

FLETCHER JOSEPH SMITH

IN THE MAYOR'S PARLOUR

Joseph Fletcher

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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	15
CHAPTER IV	21
CHAPTER V	26
CHAPTER VI	31
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	33

J. S. Fletcher

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CHAPTER I

THE MAYOR'S PARLOUR

Hathelsborough market-place lies in the middle of the town—a long, somewhat narrow parallelogram, enclosed on its longer side by old gabled houses; shut in on its western end by the massive bulk of the great parish church of St. Hathelswide, Virgin and Martyr, and at its eastern by the ancient walls and high roofs of its mediæval Moot Hall. The inner surface of this space is paved with cobble-stones, worn smooth by centuries of usage: it is only of late years that the conservative spirit of the old borough has so far accommodated itself to modern requirements as to provide foot-paths in front of the shops and houses. But there that same spirit has stopped; the utilitarian of to-day would sweep away, as being serious hindrances to wheeled traffic, the two picturesque fifteenth-century erections which stand in this market-place; these, High Cross and Low Cross, one at the east end, in front of the Moot Hall, the other at the west, facing the chancel of the church, remain, to the delight of the archæologist, as instances of the fashion in which our forefathers built gathering places in the very midst of narrow thoroughfares.

Under the graceful cupola and the flying buttresses of High Cross the countryfolk still expose for sale on market-days their butter and their eggs; around the base of the slender shaft called Low Cross they still offer their poultry and rabbits; on other than market-days High Cross and Low Cross alike make central, open-air clubs, for the patriarchs of the place, who there assemble in the lazy afternoons and still lazier eventides, to gossip over the latest items of local news; conscious that as they are doing so their ancestors have done for many a generation, and that old as they may be themselves, in their septuagenarian or octogenarian states, they are as infants in comparison with the age of the stones and bricks and timbers about them, grey and fragrant with the antiquity of at least three hundred years.

Of all this mass of venerable material, still sound and uncrumbled, the great tall-towered church at one end of the market-place, and the square, heavily fashioned Moot Hall at the other, go farthest back, through association, into the mists of the Middle Ages. The church dates from the thirteenth century and, though it has been skilfully restored on more than one occasion, there is nothing in its cathedral-like proportions that suggests modernity; the Moot Hall, erected a hundred years later, remains precisely as when it was first fashioned, and though it, too, has passed under the hand of the restorer its renovation has only taken the shape of strengthening an already formidably strong building. Extending across nearly the whole eastern end of the market-place, and flanked on one side by an ancient dwelling-house—once the official residence of the Mayors of Hathelsborough—and on the other by a more modern but still old-world building, long used as a bank, Hathelsborough Moot Hall presents the appearance of a mediæval fortress, as though its original builders had meant it to be a possible refuge for the townsfolk against masterful Baron or marauding Scot. From the market-place itself there is but one entrance to it; an arched doorway opening upon a low-roofed stone hall; in place of a door there are heavy gates of iron, with a smaller wicket-gate set in their midst; from the stone hall a stone stair leads to the various chambers above; in the outer walls the windows are high and narrow; each is filled with old painted glass. A strong, grim building, this; and when the iron gates are locked, as they are every night when the curfew bell—an ancient institution jealously kept up in Hathelsborough—rings from St. Hathelswide's tower, a man might safely wager his all to nothing that only modern artillery could effect an entrance to its dark and gloomy interior.

On a certain April evening, the time being within an hour of curfew—which, to be exact, is rung in Hathelsborough every night, all the year round, sixty minutes after sunset, despite the fact that it is nowadays but a meaningless if time-honoured ceremony—Bunning, caretaker and custodian of the Moot Hall, stood without its gates, smoking his pipe and looking around him. He was an ex-Army man, Bunning, who had seen service in many parts of the world, and was frequently heard to declare that although he had set eyes on many men and many cities he had never found the equal of Hathelsborough folk, nor seen a fairer prospect than that on which he now gazed. The truth was that Bunning was a Hathelsborough man, and having wandered about a good deal during his military service, from Aldershot to Gibraltar, and Gibraltar to Malta, and Malta to Cairo, and Cairo to Peshawar, was well content to settle down in a comfortable berth amidst the familiar scenes of his childhood. But anyone who loves the ancient country towns of England would have agreed with Bunning that Hathelsborough market-place made an unusually attractive picture on a spring evening. There were the old gabled houses, quaintly roofed and timbered; there the lace-like masonry of High Cross; there the slender proportions of Low Cross; there the mighty bulk of the great church built over the very spot whereon the virgin saint suffered martyrdom; there, towering above the gables on the north side, the well-preserved masonry of the massive Norman Keep of Hathelsborough Castle; there a score of places and signs with which Bunning had kept up a close acquaintance in youth and borne in mind when far away under other skies. And around the church tower, and at the base of the tall keep, were the elms for which the town was famous; mighty giants of the tree world, just now bursting into leaf, and above them the rooks and jackdaws circling and calling above the hum and murmur of the town.

To Bunning's right and left, going away from the eastern corner of the market-place, lay two narrow streets, called respectively River Gate and Meadow Gate—one led downwards to the little river on the southern edge of the town; the other ran towards the wide-spread grass-lands that stretched on its northern boundary. And as he stood looking about him, he saw a man turn the corner of Meadow Gate—a man who came hurrying along in his direction, walking sharply, his eyes bent on the flags beneath his feet, his whole attitude that of one in deep reflection. At sight of him Bunning put his pipe in his pocket, gave himself the soldier's shake and, as the man drew near, stood smartly to attention. The man looked up—Bunning's right hand went up to his cap in the old familiar fashion; that was how, for many a long year of service, he had saluted his superiors.

There was nothing very awe-compelling about the person whom the caretaker thus greeted with so much punctilious ceremony. He was a little, somewhat insignificant-looking man—at first sight. His clothes were well-worn and carelessly put on; the collar of his under-coat projected high above that of his overcoat; his necktie had slipped round towards one ear; his linen was frayed; his felt hat, worn anyway, needed brushing; he wore cotton gloves, too big for him. He carried a mass of papers and books under one arm; the other hand grasped an umbrella which had grown green and grey in service. He might have been all sorts of insignificant things: a clerk, going homeward from his work; a tax-gatherer, carrying his documents; a rent-collector, anxious about a defaulting tenant—anything of that sort. But Bunning knew him for Mr. Councillor John Wallingford, at that time Mayor of Hathelsborough. He knew something else too—that Wallingford, in spite of his careless attire and very ordinary appearance, was a remarkable man. He was not a native of the old town; although he was, for twelve months at any rate, its first magistrate, and consequently the most important person in the place, Hathelsborough folk still ranked him as a stranger, for he had only been amongst them for some twelve years. But during that time he had made his mark in the town—coming there as managing clerk to a firm of solicitors, he had ultimately succeeded to the practice which he had formerly managed for its two elderly partners, now retired. At an early period of his Hathelsborough career he had taken keen and deep interest in the municipal affairs of his adopted town and had succeeded in getting a seat on the Council, where he had quickly made his influence felt. And in the previous November he had been elected—by a majority of one vote—to the Mayoralty and had so

become the four hundred and eighty-first burgess of the ancient borough to wear the furred mantle and gold chain which symbolized his dignity. He looked very different in these grandeurs to what he did in his everyday attire, but whether in the Mayoral robes or in his carelessly worn clothes any close observer would have seen that Wallingford was a sharp, shrewd man with all his wits about him—a close-seeing, concentrated man, likely to go through, no matter what obstacles rose in his path, with anything that he took in hand.

Bunning was becoming accustomed to these evening visits of the Mayor to the Moot Hall. Of late, Wallingford had come there often, going upstairs to the Mayor's Parlour and remaining there alone until ten or eleven o'clock. Always he brought books and papers with him; always, as he entered, he gave the custodian the same command—no one was to disturb him, on any pretext whatever. But on this occasion, Bunning heard a different order.

