

FLETCHER JOSEPH SMITH

THE MIDDLE OF THINGS

Joseph Fletcher

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	17
CHAPTER V	21
CHAPTER VI	25
CHAPTER VII	29
CHAPTER VIII	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	34

J. S. Fletcher

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CHAPTER I

FACED WITH REALITY

On that particular November evening, Viner, a young gentleman of means and leisure, who lived in a comfortable old house in Markendale Square, Bayswater, in company with his maiden aunt Miss Bethia Penkridge, had spent his after-dinner hours in a fashion which had become a habit. Miss Penkridge, a model housekeeper and an essentially worthy woman, whose whole day was given to supervising somebody or something, had an insatiable appetite for fiction, and loved nothing so much as that her nephew should read a novel to her after the two glasses of port which she allowed herself every night had been thoughtfully consumed and he and she had adjourned from the dining-room to the hearthrug in the library. Her tastes, however, in Viner's opinion were somewhat, if not decidedly, limited. Brought up in her youth on Miss Braddon, Wilkie Collins and Mrs. Henry Wood, Miss Penkridge had become a confirmed slave to the sensational. She had no taste for the psychological, and nothing but scorn for the erotic. What she loved was a story which began with crime and ended with a detection—a story which kept you wondering who did it, how it was done, and when the doing was going to be laid bare to the light of day. Nothing pleased her better than to go to bed with a brain titivated with the mysteries of the last three chapters; nothing gave her such infinite delight as to find, when the final pages were turned, that all her own theories were wrong, and that the real criminal was somebody quite other than the person she had fancied. For a novelist who was so little master of his trade as to let you see when and how things were going, Miss Penkridge had little but good-natured pity; for one who led you by all sorts of devious tracks to a startling and surprising sensation she cherished a whole-souled love; but for the creator of a plot who could keep his secret alive and burning to his last few sentences she felt the deepest thing that she could give to any human being—respect. Such a master was entered permanently on her mental library list.

At precisely ten o'clock that evening Viner read the last page of a novel which had proved to be exactly suited to his aunt's tastes. A dead silence fell on the room, broken only by the crackling of the logs in the grate. Miss Penkridge dropped her knitting on her silk-gowned knees and stared at the leaping flames; her nephew, with an odd glance at her, rose from his easy-chair, picked up a pipe and began to fill it from a tobacco-jar on the mantelpiece. The clock had ticked several times before Miss Penkridge spoke.

"Well!" she said, with the accompanying sigh which denotes complete content. "So he did it! Now, I should never have thought it! The last person of the whole lot! Clever—very clever! Richard, you'll get all the books that that man has written!"

Viner lighted his pipe, thrust his hands in the pockets of his trousers and leaned back against the mantelpiece.

"My dear aunt!" he said half-teasingly, half-seriously. "You're worse than a drug-taker. Whatever makes a highly-respectable, shrewd old lady like you cherish such an insensate fancy for this sort of stuff?"

"Stuff?" demanded Miss Penkridge, who had resumed her knitting. "Pooh!

It's not stuff—it's life! Real life—in the form of fiction!"

Viner shook his head, pityingly. He never read fiction for his own amusement; his tastes in reading lay elsewhere, in solid directions. Moreover, in those directions he was a good deal of a student, and he knew more of his own library than of the world outside it. So he shook his head again.

"Life!" he said. "You don't mean to say that you think those things"—he pointed a half-scornful finger to a pile of novels which had come in from Mudie's that day—"really represent life?"

"What else?" demanded Miss Penkridge.

"Oh—I don't know," replied Viner vaguely. "Fancy, I suppose, and imagination, and all that sort of thing—invention, you know, and so on. But—life! Do you really think such things happen in real life, as those we've been reading about?"

"I don't think anything about it," retorted Miss Penkridge sturdily. "I'm sure of it. I never had a novel yet, nor heard one read to me, that was half as strong as it might have been!"

"Queer thing, one never hears or sees of these things, then!" exclaimed Viner. "I never have!—and I've been on this planet thirty years."

"That sort of thing hasn't come your way, Richard," remarked Miss Penkridge sententiously. "And you don't read the popular Sunday newspapers. I do! They're full of crime of all sorts. So's the world. And as to mysteries—well, I've known of two or three in my time that were much more extraordinary than any I've ever read of in novels. I should think so!"

Viner dropped into his easy-chair and stretched his legs.

"Such as—what?" he asked.

"Well," answered Miss Penkridge, regarding her knitting with appraising eyes, "there was a case that excited great interest when your poor mother and I were mere girls. It was in our town—young Quainton, the banker. He was about your age, married to a very pretty girl, and they'd a fine baby. He was immensely rich, a strong healthy young fellow, fond of life, popular, without a care in the world, so far as any one knew. One morning, after breakfasting with his wife, he walked away from his house, on the outskirts of the town—only a very small town, mind you—to go to the bank, as usual. He never reached the bank—in fact, he was never seen again, never heard of again. He'd only half a mile to walk, along a fairly frequented road, but—complete, absolute, final disappearance! And—never cleared up!"

"Odd!" agreed Viner. "Very odd, indeed. Well—any more?"

"Plenty!" said Miss Penkridge, with a click of her needles. "There was the case of poor young Lady Marshflower—as sweet a young thing as man could wish to see! Your mother and I saw her married—she was a Ravenstone, and only nineteen. She married Sir Thomas Marshflower, a man of forty. They'd only just come home from the honeymoon when it—happened. One morning Sir Thomas rode into the market-town to preside at the petty sessions—he hadn't been long gone when a fine, distinguished-looking man called, and asked to see Lady Marshflower. He was shown into the morning-room—she went to him. Five minutes later a shot was heard. The servants rushed in—to find their young mistress shot through the heart, dead. But the murderer? Disappeared as completely as last year's snow! That was never solved, never!"

"Do you mean to tell me the man was never caught?" exclaimed Viner.

"I tell you that not only was the man never caught, but that although Sir Thomas spent a fortune and nearly lost his senses in trying to find out who he was, what he wanted and what he had to do with Lady Marshflower, he never discovered one single fact!" affirmed Miss Penkridge. "There!"

"That's queerer than the other," observed Viner. "A veritable mystery!"

"Veritable mysteries!" said Miss Penkridge, with a sniff. "The world's full of 'em! How many murders go undetected—how many burglaries are never traced—how many forgeries are done and never found out? Piles of 'em—as the police could tell you. And talking about forgeries, what about old Barrett, who was *the* great man at Pumpney, when your mother and I were girls there? That was a fine case of crime going on for years and years and years, undetected—aye, and not even suspected!"

"What was it?" asked Viner, who had begun by being amused and was now becoming interested. "Who was Barrett?"

"If you'd known Pumpney when we lived there," replied Miss Penkridge, "you wouldn't have had to ask twice who Mr. Samuel Barrett was. He was everybody. He was everything—except honest."

But nobody knew that—until it was too late. He was a solicitor by profession, but that was a mere nothing—in comparison. He was chief spirit in the place. I don't know how many times he wasn't mayor of Pumpney. He held all sorts of offices. He was a big man at the parish church—vicar's warden, and all that. And he was trustee for half the moneyed people in the town—everybody wanted Samuel Barrett, for trustee or executor; he was such a solid, respectable, square-toed man, the personification of integrity. And he died, suddenly, and then it was found that he'd led a double life, and had an establishment here in London, and was a gambler and a speculator, and Heaven knows what, and all the money that had been intrusted to him was nowhere, and he'd systematically forged, and cooked accounts, and embezzled corporation money—and he'd no doubt have gone on doing it for many a year longer if he hadn't had a stroke of apoplexy. And that wasn't in a novel!" concluded Miss Penkridge triumphantly. "Novels—Improbability—pooh! Judged by what some people can tell of life, the novel that's improbable hasn't yet been written!"

"Well!" remarked Viner after a pause, "I dare say you're right, Aunt Bethia. Only, you see, I haven't come across the things in life that you read about in novels."

"You may yet," replied Miss Penkridge. "But when anybody says to me of a novel that it's impossible and far-fetched and so on, I'm always inclined to remind him of the old adage. For you can take it from me, Richard, that truth is stranger than fiction, and that life's full of queer things. Only, as you say, we don't all come across the strange things."

The silvery chime of the clock on the mantelpiece caused Miss Penkridge, at this point, to bring her work and her words to a summary conclusion. Hurrying her knitting into the hand-bag which she carried at her belt, she rose, kissed her nephew and departed bedward; while Viner, after refilling his pipe, proceeded to carry out another nightly proceeding which had become a habit. Every night, throughout the year, he always went for a walk before going to bed. And now, getting into an overcoat and pulling a soft cap over his head, he let himself out of the house, and crossing the square, turned down a side-street and marched slowly in the direction of the Bayswater Road.

November though it was the night was fine and clear, and there was a half-moon in the heavens; also there was rather more than a suspicion of frost in the air, and the stars, accordingly, wore a more brilliant appearance. To one who loved night strolling, as Viner did, this was indeed an ideal night for the time of year; and on this occasion, therefore, he went further than usual going along Bayswater Road as far as Notting Hill Gate, and thence returning through the various streets and terraces which lay between Pembridge Gardens and Markendale Square. And while he strolled along, smoking his pipe, watching the twinkling lights of passing vehicles and enjoying the touch of frost, he was thinking, in a half-cynical, half-amused way, of his Aunt Bethia's taste for the sensational fiction and of her evidently sincere conviction that there were much stranger things in real life than could be found between the covers of any novel.

"Those were certainly two very odd instances which she gave me," he mused, "those of the prosperous banker and the pretty bride. In the first, how on earth did the man contrive to get away unobserved from a town in which, presumably, every soul knew him? Why did he go? Did he go? Is his body lying at the bottom of some hole by some roadside? Was he murdered in broad daylight on a public road? Did he lose his reason or his memory, and wander away and away? I think, as my aunt sagely remarked, that nobody is ever going to find anything about that affair! Then my Lady Marshflower—there's a fine mystery! Who was the man? What did she know about him? Where had they met? Had they ever met? Why did he shoot her? How on earth did he contrive to disappear without leaving some trace? How—"

At this point Viner's musings and questionings were suddenly and rudely interrupted. Unconsciously he had walked back close to his own Square, but on the opposite side to that by which he had left it, approaching it by one of the numerous long terraces which run out of the main road in the Westbourne Grove district—when his musings were rudely interrupted. Between this terrace and Markendale Square was a narrow passage, little frequented save by residents, or by such folk familiar

enough with the neighbourhood to know that it afforded a shortcut. Viner was about to turn into this passage, a dark affair set between high walls, when a young man darted hurriedly out of it, half collided with him, uttered a hasty word of apology, ran across the road and disappeared round the nearest corner. But just there stood a street-lamp, and in its glare Viner caught sight of the hurrying young man's face. And when the retreating footsteps had grown faint, Viner still stood staring in the direction in which they had gone.

