"Here's a sore sight for honest folk!" he said in a low voice, as he bent down and touched one of the hands. "Aye, and he's been dead a good hour, I should say, by the feel of him! You heard nothing as you came down yon lane, Mr. Hugh?"

"Not a sound!" I answered.

"And saw nothing?" he questioned.

"Nothing and nobody!" I said.

"Well," said he, "we'll have to get him away from this. You'll have to get help," he went on, turning to the constable. "Fetch some men to help us carry him. He'll have to be taken to the nearest inn for the inquest—that's how the law is. I wasn't going to ask it while yon man was about, Mr. Hugh," he continued, when Turndale had gone hurrying towards the village; "but you'll not mind me asking it now—what were you doing here yourself, at this hour?"

"You've a good right, Chisholm," said I; "and I'll tell you, for by all I can see, there'll be no way of keeping it back, and it's no concern of mine to keep it back, and I don't care who knows all about it—not me! The truth is, we've a lodger at our house, one Mr. James Gilverthwaite, that's a mysterious sort of man, and he's at present in his bed with a chill or something that's like to keep him there; and tonight he got me to ride out here to meet a man whom he ought to have met himself—and that's why I'm here and all that I have to do with it."

"You don't mean to say that—that!" he exclaimed, jerking his thumb at the dead man; "that—that's the man you were to meet?"

"Who else?" said I. "Can you think of any other that it would be? And I'm wondering if whoever killed this fellow, whoever he may be, wouldn't have killed Mr. Gilverthwaite, too, if he'd come? This is no by-chance murder, Chisholm, as you'll be finding out."

"Well, well, I never knew its like!" he remarked, staring from me to the body, and from it to me. "You saw nobody about close by—nor in the neighbourhood—no strangers on the road?"

I was ready for that question. Ever since finding the body, I had been wondering what I should say when authority, either in the shape of a coroner or a policeman, asked me about my own adventures that night. To be sure, I had seen a stranger, and I had observed that he had lost a couple of fingers, the first and second, of his right hand; and it was certainly a queer thing that he should be in that immediate neighbourhood about the time when this unfortunate man met his death. But it had been borne in on my mind pretty strongly that the man I had seen looking at his map was some gentleman-tourist who was walking the district, and had as like as not been tramping it over Plodden Field and that historic corner of the country, and had become benighted ere he could reach wherever his headquarters were. And I was not going to bring suspicion on what was in all probability an innocent stranger, so I answered Chisholm's question as I meant to answer any similar one—unless, indeed, I had reason to alter my mind.

"I saw nobody and heard nothing—about here," said I. "It's not likely there'd be strangers in this spot at midnight."

"For that matter, the poor fellow is a stranger himself," said he, once more turning his lamp on the dead face. "Anyway, he's not known to me, and I've been in these parts twenty years. And altogether it's a fine mystery you've hit on, Mr. Hugh, and there'll be strange doings before we're at the bottom of it, I'm thinking."

That there was mystery in this affair was surer than ever when, having got the man to the nearest inn, and brought more help, including a doctor, they began to examine him and his clothing. And now that I saw him in a stronger light, I found that he was a strongly built, well-made man of about Mr. Gilverthwaite's age—say, just over sixty years or so,—dressed in a gentlemanlike fashion, and wearing good boots and linen and a tweed suit of the sort affected by tourists. There was a good deal of money in his pockets—bank-notes, gold, and silver—and an expensive watch and chain, and other such things that a gentleman would carry; and it seemed very evident that robbery had not been the motive of the murderers. But of papers that could identify the man there was nothing—in the shape of paper or its like there was not one scrap in all the clothing, except the return half of a railway ticket between Peebles and Coldstream, and a bit of a torn bill-head giving the name and address of a tradesman in Dundee.

"There's something to go on, anyway," remarked Chisholm, as he carefully put these things aside after pointing out to us that the ticket was dated on what was now the previous day (for it was already well past midnight, and the time was creeping on to morning), and that the dead man

must accordingly have come to Coldstream not many hours before his death; "and we'll likely find something about him from either Dundee or Peebles. But I'm inclined to think, Mr. Hugh," he continued, drawing me aside, "that even though they didn't rob the man of his money and valuables, they took something else from him that may have been of much more value than either."

"What?" I asked.

"Papers!" said he. "Look at the general appearance of the man! He's no common or ordinary sort. Is it likely, now, such a man would be without letters and that sort of thing in his pockets? Like as not he'd carry his pocket-book, and it may have been this pocket-book with what was in it they were after, and not troubling about his purse at all."

"They made sure of him, anyway," said I, and went out of the room where they had laid the body, not caring to stay longer. For I had heard what the doctor said—that the man had been killed on the spot by a single blow from a knife or dagger which had been thrust into his heart from behind with tremendous force, and the thought of it was sickening me. "What are you going to do now?" I asked of Chisholm, who had followed me. "And do you want me any more, sergeant?—for, if not, I'm anxious to get back to Berwick."

"That's just where I'm coming with you," he answered. "I've my bicycle close by, and we'll ride into the town together at once. For, do you see, Mr. Hugh, there's just one man hereabouts that can give us some light on this affair straightaway—if he will—and that the lodger you were telling me of. And I must get in and see the superintendent, and we must get speech with this Mr. Gilverthwaite of yours—for, if he knows no more, he'll know who yon man is!"

I made no answer to that. I had no certain answer to make. I was already wondering about a lot of conjectures. Would Mr. Gilverthwaite know who the man was? Was he the man I ought to have met? Or had that man been there, witnessed the murder, and gone away, frightened to stop where the murder had been done? Or—yet again—was this some man who had come upon Mr. Gilverthwaite's correspondent, and, for some reason, been murdered by him? It was, however, all beyond me just then, and presently the sergeant and I were on our machines and making for Berwick. But we had not been set out half an hour, and were only just where we could see the town's lights before us in the night, when two folk came riding bicycles through the mist that lay thick in a dip of the road, and, calling to me, let me know that they were Maisie Dunlop and her brother Tom that she had made to come with her, and in another minute Maisie and I were whispering together.

"It's all right now that I know you're safe, Hugh," she said breathlessly. "But you must get back with me quickly. Yon lodger of yours is dead, and your mother in a fine way, wondering where you are!"