"Oh, Bunning," said the Mayor, as he came up to the iron gates before which the ex-sergeant-major stood, still at attention, "I shall be in the Mayor's Parlour for some time to-night, and I'm not to be disturbed, as usual. Except, however, for this—I'm expecting my cousin, Mr. Brent, from London, this evening, and I left word at my rooms that if he came any time before ten he was to be sent on here. So, if he comes, show him up to me. But nobody else, Bunning."

"Very good, your Worship," replied Bunning. "I'll see to it. Mr. Brent, from London."

"You've seen him before," said the Mayor. "He was here last Christmas—tall young fellow, clean-shaven. You'll know him."

He hurried inside the stone hall and went away by the stairs to the upper regions of the gloomy old place, and Bunning, with another salute, turned from him, pulled out his pipe and began to smoke again. He was never tired of looking out on that old market-place; even in the quietest hours of the evening there was always something going on, something to be seen, trivial things, no doubt, but full of interest to Bunning: folks coming and going; young people sweethearting; acquaintances passing and re-passing; these things were of more importance to his essentially parochial mind than affairs of State.

Presently came along another Corporation official, whom Bunning knew as well as he knew the Mayor, an official who, indeed, was known all over the town, and familiar to everybody, from the mere fact that he was always attired in a livery the like of which he and his predecessors had been wearing for at least two hundred years. This was Spizey, a consequential person who, in the borough rolls for the time being, was entered as Bellman, Town Crier, and Mace Bearer. Spizey was a big, fleshy man, with a large solemn face, a ponderous manner, and small eyes. His ample figure was habited at all seasons of the year in a voluminous cloak which had much gold lace on its front and cuffs and many capes about the shoulders; he wore a three-cornered laced hat on his bullet head, and carried a tall staff, not unlike a wand, in his hand. There were a few—very few—progressive folk in Hathelsborough who regarded Spizey and his semi-theatrical attire as an anachronism, and openly derided both, but so far nobody had dared to advocate the abolition of him and his livery. He was part and parcel of the high tradition, a reminder of the fact that Hathelsborough possessed a Charter of Incorporation centuries before its now more popular and important neighbouring boroughs gained theirs, and in his own opinion the discontinuance of his symbols of office would have been little less serious than the sale of the Mayor's purple robe and chain of solid gold: Spizey, thus attired, was Hathelsborough. And, as he was not slow to remind awe-stricken audiences at his favourite tavern, Mayors, Aldermen and Councillors were, so to speak, creatures of the moment—the Mayor, for example, was His Worship for twelve months and plain Mr. Chipps the grocer ever after—but he, Spizey, was a Permanent Institution, and not to be moved.

Spizey was on his way to his favourite tavern now, to smoke his pipe—which it was beneath his dignity to do in public—and drink his glass amongst his cronies, but he stopped to exchange the time of day with Bunning, whom he regarded with patronizing condescension, as being a lesser light than himself. And having remarked that this was a fine evening, after the usual fashion of British

folk, who are for ever wasting time and breath in drawing each other's attention to obvious facts, he cocked one of his small eyes at the stairs behind the iron gates.

"Worship up there?" he asked, transferring his gaze to Bunning.

"Just gone up," answered Bunning. "Five minutes ago."

The Mace-Bearer looked up the market-place, down River Gate and along Meadow Gate. Having assured himself that there was nobody within fifty yards, he sank his mellow voice to a melodious whisper, and poked Bunning in the ribs with a pudgy forefinger.

"Ah!" he said confidently. "Just so! Again! Now, as a Corporation official—though not, to be sure, of the long standing that I am—what do you make of it?"

"Make of what?" demanded the caretaker.

Spizey came still nearer to his companion. He was one of those men who when disposed to confidential communication have a trick of getting as close as possible to their victims, and of poking and prodding them. Again he stuck his finger into Bunning's ribs.

"Make of what, says you!" he breathed. "Ay, to be sure! Why, of all this here coming up at night to the Moot Hall, and sitting, all alone, in that there Mayor's Parlour, not to be disturbed by nobody, whosoever! What's it all mean?"

"No business of mine," replied Bunning. "Nor of anybody's but his own. That is, so far as I'm aware of. What about it?"

Spizey removed his three-cornered hat, took a many-coloured handkerchief out of it, and wiped his forehead—he was in a state of perpetual warmth, and had a habit of mopping his brow when called on for mental effort.

"Ah!" he said. "That's just it—what about it, do you say? Well, what I say is this here—'taint in accordance with precedent! Precedent, mark you!—which is what a ancient Corporation of this sort goes by. Where should we all be if what was done by our fathers before us wasn't done by us? What has been, must be! Take me, don't I do what's been done in this here town of Hathelsborough for time immemorial? Well, then!"

"That's just it," said Bunning. "Well, then? Why shouldn't his Worship come here at night and stick up there as long as he likes? What's against it?"

"Precedent!" retorted Spizey. "Ain't never been done before—never! Haven't I been in the office I hold nigh on to forty years? Seen a many mayors, aldermen and common councillors come and go in my time. But never do I remember a Mayor coming here to this Moot Hall of a night, with books and papers—which is dangerous matters at any time, except in their proper place, such as my proclamations and the town dockyments—and sitting there for hours, doing—what?"

Bunning shook his head. He was pulling steadily at his pipe as he listened, and he gazed meditatively at the smoke curling away from it and his pipe.

"Well?" he said, after a pause. "And what do you make of it? You'll have some idea, I reckon, a man of your importance."

Once more the Mace-Bearer looked round, and once more applied his forefinger to Bunning's waistline. His voice grew deep with confidence.

"Mischief!" he whispered. "Mischief! That's what I make of it! He's up to something—something what'll be dangerous to the vested interests in this here ancient borough. Ain't he allus been one o' them Radicals—what wants to pull down everything that's made this here country what it is? Didn't he put in his last election address, when he was a candidate for the Council, for the Castle Ward, that he was all for retrenchment and reform? Didn't he say, when he was elected Mayor—by a majority of one vote!—that he intended to go thoroughly into the financial affairs of the town, and do away with a lot of expenses which in his opinion wasn't necessary? Oh, I've heard talk—men in high office, like me, hears a deal. Why, I've heard it said that he's been heard to say, in private, that it was high time to abolish me!"

Bunning's mouth opened a little. He was a man of simple nature, and the picture of Hathelsborough without Spizey and his livery appalled him.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed.

"To be sure!" said Spizey. "It's beyond comprehension! To abolish me!—what, in a manner of speaking, has existed I don't know how long. I ain't a man—I'm a office! Who'd cry things that was lost—at that there Cross? Who'd pull the big bell on great occasions, and carry round the little 'un when there was proclamations to be made? Who'd walk in front o' the Mayor's procession, with the Mace—what was give to this here town by King Henry VII, his very self? Abolish me? Why, it's as bad as talking about abolishing the Bible!"

"It's the age for that sort of thing," remarked Bunning. "I seen a deal of it in the Army. Abolished all sorts o' things, they have, there. I never seen no good come of it, neither. I'm all for keeping up the good old things—can't better 'em, in my opinion. And, as you say, that there mace of ours—'tis ancient!"

"Nobody but one o' these here Radicals and levellers could talk o' doing away with such proper institutions," affirmed Spizey. "But I tell yer—I've heard of it. He said—but you'd scarce believe it!—there was no need for a town crier, nor a bellman, and, as for this mace, it could be carried on Mayor's Day by a policeman! Fancy that, now—our mace carried by a policeman!"

"Dear, dear!" said Bunning. "Don't seem to fit in, that! However," he added consolingly, "if they did abolish you, you'd no doubt get a handsome pension."