"That's strange!" he muttered. "I've seen that chap somewhere—I know him. Now, who is he? And what made him in such a deuce of a hurry?"

It was very quiet at that point. There seemed to be nobody about. Behind him, far down the long, wide terrace, he heard slow, measured steps—that, of course, was a policeman on his beat. But beyond the subdued murmur of the traffic in the Bayswater Road in one direction and in Bishop's Road, Viner heard nothing but those measured steps. And after listening to them for a minute, he turned into the passage out of which the young man had just rushed so unceremoniously.

There was just one lamp in that passage—an old-fashioned affair, fixed against the wall, halfway down. It threw but little light on its surroundings. Those surroundings were ordinary enough. The passage itself was about thirty yards in length. It was inclosed on each-side by old brick walls, so old that the brick had grown black with age and smoke. These walls were some fifteen feet in height; here and there they were pierced by doors—the doors of the yards at the rear of the big houses on either side. The doors were set flush with the walls—Viner, who often walked through that passage at night, and who had something of a whimsical fancy, had thought more than once that after nightfall the doors looked as if they had never been opened, never shut. There was an air of queer, cloistral or prisonlike security in their very look. They were all shut now, as he paced down the passage, as lonely a place at that hour as you could find in all London. It was queer, he reflected, that he scarcely ever remembered meeting anybody in that passage.

And then he suddenly paused, pulling himself up with a strange consciousness that at last he was to meet something. Beneath the feeble light of the one lamp Viner saw a man. Not a man walking, or standing still, or leaning against the wall, but lying full length across the flagged pavement, motionless—so motionless that at the end of the first moment of surprise, Viner felt sure that he was in the presence of death. And then he stole nearer, listening, and looked down, and drawing his match-box from his pocket added the flash of a match to the poor rays from above. Then he saw white linen, and a bloodstain slowly spreading over its glossy surface.

CHAPTER II

NUMBER SEVEN IN THE SQUARE

Before the sputter of the match had died out, Viner had recognized the man who lay dead at his feet. He was a man about whom he had recently felt some curiosity, a man who, a few weeks before, had come to live in a house close to his own, in company with an elderly lady and a pretty girl; Viner and Miss Penkridge had often seen all three in and about Markendale Square, and had wondered who they were. The man looked as if he had seen things in life—a big, burly, bearded man of apparently sixty years of age, hard, bronzed; something about him suggested sun and wind as they are met with in the far-off places. Usually he was seen in loose, comfortable, semi-nautical suits of blue serge; there was a roll in his walk that suggested the sea. But here, as he lay before Viner, he was in evening dress, with a light overcoat thrown over it; the overcoat was unbuttoned and the shirt-front exposed. And on it that sickening crimson stain widened and widened as Viner watched.

Here, without doubt, was murder, and Viner's thoughts immediately turned to two things—one the hurrying young man whose face he thought he had remembered in some vague fashion; the other the fact that a policeman was slowly pacing up the terrace close by. He turned and ran swiftly up the still deserted passage. And there was the policeman, twenty yards away, coming along with the leisureliness of one who knows that he has a certain area to patrol. He pulled himself to an attitude of watchful attention as Viner ran up to him; then suddenly recognizing Viner as a well-known inhabitant of the Square, touched the rim of his helmet.

"I say!" said Viner in the hushed voice of one who imparts strange and confidential tidings. "There's a man lying dead in the passage round here. And without doubt murdered! There's blood all over his shirt-front."

The policeman stood stock still for the fraction of a second. Then he pulled out his whistle and blew loudly and insistently. Before the shrill call had died away, he was striding towards the passage, with Viner at his side.

"Did you find him, Mr. Viner?" he asked.

"I found him," asserted Viner. "Just now—halfway down the passage!"

"Sure he's dead, sir?"

"Dead—yes! And murdered, too! And—"

He was about to mention the hurrying young man, but they had just then arrived at the mouth of the passage, and the policeman once more drew out his whistle and blew more insistently than before.

"There's my sergeant and inspector not far off," he remarked. "Some of 'em'll be on the spot in a minute or two. Now then, sir."

He marched down the passage to the dead man, glanced at the lamp, and turning on his own lantern, directed its light on the body.

"God bless me!" he muttered. "Mr. Ashton!"

"You know him?" said Viner.

"Gent that came to live at number seven in your square a while back, Mr. Viner," answered the policeman. "Australian or New Zealander, I fancy. He's gone right enough, sir! And—knifed! You didn't see anybody about, sir?"

"Yes," replied Viner, "that's just it. As I turned into the passage, I met a young fellow running out of it in a great hurry—he ran into me, and then, shot off across the road, Westbourne Grove way. Then I came along and found—this!"

The policeman bent lower and suddenly put a knowing finger on certain of the dead man's pockets.

"Robbed!" he said. "No watch there, anyway, and nothing where you'd expect to find his purse. Robbery and murder—murder for the sake of robbery—that's what it is, Mr. Viner! Westbourne Grove way, you say this fellow went? And five minutes' start!"

"Is it any good getting a doctor?" asked Viner.

"A thousand doctors'll do him no good," replied the policeman grimly. "But—there's Dr. Cortelyon somewhere about here—number seven in the terrace. One of these back doors is his. We might call him."

He turned the light of his lantern on the line of doors in the right-hand wall, and finding the number he wanted, pulled the bell. As its tinkle sounded somewhere up the yard behind, he thrust his whistle into Viner's hand.

"Mr. Viner," he said, "go up to the end of the passage and blow on that as loud as you can, three times. I'll stand by here till you come back. If you don't hear or see any of our people coming from either direction, blow again."

Viner heard steps coming down the yard behind the door as he walked away. And he heard more steps, hurrying steps, as he reached the end of the passage. He turned it to find an inspector and a sergeant approaching from one part of the terrace, a constable from another.

"You're wanted down here," said Viner as they all converged on him. "There's been murder! One of your men's there—he gave me this whistle to summon further help. This way!"

The police followed him in silence down the passage. Another figure had come on the scene. Bending over the body and closely scrutinizing it in the light of the policeman's lantern was a man whom Viner knew well enough by sight—a tall, handsome man, whose olive-tinted complexion, large lustrous eyes and Vandyke beard gave him the appearance of a foreigner. Yet though he had often seen him, Viner did not know his name; the police-inspector, however, evidently knew it well enough.

"What is it, Dr. Cortelyon?" he asked as he pushed himself to the front.

"Is the man dead?"

Dr. Cortelyon drew himself up from his stooping position to his full height—a striking figure in his dress jacket and immaculate linen. He glanced round at the expectant faces.

"The man's been murdered!" he said in calm, professional accents. "He's been stabbed clean through the heart. Dead? Yes, for several minutes."

"Who found him here?" demanded the inspector.

"I found him," answered Viner. He gave a hurried account of the whole circumstances as he knew them, the police watching him keenly. "I should know the man again if I saw him," he concluded. "I saw his face clearly enough as he passed me."

The inspector bent down and hastily felt the dead man's pockets.

"Nothing at all here," he said as he straightened himself. "No watch or chain or purse or anything. Looks like robbery as well as murder. Does anybody know him?"

"I know who this gentlemen is, sir," answered the policeman to whom Viner had first gone. "He's a Mr. Ashton, who came to live not so long since at number seven in Markendale Square, close by Mr. Viner there. I've heard that he came from the Colonies."

"Do you know him," asked the inspector, turning to Viner.

"Only by sight," answered Viner. "I've seen him often, but I didn't know his name. I believe he has a wife and daughter—"

"No sir," interrupted the policeman. "He was a single gentleman. The young lady at number seven is his ward, and the older lady looked after her—sort of a companion."

The Inspector looked round. Other policemen, attracted by the whistle, were coming into the passage at each end, and he turned to his sergeant.

"Put a man at the top and another at the bottom of this passage," he said. "Keep everybody out. Send for the divisional surgeon. Dr. Cortelyon, will you see him when he comes along? I want

him to see the body before its removal. Now, then, about these ladies—they'll have to be told." He turned to Viner. "I understand you live close by them?" he asked. "Perhaps you'll go there with me?"

Viner nodded; and the inspector, after giving a few more words of instruction to the sergeant, motioned him to follow; together they went down the passage into Markendale Square.

"Been resident here long, Mr. Viner?" asked the Inspector as they emerged. "I noticed that some of my men knew you. I've only recently come into this part myself."

"Fifteen years," answered Viner.

"Do you know anything of this dead man?"

"Nothing—not so much as your constable knows."

"Policemen pick things up. These ladies, now? It's a most unpleasant thing to have to go and break news like this. You know nothing about them, sir?"

"Not even as much as your man knew. I've seen them often—with him, the dead man. There's an elderly lady and a younger one, a mere girl. I took them for his wife and daughter. But you heard what your man said."

"Well, whatever they are, they've got to be told. I'd be obliged if you'd come with me. And then—that fellow you saw running away! You'll have to give us as near a description of him as you can. What number did my man say it was—seven?"

Viner suddenly laid a hand on his companion's sleeve. A smart car, of the sort let out on hire from the more pretentious automobile establishments, had just come round the corner and was being pulled up at the door of a house in whose porticoed front hung a brilliant lamp.

"That's number seven," said Viner. "And—those are the two ladies."

The Inspector stopped and watched. The door of the house opened, letting a further flood of light on the broad step beneath the portico and on the pavement beyond; the door of the car opened too, and a girl stepped out, and for a second or two stood in the full glare of the lamps. She was a slender, lissome young creature, gowned in white, and muffled to the throat in an opera cloak out of which a fresh, girlish face, bright in colour, sparkling of eye, crowned by a mass of hair of the tint of dead gold, showed clearly ere she rapidly crossed to the open door. After her came an elderly, well-preserved woman in an elaborate evening toilette, the personification of the precise and conventional chaperon. The door closed; the car drove away; the Inspector turned to Viner with a shake of his head.

"Just home from the theatre!" he said. "And—to hear this! Well, it's got to be done, Mr. Viner, anyhow."