CHAPTER V

THE BRASS-BOUND CHEST

The police-sergeant had got off his bicycle at the same time that I jumped from mine, and he was close behind me when Maisie and I met, and I heard him give a sharp whistle at her news. And as for me, I was dumbfounded, for though I had seen well enough that Mr. Gilverthwaite was very ill when I left him, I was certainly a long way from thinking him like to die. Indeed, I was so astonished that all I could do was to stand staring at Maisie in the grey light which was just coming between the midnight and the morning. But the sergeant found his tongue more readily.

"I suppose he died in his bed, miss?" he asked softly. "Mr. Hugh here said he was ill; it would be a turn for the worse, no doubt, after Mr. Hugh left him?"

"He died suddenly just after eleven o'clock," answered Maisie; "and your mother sought you at Mr. Lindsey's office, Hugh, and when she found you weren't there, she came down to our house, and I had to tell her that you'd come out this way on an errand for Mr. Gilverthwaite. And I told her, too, what I wasn't so sure of myself, that there'd no harm come to you of it, and that you'd be back soon after twelve, and I went down to your house and waited with her; and when you didn't come, and didn't come, why, I got Tom here to get our bicycles out and we came to seek you. And let's be getting back, for your mother's anxious about you, and the man's death has upset her—he went all at once, she said, while she was with him."

We all got on our bicycles again and set off homewards, and Chisholm wheeled alongside me and we dropped behind a little.

"This is a strange affair," said he, in a low voice; "and it's like to be made stranger by this man's sudden death. I'd been looking to him to get news of this other man. What do you know of Mr. Gilverthwaite, now?"

"Nothing!" said I.

"But he's lodged with you seven weeks?" said he.

"If you'd known him, sergeant," I answered, "you'd know that he was this sort of man—you'd know no more of him at the end of seven months than you would at the end of seven weeks, and no more at the end of seven years than at the end of seven months. We knew nothing, my mother and I, except that he was a decent, well-spoken man, free with his money and having plenty of it, and that his name was what he called it, and that he said he'd been a master mariner. But who he was, or where he came from, I know no more than you do."

"Well, he'll have papers, letters, something or other that'll throw some light on matters, no doubt?" he suggested. "Can you say as to that?"

"I can tell you that he's got a chest in his chamber that's nigh as heavy as if it were made of solid lead," I answered. "And doubtless he'll have a key on him or about him that'll unlock it. But what might be in it, I can't say, never having seen him open it at any time."

"Well," he said, "I'll have to bring the superintendent down, and we must trouble your mother to let us take a look at this Mr. Gilverthwaite's effects. Had he a doctor to him since he was taken ill?"

"Dr. Watson—this—I mean yesterday—afternoon," I answered.

"Then there'll be no inquest in his case," said the sergeant, "for the doctor'll be able to certify. But there'll be a searching inquiry in this murder affair, and as Gilverthwaite sent you to meet the man that's been murdered—"

"Wait a bit!" said I. "You don't know, and I don't, that the man who's been murdered is the man I was sent to meet. The man I was to meet may have been the murderer; you don't know who

the murdered man is. So you'd better put it this way: since Gilverthwaite sent me to meet some man at the place where this murder's been committed—well?"

"That'll be one of your lawyer's quibbles," said he calmly. "My meaning's plain enough—we'll want to find out, if we can, who it was that Gilverthwaite sent you to meet. And—for what reason? And—where it was that the man was to wait for him? And I'll get the superintendent to come down presently."

"Make it in, say, half an hour," said I. "This is a queer business altogether, sergeant, and I'm so much in it that I'm not going to do things on my own responsibility. I'll call Mr. Lindsey up from his bed, and get him to come down to talk over what's to be done."

"Aye, you're in the right of it there," he said. "Mr. Lindsey'll know all the law on such matters. Half an hour or so, then."

He made off to the county police-station, and Maisie and Tom and I went on to our house, and were presently inside. My mother was so relieved at the sight of me that she forbore to scold me at that time for going off on such an errand without telling her of my business; but she grew white as her cap when I told her of what I had chanced on, and she glanced at the stair and shook her head.

"And indeed I wish that poor man had never come here, if it's this sort of dreadfulness follows him!" she said. "And though I was slow to say it, Hugh, I always had a feeling of mystery about him. However, he's gone now—and died that suddenly and quietly!—and we've laid him out in his bed; and—and—what's to be done now?" she exclaimed. "We don't know who he is!"

"Don't trouble yourself, mother," said I. "You've done your duty by him. And now that you've seen I'm safe, I'm away to bring Mr. Lindsey down and he'll tell us all that should be done."

I left Maisie and Tom Dunlop keeping my mother company and made haste to Mr. Lindsey's house, and after a little trouble roused him out of his bed and got him down to me. It was nearly daylight by that time, and the grey morning was breaking over the sea and the river as he and I walked back through the empty streets—I telling him of all the events of the night, and he listening with an occasional word of surprise. He was not a native of our parts, but a Yorkshireman that had bought a practice in the town some years before, and had gained a great character for shrewdness and ability, and I knew that he was the very man to turn to in an affair of this sort.

"There's a lot more in this than's on the surface, Hugh, my lad," he remarked when I had made an end of my tale. "And it'll be a nice job to find out all the meaning of it, and if the man that's been murdered was the man Gilverthwaite sent you to meet, or if he's some other that got there before you, and was got rid of for some extraordinary reason that we know nothing about. But one thing's certain: we've got to get some light on your late lodger. That's step number one—and a most important one."

The superintendent of police, Mr. Murray, a big, bustling man, was outside our house with Chisholm when we got there, and after a word or two between us, we went in, and were presently upstairs in Gilverthwaite's room. He lay there in his bed, the sheet drawn about him and a napkin over his face; and though the police took a look at him, I kept away, being too much upset by the doings of the night to stand any more just then. What I was anxious about was to get some inkling of what all this meant, and I waited impatiently to see what Mr. Lindsey would do. He was looking about the room, and when the others turned away from the dead man he pointed to Gilverthwaite's clothes, that were laid tidily folded on a chair.

"The first thing to do is to search for his papers and his keys," he said. "Go carefully through his pockets, sergeant, and let's see what there is."

But there was as little in the way of papers there, as there had been in the case of the murdered man. There were no letters. There was a map of the district, and under the names of several of the villages and places on either side of the Tweed, between Berwick and Kelso, heavy marks in blue pencil had been made. I, who knew something of Gilverthwaite's habits, took it that these were the places he had visited during his seven weeks' stay with us. And folded in the map were scraps of newspaper cuttings, every one of them about some antiquity or other in the neighbourhood, as if such

things had an interest for him. And in another pocket was a guide-book, much thumbed, and between two of the leaves, slipped as if to mark a place, was a registered envelope.