"Pension!" exclaimed Spizey. "That's a detail!—it's the office I'm a-considering of. What this here free and ancient borough 'ud look like, without me, I cannot think!"

He shook his head and went sadly away, and Bunning, suddenly remembering that it was about his supper-time, prepared to retreat into the room which he and his wife shared, at the end of the stone hall. But as he entered the gates, a quick firm footstep sounded behind him, and he turned to see a smart, alert-looking young man approaching. Bunning recognized him as a stranger whom he had seen once or twice before, at intervals, in company with Wallingford. For the second time that night he saluted.

"Looking for the Mayor, sir?" he asked, throwing the gate open. "His Worship's upstairs—I was to show you up. Mr. Brent, isn't it, sir?"

"Right!" replied the other. "My cousin left word I was to join him here. Whereabouts is he in this old fortress of yours?"

"This way, sir," said Bunning. "Fortress, you call it, sir, but it's more like a rabbit-warren! No end of twists and turns—that is, once you get inside it."

He preceded Richard Brent up the stone staircase, along narrow corridors and passages, until he came to a door, at which he knocked gently. Receiving no reply he opened it and went in, motioning Brent to follow. But before Bunning had well crossed the threshold he started back with a sharp cry. The Mayor was there, but he was lying face forward across the desk—lifeless.

CHAPTER II

THE CAMBRIC HANDKERCHIEF

Bunning knew the Mayor was dead before that cry of surprise had passed his lips. In his time he had seen many dead men—sometimes it was a bullet, sometimes a bayonet; he knew the signs of what follows on the swift passage of one and the sharp thrust of the other. In his first glance into the room he had been quick to notice the limp hand hanging across the edge of the desk, the way in which Wallingford's head lay athwart the mass of papers over which he had collapsed in falling forward from his chair—that meant death. And the old soldier's observant eye had seen more than that—over the litter of documents which lay around the still figure were great crimson stains. The caretaker's cry changed to articulated speech.

"Murder! The Mayor's been murdered!"

Brent, a strongly-built and active man, pushed by, and made for the desk. He was going to lay a hand on his cousin's shoulder, but Bunning stopped him.

"For God's sake, Mr. Brent, don't touch him!" he exclaimed. "Let him be, sir, till the police—" He paused, staring round the gloomy, oak-panelled room from the walls of which the portraits of various dignitaries looked down. "Who on earth can have done it?" he muttered. "It's—it's not three-quarters of an hour since he came up here!"

"Alone?" asked Brent.

"Alone, sir! And I'll take my solemn oath that nobody was here, waiting for him. I'd been in this room myself, not five minutes before he came," said Dunning. "It was empty of course."

Brent disregarded the caretaker's admonition and laid a finger on the dead man's forehead. But Bunning pointed to a dark stain, still spreading, on the back of the Mayor's coat—a well-worn garment of grey tweed.

"Look there, sir," he whispered. "He's been run through the body from behind—right through the heart!—as he sat in his chair. Murder!"

"Who should murder him?" demanded Brent.

Bunning made no answer. He was looking round. There were three doors into that room; he glanced at each, shaking his head after each glance.

"We'd best get the police, at once, Mr. Brent," he said. "The police station's just at the back—there's a way down to it from outside this parlour. I'll run down now. You, sir—"

"I'll stop here," answered Brent. "But get a doctor, will you? I want to know—"

"Dr. Wellesley, the police-surgeon, is next door," replied Brent. "The police'll get him. But he's beyond all doctors, Mr. Brent! Instantaneous—that! I know!"

He hurried out of the room, and Brent, left alone with the dead man, looked at him once again wonderingly. Cousins though they were, he and Wallingford knew little of each other: their acquaintance, such as it was, had not been deep enough to establish any particular affection between them. But since Wallingford's election as Mayor of Hathelsborough Brent, by profession a journalist in London, had twice spent a week-end with him in the old town, and had learnt something of his plans for a reform of certain matters connected with the administration of its affairs. They had discussed these things on the occasion of his last visit, and now, as he stood by the dead man, Brent remembered certain words which Wallingford had spoken.

"There are things that I can do," Wallingford had said, with some confidence. And then he had added, with a cynical laugh, "But there are other things that—why, it would be, literally, as much as my life's worth to even try to undermine them!"

That was now four months since, but Brent remembered. And as he stood there, waiting for help which would be useless, he began to wonder if Wallingford, eager for reform, had attempted anything

likely to bring him into personal danger. Certainly, from all that Brent knew of him, he was the sort of man who, having set himself to a task, would let nothing stop him in accomplishing it; he was the sort of man too, Brent thought, who had a genius for making enemies: such men always have. But murder? Cold-blooded, deliberate, apparently well-planned murder! Yet there it was, before him. The Mayor of Hathelsborough had walked up into that room, sacred to his official uses and suggestive in its atmosphere and furniture of his great dignity, and had settled down to his desk, only to be assassinated by some enemy who had taken good care to perform his crime with swiftness and thoroughness.

The sound of heavy footsteps on the stairs outside the half-open door aroused Brent from these melancholy speculations; he turned to see Bunning coming back, attended by several men, and foremost among them, Hawthwaite, superintendent of the borough police, whom Brent had met once or twice on his previous visits to the town. Hawthwaite, a big, bearded man, was obviously upset, if not actually frightened; his ruddy face had paled under the caretaker's startling news, and he drew his breath sharply as he entered the Mayor's Parlour and caught sight of the still figure lying across the big desk in the—middle.

"God bless my life and soul, Mr. Brent!" he exclaimed in hushed tones as he tiptoed nearer to the dead and the living. "What's all this? You found the Mayor dead—you and Bunning? Why—why—"

"We found him as you see him," answered Brent. "He's been murdered! There's no doubt about this, superintendent."

Hawthwaite bent down fearfully towards the dead man, and then looked round at Bunning.

"When did he come up here?" he asked sharply.

"About three-quarters of an hour before Mr. Brent came, sir," replied Bunning. "He came up to me as I was standing outside the gates, smoking my pipe, and said that he was going up to the Mayor's Parlour, and nobody was to be allowed to disturb him, but that if his cousin, Mr. Brent, came, he was to be shown up. Mr. Brent came and I brought him up, and we found his Worship as you see."

"Somebody's been lying in wait for him," muttered Hawthwaite. "Hid in this room!"

"Nobody here five minutes before he came up, sir," affirmed Bunning. "I was up here myself. There was nobody in here, and nobody in this part of the building."

Hawthwaite looked round the room, and Brent looked with him. It was a big room, panelled in old oak to half the height of its walls; above the panelling hung numerous portraits of past occupants of the Mayoral chair and some old engravings of scenes in the town. A wide, old-fashioned fire-place stood to the right of the massive desk; on either side of it were recesses, in each of which there was a door. Hawthwaite stepped across to these in turn and tried them; each was locked from the inside; he silently pointed to the keys.

"The door to the stairs was open, sir," remarked Bunning. "I mean his Worship hadn't locked himself in, as I have known him do."

Hawthwaite nodded. Then he nudged Brent's elbow, looking sideways at the dead man.

"Been done as he sat writing in his chair," he muttered. "Look—the pen's fallen from his fingers as he fell forward. Queer!"

A policeman came hurrying into the room, pulling himself up as he saw what was there. His voice instinctively hushed.

"Dr. Wellesley's just gone down Meadow Gate, sir," he announced. "They've sent for him to come here at once."

"Unless!" murmured the superintendent. "Still—"

Then the five or six men present stood, silently waiting. Some stared about the room, as if wondering at its secret: some occasionally took covert glances at its central figure. One of the three high, narrow windows was open: Brent distinctly heard the murmur of children playing in the streets outside. And suddenly, from the tower of St. Hathelswide, at the other end of the market-place, curfew began to ring.