Viner, who had often observed the girl whom they had just seen with an interest for which he had never troubled to account, found himself wishing that Miss Penkridge was there in his place. He did not know what part he was to play, what he was to do or say; worse than that, he did not know if the girl in whose presence he would certainly find himself within a minute or two was very fond of the man whom he had just found done to death. In that case—but here his musings were cut short by the fact that the Inspector had touched the bell in the portico of number seven, and that the door had opened, to reveal a smart and wondering parlour-maid, who glanced with surprise at the inspector's uniform.

"Hush! This is Mr. Ashton's?" said the Inspector. "Yes—well, now, what is the name of the lady—the elderly lady—I saw come in just now? Keep quiet, there's a good girl,—the fact is, Mr. Ashton's had an accident, and I want to see that lady."

"Mrs. Killenhall," answered the parlour-maid.

"And the young lady—her name?" asked the Inspector.

"Miss Wickham."

The Inspector walked inside the house.

"Just ask Mrs. Killenhall and Miss Wickham if they'll be good enough to see Inspector Drillford for a few minutes," he said. Then, as the girl closed the door and turned away up the inner hall, he

whispered to Viner. "Better see both and be done with it. It's no use keeping bad news too long; they may as well know—both."

The parlour-maid reappeared at the door of a room along the hall; and the two men, advancing in answer to her summons, entered what was evidently the dining-room of the house. The two ladies had thrown off their wraps; the younger one sat near a big, cheery fire, holding her slender fingers to the blaze; the elder stood facing the door in evident expectancy. The room itself was luxuriously furnished in a somewhat old-fashioned, heavy style; everything about it betokened wealth and comfort. And that its owner was expected home every minute was made evident to the two men by the fact that a spirit-case was set on the centre table, with glasses and mineral waters and cigars; Viner remembered, as his eyes encountered these things, that a half-burned cigar lay close to the dead man's hand in that dark passage so close by.

"Mrs. Killenhall? Miss Wickham?" began Drillford, looking sharply from one to the other. "Sorry to break in on you like this, ladies, but the fact is, there has been an accident to Mr. Ashton, and I'm obliged to come and tell you about it."

Viner, who had remained a little in the background, was watching the faces of the two to whom this initial breaking of news was made. And he saw at once that there was going to be no scene. The girl by the fire looked for an instant at the inspector with an expression of surprise, but it was not the surprise of great personal concern. As for the elder woman, after one quick glance from Drillford to Viner, whom she evidently recognized, she showed absolute self-possession.

"A bad accident?" she asked.

Drillford again looked from the elder to the younger lady.

"You'll excuse me if I ask what relation you ladies are to Mr. Ashton?" he said with a significant glance at Mrs. Killenhall.

"None!" replied Mrs. Killenhall. "Miss Wickham is Mr. Ashton's ward. I am Miss Wickham's chaperon—and companion."

"Well, ma'am," said Drillford, "then I may tell you that my news is—just about as serious as it possibly could be, you understand."

In the silence that followed, the girl turned toward the visitors, and Viner saw her colour change a little. And it was she who first spoke.

"Don't be afraid to tell us," she said. "Is Mr. Ashton dead?"

Drillford inclined his head, and spoke as he was bidden.

"I'm sorry to say he is," he replied. "And still more to be obliged to tell you that he came to his death by violence. The truth is—"

He paused, looking from one to the other, as if to gauge the effect of his words. And again it was the girl who spoke.

"What is the truth?" she asked.

"Murder!" said Drillford. "Just that!"

Mrs. Killenhall, who had remained standing until then, suddenly sat down, with a murmur of horror. But the girl was watching the inspector steadily.

"When was this? and how, and where?" she inquired.

"A little time ago, near here," answered Drillford. "This gentleman, Mr. Viner, a neighbour of yours, found him—dead. There's no doubt, from what we can see, that he was murdered for the sake of robbery. And I want some information about him, about his habits and—"

Miss Wickham got up from her chair and looked meaningly at Mrs. Killenhall.

"The fact is," she said, turning to Drillford; "strange as it may seem, neither Mrs. Killenhall nor myself know very much about Mr. Ashton."

CHAPTER III

WHO WAS MR. ASHTON?

For the first time since they had entered the room, Drillford turned and glanced at Viner; his look indicated the idea which Miss Wickham's last words had set up in his mind. Here was a mystery! The police instinct was aroused by it.

"You don't know very much about Mr. Ashton?" he said, turning back to the two ladies. "Yet—you're under his roof? This is his house, isn't it?"

"Just so," assented Miss Wickham. "But when I say we don't know much, I mean what I say. Mrs. Killenhall has only known Mr. Ashton a few weeks, and until two months ago I had not seen Mr. Ashton for twelve years. Therefore, neither of us can know much about him."

"Would you mind telling me what you do know?" asked Drillford. "We've got to know something—who he is, and so on."

"All that I know is this," replied Miss Wickham. "My father died in Australia, when I was about six years old. My mother was already dead, and my father left me in charge of Mr. Ashton. He sent me, very soon after my father's death, to school in England, and there I remained for twelve years. About two months ago Mr. Ashton came to England, took this house, fetched me from school and got Mrs. Killenhall to look after me. Here we've all been ever since—and beyond that I know scarcely anything."

Drillford looked at the elder lady.

"I know, practically, no more than Miss Wickham has told you," said Mrs. Killenhall. "Mr. Ashton and I got in touch with each other through his advertisement in the *Morning Post*. We exchanged references, and I came here."

"Ah!" said Drillford. "And—what might his references be, now?"

"To his bankers, the London and Orient, in Threadneedle Street," answered Mrs. Killenhall promptly. "And to his solicitors, Crawle, Pawle and Rattenbury, of Bedford Bow."

"Very satisfactory they were, no doubt, ma'am?" suggested Drillford.

Mrs. Killenhall let her eye run round the appointments of the room.

"Eminently so," she said dryly. "Mr. Ashton was a very wealthy man."

Drillford pulled out a pocketbook and entered the names which Mrs. Killenhall had just mentioned.

"The solicitors will be able to tell something," he murmured as he put the book back. "We'll communicate with them first thing in the morning. But just two questions before I go. Can you tell me anything about Mr. Ashton's usual habits? Had he any business? What did he do with his time?"

"He was out a great deal," said Mrs. Killenhall. "He used to go down to the City. He was often out of an evening. Once, since I came here, he was away for a week in the country—he didn't say where. He was an active man—always in and out. But he never said much as to where he went."

"The other question," said Drillford, "is this: Did he carry much on him in the way of valuables or money? I mean—as a rule?"

"He wore a very fine gold watch and chain," answered Mrs. Killenhall; "and as for money—well, he always seemed to have a lot in his purse. And he wore two diamond rings—very fine stones."

"Just so!" murmured Drillford. "Set upon for the sake of those things, no doubt. Well, ladies, I shall telephone to Crawle's first thing in the morning, and they'll send somebody along at once, of course. I'm sorry to have brought you such bad news, but—"

He turned toward the door; Miss Wickham stopped him.

"Will Mr. Ashton's body be brought here—tonight?" she asked.

"No," replied Drillford. "It will be taken to the mortuary. If you'll leave everything to me, I'll see that you are spared as much as possible. Of course, there'll have to be an inquest—but you'll hear all about that tomorrow. Leave things to us and to Mr. Ashton's solicitors."

He moved towards the door, and Viner, until then a silent spectator, looked at Miss Wickham, something impelling him to address her instead of Mrs. Killenhall.

"I live close by you," he said. "If there is anything that I can do, or that my aunt Miss Penkridge, who lives with me, can do? Perhaps you will let me call in the morning."

The girl looked at him steadily and frankly.

"Thank you, Mr. Viner," she said. "It would be very kind if you would. We've no men folk—yes, please do."

"After breakfast, then," answered Viner, and went away to join the Inspector, who had walked into the hall.

"What do you think of this matter?" he asked, when they had got outside the house.

"Oh, a very clear and ordinary case enough, Mr. Viner," replied Drillford. "No mystery about it at all. Here's this Mr. Ashton been living here some weeks—some fellow, the man, of course, whom you saw running away, has noticed that he was a very rich man and wore expensive jewellery, has watched him, probably knew that he used that passage as a short cut, and has laid in wait for him and murdered him for what he'd got on him. It wouldn't take two minutes to do the whole thing. Rings, now! They spoke of diamond rings, in there. Well, I didn't see any diamond rings on his hands when I looked at his body, and I particularly noticed his hands, to see if there were signs of any struggle. No sir—it's just a plain case of what used to be called highway robbery and murder. But come round with me to the police-station, Mr. Viner—they'll have taken him to the mortuary by now, and I should like to hear what our divisional surgeon has to say, and what our people actually found on the body."

As Viner and the Inspector walked into the police-station, Dr. Cortelyon came out. Drillford stopped him.

"Found out anything more, Doctor?" he asked.

"Nothing beyond what I said at first," replied Cortelyon. "The man has been stabbed through the heart, from behind, in one particularly well-delivered blow. I should say the murderer had waited for him in that passage, probably knowing his habits. That passage, now—you know it really will have to be seen to! That wretched old lamp in the middle gives no light at all. The wonder is that something of this sort hasn't occurred before."

Drillford muttered something about local authorities and property-owners and went forward into an office, motioning Viner to follow. The divisional surgeon was there in conversation with the sergeant whom Drillford had left in charge of the body. "That is something on which I'd stake my professional reputation," he said. "I'm sure of it."

"What's that, Doctor?" asked Drillford. "Something to do with this affair?"

"I was saying that whoever stabbed this unfortunate man had some knowledge of anatomy," remarked the doctor. "He was killed by one swift blow from a particularly keen-edged, thin-bladed weapon which was driven through his back at the exact spot. You ought to make a minute search behind the walls on either side of that passage—the probability is that the murderer threw his weapon away."

"We'll do all that, Doctor," said Drillford. "As to your suggestion—don't you forget that there are a good many criminals here in London who are regular experts in the use of the knife—I've seen plenty of instances of that myself. Now," he went on, turning to the sergeant, "about that search? What did you find on him?"

The sergeant lifted the lid of a desk and pointed to a sheet of foolscap paper whereon lay certain small articles at which Viner gazed with a sense of strange fascination. A penknife, a small gold matchbox, a gold-mounted pencil-case, some silver coins, a handkerchief, and conspicuous among the rest, a farthing.

"That's the lot," said the sergeant, "except another handkerchief, and a pair of gloves in the overcoat, where I've left them. Nothing else—no watch, chain, purse or pocketbook. And no rings—but it's very plain from his fingers that he wore two rings one on each hand, third finger in each case."

"There you are!" said Drillford with a glance at Viner. "Murdered and robbed—clear case! Now, Mr. Viner, give us as accurate a description as possible of the fellow who ran out of that passage."