"That'll be what he got yesterday afternoon!" I exclaimed. "I'm certain it was whatever there was in it that made him send me out last night, and maybe the letter in it'll tell us something."

However, there was no letter in the envelope—there was nothing. But on the envelope itself was a postmark, at which Chisholm instantly pointed.

"Peebles!" said he. "Yon man that you found murdered—his half-ticket's for Peebles. There's something of a clue, anyway."

They went on searching the clothing, only to find money—plenty of it, notes in an old pocket-book, and gold in a wash-leather bag—and the man's watch and chain, and his pocket-knife and the like, and a bunch of keys. And with the keys in his hand Mr. Lindsey turned to the chest.

"If we're going to find anything that'll throw any light on the question of this man's identity, it'll be in this box," he said. "I'll take the responsibility of opening it, in Mrs. Moneylaws' interest, anyway. Lift it on to that table, and let's see if one of these keys'll fit the lock."

There was no difficulty about finding the key—there were but a few on the bunch, and he hit on the right one straightaway, and we all crowded round him as he threw back the heavy lid. There was a curious aromatic smell came from within, a sort of mingling of cedar and camphor and spices—a smell that made you think of foreign parts and queer, far-off places. And it was indeed a strange collection of things and objects that Mr. Lindsey took out of the chest and set down on the table. There was an old cigar-box, tied about with twine, full to the brim with money—over two thousand pounds in bank-notes and gold, as we found on counting it up later on,—and there were others filled with cigars, and yet others in which the man had packed all manner of curiosities such as three of us at any rate had never seen in our lives before. But Mr. Lindsey, who was something of a curiosity collector himself, nodded his head at the sight of some of them.

"Wherever else this man may have been in his roving life," he said, "here's one thing certain—he's spent a lot of time in Mexico and Central America. And—what was the name he told you to use as a password once you met his man, Hugh—wasn't it Panama?"

"Panama!" I answered. "Just that—Panama."

"Well, and he's picked up lots of these things in those parts—Panama, Nicaragua, Mexico," he said. "And very interesting matters they are. But—you see, superintendent?—there's not a paper nor anything in this chest to tell us who this man is, nor where he came from when he came here, nor where his relations are to be found, if he has any. There's literally nothing whatever of that sort."

The police officials nodded in silence.

"And so—there's where things are," concluded Mr. Lindsey. "You've two dead men on your hands, and you know nothing whatever about either of them!"

CHAPTER VI

MR. JOHN PHILLIPS

He began to put back the various boxes and parcels into the chest as he spoke, and we all looked at each other as men might look who, taking a way unknown to them, come up against a blank wall. But Chisholm, who was a sharp fellow, with a good headpiece on him, suddenly spoke.

"There's the fact that the murdered man sent that letter from Peebles," said he, "and that he himself appears to have travelled from Peebles but yesterday. We might be hearing something of him at Peebles, and from what we might hear, there or elsewhere, we might get some connection between the two of them."

"You're right in all that, sergeant," said Mr. Lindsey, "and it's to Peebles some of you'll have to go. For the thing's plain—that man has been murdered by somebody, and the first way to get at the somebody is to find out who the murdered man is, and why he came into these parts. As for him," he continued, pointing significantly to the bed, "his secret—whatever it is—has gone with him. And our question now is, Can we get at it in any other way?"

We had more talk downstairs, and it was settled that Chisholm and I should go on to Peebles by the first train that morning, find out what we could there, and work back to the Cornhill station, where, according to the half-ticket which had been found on him, the murdered man appeared to have come on the evening of his death. Meanwhile, Murray would have the scene of the murder thoroughly and strictly searched—the daylight might reveal things which we had not been able to discover by the light of the lamps.

"And there's another thing you can do," suggested Lindsey. "That scrap of a bill-head with a name and address in Dundee on it, that you found on him, you might wire there and see if anything is known of the man. Any bit of information you can get in that way—"

"You're forgetting, Mr. Lindsey, that we don't know any name by which we can call the man," objected Chisholm. "We'll have to find a name for him before we can wire to Dundee or anywhere else. But if we can trace a name to him in Peebles—"

"Aye, that'll be the way of it," said Murray. "Let's be getting all the information we can during the day, and I'll settle with the coroner's officer for the inquest at yon inn where you've taken him—it can't be held before tomorrow morning. Mr. Lindsey," he went on, "what are you going to do as regards this man that's lying dead upstairs? Mrs. Moneylaws says the doctor had been twice with him, and'll be able to give a certificate, so there'll be no inquest about him; but what's to be done about his friends and relations? It's likely there'll be somebody, somewhere. And—all that money on him and in his chest?"

Mr. Lindsey shook his head and smiled.

"If you think all this'll be done in hole-and-corner fashion, superintendent," he said, "you're not the wise man I take you for. Lord bless you, man, the news'll be all over the country within forty-eight hours! If this Gilverthwaite has folk of his own, they'll be here fast as crows hurry to a new-sown field! Let the news of it once out, and you'll wish that such men as newspaper reporters had never been born. You can't keep these things quiet; and if we're going to get to the bottom of all this, then publicity's the very thing that's needed."

All this was said in the presence of my mother, who, being by nature as quiet a body as ever lived, was by no means pleased to know that her house was, as it were, to be made a centre of attraction. And when Mr. Lindsey and the police had gone away, and she began getting some breakfast ready for me before my going to meet Chisholm at the station, she set on to bewail our misfortune in

ever taking Gilverthwaite into the house, and so getting mixed up with such awful things as murder. She should have had references with the man, she said, before taking him in, and so have known who she was dealing with. And nothing that either I or Maisie—who was still there, staying to be of help, Tom Dunlop having gone home to tell his father the great news—could say would drive out of her head the idea that Gilverthwaite, somehow or other, had something to do with the killing of the strange man. And, womanlike, and not being over-amenable to reason, she saw no cause for a great fuss about the affair in her own house, at any rate. The man was dead, she said, and let them get him put decently away, and hold his money till somebody came forward to claim it—all quietly and without the pieces in the paper that Mr. Lindsey talked about.

"And how are we to let people know anything about him if there isn't news in the papers?" I asked. "It's only that way that we can let his relatives know he's dead, mother. You're forgetting that we don't even know where the man's from!"

"Maybe I've a better idea of where he was from, when he came here, than any lawyer-folk or police-folk either, my man!" she retorted, giving me and Maisie a sharp look. "I've eyes in my head, anyway, and it doesn't take me long to see a thing that's put plain before them."