"He's coming, sir!" whispered the policeman who stood near the door. "On the stairs, sir."

Brent turned as Dr. Wellesley came hurrying into the room; a tall, clean-shaven, fresh-coloured man, who went straight to the desk, looked at what he found there, and turned quickly on the men grouped around.

"How long is it since he was found?" he asked abruptly.

"Ten or twelve minutes," answered Brent.

"Dead then?"

"Yes," said Brent. "I should say—of course, I don't speak professionally—but I should think he'd been dead at least half an hour."

The doctor glanced at the superintendent.

"We must have him taken down to the mortuary," he said. "Let some of you men stay here with me, and send another for my assistant and for Dr. Barber."

The superintendent gave some orders, and touching Brent's arm motioned him to follow outside the room.

"This is a bad business, Mr. Brent!" he said as they paused at the head of the stair. "That's murder, sir! But how on earth did the murderer get in there? Bunning tells me that he himself was standing outside the iron gates at the entrance to the Moot Hall from the time the Mayor entered until you came. He asserts that nobody entered the place by those gates."

"I suppose there are other means of entrance?" suggested Brent.

"Doubtful if anybody could get in by them at this hour of the evening," answered the superintendent. "But there are two ways by which anybody could get to the Mayor's Parlour. They're both what you might call complicated. I'll show you them. Come this way."

He led Brent across a corridor that branched off from the head of the stone staircase, and presently stopped at a big double door.

"This is the Council Chamber," he said, as they entered a spacious apartment. "You see that door in the far corner, over there? There's a staircase leads down from that to the rooms that Bunning and his wife occupy as caretakers—a back stairs, in fact. But nobody can come up it, and through the Council Chamber, and along the corridor to the Mayor's Parlour without first coming through Bunning's rooms, that's flat. As for the other—well, it's still more unlikely."

He led Brent out of the Council Chamber and farther along to another door, which he flung open as he motioned his companion to enter.

"This is the Borough Court," he said. "Magistrates' bench, solicitors' table, and all the rest of it. And there's the dock, where we put the prisoners. Now, Mr. Brent, there's a staircase—a corkscrew staircase, modern, of ironwork—in the corner of that dock which leads down to the cells. And that's the second way by which you could get to the Mayor's Parlour. But just fancy what that means! A man who wanted to reach the Mayor's Parlour by that means of approach would have to enter the police station from St. Laurence Lane, at the back of the Moot Hall, pass the charge office, pass my office, go along a passage in which he'd be pretty certain to meet somebody, come up that stairs into the dock there, cross the court and—so on. That's not likely! And yet, those are the only ways by which there's access to the Mayor's Parlour except by the big staircase from the iron gates."

"What is certain," observed Brent, "is that the murderer did get to the Mayor's Parlour. And what seems more important just now is the question—how did he get away from it, unobserved? If Bunning is certain that no one entered by the front between my cousin's arrival and my coming, he is equally certain that no one left. Is it possible that anyone left by the police station entrance?"

"We'll soon settle that point!" answered Hawthwaite. "Come down there."

He opened the door of the dock and led Brent down an iron staircase into an arched and vaulted hall at its foot, whence they proceeded along various gloomy passages towards a heavy, iron-studded door. Near this, a police constable stood writing at a tall desk; the superintendent approached and spoke to him. Presently he turned back to Brent.

"There's nobody that he doesn't know has been in or out of this place during the whole of the evening," he said. "He's been on duty there since six o'clock. Nobody has entered—or left—during the time that's elapsed."

"I never supposed they had," remarked Brent. "The thing's been done in much cleverer fashion than that! As I said before, what we do know is that the murderer got to the Mayor's Parlour, and that he got away from it!"

Hawthwaite shook his head, with a puzzled expression overspreading his somewhat heavy and unimaginative features.

"Ay, but how?" he said. "How?"

"That's a job for you," replied Brent, with a suggestive glance. "And, if I might suggest it, why not make a thorough examination of the Moot Hall? My cousin showed me over it when I was here last, and I remember some queer places in it."

"There are queer places in it," admitted Hawthwaite. "But it's hardly likely the murderer would hang about after doing what he did. Of course I'll have the whole place searched thoroughly—every inch of it!—for any possible clues and traces. We shall neglect nothing in a case of this sort, I can assure you, Mr. Brent. I—But come into my office."

He led the way into a drab-walled, official-looking apartment, curiously suggestive of the lesser and meaner forms of crime, and pointed to a chair.

"Sit down," he said. "As I was about to say—"

"Oughtn't one to be doing something?" interrupted Brent, refusing the chair. "That's what I feel anyway. Only what can one do?"

"Ah, that's just it!" exclaimed Hawthwaite. "You may feel as energetic as you will, but what can you do? The doctors are doing the absolutely necessary things at present; as for me, all I can do is to search for clues and traces, as I suggested, and make all possible inquiries. But there you are, we've nothing to go on—nothing, I mean, that would identify."

Brent gave the superintendent a keen glance.

"Between ourselves," he said, "have you any reason for suspecting anyone?"

Hawthwaite started. His surprise was genuine enough.

"For suspecting anyone?" he exclaimed. "Good Lord, no, Mr. Brent! His Worship, poor man, wasn't exactly popular in the town—with a certain section, that is—but I couldn't believe that there's man or woman in the place would wish him harm! No, sir—in my opinion this is outside work!"

"Somewhat doubtful whether any outsider could obtain the apparently very accurate knowledge of Hathelsborough Moot Hall which the murderer of my cousin evidently possessed, isn't it?" suggested Brent. "I should say the guilty person is some one who knows the place extremely well!"

Before the superintendent could reply, his partly-open door was further opened, and a little, bustling, eager-faced man, who wore large spectacles and carried a pencil behind his right ear, looked in. Brent recognized him as another of the half-dozen Hathelsborough men whose acquaintance he had made on former visits—Peppermore, the hard-worked editor-reporter of the one local newspaper. Wallingford had introduced him to Peppermore in the smoking-room of the *Chancellor* Hotel, and Peppermore, who rarely got the chance of talking to London journalists, had been loquacious and ingratiating. His expressive eyebrows—prominent features of his somewhat odd countenance—went up now as he caught sight of Brent standing on the superintendent's hearth-rug. He came quickly into the room.

"Mr. Brent!" he exclaimed. "No idea you were here, sir. My profound sympathy, Mr. Brent! Dear, dear! what a truly terrible affair!" Then, his professional instincts getting the better of him, he turned on Hawthwaite, at the same time pulling out a note-book. "What are the details, Mr. Superintendent?" he asked. "I just met one of your officers, going for Dr. Barber; he gave me the scantiest information, so I hurried to see you."

"And I can't give you any more," replied Hawthwaite. "There are no details yet, my lad! All we know is that the Mayor was found dead in the Mayor's Parlour half an hour ago, and that he's been murdered. You'll have to wait for the rest."

"We don't go to press till 12.30," remarked Peppermore, unperturbed by this curtness. "Perhaps by then you can give me more news, Mr. Superintendent? Murdered! The Mayor of Hathelsborough! Now that's something that's unique in the history of the town, I believe. I was looking over the records not so long since, and I don't remember coming across any entry of such an event as this. Unparalleled!"

Hawthwaite made no reply. At that moment a policeman put his head inside the door and asked him to go to Dr. Wellesley, and he went off, leaving the two newspaper men together. Brent looked at Peppermore and suddenly put an abrupt question to him.

"I guess you'll know," he said meaningly. "Was my cousin unpopular in this place?"

Peppermore turned his big spectacles on his questioner and sank his voice to a whisper.

"Between ourselves," he answered, "in some quarters—very!"

"Of late, I suppose?" suggested Brent.