Viner did his best. His recollections were of a young man of about his own age, about his own height and build, somewhat above the medium; it was his impression, he said, that the man was dressed, if not shabbily, at least poorly; he had an impression, too, that the clean-shaven face which he had seen for a brief moment was thin and worn.

"Got any recollection of his exact look?" inquired the Inspector. "That's a lot to go by."

"I'm trying to think," said Viner. "Yes—I should say he looked to be pretty hard-up. There was a sort of desperate gleam in his eye. And—"

"Take your time," remarked Drillford. "Anything you can suggest, you know—"

"Well," replied Viner. "I'd an idea at the moment, and I've had it since, that I'd seen this man before. Something in his face was familiar. The only thing I can think of is this: I potter round old bookshops and curiosity-shops a good deal—I may have seen this young fellow on some occasion of that sort."

"Anyway," suggested Drillford, glancing over the particulars which he had written down, "you'd know him again if you saw him?"

"Oh, certainly!" asserted Viner. "I should know him anywhere."

"Then that's all we need trouble you with now, sir," said Drillford. "The next business will be—tomorrow."

Viner walked slowly out of the police-station and still more slowly homeward. When he reached the first lamp, he drew out his watch. Half-past twelve! Just two hours ago he had been in his own comfortable library, smiling at Miss Penkridge's ideas about the very matters into one of which he was now plunged. He would not have been surprised if he had suddenly awoke, to find that all this was a bad dream, induced by the evening's conversation. But just then he came to the passage in which the murder had been committed. A policeman was on guard at the terrace end—and Viner, rather than hear any more of the matter, hastened past him and made a circuitous way to Markendale Square.

He let himself into his house as quietly as possible, and contrary to taste and custom, went into the dining-room, switched on the electric light and helped himself to a stiff glass of brandy and soda at the sideboard. When the mixture was duly prepared, he forgot to drink it. He stood by the sideboard, the glass in his hand, his eyes staring at vacancy. Nor did he move when a very light foot stole down the stairs, and Miss Penkridge, in wraps and curl-papers, looked round the side of the door.

"Heavens above, Richard!" she exclaimed, "What is the matter! I wondered if you were burglars! Half-past twelve!"

Viner suddenly became aware of the glass which he was unconsciously holding. He lifted it to his lips, wondering whatever it was that made his mouth feel so dry. And when he had taken a big gulp, and then spoke, his voice—to himself—sounded just as queer as his tongue had been feeling.

"You were right!" he said suddenly. "There are queerer, stranger affairs in life than one fancies! And I—I've been pitchforked—thrown—clean into the middle of things! I!"

Miss Penkridge came closer to him, staring. She looked from him to the glass, from the glass to him.

"No—I haven't been drinking," said Viner with a harsh laugh. "I'm drinking now, and I'm going to have another, too. Listen!"

He pushed her gently into a chair, and seating himself on the edge of the table, told her the adventure. And Miss Penkridge, who was an admirable listener to fictitious tales of horror, proved

herself no less admirable in listening to one of plain fact, and made no comment until her nephew had finished.

"That poor man!" she said at last. "Such a fine, strong, healthy-looking man, too! I used to wonder about him, when I saw him in the square, I used to think of him as somebody who'd seen things!"

Viner made a sudden grimace.

"Don't!" he said. "Ugh! I've seen things tonight that I never wished to see! And I wish—"

"What?" demanded Miss Penkridge after a pause, during which Viner had sat staring at the floor.

"I wish to God I'd never seen that poor devil who was running away!" exclaimed Viner with sudden passion. "They'll catch him, and I shall have to give evidence against him, and my evidence'll hang him, and—"

"There's a lot to do, and a lot'll happen before that comes off, Richard," interrupted Miss Penkridge. "The man may be innocent."

"He'd have a nice job to prove it!" said Viner with a forced laugh. "No, if the police get him—besides, he was running straight from the place! Isn't it a queer thing?" he went on, laughing again. "I don't mind remembering the—the dead man, but I hate the recollection of that chap hurrying away! I wonder what it feels like when you've just murdered another fellow, to slink off like—"

"You've no business to be wondering any such thing!" said Miss Penkridge sharply. "Here—get yourself another brandy and soda, and let us talk business. These two women—did they feel it much?"

"They puzzled me," replied Viner. He took his aunt's advice about the extra glass, and obeyed her, too, when she silently pointed to a box of cigars which lay on the sideboard. "All right," he said after a minute or two. "I'm not going to have nerves. What was I saying? They puzzled me? Yes, puzzled. Especially the girl; she seemed so collected about everything. And yet, according to her own story, she's only just out of the schoolroom. You'll go round there with me?"

"If we can be of any service to them? certainly," assented Miss Penkridge.

"The girl said they'd no men folk," remarked Viner.

"In that case I shall certainly go," said Miss Penkridge. "Now, Richard, smoke your cigar, and think no more about all this till tomorrow."

Viner flung himself into an easy-chair.

"All right!" he said. "Don't bother! It's been a bit of a facer, but—"

He was astonished when he woke the next morning, much later than was his wont, to find that he had not dreamed about the events of the midnight. And he was his usual practical and cool-headed self when, at eleven o'clock, he stood waiting in the hall for Miss Penkridge to go round with him to number seven. But the visit was not to be paid just then—as they were about to leave the house, a police-officer came hurrying up and accosted Viner. Inspector Drillford's compliments, and would Mr. Viner come round? And then the messenger gave a knowing grin.

"We've got the man, sir!" he whispered. "That's why you're wanted."

CHAPTER IV

THE RING AND THE KNIFE

Viner was hoping that the police had got hold of the wrong man as he reluctantly walked into Drillford's office, but one glance at the inspector's confident face, alert and smiling, showed him that Drillford himself had no doubts on that point.

"Well, Mr. Viner," he said with a triumphant laugh, "we haven't been so long about it, you see! Much quicker work than I'd anticipated, too."

"Are you sure you've got the right man?" asked Viner. "I mean—have you got the man I saw running away from the passage?"

"You shall settle that yourself," answered Drillford. "Come this way."

He led Viner down a corridor, through one or two locked doors, and motioning him to tread softly, drew back a sliding panel in the door of a cell and silently pointed. Viner, with a worse sickness than before, stole up and looked through the barred opening. One glance at the man sitting inside the cell, white-faced, staring at the drab, bare wall, was enough; he turned to Drillford and nodded. Drillford nodded too, and led him back to the office.

"That's the man I saw," said Viner.

"Of course!" assented Drillford. "I'd no doubt of it. Well, it's been a far simpler thing than I'd dared to hope. I'll tell you how we got him. This morning, about ten o'clock, this chap, who won't give his name, went into the pawnbroker's shop in Edgware Road, and asked for a loan on a diamond ring which he produced. Now, Pelver, who happened to attend to him himself, is a good deal of an expert in diamonds—he's a jeweller as well as a pawnbroker, and he saw at once that the diamond in this ring was well worth all of a thousand pounds—a gem of the first water! He was therefore considerably astonished when his customer asked for a loan of ten pounds on it—still more so when the fellow suggested that Pelver should buy it outright for twenty-five. Pelver asked him some questions as to his property in the ring—he made some excuses about its having been in his family for some time, and that he would be glad to realize on it. Under pretence of examining it, Pelver took the ring to another part of his shop and quietly sent for a policeman. And the end was, this officer brought the man here, and Pelver with him, and the ring. Here it is!"

He opened a safe and produced a diamond ring at which Viner stared with feelings for which he could scarcely account.

"How do you know that's one of Mr. Ashton's rings?" he asked.

"Oh, I soon solved that!" laughed Drillford. "I hurried round to Markendale Square with it at once. Both the ladies recognized it—Mr. Ashton had often shown it to them, and told them its value, and there's a private mark of his inside it. And so we arrested him, and there he is! Clear case!"

"What did he say?" asked Viner.

"He's a curious customer," replied Drillford. "I should say that whatever he is now, he has been a gentleman. He was extremely nervous and so on while we were questioning him about the ring, but when it came to the crucial point, and I charged him and warned him, he turned strangely cool. I'll tell you what he said, in his exact words. 'I'm absolutely innocent of that!' he said. 'But I can see that I've placed myself in a very strange position.' And after that he would say no more—he hasn't even asked to see a solicitor."

"What will be done next?" asked Viner.

"He'll be brought before the magistrate in an hour or two," said Drillford. "Formal proceedings—for a remand, you know. I shall want you there, Mr. Viner; it won't take long. I wish the fellow would tell us who he is."

"And I wish I could remember where and when I have seen him before!" exclaimed Viner.

"Ah, that's still your impression?" remarked Drillford. "You're still convinced of it?"

"More than ever—since seeing him just now," affirmed Viner. "I know his face, but that's all I can say. I suppose," he continued, looking diffidently at the inspector, as if he half-expected to be laughed at for the suggestion he was about to make, "I suppose you don't believe that this unfortunate fellow may have some explanation of his possession of Mr. Ashton's ring?"

Drillford, who had been replacing the ring in a safe, locked the door upon it with a snap, and turned on his questioner with a look which became more and more businesslike and official with each succeeding word.

"Now, Mr. Viner," he said, "you look at it from our point of view. An elderly gentleman is murdered and robbed. A certain man is seen—by you, as it happens—running away as fast as he can from the scene of the murder. Next morning that very man is found trying to get rid of a ring which, without doubt, was taken from the murdered man's finger. What do you think? Or—another question—what could we, police officials, do?"

"Nothing but what you're doing, I suppose," said Viner. "Still—there may be a good deal that's—what shall I say?—behind all this."

"It's for him to speak," observed Drillford, nodding in the direction of the cells. "He's got a bell within reach of his fingers; he's only got to ring it and to ask for me or any solicitor he likes to name. But—we shall see!"

Nothing had been seen or heard, in the way hinted at by Drillford, when, an hour later, Viner, waiting in the neighbouring police-court, was aware that the humdrum, sordid routine was about to be interrupted by something unusual. The news of an arrest in connection with the Lonsdale Passage murder had somehow leaked out, and the court was packed to the doors—Viner himself had gradually been forced into a corner near the witness-box in which he was to make an unwilling appearance. And from that corner he looked with renewed interest at the man who was presently placed in the dock, and for the hundredth time asked himself what it was in his face that woke some chord of memory in him.