"Well?" said I, seeing quick enough that she'd some notion in her mind.

"You've found something out?"

Without answering the question in words she went out of the kitchen and up the stairs, and presently came back to us, carrying in one hand a man's collar and in the other Gilverthwaite's blue serge jacket. And she turned the inside of the collar to us, pointing her finger to some words stamped in black on the linen.

"Take heed of that!" she said. "He'd a dozen of those collars, brand-new, when he came, and this, you see, is where he bought them; and where he bought them, there, too, he bought his ready-made suit of clothes—that was brand-new as well,—here's the name on a tab inside the coat: Brown Brothers, Gentlemen's Outfitters, Exchange Street, Liverpool. What does all that prove but that it was from Liverpool he came?"

"Aye!" I said. "And it proves, too, that he was wanting an outfit when he came to Liverpool from—where? A long way further afield, I'm thinking! But it's something to know as much as that, and you've no doubt hit on a clue that might be useful, mother. And if we can find out that the other man came from Liverpool, too, why then—"

But I stopped short there, having a sudden vision of a very wide world of which Liverpool was but an outlet. Where had Gilverthwaite last come from when he struck Liverpool, and set himself up with new clothes and linen? And had this mysterious man who had met such a terrible fate come also from some far-off part, to join him in whatever it was that had brought Gilverthwaite to Berwick? And—a far more important thing,—mysterious as these two men were, what about the equally mysterious man that was somewhere in the background—the murderer?

Chisholm and I had no great difficulty—indeed, we had nothing that you might call a difficulty—in finding out something about the murdered man at Peebles. We had the half-ticket with us, and we soon got hold of the booking-clerk who had issued it on the previous afternoon. He remembered the looks of the man to whom he had sold it, and described him to us well enough. Moreover, he found us a ticket-collector who remembered that same man arriving in Peebles two days before, and giving up a ticket from Glasgow. He had a reason for remembering him, for the man had asked him to recommend him to a good hotel, and had given him a two-shilling piece for his trouble. So far, then, we had plain sailing, and it continued plain and easy during the short time we stayed in Peebles. And it came to this: the man we were asking about came to the town early in the afternoon of the day before the murder; he put himself up at the best hotel in the place; he was in and out of it all the afternoon and evening; he stayed there until the middle of the afternoon of the next day, when he paid his bill and left. And there was the name he had written in the register book—Mr. John Phillips, Glasgow.

Chisholm drew me out of the hotel where we had heard all this and pulled the scrap of bill-head from his pocket-book.

"Now that we've got the name to go on," said he, "we'll send a wire to this address in Dundee asking if anything's known there of Mr. John Phillips. And we'll have the reply sent to Berwick—it'll be waiting us when we get back this morning."

The name and address in Dundee was of one Gavin Smeaton, Agent, 131A Bank Street. And the question which Chisholm sent him over the wire was plain and direct enough: Could he give the Berwick police any information about a man named John Phillips, found dead, on whose body Mr. Smeaton's name and address had been discovered?

"We may get something out of that," said Chisholm, as we left the post-office, "and we may get nothing. And now that we do know that this man left here for Coldstream, let's get back there, and go on with our tracing of his movements last night."

But when we had got back to our own district we were quickly at a dead loss. The folk at Cornhill station remembered the man well enough. He had arrived there about half-past eight the previous evening. He had been seen to go down the road to the bridge which leads over the Tweed to Coldstream. We could not find out that he had asked the way of anybody—he appeared to have just walked that way as if he were well acquainted with the place. But we got news of him at an inn just across the bridge. Such a man—a gentleman, the inn folk called him—had walked in there, asked for a glass of whisky, lingered for a few minutes while he drank it, and had gone out again. And from that point we lost all trace of him. We were now, of course, within a few miles of the place where the man had been murdered, and the people on both sides of the river were all in a high state of excitement about it; but we could learn nothing more. From the moment of the man's leaving the inn on the Coldstream side of the bridge, nobody seemed to have seen him until I myself found his body.

There was another back-set for us when we reached Berwick—in the reply from Dundee. It was brief and decisive enough. "Have no knowledge whatever of any person named John Phillips—Gavin Smeaton." So, for the moment, there was nothing to be gained from that quarter.

Mr. Lindsey and I were at the inn where the body had been taken, and where the inquest was to be held, early next morning, in company with the police, and amidst a crowd that had gathered from all parts of the country. As we hung about, waiting the coroner's arrival, a gentleman rode up on a fine bay horse—a good-looking elderly man, whose coming attracted much attention. He dismounted and came towards the inn door, and as he drew the glove off his right hand I saw that the first and second fingers of that hand were missing. Here, without doubt, was the man whom I had seen at the cross-roads just before my discovery of the murder!

CHAPTER VII

THE INQUEST ON JOHN PHILLIPS

Several of the notabilities of the neighbourhood had ridden or driven to the inn, attracted, of course, by curiosity, and the man with the maimed hand immediately joined them as they stood talking apart from the rest of us. Now, I knew all such people of our parts well enough by sight, but I did not know this man, who certainly belonged to their class, and I turned to Mr. Lindsey, asking him who was this gentleman that had just ridden up. He glanced at me with evident surprise at my question.

"What?" said he. "You don't know him? That's the man there's been so much talk about lately—Sir Gilbert Carstairs of Hathercleugh House, the new successor to the old baronetcy."

I knew at once what he meant. Between Norham and Berwick, overlooking the Tweed, and on the English side of the river, stood an ancient, picturesque, romantic old place, half-mansion, half-castle, set in its own grounds, and shut off from the rest of the world by high walls and groves of pine and fir, which had belonged for many a generation to the old family of Carstairs. Its last proprietor, Sir Alexander Carstairs, sixth baronet, had been a good deal of a recluse, and I never remember seeing him but once, when I caught sight of him driving in the town—a very, very old man who looked like what he really was, a hermit. He had been a widower for many long years, and though he had three children, it was little company that he seemed to have ever got out of them, for his elder son, Mr. Michael Carstairs, had long since gone away to foreign parts, and had died there; his younger son, Mr. Gilbert, was, it was understood, a doctor in London, and never came near the old place; and his one daughter, Mrs. Ralston, though she lived within ten miles of her father, was not on good terms with him. It was said that the old gentleman was queer and eccentric, and hard to please or manage; however that may be, it is certain that he lived a lonely life till he was well over eighty years of age. And he had died suddenly, not so very long before James Gilverthwaite came to lodge with us; and Mr. Michael being dead, unmarried, and therefore without family, the title and estate had passed to Mr. Gilbert, who had recently come down to Hathercleugh House and taken possession, bringing with him—though he himself was getting on in years, being certainly over fifty—a beautiful young wife whom, they said, he had recently married, and was, according to various accounts which had crept out, a very wealthy woman in her own right.