"Become—gradually—more and more so, Mr. Brent," said Peppermore. "You see, he only got elected Mayor by one vote. That meant that half the Council was against him. Against his policy and ideas, you know. Of course he was a reformer. Those who didn't like him called him a meddler. And in my experience of this place—ten years—it's a bad thing to meddle in Hathelsborough affairs. Too many vested interests, sir! Certainly—amongst some people—Mr. Wallingford was not at all popular. But—murder!"

"There are plenty of people who don't stick at that," remarked Brent. "But you wanted information. I'll give you some." He went on to tell how he and Bunning had found Wallingford, and of the difficulties of access to the Mayor's Parlour. "The thing is," he concluded, "how did the murderer get in, and how did he get away?"

"Queer!" admitted Peppermore, scribbling fast in his note-book. "That's a nice job for the detectives. Looks like a skilfully-planned, premeditated job too—"

Hawthwaite came in again, carrying something in his hand, concealed by a piece of brown paper. His face betokened a discovery.

"Look here!" he said. "No secret about it—you can mention it, Peppermore. Just after you and I had gone out of the Mayor's Parlour, Mr. Brent, Bunning picked something out of the hearth, where it was half-burnt, and what's left charred, and gave it to Dr. Wellesley. See!"

He laid the brown paper on his desk, turned back the edges, and revealed part of a fine cambric pocket-handkerchief, crumpled and blood-stained, charred and blackened.

"Without a doubt," he whispered confidentially, "this belonged to the murderer! He got blood on his hands—he wiped them on this, and threw it away on the fire, to burn. And this half is not burned!"

CHAPTER III

THE TANNERY HOUSE

During a moment's impressive silence the three men, standing side by side at Hawthwaite's desk, stared at the blood-stained memento of the crime. Each was thinking the same thought—there, before them, was the life-blood of the man who little more than an hour previously had been full of energy, forcefulness, ambition. It was Peppermore who first spoke, in an awe-stricken voice.

"You'll take care of that, Mr. Superintendent?" he said. "A clue!"

"I should just think so!" exclaimed Hawthwaite. He picked up a box of letter-paper which lay close by, emptied it of its contents, and lifted the fragment of handkerchief by a corner. "That goes into my safe," he continued, as he placed his find in the box. "A clue, as you say, and an important one. That, as you may observe, is no common article; it's a gentleman's handkerchief—fine cambric. If it had only been the other part of it, now, there'd probably have been a name on it, or initials wove into it: there's nothing of that sort, you see, on what's left. But it's something, and it may lead to a good deal."

He put the cardboard box away in a safe and locked it up; putting the key in his pocket, he gave Brent an informing glance.

"I've had a word or two with the medical men while I was out there," he said confidentially. "They say there's no doubt as to how he was killed. The murderer, they're confident, was standing behind him as he himself was either writing or looking over the papers on his desk, and suddenly thrust a knife clean through his shoulders. They say death would be instantaneous."

"A knife!" muttered Brent.

"Well," continued Hawthwaite, "as regards that, there are all sorts of knives. It would be a long, thin weapon, said Dr. Wellesley; and Dr. Barber, he suggested that it was the sort of wound that would be caused by one of those old-fashioned rapiers. And they did say, both of them, that it had been used—whatever the weapon was—with great force: gone clean through."

Peppermore was listening to these gruesome details with all the ardour of the born news-seeker. But Brent turned away.

"Is there anything I can do?" he asked.

"Why, there isn't," replied Hawthwaite. "The fact is, there is nothing to do outside our work. The doctors are doing theirs, and there'll have to be an inquest of course. I've sent to notify Mr. Seagrave, the coroner, already, and I'm having a thorough search made of the Moot Hall, and making inquiries about his Worship's last movements. There's nothing more can be done, at present. One of my men has gone round to tell his landlady. It's a fortunate thing, Mr. Brent," he added with a knowing look, "that your cousin wasn't a married man! This would have been a fine thing to have to break to a man's wife and family! About relations, now, Mr. Brent, you'll know what to do? I know nothing about his private affairs."

"Yes," answered Brent. "But I'm much more concerned, just now, about his public affairs. It seems to me—indeed, it's no use trying to disguise it—that this has arisen out of the fact that as Mayor of Hathelsborough he was concerning himself in bringing about some drastic reforms in the town. You probably know yourself that he wasn't popular—"

"Yes, yes, Mr. Brent," interrupted Hawthwaite.

"But then, you know, murder—! I can't think there's anybody in this place would carry their likes to that length! Murder!"

"You don't know," said Brent. "But, at any rate, I'm my cousin's nearest blood-relation, and I'm going to find out who killed him, if it's humanly possible. Now who is there in the town who

knows most about his public affairs—who is there who's most conversant with whatever it was that he had in hand?"

Hawthwaite seemed to consider matters.

"Well, Alderman Crood, the tanner, is the Deputy-Mayor," he replied at last. "I should say he's as good a man to go to as anybody, Mr. Brent. He's chairman of the Financial Committee too; and it was in financial matters that Mr. Wallingford was wanting to make these reforms you've mentioned. If there's anything known—I mean that I don't know—Alderman Crood's the most likely man to know it."

"Alderman Crood," remarked Peppermore softly, "knows everything that goes on in Hathelsborough—everything!"

"So to speak; so to speak!" said Hawthwaite. "There are things of course—"

"Where does Alderman Crood live?" asked Brent. Already he was moving towards the door. "As I can do nothing here, I'll go to him at once. I'm not going to leave a stone unturned in this matter, superintendent."

"Quite right, Mr. Brent, quite right! Neither will I," asserted Hawthwaite. "Alderman Crood lives by his tannery—the far end of the town. Anybody'll show you the place, once you're past the big church."

"I'm going that way," remarked Peppermore. "Come with me, Mr. Brent." He led Brent out into St. Lawrence Lane, a narrow thoroughfare at the back of the Moot Hall, and turning a corner, emerged on the market-place, over which the night shadows had now fallen. "A terrible affair, this, Mr. Brent!" he said as they walked along. "And a most extraordinary one too—it'll be more than a nine days' wonder here. A deep mystery, sir, and I question if you'll get much light on it where you're going."

"You said that Alderman Crood knew everything," observed Brent.

"Ay!" answered Peppermore, with a short laugh. "But that isn't to say that he'll tell everything—or anything! Alderman Crood, Mr. Brent, is the closest man in this town—which is saying a good deal. Since I came here, sir, ten years ago, I've learnt much—and if you'll drop in at the *Monitor* office any time you like, Mr. Brent—mornings preferable—I'll give you the benefit of my experience: Hathelsborough folk, sir, are, in my opinion, the queerest lot in all England. But you want to see Alderman Crood—now, go to the end of the market-place, turn down Barley Market, and drop a hundred yards or so down the hill at the end—then you'll smell Crood's tan-yard, even if you don't see it. His is the big, solid-looking house at the side—you can't miss it."

The editor-reporter shot up an alley at his left, at the head of which was a lighted window with *Monitor Office* on it in black letters; and Brent went on his way to seek the Deputy-Mayor. As he passed Low Cross, and the east end of the great church, and turned into the wide, irregular space called Barley Market, he tried to analyse his feelings about the tragic event on which he had chanced without warning. He had left Fleet Street early that afternoon, thinking of nothing but a few days' pleasant change, and here he was, in that quiet, old-world town, faced with the fact that his kinsman and host had been brutally murdered at the very hour of his arrival. He was conscious of a fierce if dull resentment—the resentment of a tribesman who finds one of his clan done to death, and knows that the avenging of blood is on his shoulders from henceforth. He had no particular affection for his cousin, and therefore no great sense of personal loss, but Wallingford after all was of his breed, and he must bring his murderer to justice.