There was nothing of the criminal in the accused man's appearance. Apparently about thirty years of age, spare of figure, clean-shaven, of a decidedly intellectual type of countenance, he looked like an actor. His much-worn suit of tweed was well cut and had evidently been carefully kept, in spite of its undoubtedly threadbare condition. It, and the worn and haggard look of the man's face, denoted poverty, if not recent actual privation, and the thought was present in more than one mind there in possession of certain facts: if this man had really owned the ring which he had offered to the pawnbroker, why had he delayed so long in placing himself in funds through its means? For if his face expressed anything, it was hunger.

Viner, who was now witnessing police-court proceedings for the first time in his life, felt an almost morbid curiosity in hearing the tale unfolded against the prisoner. For some reason, best known to themselves, the police brought forward more evidence than was usual on first proceedings before a magistrate. Viner himself proved the finding of the body; the divisional surgeon spoke as to the cause of death; the dead man's solicitor testified to his identity and swore positively as to the ring; the pawnbroker gave evidence as to the prisoner's attempt to pawn or sell the ring that morning. Finally, the police proved that on searching the prisoner after his arrest, a knife was found in his hip-pocket which, in the opinion of the divisional surgeon, would have caused the wound found in the dead man's body. From a superficial aspect, no case could have seemed clearer.

But in Viner's reckoning of things there was mystery. Two episodes occurred during the comparatively brief proceedings which made him certain that all was not being brought out. The first was when he himself went into the witness-box to prove his discovery of the body and to swear that the prisoner was the man he had seen running away from the passage. The accused glanced at him with evident curiosity as he came forward; on hearing Viner's name, he looked at him in a strange

manner, changed colour and turned his head away. But when a certain question was put to Viner, he looked round again, evidently anxious to hear the answer.

"I believe you thought, on first seeing him, that the prisoner's face was familiar to you, Mr. Viner?"

"Yes—I certainly think that I have seen him before, somewhere."

"You can't recollect more? You don't know when or where you saw him?"

"I don't. But that I have seen him, perhaps met him, somewhere, I am certain."

This induced the magistrate to urge the accused man—who had steadfastly refused to give name or address—to reveal his identity. But the prisoner only shook his head.

"I would rather not give my name at present," he answered. "I am absolutely innocent of this charge of murder, but I quite realize that the police are fully justified in bringing it against me. I had nothing whatever to do with Mr. Ashton's death—nothing! Perhaps the police will find out the truth; and meanwhile I had rather not give my name."

"You will be well advised to reconsider that," said the magistrate. "If you are innocent, as you say, it will be far better for you to say who you are, and to see a solicitor. As things are, you are in a very dangerous position."

But the prisoner shook his head.

"Not yet, at any rate," he answered. "I want to hear more."

When the proceedings were over and the accused, formally remanded for a week, had been removed to the cells previous to being taken away, Viner went round to Drillford's office.

"Look here!" he said abruptly, finding the Inspector alone, "I dare say you think I'm very foolish, but I don't believe that chap murdered Ashton. I don't believe it for one second!"

Drillford who was filling up some papers, smiled.

"No?" he said. "Now, why, Mr. Viner?"

"You can call it intuition if you like," answered Viner. "But I don't! And I shall be surprised if I'm not right. There are certain things that I should think would strike you."

"What, for instance?" asked Drillford.

"Do you think it likely that a man who must have known that a regular hue and cry would be raised about that murder, would be such a fool as to go and offer one of the murdered man's rings within a mile of the spot where the murder took place?" asked Viner.

Drillford turned and looked steadily at his questioner.

"Well, but that's precisely what he did, Mr. Viner!" he exclaimed. "There's no doubt whatever that the ring in question was Ashton's; there's also no doubt that this man did offer it to Pelter this morning. Either the fellow is a fool or singularly ignorant, to do such a mad thing! But—he did it! And I know why."

"Why, then?" demanded Viner.

"Because he was just starving," answered Drillford. "When he was brought in here, straight from Pelter's, he hadn't a halfpenny on him, and in the very thick of my questionings—and just think how important they were!—he stopped me. 'May I say a word that's just now much more important to me than all this?' he said. 'I'm starving! I haven't touched food or drink for nearly three days. Give me something, if it's only a crust of bread!' That's fact, Mr. Viner."

"What did you do?" inquired Viner.

"Got the poor chap some breakfast, at once," answered Drillford, "and let him alone till he'd finished. Have you ever seen a starved dog eat? No—well, I have, and he ate like that—he was ravenous! And when a man's at that stage, do you think he's going to stop at anything? Not he! This fellow, you may be sure, after killing and robbing Ashton, had but one thought—how soon he could convert some of the property into cash, so that he could eat. If Pelter had made him that advance, or bought the ring, he'd have made a bee-line for the nearest coffee-shop. I tell you he was mad for food!"

"Another thing," said Viner. "Where is the rest of Mr. Ashton's property—his watch, chain, the other ring, his purse, and—wasn't there a pocketbook? How is it this man wasn't found in possession of them?"

"Easy enough for him to hide all those things, Mr. Viner," said Drillford, with an indulgent smile. "What easier? You don't know as much of these things as I do—he could quite easily plant all those articles safely during the night. He just stuck to the article which he could most easily convert into money."

"Well, I don't believe he's guilty," repeated Viner. "And I want to do something for him. You may think me quixotic, but I'd like to help him. Is there anything to prevent you from going to him, telling him that I'm convinced of his innocence and that I should like to get him help—legal help?"

"There's nothing to prevent it, to be sure," answered Drillford. "But Mr. Viner, you can't get over the fact that this fellow had Ashton's diamond ring in his possession!"

"How do I—how do you—know how he came into possession of it?" demanded Viner.

"And then—that knife!" exclaimed Drillford. "Look here! I've got it. What sort of thing is that for an innocent, harmless man to carry about him? It's an American bowie-knife!"

He opened a drawer and exhibited a weapon which, lying on a pile of paper, looked singularly suggestive and fearsome.

"I don't care!" said Viner with a certain amount of stubbornness. "I'm convinced that the man didn't kill Ashton. And I want to help him. I'm a man of considerable means; and in this case—well, that's how I feel about it."

Drillford made no answer. But presently he left the room, after pointing Viner to a chair. Viner waited—five, ten minutes. Then the door opened again, and Drillford came back. Behind him walked the accused man, with a couple of policemen in attendance upon him.

"There, Mr. Viner!" said Drillford. "You can speak to him yourself!"

Viner rose from his chair. The prisoner stepped forward, regarding him earnestly.

"Viner!" he said, in a low, concentrated tone, "don't you know me? I'm Langton Hyde! You and I were at Rugby together. And—we meet again, here!"

CHAPTER V

LOOK FOR THAT MAN!

At these words Viner drew back with an exclamation of astonishment, but in the next instant he stepped forward again, holding out his hand.

"Hyde!" he said. "Then—that's what I remembered! Of course I know you! But good heavens, man, what does all this mean? What's brought you to this—to be here, in this place?"

The prisoner looked round at his captors, and back at Viner, and smiled as a man smiles who is beginning to realize hopelessness to the full.

"I don't know if I'm allowed to speak," he said.

Drillford, who had been watching this episode with keen attention, motioned to the two policemen.

"Wait outside," he said abruptly. "Now, then," he continued when he, Viner and Hyde were alone, "this man can say anything he likes to you, Mr. Viner, so long as you've asked to see him. This is all irregular, but I've no wish to stop him from telling you whatever he pleases. But remember," he went on, glancing at the prisoner, "you're saying it before me—and in my opinion, you'd a deal better have said something when you were in court just now."

"I didn't know what to say," replied Hyde doubtfully. "I'm pretty much on the rocks, as you can guess; but—I have relatives! And if it's possible, I don't want them to know about this."

Drillford looked at Viner and shook his head, as if to signify his contempt of Hyde's attitude.

"Considering the position you're in," he said, turning again to Hyde, "you must see that it's impossible that your relations should be kept from knowing. You'll have to give particulars about yourself, sooner or later. And charges of murder, like this, can't be kept out of the newspapers."

"Tell me, Hyde!" exclaimed Viner. "Look here, now, to begin with—you didn't kill this man?"

Hyde shook his head in a puzzled fashion—something was evidently causing him surprise.

"I didn't know the man was killed, or dead, until they brought me here, from that pawnbroker's this morning!" he said. Then he laughed almost contemptuously, and with some slight show of spirit. "Do you think I'd have been such a fool as to try to pawn or sell a ring that belonged to a man who'd just been murdered?" he demanded. "I'm not quite such an ass as that!"

Viner looked round at Drillford.

"There!" he said quietly. "What did I tell you? Isn't that what I said? You're on the wrong track, Inspector!"

But Drillford, sternly official in manner, shook his head.

"How did he come by the ring, then?" he asked, pointing at his prisoner. "Let him say!"

"Hyde!" said Viner. "Tell! I've been certain for an hour that you didn't kill this man, and I want to help you. But—tell us the truth! What do you know about it? How did you get that ring?"

"I shall make use of anything he tells," remarked Drillford warningly.

"He's going to tell—everything," said Viner. "Come now, Hyde, the truth!"

Hyde suddenly dropped into a chair by which he was standing, and pressed his hand over his face with a gesture which seemed to indicate a certain amount of bewilderment.

"Let me sit down," he said. "I'm weak, tired, too. Until this morning I hadn't had a mouthful of food for a long time, and I'd—well, I'd been walking about, night as well as day. I was walking about all yesterday, and a lot of last night. I'm pretty nearly done, if you want to know!"

"Take your time," said Drillford. "Here, wait a bit," he went on after a sudden glance at his prisoner. "Keep quiet a minute." He turned to a cupboard in the corner of the room and presently came back with something in a glass. "Drink that," he said not unkindly. "Drop of weak brandy and water," he muttered to Viner. "Do him no harm—I see how it is with him—he's been starving."

Hyde caught the last word and laughed feebly as he handed the glass back.

"Starving!" he said. "Yes—that's it! I hope neither of you'll know what it means! Three days without—"

"Now, Hyde!" interrupted Viner. "Never mind that—you won't starve again. Come—tell us all about this—tell everything."

Hyde bent forward in his chair, but after a look at the two men, his eyes sought the floor and moved from one plank to another as if he found it difficult to find a fixed point.

"I don't know where to begin, Viner," he said at last. "You see, you've never met me since we left school. I went in for medicine—I was at Bart's for a time, but—well, I was no good, somehow. And then I went in for the stage—I've had some fairly decent engagements, both here and in the States, now and then. But you know what a precarious business that is. And some time ago I struck a real bad patch, and I've been out of a job for months. And lately it's gone from bad to worse—you know, or rather I suppose you don't know, because you've never been in that fix—pawning everything, and so on, until—well, I haven't had a penny in my pockets for days now!"

"Your relations?" questioned Viner.