So here was Sir Gilbert Carstairs, seventh baronet, before me, chatting away to some of the other gentlemen of the neighbourhood, and there was not a doubt in my mind that he was the man whom I had seen on the road the night of the murder. I was close enough to him now to look more particularly at his hand, and I saw that the two first fingers had completely disappeared, and that the rest of it was no more than a claw. It was not likely there could be two men in our neighbourhood thus disfigured. Moreover, the general build of the man, the tweed suit of grey that he was wearing, the attitude in which he stood, all convinced me that this was the person I had seen at the cross-roads, holding his electric torch to the face of his map. And I made up my mind there and then to say nothing in my evidence about that meeting, for I had no reason to connect such a great gentleman as Sir Gilbert Carstairs with the murder, and it seemed to me that his presence at those cross-roads was easily enough explained. He was a big, athletic man and was likely fond of a walk, and had been taking one that evening, and, not as yet being over-familiar with the neighbourhood—having lived so long away from it,—had got somewhat out of his way in returning home. No, I would say nothing. I had been brought up to have a firm belief in the old proverb which tells you that the least said is soonest mended. We were all packed pretty tightly in the big room of the inn when the coroner

opened his inquiry. And at the very onset of the proceedings he made a remark which was expected by all of us that knew how these things are done and are likely to go. We could not do much that day; there would have to be an adjournment, after taking what he might call the surface evidence. He understood, he remarked, with a significant glance at the police officials and at one or two solicitors that were there, that there was some extraordinary mystery at the back of this matter, and that a good many things would have to be brought to light before the jury could get even an idea as to who it was that had killed the man whose body had been found, and as to the reason for his murder. And all they could do that day, he went on, was to hear such evidence—not much—as had already been collected, and then to adjourn.

Mr. Lindsey had said to me as we drove along to the inn that I should find myself the principal witness, and that Gilverthwaite would come into the matter more prominently than anybody fancied. And this, of course, was soon made evident. What there was to tell of the dead man, up to that time, was little. There was the medical evidence that he had been stabbed to death by a blow from a very formidable knife or dagger, which had been driven into his heart from behind. There was the evidence which Chisholm and I had collected in Peebles and at Cornhill station, and at the inn across the Coldstream Bridge. There was the telegram which had been sent by Mr. Gavin Smeaton—whoever he might be—from Dundee. And that was about all, and it came to this: that here was a man who, in registering at a Peebles hotel, called himself John Phillips and wrote down that he came from Glasgow, where, up to that moment, the police had failed to trace anything relating to such a person; and this man had travelled to Cornhill station from Peebles, been seen in an adjacent inn, had then disappeared, and had been found, about two hours later, murdered in a lonely place.

"And the question comes to this," observed the coroner, "what was this man doing at that place, and who was he likely to meet there? We have some evidence on that point, and," he added, with one shrewd glance at the legal folk in front of him and another at the jurymen at his side, "I think you'll find, gentlemen of the jury, that it's just enough to whet your appetite for more."

They had kept my evidence to the last, and if there had been a good deal of suppressed excitement in the crowded room while Chisholm and the doctor and the landlord of the inn on the other side of Coldstream Bridge gave their testimonies, there was much more when I got up to tell my tale, and to answer any questions that anybody liked to put to me. Mine, of course, was a straight enough story, told in a few sentences, and I did not see what great amount of questioning could arise out of it. But whether it was that he fancied I was keeping something back, or that he wanted, even at that initial stage of the proceedings, to make matters as plain as possible, a solicitor that was representing the county police began to ask me questions.

"There was no one else with you in the room when this man Gilverthwaite gave you his orders?" he asked.

"No one," I answered.

"And you've told me everything that he said to you?"

"As near as I can recollect it, every word."

"He didn't describe the man you were to meet?"

"He didn't—in any way."

"Nor tell you his name?"

"Nor tell me his name."

"So that you'd no idea whatever as to who it was that you were to meet, nor for what purpose he was coming to meet Gilverthwaite, if Gilverthwaite had been able to meet him?"

"I'd no idea," said I. "I knew nothing but that I was to meet a man and give him a message."

He seemed to consider matters a little, keeping silence, and then he went off on another tack.

"What do you know of the movements of this man Gilverthwaite while he was lodging with your mother?" he asked.

"Next to nothing," I replied.

"But how much?" he inquired. "You'd know something."

"Of my own knowledge, next to nothing," I repeated. "I've seen him in the streets, and on the pier, and taking his walks on the walls and over the Border Bridge; and I've heard him say that he'd been out in the country."

And that's all."

"Was he always alone?" he asked.

"I never saw him with anybody, never heard of his talking to anybody, nor of his going to see a soul in the place," I answered; "and first and last, he never brought any one into our house, nor had anybody asked at the door for him."

"And with the exception of that registered letter we've heard of, he never had a letter delivered to him all the time he lodged with you?" he said.

"Not one," said I. "From first to last, not one."

He was silent again for a time, and all the folk staring at him and me; and for the life of me I could not think what other questions he could get out of his brain to throw at me. But he found one, and put it with a sharp cast of his eye.

"Now, did this man ever give you, while he was in your house, any reason at all for his coming to Berwick?" he asked.

"Yes," I answered; "he did that when he came asking for lodgings. He said he had folk of his own buried in the neighbourhood, and he was minded to take a look at their graves and at the old places where they'd lived."

"Giving you, in fact, an impression that he was either a native of these parts, or had lived here at some time, or had kindred that had?" he asked.

"Just that," I replied.

"Did he tell you the names of such folk, or where they were buried, or anything of that sort?" he suggested.

"No—never," said I. "He never mentioned the matter again."

"And you don't know that he ever went to any particular place to look at any particular grave or house?" he inquired.

"No," I replied; "but we knew that he took his walks into the country on both sides Tweed."

He hesitated a bit, looked at me and back at his papers, and then, with a glance at the coroner, sat down. And the coroner, nodding at him as if there was some understanding between them, turned to the jury.