Alderman Crood's house, big, broad, high, loomed up across him as the odours of the tan-yard at its side and rear assailed his nostrils. As he went towards it, the front door opened a little, and a man came out. He and Brent met in the light of a street lamp, and Brent recognized a policeman whom he had seen in the Mayor's Parlour. The man recognized him, and touched his helmet. Brent stopped.

"Oh," he said, "have you been to tell Mr. Crood of what has happened?"

"Just that, sir," replied the policeman. "He's Deputy-Mayor, sir."

"I know," said Brent. "Then, he's at home?"

"Yes, sir."

Brent was going forward, but a sudden curiosity seized on him. He paused, glancing at the policeman suggestively.

"Did—did Mr. Crood say anything?" he asked.

The policeman shook his head.

"Nothing, sir, except that he supposed Superintendent Hawthwaite was seeing to everything."

"Did you happen to tell him that I was here?"

"I did, sir; I said his Worship's cousin from London had just come. No harm, sir, I hope?"

"Not a bit—glad you did," said Brent. "He'll expect me."

He said good night to the man and walked forward to Alderman Crood's door. It was like the house to which it gave entrance—very high and broad, a massive affair, topped by a glass transom, behind which a light, very dim and feeble, was burning. Brent felt for and rang a bell, and heard it ring somewhere far off in the house. Then he waited; waited so long that he was about to ring again, when he heard a bolt being withdrawn inside the big door; then another. Each creaked in a fashion that suggested small use, and the need of a little oil. The door opened, and he found himself confronting a girl, who stood holding a small lamp in her hand; behind her, at the far end of a gloomy, cavernous hall a swinging lamp, turned low, silhouetted her figure.

Something about the girl made Brent look at her with more attention than he would ordinarily have given. She was a tallish girl, whose figure would have been unusually good had it been properly filled out; as it was, she was thin, but only too thin for her proportions—her thinness, had she been three inches shorter, would have passed for a graceful slenderness. But Brent took this in at a glance; his attention was more particularly concentrated on the girl's face—a delicate oval, framed in a mass of dark hair. She was all dark—dark hair, an olive complexion, large, unusually lustrous dark eyes, fringed by long soft lashes, an almost dark rose-tint on her cheeks. And in the look which she gave him there was something as soft as her eyes, which were those of a shy animal—something appealing, pathetic. He glanced hastily at her attire—simple, even to plainness—and wondered who she was, and what was her exact status in that big house, which seemed to require the services of a staff of domestics.

Brent asked for Alderman Crood. The girl glanced towards the end of the hall and then looked at him doubtfully.

"What name?" she inquired in tones that were little above a whisper.

"My name's Brent," the caller answered, in a clear, loud voice. Somehow, he had a suspicion that Crood was listening at the other end of the cavernous hall. "I am Mr. Wallingford's cousin."

The girl gave him a curious glance and motioning him to wait, went away up the hall to a door which stood partly open, revealing a lighted interior. She disappeared within; came out again, walked a little way towards Brent, and spoke with a timid smile.

"Will you please come this way?" she said. "Mr. Crood will see you."

Brent strode up the hall, the girl, preceding him, pushed open the door which she had just left. He walked into a big room and, through a fog of tobacco smoke, saw that he was in the presence of three men, who sat in arm-chairs round a hearth whereon a big fire of logs blazed. Behind their chairs a table was set out with decanters and glasses, a tobacco-jar and cigar-boxes: clearly he had interrupted a symposium of a friendly and social sort.

The visitor's eyes went straight to the obvious master of the house, a big, heavily-built, massive-framed man of sixty or thereabouts, who sat in state on the right-hand side of the hearth. Brent took in certain details of his appearance at a glance: the broad, flabby, parchment-hued face, wide mouth, square jaw, and small, shrewd eyes; the suit of dead-black broadcloth, and the ample black neckcloth swathed about an old-fashioned collar; he noted, too, the fob which dangled from Alderman Crood's waist, and its ancient seals and ornaments. A survival of the past, Alderman Crood, he thought, in

outward seeming, but there was that in his watchful expression which has belonged to man in every age.

The small shrewd eyes, in their turn, measured up Brent as he crossed the threshold, and Crood, seeing what he would have described as a well-dressed young gentleman who was evidently used to superior society, did what he would certainly not have done for any man in Hathelsborough—he rose from his chair and stretched out a hand.

"How do you do, sir?" he said in a fat, unctuous voice. "The cousin of our lamented Mayor, poor gentleman, of whose terrible fate we have this moment learned, sir. I can assure you, Mr.—Brent, I think?—and whatever other relations there may be, of our sincere sympathy, sir—I never knew a more deplorable thing in my life. And to happen just as you should arrive on a visit to your cousin, Mr. Brent—dear, dear! The constable who came to inform me of what had happened mentioned that you'd come, and we were just talking—But I'll introduce you to these gentlemen, sir; allow me—Mr. Mallett, our esteemed bank manager. Mr. Coppinger, our respected borough treasurer."

Brent silently shook hands with the two other men; just as silently he made a sharp inspection of them as they resettled themselves in their chairs. Mallett, a spick-and-span sort of man, very precise as to the cut of his clothes and particular as to the quality of his linen and the trimming of his old-fashioned side-whiskers, he set down at once as the personification of sly watchfulness: he was the type of person who would hear all and say no more than was necessary or obligatory. Coppinger, a younger man, had that same watchful look; a moment later, Brent saw it in Crood's big face too. They were all watchful, all sly, these men, he decided: the sort who would sit by and listen, and admit nothing and tell nothing; already, before even he asked the questions which he had come to put, he knew that he would get no answer other than noncommittal, evasive ones. He saw that all three men, instead of being anxious to give him information, were actuated by the same desire—to find out what he knew, to hear what he had to say.

Crood, as Brent seated himself, waved a hand towards the decanters on the table.

"You'll try a little drop o' something, Mr. Brent?" he said, with insinuating hospitality. "A taste of whisky, now? Do you no harm after what you've just been through." He turned to the girl, who had followed Brent into the room and, picking up her needlework, had seated herself near the master of the house. "Queenie, my love," he continued, "give the gentleman a whisky and soda—say the word, sir. My niece, sir—Miss Queenie Crood—all my establishment, Mr. Brent; quiet, old-fashioned folk we are, but glad to see you, sir; though I wish the occasion had been a merrier one—dear, dear!"

Brent made the girl a polite bow and, not wishing to show himself stand-offish, took the glass which she mixed and handed to him. He turned to Crood.

"It's not a pleasant occasion for me, sir," he said. "I am my cousin's nearest blood-relative, and it lies with me to do what I can to find out who's responsible for his death. I understand that you are Deputy-Mayor, so naturally you're conversant with his public affairs. Now, I've learnt within the last hour that he had become unpopular in the town—made enemies. Is that so, Mr. Crood?"

Crood, who was smoking a long churchwarden pipe, took its stem from his lips, and waved it in the air with an expressive motion.

"Well, well!" he said soothingly. "There might ha' been a little of something of that sort, you know, Mr. Brent, but in a purely political sense, sir, an entirely political sense only. No personal feeling, you know, sir. I'm sure Mr. Mallett there will agree with me—and Mr. Coppinger too."

"Absolutely!" said Mallett.

"Unreservedly!" said Coppinger.

"Your cousin, sir, our late lamented Mayor, was much respected in the town," continued Crood. "He was the hardest-working Mayor we've had for many years, Mr. Brent."

"A first-rate man of business!" observed Mallett.

"A particularly clever hand at figures!" remarked Coppinger.

"A man as tried hard to do his duty," said Crood. "Of course I'll not say that everybody saw eye to eye with him. They didn't. Wherever there's public bodies, Mr. Brent, there'll be parties. Your poor cousin had his party—and there was, to be sure, a party against him and his. But you'll be well aware, sir, as a London gentleman, that no doubt often visits Parliament, that here in England men is enemies in politics that's firm friends outside 'em. I believe I may say that that's a fact, sir?"