"Didn't want them to know," answered Hyde. "The fact is, I haven't been on good terms with them for a long time, and I've got some pride left—or I had, until yesterday. But here's the truth: I had to clear out of my lodgings—which was nothing but an attic, three days since, and I've been wandering about, literally hungry and homeless, since that. If it hadn't been for that, I should never have been in this hole! And that's due to circumstances that beat me, for I tell you again, I don't know anything about this man's murder—at least, not about it actually."

"What do you know?" asked Viner. "Tell us plainly."

"I'm going to," responded Hyde. "I was hanging about the Park and around Kensington Gardens most of yesterday. Then, at night, I got wandering about this part—didn't seem to matter much where I went. You don't know, either of you, what it means to wander round, starving. You get into a sort of comatose state—you just go on and on. Well, last night I was walking, in that way, in and out about these Bayswater squares. I got into Markendale Square. As I was going along the top side of it, I noticed a passage and turned into it—as I've said, when a man's in the state I was in, it doesn't matter where he slouches—anywhere! I turned into that passage, I tell you, just aimlessly, as a man came walking out. Viner, look for that man! Find him! He's the fellow these police want! If there's been murder—"

"Keep calm, Hyde!" said Viner. "Go on, quietly."

"This man passed me and went on into the square," continued Hyde. "I went up the passage. It was very dark, except in the middle, where there's an old-fashioned lamp. And then I saw another man, who was lying across the flags. I don't know that I'd any impression about him—I was too sick and weary. I believe I thought he was drunk, or ill or something. But you see, at the same instant that I saw him, I saw something else which drove him clean out of my mind. In fact, as soon as I'd seen it, I never thought about him any more, nor looked at him again."

"What was it?" demanded Viner, certain of what the answer would be.

"A diamond ring," replied Hyde. "It was lying on the flags close by the man. The light from the lamp fell full on it. And I snatched it up, thrust it into my pocket and ran up the passage. I ran into somebody at the far end—it turns out to have been you. Well, you saw me hurry off—I got as far away as I could, lest you or somebody else should follow. I wandered round Westbourne Grove, and then up into the Harrow Road, and in a sort of back street there I sneaked into a shanty in a yard, and stopped in it the rest of the night. And this morning I tried to pawn the ring."

"Having no idea of its value," suggested Viner, with a glance at Drillford, who was listening to everything with an immovable countenance.

"I thought it might be worth thirty or forty pounds," answered Hyde. "Of course, I'd no idea that it was worth what's been said. You see, I'm fairly presentable, and I thought I could tell a satisfactory

story if I was asked anything at the pawnshop. I didn't anticipate any difficulty about pawning the ring—I don't think there'd have been any if it hadn't been for its value. A thousand pounds! of course, I'd no idea of that!"

"And that's the whole truth?" asked Viner.

"It's the whole truth as far as I'm concerned," answered Hyde. "I certainly picked up that ring in that passage, close by this man who was lying there. But I didn't know he was dead; I didn't know he'd been murdered. All I know is that I was absolutely famishing, desperate, in no condition to think clearly about anything. I guess I should do the same thing again, under the circumstances. I only wish—"

He paused and began muttering to himself, and the two listeners glanced at each other. "You only wish what, Hyde?" asked Viner.

"I wish it had been a half-crown instead of that ring!" said Hyde with a queer flashing glance at his audience. "I could have got a bed for fourpence, and have lived for three days on the rest. And now—"

Viner made no remark; and Drillford, who was leaning against his desk, watching his prisoner closely, tapped Hyde on the shoulder.

"Can you describe the man who came out of the passage as you entered it?" he asked. "Be accurate, now!"

Hyde's face brightened a little, and his eyes became more intelligent.

"Yes!" he answered. "You know—or you don't know—how your mental faculties get sharpened by hunger. I was dull enough, in one way, but alert enough in another. I can describe the man—as much as I saw of him. A tall man—neither broad nor slender—half-and-half. Dressed in black from top to toe. A silk hat—patent leather boots—and muffled to the eyes in a white silk handkerchief."

"Could you see his face?" asked Drillford. "Was he clean-shaved, or bearded, or what?"

"I tell you he was muffled to the very eyes," answered Hyde. "One of those big silk handkerchiefs, you know—he had it drawn up over his chin and nose—right up."

"Then you'd have difficulty in knowing him again," observed Drillford. "There are a few thousand men in the West End of London who'd answer the description you've given."

"All right!" muttered Hyde doggedly. "But—I know what I saw. And if you want to help me, Viner, find that man—because he must have come straight away from the body!"

Drillford turned to Viner, glancing at the same time at the clock.

"Do you want to ask him any more questions?" he inquired. "No? Well, there's just one I want to ask. What were you doing with that knife in your possession?" he went on, turning to Hyde. "Be careful, now; you heard what the doctor said about it, in court?"

"I've nothing to conceal," replied Hyde. "You heard me say just now that I'd had engagements in the States. I bought that knife when I was out West—more as a curiosity than anything—and I've carried it in my pocket ever since."

Drillford looked again at Viner.

"He'll have to go, now," he said. "If you're going to employ legal help for him, the solicitor will know where and when he can see him." He paused on his way to the door and looked a little doubtfully at his prisoner. "I'll give you a bit of advice," he said, "not as an official, but as an individual. If you want to clear yourself, you'd better give all the information you can."

"I'll send my own solicitor to you, Hyde, at once," said Viner. "Be absolutely frank with him about everything."

When Viner was once more alone with Drillford, the two men looked at each other.

"My own impression," said Viner, after a significant silence, "is that we have just heard the plain truth! I'm going to work on it, anyway."

"In that case, Mr. Viner, there's no need for me to say anything," remarked Drillford. "It may be the plain truth. But as I am what I am, all I know is the first-hand evidence against this young fellow. So he really was a schoolmate of yours?"

"Certainly!" said Viner. "His people live, or did live, in the north. I shall have to get into communication with them. But now—what about the information he gave you? This man he saw?"

Drillford shook his head.

"Mr. Viner," he answered, "you don't understand police methods. We've got very strong evidence against Hyde. We know nothing about a tall man in a white muffler. If you want to clear Hyde, you'd better do what he suggested—find that man! I wish you may—if he ever existed!"

"You don't believe Hyde?" asked Viner.

"I'm not required to believe anything, sir, unless I've good proof of it," said Drillford with a significant smile. "If there is any mystery in this murder, well—let's hope something will clear it up."

Viner went away troubled and thoughtful. He remembered Hyde well enough now, though so many years had elapsed since their last meeting. And he was genuinely convinced of his innocence: there had been a ring of truth in all that he had said. Who, then, was the guilty man? And had robbery been the real motive of the murder? Might it not have been that Ashton had been murdered for some quite different motive, and that the murderer had hastily removed the watch, chain, purse, and rings from the body with the idea of diverting suspicion, and in his haste had dropped one of the rings?

"If only one knew more about Ashton and his affairs!" mused Viner. "Even his own people don't seem to know much."

This reminded him of his promise to call on Miss Wickham. He glanced at his watch: it was not yet one o'clock: the proceedings before the magistrate and the subsequent talk with Hyde had occupied comparatively little time. So Viner walked rapidly to number seven in the square, intent on doing something toward clearing Hyde of the charge brought against him. The parlour-maid whom he had seen the night before admitted him at once; it seemed to Viner that he was expected. She led him straight to a room in which Mrs. Killenhall and Miss Wickham were in conversation with an elderly man, who looked at Viner with considerable curiosity when his name was mentioned, and who was presently introduced to him as Mr. Ashton's solicitor, Mr. Pawle, of Crawle, Pawle and Rattenbury.

CHAPTER VI

SPECULATIONS

Mr. Pawle, an alert-looking, sharp-eyed little man, whom Viner at once recognized as having been present in the magistrate's court when Hyde was brought up, smiled as he shook hands with the new visitor.

"You don't know me, Mr. Viner," he said. "But I knew your father very well—he and I did a lot of business together in our time. You haven't followed his profession, I gather?"

"I'm afraid I haven't any profession, Mr. Pawle," answered Viner. "I'm a student—and a bit, a very little bit, of a writer."

"Aye, well, your father was a bit in that way too," remarked Mr. Pawle. "I remember that he was a great collector of books—you have his library, no doubt?"

"Yes, and I'm always adding to it," said Viner. "I shall be glad to show you my additions, any time."

Mr. Pawle turned to the two ladies, waving his hand at Viner.

"Knew his father most intimately," he said, as if he were guaranteeing the younger man's status. "Fine fellow, was Stephen Viner. Well," he continued, dropping into a chair, and pointing Viner to another, "this is a sad business that we've got concerned in, young man! Now, what do you think of the proceedings we've just heard? Your opinion, Mr. Viner, is probably better worth having than anybody's, for you saw this fellow running away from the scene, and you found my unfortunate client lying dead. What, frankly, *is* your opinion?"

"I had better tell you something that's just happened," replied Viner. He went on to repeat the statements which Hyde had just made to Drillford and himself. "My opinion," he concluded, "is that Hyde is speaking the plain truth—that all he really did was, as he affirms, to pick up that ring and run away. I don't believe he murdered Mr. Ashton, and I'm going to do my best to clear him."

He looked round from one listener to another, seeking opinion from each. Mr. Pawle maintained a professional imperturbability; Mrs. Killenhall looked mildly excited on hearing this new theory. But from Miss Wickham, Viner got a flash of intelligent comprehension.

"The real thing is this," she said, "none of us know anything about Mr. Ashton, really. He may have had enemies."

Pawle rubbed his chin; the action suggested perplexity.

"Miss Wickham is quite right," he said. "Mr. Ashton is more or less a man of mystery. He had been here in England two months. His ward knows next to nothing about him, except that she was left in his guardianship many a year ago, that he sent her to England, to school, and that he recently joined her here. Mrs. Killenhall knows no more than that he engaged her as chaperon to his ward, and that they exchanged references. His references were to his bankers and to me. But neither his bankers nor I know anything of him, except that he was a very well-to-do man. I can tell precisely what his bankers know. It is merely this: he transferred his banking-account from an Australian bank to them on coming to London. I saw them this morning on first getting the news. They have about two hundred thousand pounds lying to his credit. That's absolutely all they know about him—all!"

"The Australian bankers would know more," suggested Viner.