"It may seem without the scope of this inquiry, gentlemen," he said, "but the presence of this man Gilverthwaite in the neighbourhood has evidently so much to do with the death of the other man, whom we know as John Phillips, that we must not neglect any pertinent evidence. There is a gentleman present that can tell us something. Call the Reverend Septimus Ridley."

CHAPTER VIII

THE PARISH REGISTERS

I had noticed the Reverend Mr. Ridley sitting in the room with some other gentlemen of the neighbourhood, and had wondered what had brought him, a clergyman, there. I knew him well enough by sight. He was a vicar of a lonely parish away up in the hills—a tall, thin, student-looking man that you might occasionally see in the Berwick streets, walking very fast with his eyes on the ground, as if, as the youngsters say, he was seeking sixpences; and I should not have thought him likely to be attracted to an affair of that sort by mere curiosity. And, whatever he might be in his pulpit, he looked very nervous and shy as he stood up between the coroner and the jury to give his evidence.

"Whatever are we going to hear now?" whispered Mr. Lindsey in my ear. "Didn't I tell you there'd be revelations about Gilverthwaite, Hugh, my lad? Well, there's something coming out! But what can this parson know?"

As it soon appeared, Mr. Ridley knew a good deal. After a bit of preliminary questioning, making things right in the proper legal fashion as to who he was, and so on, the coroner put a plain inquiry to him. "Mr. Ridley, you have had some recent dealings with this man James Gilverthwaite, who has just been mentioned in connection with this inquiry?" he asked.

"Some dealings recently—yes," answered the clergyman.

"Just tell us, in your own way, what they were," said the coroner. "And, of course, when they took place."

"Gilverthwaite," said Mr. Ridley, "came to me, at my vicarage, about a month or five weeks ago. I had previously seen him about the church and churchyard. He told me he was interested in parish registers, and in antiquities generally, and asked if he could see our registers, offering to pay whatever fee was charged. I allowed him to look at the registers, but I soon discovered that his interest was confined to a particular period. The fact was, he wished to examine the various entries made between 1870 and 1880. That became very plain; but as he did not express his wish in so many words, I humoured him. Still, as I was with him during the whole of the time he was looking at the books, I saw what it was that he examined."

Here Mr. Ridley paused, glancing at the coroner.

"That is really about all that I can tell," he said. "He only came to me on that one occasion."

"Perhaps I can get a little more out of you, Mr. Ridley," remarked the coroner with a smile. "A question or two, now. What particular registers did this man examine? Births, deaths, marriages—which?"

"All three, between the dates I have mentioned—1870 to 1880," replied Mr. Ridley.

"Did you think that he was searching for some particular entry?"

"I certainly did think so."

"Did he seem to find it?" asked the coroner, with a shrewd glance.

"If he did find such an entry," replied Mr. Ridley slowly, "he gave no sign of it; he did not copy or make a note of it, and he did not ask any copy of it from me. My impression—whatever it is worth—is that he did not find what he wanted in our registers. I am all the more convinced of that because—"

Here Mr. Ridley paused, as if uncertain whether to proceed or not; but at an encouraging nod from the coroner he went on.

"I was merely going to say—and I don't suppose it is evidence—" he added, "that I understand this man visited several of my brother clergymen in the neighbourhood on the same errand. It was talked of at the last meeting of our rural deanery."

"Ah!" remarked the coroner significantly. "He appears, then, to have been going round examining the parish registers—we must get more evidence of that later, for I'm convinced it has a bearing on the subject of this present inquiry. But a question or two more, Mr. Ridley. There are stipulated fees for searching the registers, I believe. Did Gilverthwaite pay them in your case?"

Mr. Ridley smiled.

"He not only paid the fees," he answered, "but he forced me to accept something for the poor box. He struck me as being a man who was inclined to be free with his money."

The coroner looked at the solicitor who was representing the police.

"I don't know if you want to ask this witness any questions?" he inquired.

"Yes," said the solicitor. He turned to Mr. Ridley. "You heard what the witness Hugh Moneylaws said?—that Gilverthwaite mentioned on his coming to Berwick that he had kinsfolk buried in the neighbourhood? You did? Well, Mr. Ridley, do you know if there are people of that name buried in your churchyard?"

"There are not," replied Mr. Ridley promptly. "What is more, the name Gilverthwaite does not occur in our parish registers. I have a complete index of the registers from 1580, when they began to be kept, and there is no such name in it. I can also tell you this," he added, "I am, I think I may say, something of an authority on the parish registers of this district—I have prepared and edited several of them for publication, and I am familiar with most of them. I do not think that name, Gilverthwaite, occurs in any of them."

"What do you deduce from that, now?" asked the solicitor.

"That whatever it was that the man was searching for—and I am sure he was searching—it was not for particulars of his father's family," answered Mr. Ridley. "That is, of course, if his name really was what he gave it out to be—Gilverthwaite."

"Precisely!" said the coroner. "It may have been an assumed name."

"The man may have been searching for particulars of his mother's family," remarked the solicitor.

"That line of thought would carry us too far afield just now," said the coroner. He turned to the jury. "I've allowed this evidence about the man Gilverthwaite, gentlemen," he said, "because it's very evident that Gilverthwaite came to this neighbourhood for some special purpose and wanted to get some particular information; and it's more than probable that the man into the circumstances of whose death we're inquiring was concerned with him in his purpose. But we cannot go any further today," he concluded, "and I shall adjourn the inquiry for a fortnight, when, no doubt, there'll be more evidence to put before you."

I think that the folk who had crowded into that room, all agog to hear whatever could be told, went out of it more puzzled than when they came in. They split up into groups outside the inn, and began to discuss matters amongst themselves. And presently two sharp-looking young fellows, whom I had seen taking notes at the end of the big table whereat the coroner and the officials sat, came up to me, and telling me that they were reporters, specially sent over, one from Edinburgh, the other from Newcastle, begged me to give them a faithful and detailed account of my doings and experiences on the night of the murder—there was already vast interest in this affair all over the country, they affirmed, and whatever I could or would tell them would make splendid reading and be printed in big type in their journals. But Mr. Lindsey, who was close by, seized my arm and steered me away from these persistent seekers after copy.

"Not just now, my lads!" said he good-humouredly. "You've got plenty enough to go on with—you've heard plenty in there this morning to keep your readers going for a bit. Not a word, Hugh! And

as for you, gentlemen, if you want to do something towards clearing up this mystery, and assisting justice, there's something you can do—and nobody can do it better."

"What's that?" asked one of them eagerly.