"Oh, no doubt!" agreed Brent. He was already feeling at a loss, and he scarcely knew what to say next. "I heard, though, that my cousin, as Mayor, was proposing such drastic reforms in the administration of your borough affairs, that—well, in short, that personal feeling had been imported."

Crood shook his head more solemnly than ever.

"I think you've been misinformed on that point, Mr. Brent," he said. "There may be—no doubt are—mischievous persons that would say such things, but I never heard nothing of the sort, sir. Political feeling, perhaps; but personal feeling—no!"

"Certainly not!" said Mallett.

"Nothing of the sort!" said Coppinger.

"Now, I should say," remarked Crood, waving his pipe again, "that our late lamented Mayor, as an individual, was much thought of amongst the townspeople. I believe Mr. Mallett will agree with that—and Mr. Coppinger."

"A great deal thought of," answered Mallett.

"By, I should say, everybody," added Coppinger.

"He was, of course, a comparative stranger," continued Crood. "Twelve years only had he been amongst us—and now cut off, sudden and malicious, at the beginning of his career! But well thought of, sir, well thought of!"

"Then you feel sure that this crime has not sprung out of his public affairs?" suggested Brent. "It's not what you'd call a political murder?"

"Of that, sir, I would take my solemn oath!" declared Crood. "The idea, sir, is ridiculous."

"Absurd!" said Mallett.

"Out of the question!" affirmed Coppinger.

"Why then, has he been murdered?" asked Brent. "What's at the bottom of it?"

All three men shook their heads. They looked at each other. They looked at Brent.

"Ay—what?" said Crood.

"Just so!" agreed Mallett.

"That's precisely where it is," concluded Coppinger. "Exactly!"

"More in it than anyone knows of—most probably—at present, Mr. Brent," observed Crood, with solemn significance. "Time, sir, time! Time, sir, may tell—may!"

Brent saw that he was not going to get any information under that roof, and after a further brief exchange of trite observations he rose to take his leave. Alderman Crood wrung his hand.

"Sorry I am, sir, that your first visit to my establishment should be under such painful circumstances," he said unctuously. "I hope you'll favour me with another talk, sir—always pleased to see a London gentleman, I'm sure—we're behind, perhaps, in these parts, Mr. Brent, but honest and hearty, sir, honest and hearty. Queenie, my love, you'll open the door for the young gentleman?"

The girl took Brent into the gloomy hall. Halfway along its shadows, she suddenly turned on him with a half shy, half daring expression.

"You are from London?" she whispered.

"From London?—yes," said Brent. "Why?"

"I want to—to talk to somebody about London," she went on, with a nervous, backward glance at the door they had just left. "May I—will you let me talk to—you?"

"To be sure!" answered Brent. "But when—where?"

"I go into the Castle grounds every afternoon," she answered timidly. "Could—could you come there—some time?"

"To-morrow afternoon?" suggested Brent. "Say three o'clock? Would that do?"

"Yes," she whispered. "Thank you—I'll be there. It seems—queer, but I'll tell you. Thank you again—you'll understand to-morrow."

She had her hand on the big street door by then. Without more words she let him out into the night; he heard the door close heavily behind him. He went back towards the heart of the little town, wondering. Only a few hours before, he had been in the rush and bustle of Fleet Street, and now, here he was, two hundred miles away, out of the world, and faced with an atmosphere of murder and mystery.

CHAPTER IV

BULL'S SNUG

When Brent came again to the centre of the town he found that Hathelsborough, instead of sinking to sleep within an hour of curfew, according to long-established custom, had awakened to new life. There were groups at every corner, and little knots of folk at doors, and men in twos and threes on the pavement, and it needed no particular stretching of his ears to inform him that everybody was talking of the murder of his cousin. He caught fragmentary bits of surmise and comment as he walked along; near a shadowy corner of the great church he purposely paused, pretending to tie his shoelace, in order to overhear a conversation between three or four men who had just emerged from the door of an adjacent tavern, and were talking in loud, somewhat excited tones: working men, these, whose speech was in the vernacular.

"You can bet your life 'at this job's been done by them whose little game Wallingford were going to checkmate!" declared one man. "I've allus said 'at he were running a rare old risk. We know what t' old saying is about new brooms sweeping clean—all very well, is that, but ye can smash a new broom if ye use it over vigorously. Wallingford were going a bit too deeply into t' abuses o' this town—an' he's paid t' penalty. Put out o' t' way—that's t' truth on it!"

"Happen it may be," said a second man. "And happen not. There's no denying 'at t' Mayor were what they call a man o' mystery. A mysterious chap, d'ye see, in his comings and goings. Ye don't know 'at he mayn't ha' had secret enemies; after all, he were nowt but a stranger i' t' town—nobbut been here twelve year or so. How do we know owt about him? It may be summat to do wi' t' past, this here affair. I'm none going t' believe 'at there's anybody i' Hathelsborough 'ud stick a knife into him just because he were cleaning up t' town money affairs, like."

"Never ye mind!" asserted the former speaker. "He were going to touch t' pockets o' some on 'em, pretty considerable, were t' Mayor. And ye know what Hathelsborough folk is when their pockets is touched—they'll stick at nowt! He's been put away, has Wallingford, 'cause he were interfering over much."

Brent walked on, reflecting. His own opinions coincided, uncomfortably but decidedly, with those of the last speaker, and a rapidly-growing feeling of indignation and desire for vengeance welled up within him. He looked round at the dark-walled, closely shuttered old houses about him with a sense of dull anger—surely they were typical of the reserve, the cunning watchfulness, the suggestive silences of the folk who lived in them, of whom he had just left three excellent specimens in Crood, Mallett and Coppinger. How was he, a stranger, going to unearth the truth about his cousin's brutal murder, amongst people like these, endowed, it seemed to him, with an Eastern-like quality of secretiveness? But he would!

He went on to the rooms in which Wallingford had lived ever since his first coming to the town. They were good, roomy, old-fashioned apartments in a big house, cosy and comfortable, but the sight of Wallingford's study, of his desk, his books and papers, of his favourite chair and his slippers at the fire, of the supper-table already spread for him and Brent in an inner parlour, turned Brent sick at heart. He turned hastily to Wallingford's landlady, who had let him in and followed him into the dead man's room.

"It's no use, Mrs. Appleyard," he said. "I can't stop here to-night, anyway. It would be too much! I'll go to the *Chancellor*, and send on for my luggage."

The woman nodded, staring at him wonderingly. The news had evidently wrought a curious change in her; usually, she was a cheery, good-natured, rather garrulous woman, but she looked at Brent now as if something had dazed her.

"Mr. Brent," she whispered, in awe-stricken accents, "you could have knocked me down with a feather when they came here and told me. He was that well—and cheerful—when he went out!"

"Yes," said Brent dully. "Yes." He let his eyes run over the room again—he had looked forward to having a long, intimate chat with Wallingford that night over the bright fire, still crackling and glowing in readiness for host and guest. "Ay, well!" he added. "It's done now!"

"Them police fellows, Mr. Brent," said the landlady, "have they any idea who did it?"

"I don't think they've the least idea yet," replied Brent. "I suppose you haven't, either?"

Mrs. Appleyard, thus spurred to reminiscence, recovered something of her customary loquaciousness.

"No, to be sure I haven't," she answered. "But I've heard things, and I wish—eh, I do wish!—that I'd warned him! I ought to ha' done."

"What about?" asked Brent. "And what things?"

The landlady hesitated a little, shaking her head.