"Precisely!" agreed Mr. Pawle. "We can get news from them, in time. But now, what do I know? No more than this—Mr. Ashton called on me about six or seven weeks ago, told me that he was an Australian who had come to settle in London, that he was pretty well off, and that he wanted to make a will. We drafted a will on his instructions, and he duly executed it. Here it is! Miss Wickham has just seen it. Mr. Ashton has left every penny he had to Miss Wickham. He told me she was the only child of an old friend of his, who had given her into his care on his death out in Australia, some years

ago, and that as he, Ashton, had no near relations, he had always intended to leave her all he had. And so he has, without condition, or reservation, or anything—all is yours, Miss Wickham, and I'm your executor. But now," continued Mr. Pawle, "how far does this take us toward solving the mystery of my client's death? So far as I can see, next to nowhere! And I am certain of this, Mr. Viner: if we are going to solve it, and if this old school friend of yours is being unjustly accused, and is to be cleared, we must find out more about Ashton's doings since he came to London. The secret lies—there!"

"I quite agree," answered Viner. "But—who knows anything?"

Mr. Pawle looked at the two ladies.

"That's a stiff question!" he said. "The bankers tell me that Ashton only called on them two or three times; he called on me not oftener; neither they nor I ever had much conversation with him. These two ladies should know more about him than anybody—but they seem to know little."

Viner, who was sitting opposite to her, looked at Miss Wickham.

"You must know something about his daily life?" he said. "What did he do with himself?"

"We told you and the police-inspector pretty nearly all we know, last night," replied Miss Wickham. "As a rule, he used to go out of a morning—I think, from his conversation, he used to go down to the City. I don't think it was on business: I think, he liked to look about him. Sometimes he came home to lunch; sometimes he didn't. Very often in the afternoon he took us for motor-rides into the country—sometimes he took us to the theatres. He used to go out a good deal, alone at night—we don't know where."

"Did he ever mention any club?" asked Mr. Pawle.

"No, never!" replied Miss Wickham. "He was reticent about himself—always very kind and thoughtful and considerate for Mrs. Killenhall and myself, but he was a reserved man."

"Did he ever have any one to see him?" inquired the solicitor. "Any men to dine, or anything of that sort?"

"No—not once. No one has ever even called on him," said Miss Wickham. "We have had two or three dinner-parties, but the people who came were friends of mine—two or three girls whom I knew at school, who are now married and live in London."

"A lonely sort of man!" commented Mr. Pawle. "Yet—he must have known people. Where did he go when he went into the City? Where did he go at night? There must be somebody somewhere who can tell more about him. I think it will be well if I ask for information through the newspapers."

"There is one matter we haven't mentioned," said Mrs. Killenhall. "Just after we got settled down here, Mr. Ashton went away for some days—three or four days. That, of course, may be quite insignificant."

"Do you know where he went?" asked Mr. Pawle.

"No, we don't know," answered Mrs. Killenhall. "He went away one Monday morning, saying that now everything was in order we could spare him for a few days. He returned on the following Thursday or Friday,—I forget which,—but he didn't tell us where he had been."

"You don't think any of the servants would know?" asked Mr. Pawle.

"Oh, dear me, no!" replied Mrs. Killenhall. "He was the sort of man who rarely speaks to his servants—except when he wanted something."

Mr. Pawle looked at his watch and rose.

"Well!" he said. "We shall have to find out more about my late client's habits and whom he knew in London. There may have been a motive for this murder of which we know nothing. Are you coming, Mr. Viner? I should like a word with you!"

Viner, too, had risen; he looked at Miss Wickham.

"I hope my aunt called on you this morning?" he asked. "I was coming with her, but I had to go round to the police-station."

"She did call, and she was very kind indeed, thank you," said Miss Wickham. "I hope she'll come again."

"We shall both be glad to do anything," said Viner. "Please don't hesitate about sending round for me if there's anything at all I can do." He followed Mr. Pawle into the square, and turned him towards his own house. "Come and lunch with me," he said. "We can talk over this at our leisure."

"Thank you—I will," answered Mr. Pawle. "Very pleased. Between you and me, Mr. Viner, this is a very queer business. I'm quite prepared to believe the story that young fellow Hyde tells. I wish he'd told it straight out in court. But you must see that he's in a very dangerous position—very dangerous indeed! The police, of course, won't credit a word of his tale—not they! They've got a strong *prima facie* case against him, and they'll follow it up for all they're worth. The real thing to do, if you're to save him, is to find the real murderer. And to do that, you'll need all your wits! If one only had some theory!"

Viner introduced Mr. Pawle to Miss Penkridge with the remark that she was something of an authority in mysteries, and as soon as they had sat down to lunch, told her of Langton Hyde and his statement.

"Just so!" said Miss Penkridge dryly. "That's much more likely to be the real truth than that this lad killed Ashton. There's a great deal more in this murder than is on the surface, and I dare say Mr. Pawle agrees with me."

"I dare say I do," assented Mr. Pawle. "The difficulty is—how to penetrate into the thick cloak of mystery."

"When I was round there, at Number Seven, this morning," observed Miss Penkridge, "those two talked very freely to me about Mr. Ashton. Now, there's one thing struck me at once—there must be men in London who knew him. He couldn't go out and about, as he evidently did, without meeting men. Even if it wasn't in business, he'd meet men somewhere. And if I were you, I should invite men who knew him to come forward and tell what they know."

"It shall be done—very good advice, ma'am," said Mr. Pawle.

"And there's another thing," said Miss Penkridge. "I should find out what can be told about Mr. Ashton where he came from. I believe you can get telegraphic information from Australia within a few hours. Why not go to the expense—when there's so much at stake? Depend upon it, the real secret of this murder lies back in the past—perhaps the far past."

"That too shall be done," agreed Mr. Pawle. "I shouldn't be surprised if you're right."

"In my opinion," remarked Miss Penkridge, dryly, "the robbing of this dead man was all a blind. Robbery wasn't the motive. Murder was the thing in view! And why? It may have been revenge. It may be that Ashton had to be got out of the way. And I shouldn't wonder a bit if that isn't at the bottom of it, which is at the top and bottom of pretty nearly everything!"

"And that, ma'am?" asked Mr. Pawle, who evidently admired Miss Penkridge's shrewd observations, "that is what, now?"

"Money!" said Miss Penkridge. "Money!"

The old solicitor went away, promising to get to work on the lines suggested by Miss Penkridge, and next day he telephoned to Viner asking him to go down to his offices in Bedford Row. Viner hurried off, and on arriving found Mr. Pawle with a cablegram before him.

"I sent a pretty long message to Melbourne, to Ashton's old bankers, as soon as I left you yesterday," he said. "I gave them the news of his murder, and asked for certain information. Here's their answer. I rang you up as soon as I got it."

Viner read the cablegram carefully:

Deeply regret news. Ashton well known here thirty years dealer in real estate. Respected, wealthy. Quiet man, bachelor. Have made inquiries in quarters likely to know. Cannot trace anything about friend named Wickham. Ashton was away from Melbourne, up country, four years, some years ago. May have known Wickham then. Ashton left here end July, by *Maraquibo*, for London. Was accompanied by two friends Fosdick and Stephens. Please inform if can do more.

"What do you think of that?" asked Mr. Pawle. "Not much in it, is there?"

"There's the mention of two men who might know something of Ashton's habits," said Viner. "If Fosdick and Stephens are still in England and were Ashton's friends, one would naturally conclude that he'd seen them sometimes. Yet we haven't heard of their ever going to his house."

"We can be quite certain that they never did—from what the two ladies say," remarked Mr. Pawle. "Perhaps they don't live in London. I'll advertise for both. But now, here's another matter. I asked these people if they could tell me anything about Wickham, the father of this girl to whom Ashton's left his very considerable fortune. Well, you see, they can't. Now, it's a very curious thing, but Miss Wickham has no papers, has, in fact, nothing whatever to prove her identity. Nor have I. Ashton left nothing of that sort. I know no more, and she knows no more, than what he told both of us—that her father died when she was a mere child, her mother already being dead, that the father left her in Ashton's guardianship, and that Ashton, after sending her here to school, eventually came and took her to live with him. There isn't a single document really to show who she is, who her father was, or anything about her family."

"Is that very important?" asked Viner.

"It's decidedly odd!" said Mr. Pawle. "This affair seems to be getting more mysterious than ever."

"What's to be done next?" inquired Viner.

"Well, the newspapers are always very good about that," answered the solicitor. "I'm getting them to insert paragraphs asking the two men, Fosdick and Stephens, to come forward and tell us if they've seen anything of Ashton since he came to England; I'm also asking if anybody can tell us where Ashton was when he went away from home on that visit that Mrs. Killenhall spoke of. If—"

Just then a clerk came into Mr. Pawle's room, and bending down to him, whispered a few words which evidently occasioned him great surprise.

"At once!" he said. "Bring them straight in, Parkinson. God bless me!" he exclaimed, turning to Viner. "Here are the two men in question—Fosdick and Stephens! Saw our name in the paper as Ashton's solicitors and want to see me urgently."

CHAPTER VII

WHAT WAS THE SECRET?

The two men who were presently ushered in were typical Colonials—big, hefty fellows as yet in early middle age, alert, evidently prosperous, if their attire and appointments were anything to go by, and each was obviously deeply interested in the occasion of his visit to Mr. Pawle. Two pairs of quick eyes took in the old solicitor and his companion, and the elder of the men came forward in a businesslike manner.

"Mr. Pawle, I understand?" he said. "I'm Mr. Fosdick, of Melbourne, Victoria; this is my friend Mr. Stephens, same place."

"Take a seat, Mr. Fosdick—have this chair, Mr. Stephens," responded Mr. Pawle. "You wish to see me—on business?"

"That's so," answered Fosdick as the two men seated themselves by the solicitor's desk. "We saw your name in the newspapers this morning in connection with the murder of John Ashton. Now, we knew John Ashton—he was a Melbourne man, too—and we can tell something about him. So we came to you instead of the police. Because, Mr. Pawle, what we can tell is maybe more a matter for a lawyer than for a policeman. It's mysterious."

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Pawle, "I'll be frank with you. I recognized your names as soon as my clerk announced them. Here's a cablegram which I have just received from Melbourne—you'll see your names mentioned in it."

The two callers bent over the cablegram, and Fosdick looked up and nodded.

"Yes, that's right," he said. "We came over with John Ashton in the *Maraquibo*. We knew him pretty well before that—most folk in Melbourne did. But of course, we were thrown into his company on board ship rather more than we'd ever been before. And we very much regret to hear of what's happened to him."

"You say there is something you can tell?" observed Mr. Pawle. "If it's anything that will help to solve the mystery of this murder,—for there is a mystery,—I shall be very glad to hear it."

Fosdick and Stephens glanced at each other and then at Viner, who sat a little in Mr. Pawle's rear.