"Ask through your columns for the relations, friends, acquaintances, anybody who knows them or ought about them, of these two men, James Gilverthwaite and John Phillips," replied Mr. Lindsey. "Noise it abroad as much as you like and can! If they've folk belonging to them, let them come forward. For," he went on, giving them a knowing look, "there's a bigger mystery in this affair than any one of us has any conception of, and the more we can find out the sooner it'll be solved. And I'll say this to you young fellows: the press can do more than the police. There's a hint for you!"

Then he led me off, and we got into the trap in which he and I had driven out from Berwick, and as soon as we had started homeward he fell into a brown study and continued in it until we were in sight of the town.

"Hugh, my lad!" he suddenly exclaimed, at last starting out of his reverie. "I'd give a good deal if I could see daylight in this affair! I've had two-and-twenty years' experience of the law, and I've known some queer matters, and some dark matters, and some ugly matters in my time; but hang me if I ever knew one that promises to be as ugly and as dark and as queer as this does—that's a fact!"

"You're thinking it's all that, Mr. Lindsey?" I asked, knowing him as I did to be an uncommonly sharp man.

"I'm thinking there's more than meets the eye," he answered. "Bloody murder we know there is—maybe there'll be more, or maybe there has been more already. What was that deep old fish Gilverthwaite after? What took place between Phillips's walking out of that inn at Coldstream Bridge and your finding of his body? Who met Phillips? Who did him to his death? And what were the two of 'em after in this corner of the country? Black mystery, my lad, on all hands!"

I made no answer just then. I was thinking, wondering if I should tell him about my meeting with Sir Gilbert Carstairs at the cross-roads. Mr. Lindsey was just the man you could and would tell anything to, and it would maybe have been best if I had told him of that matter there and then. But there's a curious run of caution and reserve in our family. I got it from both father and mother, and deepened it on my own account, and I could not bring myself to be incriminating and suspicioning a man whose presence so near the place of the murder might be innocent enough. So I held my tongue.

"I wonder will all the stuff in the newspapers bring any one forward?" he said, presently. "It ought to!—if there is anybody."

Nothing, however, was heard by the police or by ourselves for the next three or four days; and then—I think it was the fourth day after the inquest—I looked up from my desk in Mr. Lindsey's outer office one afternoon to see Maisie Dunlop coming in at the door, followed by an elderly woman, poorly but respectably dressed, a stranger.

"Hugh," said Maisie, coming up to my side, "your mother asked me to bring this woman up to see Mr. Lindsey. She's just come in from the south, and she says she's yon James Gilverthwaite's sister."

CHAPTER IX

THE MARINE-STORE DEALER

Mr. Lindsey was standing just within his own room when Maisie and the strange woman came into the office, and hearing what was said, he called us all three to go into him. And, like myself, he looked at the woman with a good deal of curiosity, wanting—as I did—to see some likeness to the dead man. But there was no likeness to be seen, for whereas Gilverthwaite was a big and stalwart fellow, this was a small and spare woman, whose rusty black clothes made her look thinner and more meagre than she really was. All the same, when she spoke I knew there was a likeness between them, for her speech was like his, different altogether from ours of the Border.

"So you believe you're the sister of this man James Gilverthwaite, ma'am?" began Mr. Lindsey, motioning the visitor to sit down, and beckoning Maisie to stop with us. "What might your name be, now?"

"I believe this man that's talked about in the newspapers is my brother, sir," answered the woman. "Else I shouldn't have taken the trouble to come all this way. My name's Hanson—Mrs. Hanson. I come from Garston, near Liverpool."

"Aye—just so—a Lancashire woman," said Mr. Lindsey, nodding. "Your name would be Gilverthwaite, then, before you were married?"

"To be sure, sir—same as James's," she replied. "Him and me was the only two there was. I've brought papers with me that'll prove what I say. I went to a lawyer before ever I came, and he told me to come at once, and to bring my marriage lines, and a copy of James's birth certificate, and one or two other things of that sort. There's no doubt that this man we've read about in the newspapers was my brother, and of course I would like to put in my claim to what he's left—if he's left it to nobody else."

"Just so," agreed Mr. Lindsey. "Aye—and how long is it since you last saw your brother, now?"

The woman shook her head as if this question presented difficulties.

"I couldn't rightly say to a year or two, no, not even to a few years," she answered. "And to the best of my belief, sir, it'll be a good thirty years, at the least. It was just after I was married to Hanson, and that was when I was about three-and-twenty, and I was fifty-six last birthday. James came—once—to see me and Hanson soon after we was settled down, and I've never set eyes on him from that day to this. But—I should know him now."

"He was buried yesterday," remarked Mr. Lindsey. "It's a pity you didn't telegraph to some of us."

"The lawyer I went to, sir, said, 'Go yourself!'" replied Mrs. Hanson.

"So I set off—first thing this morning."

"Let me have a look at those papers," said Mr. Lindsey.

He motioned me to his side, and together we looked through two or three documents which the woman produced.

The most important was a certified copy of James Gilverthwaite's birth certificate, which went to prove that this man had been born in Liverpool about sixty-two years previously; that, as Mr. Lindsey was quick to point out, fitted in with what Gilverthwaite had told my mother and myself about his age.

"Well," he said, turning to Mrs. Hanson, "you can answer some questions, no doubt, about your brother, and about matters in relation to him. First of all, do you know if any of your folks hailed from this part?"

"Not that I ever heard of, sir," she replied. "No, I'm sure they wouldn't. They were all Lancashire folks, on both sides. I know all about them as far back as my great-grandfather's and great-grandmother's."

"Do you know if your brother ever came to Berwick as a lad?" asked Mr.

Lindsey, with a glance at me.

"He might ha' done that, sir," said Mrs. Hanson. "He was a great, masterful, strong lad, and he'd run off to sea by the time he was ten years old—there'd been no doing aught with him for a couple of years before that. I knew that when he was about twelve or thirteen he was on a coasting steamer that used to go in and out of Sunderland and Newcastle, and he might have put in here."

"To be sure," said Mr. Lindsey. "But what's more important is to get on to his later history. You say you've never seen him for thirty years, or more? But have you never heard of him?"

She nodded her head with decision at that question.

"Yes," she replied, "I have heard of him—just once. There was a man, a neighbour of ours, came home from Central America, maybe five years ago, and he told us he'd seen our James out there, and that he was working as a sub-contractor, or something of that sort, on that Panama Canal there was so much talk about in them days."

Mr. Lindsey and I looked at each other. Panama!—that was the password which James Gilverthwaite had given me. So—here, at any rate, was something, however little, that had the makings of a clue in it.

"Aye!" he said, "Panama, now? He was there? And that's the last you ever heard?"

"That's the very last we ever heard, sir," she answered. "Till, of course, we saw these pieces in the papers this last day or two."

Mr. Lindsey twisted round on her with a sharp look.

"Do you know aught of that man, John Phillips, whose name's in the papers too?" he asked.

"No, sir, nothing!" she replied promptly. "Never heard tell of him!"

"And you've never heard of your brother's having been seen in Liverpool of late?" he went on. "Never heard that he called to see any old friends at all? For we know, as you have seen in the papers, Mrs. Hanson, that he was certainly in Liverpool, and bought clothes and linen there, within this last three months."

"He never came near me, sir," she said. "And I never heard word of his being there from anybody."

There was a bit of a silence then, and at last the woman put the question which, it was evident, she was anxious to have answered definitely.

"Do you think there's a will, mister?" she asked. "For, if not, the lawyer I went to said what there was would come to me—and I could do with it."

"We've seen nothing of any will," answered Mr. Lindsey. "And I should say there is none, and on satisfactory proof of your being next-of-kin, you'll get all he left. I've no doubt you're his sister, and I'll take the responsibility of going through his effects with you. You'll be stopping in the town a day or two? Maybe your mother, Hugh, can find Mrs. Hanson a lodging?"

I answered that my mother would no doubt do what she could to look after Mrs. Hanson; and presently the woman went away with Maisie, leaving her papers with Mr. Lindsey. He turned to me when we were alone.

"Some folks would think that was a bit of help to me in solving the mystery, Hugh," said he; "but hang me if I don't think it makes the whole thing more mysterious than ever! And do you know, my lad, where, in my opinion, the very beginning of it may have to be sought for?"

"I can't put a word to that, Mr. Lindsey," I answered. "Where, sir?"

"Panama!" he exclaimed, with a jerk of his head. "Panama! just that! It began a long way off—Panama, as far as I see it. And what did begin, and what was going on? The two men that knew, and could have told, are dead as door-nails—and both buried, for that matter."

So, in spite of Mrs. Hanson's coming and her revelations as to some, at any rate, of James Gilverthwaite's history, we were just as wise as ever at the end of the first week after the murder of John Phillips. And it was just the eighth night after my finding of the body that I got into the hands of Abel Crone.

Abel Crone was a man that had come to Berwick about three years before this, from heaven only knows where, and had set himself up in business as a marine-store dealer, in a back street which ran down to the shore of the Tweed. He was a little red-haired, pale-eyed rat of a man, with ferrety eyes and a goatee beard, quiet and peaceable in his ways and inoffensive enough, but a rare hand at gossiping about the beach and the walls—you might find him at all odd hours either in these public places or in the door of his shop, talking away with any idler like himself. And how I came to get into talk with him on that particular night was here: Tom Dunlop, Maisie's young brother, was for keeping tame rabbits just then, and I was helping him to build hutches for the beasts in his father's back-yard, and we were wanting some bits of stuff, iron and wire and the like, and knowing I would pick it up for a few pence at Crone's shop, I went round there alone. Before I knew how it came about, Crone was deep into the murder business.

"They'll not have found much out by this time, yon police fellows, no doubt, Mr. Moneylaws?" he said, eyeing me inquisitively in the light of the one naphtha lamp that was spurting and jumping in his untidy shop. "They're a slow unoriginal lot, the police—there's no imagination in their brains and no ingenuity in their minds. What's wanted in an affair like this is one of those geniuses you read about in the storybooks—the men that can trace a murder from the way a man turns out his toes, or by the fashion he's bitten into a bit of bread that he's left on his plate, or the like of that—something more than by ordinary, you'll understand me to mean, Mr. Moneylaws?"

"Maybe you'll be for taking a hand in this game yourself, Mr. Crone?" said I, thinking to joke with him. "You seem to have the right instinct for it, anyway."

"Aye, well," he answered, "and I might be doing as well as anybody else, and no worse. You haven't thought of following anything up yourself, Mr. Moneylaws, I suppose?"

"Me!" I exclaimed. "What should I be following up, man? I know no more than the mere surface facts of the affair."

He gave a sharp glance at his open door when I thus answered him, and the next instant he was close to me in the gloom and looking sharply in my face.

"Are you so sure of that, now?" he whispered cunningly. "Come now, I'll put a question to yourself, Mr. Moneylaws. What for did you not let on in your evidence that you saw Sir Gilbert Carstairs at yon cross-roads just before you found the dead man? Come!"

You could have knocked me down with a feather, as the saying is, when he said that. And before I could recover from the surprise of it, he had a hand on my arm.

"Come this way," he said. "I'll have a word with you in private."

CHAPTER X

THE OTHER WITNESS

It was with a thumping heart and nerves all a-tingle that I followed Abel Crone out of his front shop into a sort of office that he had at the back of it—a little, dirty hole of a place, in which there was a ramshackle table, a chair or two, a stand-up desk, a cupboard, and a variety of odds and ends that he had picked up in his trade. The man's sudden revelation of knowledge had knocked all the confidence out of me. It had never crossed my mind that any living soul had a notion of my secret—for secret, of course, it was, and one that I would not have trusted to Crone, of all men in the world, knowing him as I did to be such a one for gossip. And he had let this challenge out on me so sharply, catching me unawares that I was alone with him, and, as it were, at his mercy, before I could pull my wits together. Everything in me was confused. I was thinking several things all at a time. How did he come to know? Had I been watched? Had some person followed me out of Berwick that night? Was this part of the general mystery? And what was going to come of it, now that Abel Crone was aware that I knew something which, up to then, I had kept back?

I stood helplessly staring at him as he turned up the wick of an oil lamp that stood on a mantelpiece littered with a mess of small things, and he caught a sight of my face when there was more light, and as he shut the door on us he laughed—laughed as if he knew that he had me in a trap. And before he spoke again he went over to the cupboard and took out a bottle and glasses.

"Will you taste?" he asked, leering at me. "A wee drop, now? It'll do you good."

"No!" said I.

"Then I'll drink for the two of us," he responded, and poured out a half-tumblerful of whisky, to which he added precious little water. "Here's to you, my lad; and may you have grace to take advantage of your chances!"

He winked over the rim of his glass as he took a big pull at its contents, and there was something so villainous in the look of him that it did me good in the way of steeling my nerves again. For I now saw that here was an uncommonly bad man to deal with, and that I had best be on my guard.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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