"Partner of yours?" asked Fosdick.

"Not at all! This gentleman," replied Mr. Pawle, "is Mr. Viner. It was he who found Ashton's dead body. They were neighbours."

"Well, you found the body of a very worthy man, sir," remarked Fosdick gravely. "And we'd like to do something toward finding the man who killed him. For we don't think it was this young fellow who's charged with it, nor that robbery was the motive. We think John Ashton was—removed. Put out of the way!"

"Why, now?" asked Mr. Pawle.

"I'll tell you," replied Fosdick. "My friend Stephens, here, is a man of few words; he credits me with more talkativeness than he'll lay claim to. So I'm to tell the tale. There mayn't be much in it, and there may be a lot. We think there's a big lot! But this is what it comes to: Ashton was a close man, a reserved man. However, one night, when the three of us were having a quiet cigar in a corner of the smoking saloon in the *Maraquibo*, he opened out to us a bit. We'd been talking about getting over to England—we'd all three emigrated, you'll understand, when we were very young—and the talk ran on what we'd do. Fosdick and Stephens, d'ye see, were only on a visit,—which is just coming to an end, Mr. Pawle; we sail home in a day or two,—but Ashton was turning home for good. And he said to us, in a sort of burst of confidence, that he'd have plenty to do when he landed. He said that he was in possession—sole possession—of a most extraordinary secret, the revelation of which would

affect one of the first families in England, and he was going to bring it out as soon as he'd got settled down in London. Well—you may be surprised, but—that's all."

"All you can tell?" exclaimed Mr. Pawle.

"All! But we can see plenty in it," said Fosdick. "Our notion is that Ashton was murdered by somebody who didn't want that secret to come out. Now, you see if events don't prove we're right."

"Gentlemen," said Mr. Pawle, "allow me to ask you a few questions."

"Many as you please, sir," assented Fosdick. "We'll answer anything."

"He didn't tell you what the secret was?" asked Mr. Pawle.

"No. He said we'd know more about it in time," replied Fosdick. "It would possibly lead to legal proceedings, he said—in that case, it would be one of the most celebrated cases ever known."

"And romantic," added Stephens, speaking for the first time. "Romantic!"

That was the term he used."

"And romantic—quite so," assented Fosdick. "Celebrated and romantic—those were the words. But in any case, he said, whether it got to law matters or not, it couldn't fail to be in the papers, and we should read all about it in due time."

"And you know no more than that?" inquired Mr. Pawle.

"Nothing!" said Fosdick with decision.

Mr. Pawle looked at Viner as if to seek some inspiration. And Viner took up the work of examination.

"Do you know anything of Mr. Ashton's movements since he came to London?" he asked.

"Next to nothing," replied Fosdick. "Ashton left the *Maraquibo* at Naples, and came overland—he wanted to put in a day or two in Rome and a day or two in Paris. We came round by sea to Tilbury. Then Stephens and I separated—he went to see his people in Scotland, and I went to mine in Lancashire. We met—Stephens and I—in London here last week. And we saw Ashton for just a few minutes, down in the City."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Pawle. "You have seen him, then! Did anything happen?"

"You mean relating to what he'd told *us*?" said Fosdick. "Well, no more than I asked him sort of jokingly, how the secret was. And he said it was just about to come out, and we must watch the papers."

"There was a remark he made," observed Stephens. "He said it would be of just as much interest, perhaps of far more, to our Colonial papers as to the English."

"Yes—he said that," agreed Fosdick. "He knew, you see, that we were just about setting off home."

"He didn't ask you to his house?" inquired Mr. Pawle.

"That was mentioned, but we couldn't fix dates," replied Fosdick. "However, we told him we were both coming over again on business, next year, and we'd come and see him then."

Mr. Pawle spread out his hands with a gesture of helplessness.

"We're as wise as ever," he exclaimed.

"No," said Fosdick emphatically, "wiser! The man had a secret, affecting powerful interests. Many a man's been put away for having a secret."

Mr. Pawle put his finger-tips together and looked thoughtfully at his elder visitor.

"Well, there's a good deal in that," he said at last. "Now, while you're here, perhaps you can tell me something else about Ashton. How long have you known him?"

"Ever since we were lads," answered Fosdick readily. "He was a grown man, then, though. Stephens and I are about forty—Ashton was sixty."

"You've always known of him as a townsman of Melbourne?"

"That's so. We were taken out there when we were about ten or twelve—Ashton lived near where we settled down. He was a speculator in property—made his money in buying and selling lots."

"Was he well known?"

"Everybody knew Ashton."

"Did you ever know of his having a friend named Wickham?" inquired Mr. Pawle with a side-glance at Viner. "Think carefully, now!"

But Fosdick shook his head, and Stephens shook his.

"Never heard the name," said Fosdick.

"Did you ever hear Ashton mention the name!" asked Mr. Pawle.

"Never!"

"Never heard him mention it on board ship—when he was coming home?"

"No—never!"

"Well," said Mr. Pawle, "I happen to know that Ashton, some years ago, had a very particular friend named Wickham, out in Australia."

A sudden light came into Fosdick's keen grey-blue eyes.

"Ah," he said. "I can tell how that may be. A good many years ago, when we were just familiar enough with Melbourne to know certain people in it, I remember that Ashton was away up country for some time—as that cablegram says. Most likely he knew this Wickham then. Is that the Wickham mentioned there?"

"It is," assented Mr. Pawle, "and I want to know who he was."

"Glad to set any inquiries going for you when we get back," said Fosdick.

"We sail in two days."

"Gentlemen," answered Mr. Pawle gravely, "it takes, I believe, five or six weeks to reach Australia. By the time you get there, this unfortunate fellow Hyde, who's charged with the murder of Ashton, on evidence that is quite sufficient to satisfy an average British jury, will probably have been tried, convicted and hanged. No! I'm afraid we must act at once if we're to help him, as Mr. Viner here is very anxious to do. And there's something you can do. The coroner's inquest is to be held tomorrow. Go there and volunteer the evidence you've just told us! It mayn't do a scrap of good—but it will introduce an element of doubt into the case against Hyde, and that will benefit him."

"Tomorrow?" said Fosdick. "We'll do it. Give us the time and place. We'll be there, Mr. Pawle. I see your point, sir—to introduce the idea that there's more to this than the police think."

When the two callers had gone, Mr. Pawle turned to Viner.

"Now, my friend," he said, "you've already sent your own solicitor to Hyde, haven't you? Who is he, by the by?"

"Felpham, of Chancery Lane," replied Viner.

"Excellent man! Now," said Mr. Pawle, "you go to Felpham and tell him what these two Australians have just told us, and say that in my opinion it will be well worth while, in his client's interest, to develop their evidence for all it's worth. That theory of Fosdick's may have a great deal in it. And another thing—Felpham must insist on Hyde being present at the inquest tomorrow and giving evidence. That, I say, must be done! Hyde must make his story public as soon as possible. He must be brought to the inquest. He'll be warned by the coroner, of course, that he's not bound to give any evidence at all, but he must go into the box and tell, on oath, all that he told you and Drillford. Now be off to Felpham and insist on all this being done."

Viner went away to Chancery Lane more puzzled than ever. What was this secret affecting one of the first families in England, of which Ashton had told his two Melbourne friends? How was it, if legal proceedings were likely to arise out of it, that Ashton had not told Pawle about it? Was it possible that he had gone to some other solicitor? If so, why didn't he come forward? And what, too, was this mystery about Miss Wickham and her father? Why, as Pawle had remarked, were there no papers or documents, concerning her to be found anywhere? Had she anything to do with the secret? It seemed to him that the confusion was becoming more confounded. But the first thing to do was to save Hyde. And he was relieved to see that Felpham jumped at Pawle's suggestion.

"Good!" said Felpham. "Of course, I'll have Hyde brought up at the inquest, and he shall tell his story. And we'll save these Australian chaps until Hyde's been in the box. I do wish Hyde himself could tell us more about that man whom he saw leaving the passage. Of course, that man is the actual murderer."

"You think that?" asked Viner.

"Don't doubt it for one moment—and a cool, calculating hand, too!" declared Felpham. "A man who knew what he was doing. How long do you suppose it would take to strike the life out of a man and to snatch a few valuables from his clothing? Pooh! to a hand such as this evidently was, a minute. Then, he walks calmly away. And—who is he? But—we're not doing badly."

That, too, was Viner's impression when he walked out of the coroner's court next day. After having endured its close and sordid atmosphere for four long hours, he felt, more from intuition than from anything tangible, that things had gone well for Hyde. One fact was plain—nothing more could be brought out against Hyde, either there, when the inquest was resumed a week later, or before the magistrate, or before a judge and jury. Every scrap of evidence against him was produced before the coroner: it was obvious that the police could rake up no more, unless indeed they could prove him to have hidden Ashton's remaining valuables somewhere which was ostensibly an impossibility. And the evidence of Hyde himself had impressed the court. Two days' rest and refreshment, even in a prison and on prison fare, had pulled him together, and he had given his evidence clearly and confidently. Viner had seen that people were impressed by it: they had been impressed, too, by the evidence volunteered by the two Australians. And when the coroner announced that he should adjourn the inquiry for a week, the folk who had crowded the court went away asking each other not if Hyde was guilty, but what was this secret of which Ashton had boasted the possession?

Drillford caught Viner up as he walked down the street and smiled grimly at him.

"Well, you're doing your best for him, and no mistake, Mr. Viner," he said. "He's a lucky chap to have found such a friend!"

"He's as innocent as I am," answered Viner. "Look here; if you police want to do justice, why don't you try to track the man whom Hyde has told of?"

"What clue have we?" exclaimed Drillford almost contemptuously. "A tall man in black clothes, muffled to his eyes! But I'll tell you what, Mr. Viner," he added with a grin: "as you're so confident, why don't you find him?"

"Perhaps I shall," said Viner, quietly.

He meant what he said, and he was thinking deeply what might be done towards accomplishing his desires, when, later in the afternoon, Mr. Pawle rang him up on the telephone.

"Run down!" said Mr. Pawle cheerily. "There's a new development!"

CHAPTER VIII

NEWS FROM ARCADIA

When Viner, half an hour later, walked into the waiting-room at Crawle, Pawle and Rattenbury's, he was aware of a modestly attired young woman, evidently, from her dress and appearance, a country girl, who sat shyly turning over the pages of an illustrated paper. And as soon as he got into Pawle's private room, the old solicitor jerked his thumb at the door by which Viner had entered, and smiled significantly.

"See that girl outside?" he asked. "She's the reason of my ringing you up."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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