"Well, you know, Mr. Brent," she said at last, "in a little town like this, folk will talk—Hathelsborough's a particular bad place for talk and gossip; for all that, Hathelsborough people's as secret as the grave when they like, about their own affairs. And, as I say, I've heard things. There's a woman comes here to work for me at odd times, a woman that sometimes goes to put in a day or two at Marriner's Laundry, where a lot of women works, and I recollect her telling me not so long since that there was talk amongst those women about the Mayor and his interfering with things, and she'd heard some of 'em remark that he'd best keep his fingers out o' the pie or he'd pay for it. No more, Mr. Brent; but a straw'll show which way the wind blows. I'm sure there was them in the town that wanted to get rid of him. All the same—murder!"

"Just so," said Brent. "Well, I've got to find it all out."

He went away to the *Chancellor* Hotel, made his arrangements, sent to Mrs. Appleyard's for his luggage, and eventually turned into bed.

But it was little sleep that Brent got that night, and he was thankful when morning came and he could leave his bed and find relief in activity. He was out and about while the grey mists still hung around the Hathelsborough elms, and at eight o'clock walked into the police-station, anxious for news.

Hawthwaite had no news for him. Late the previous night, and early that morning, the police had carried out an exhaustive search of the old Moot Hall, and had failed to discover anything that seemed to bear relation to the crime. Also they had made themselves acquainted with the murdered man's movements immediately previous to his arrival at the Moot Hall; there was nothing whatever in them that afforded any clue.

"We know all that he did from five o'clock yesterday afternoon to the time you found him, Mr. Brent," said Hawthwaite. "He left his office at five o'clock, and went home to his rooms. He was there till nearly seven o'clock. He went out then and walked round by Abbey Lodge, where he left some books—novels, or something of the sort—for Mrs. Saumarez. Then—"

"Who's Mrs. Saumarez?" asked Brent.

"She's a young widow lady, very wealthy, it's understood, who came to live in the town some two years ago," replied Hawthwaite. "Very handsome young woman—you'll be seeing her. Between you and me," he added, with a knowing glance, "his Worship—late Worship, I should say—had been showing her great attention, and I don't think she was indifferent to him—he used to go and dine with her a good deal anyway. However, that's neither here nor there, just now. He called, I say, at Abbey Lodge, left these books, and then came on to the Moot Hall, as Bunning said. That's the plain truth about his movements."

"I don't think his movements matter," observed Brent. "What does matter is—what were the movements of the murderer, and how did he get into the Mayor's Parlour? Or was he concealed there when my cousin entered and, if so, how did he get out and away?"

"Ay, just so, Mr. Brent," agreed Hawthwaite. "As to that, we know nothing—so far. But it was of importance to find out about your cousin's own movements, because, you see, he might have been seen, for instance, in conversation with some stranger, or—or something of that sort, and it all helps."

"You don't know anything about the presence of any strangers in the town last night?" inquired Brent.

"Oh, we've satisfied ourselves about that," replied Hawthwaite. "We made full inquiries last night at the railway station and at the hotels. There were no strangers came into the town last night, or evening, or afternoon, barring yourself and a couple of commercial travellers who are well known here. We saw to that particular at once."

"Then you've really found out—nothing?" suggested Brent.

"Nothing!" asserted Hawthwaite. "But the inquest won't be held until to-morrow morning, and by then we may know something. And, in the meantime, there's something you might do, Mr. Brent—I gather that you're his next-of-kin? Very well, sir, then you might examine his papers—private papers and so on. You never know what bit of sidelight you might come upon."

"Very good," said Brent. "But I shall want help—large help—in that. Can you recommend a solicitor, now?"

"There's Mr. Tansley," replied Hawthwaite. "His office is next door to his late Worship's—a sound man, Tansley, Mr. Brent. And, if I were you, I should get Tansley to represent you at the inquest to-morrow—legal assistance is a good thing to have, sir, at an affair of that sort."

Brent nodded his acquiescence and went back to his hotel. He was thankful that there were few guests in the house—he had no wish to be stared at as a principal actor in the unfolding drama. Yet he speedily realized that he had better lay aside all squeamish feelings of that sort; he foresaw that the murder of its Mayor would throw Hathelsborough into the fever of a nine-days' wonder, and that his own activities would perforce draw attention to himself. And there were things to be done, and after he had breakfasted he set resolutely and systematically about doing them. Tansley's office first—he made an arrangement with Tansley to meet him at Wallingford's rooms that afternoon, to go through any private papers that might be found there. Then his cousin's office—there were clerks there awaiting instructions. Brent had to consult with them as to what was to be done about business. And that over, there was another and still more difficult task—the arrangements for Wallingford's interment. Of one thing Brent was determined—whatever Alderman Crood, as Deputy-Mayor, or whatever the Aldermen and Councillors of Hathelsborough desired, he, as the murdered man's next-of-kin, was not going to have any public funeral or demonstration; it roused his anger to white heat to think of even the bare possibility of Wallingford's murderer following him in smug hypocrisy to his grave. And in Brent's decided opinion that murderer was a Hathelsborough man, and one of high place.

It was nearly noon when he had completed these arrangements, and then, having no more to do at the moment, he remembered the little newspaper man, Peppermore, and his invitation to call at the *Monitor* office. So, as twelve o'clock chimed and struck from the tower of St. Hathelswide, he walked up the narrow entry from the market-place, along which the editor-reporter had shot the previous night, and, after a preliminary reconnoitring of the premises, tapped at a door marked "Editorial." A shrill voice bade him enter, and he turned the handle to find himself inspecting an unusually untidy and littered room, the atmosphere of which seemed chiefly to be derived from a mixture of gas, paste and printers' ink. Somewhere beyond sounded the monotonous rumble of what was probably an old-fashioned printing machine.

A small-figured, sharp-faced, red-haired youngster of apparently fifteen or sixteen years was the sole occupant of this unsavoury sanctum. He was very busy—so busy that he had divested himself of his jacket, and had rolled up his shirt-sleeves. In his right hand he wielded a pair of scissors; with them he was industriously clipping paragraphs from a pile of newspapers which lay before him on a side-table. It was evident that he had a sharp eye for telling stuff, for in the moment which elapsed

after Brent's entrance he had run it over a column, swooped on a likely item, snipped it out and added it to a heap of similar gleanings at his elbow. He glanced at his caller with an expression which was of the sort that discourages wasting of time.

"Mr. Peppermore?" inquired Brent, taking his cue. "In?"

"Out," answered the boy.

"Long?" demanded Brent.

"Can't say," said the busy one. "Might be and mightn't." Then he gave Brent a close inspection. "If it's news," he added, "I can take it. Is it?"

"No news," replied Brent. "Mr. Peppermore asked me to call. I'll wait." He perched himself on the counter, and watched the scissors. "You're the sub-editor, I reckon?" he said at last with a smile. "Eh?"

"I'm all sorts of things in this blooming office," answered the boy. "We're short-handed here, I can tell you! Takes me and Mr. P. all our time to get the paper out. Why, last week, Mr. P. he didn't have time to write his Editorial! We had to shove an old one in. But lor' bless you, I don't believe anybody reads 'em! Liveliness, and something about turnips—that's what our folks likes. However, they'll have some good stuff this week. We'd a real first-class murder in this town last night. The Mayor! Heard about it?"

"I've heard," said Brent. "Um! And how long have you been at that job?"

"Twelve months," replied the boy. "I was in the law before that—six months. But the law didn't suit me. Slow! There's some go in this—bit too much now and then. What we want is another reporter. Comes hard on me and Mr. Peppermore, times. I did two cricket matches, a fire, a lost child, and a drowning case last Saturday."

"Good!" said Brent. "Know any shorthand?"

"I can do a fair bit," answered the man-of-all-work. "Learning. Can you?"

"Some," replied Brent. "Did a lot—once. What system?"

But just then Peppermore, more in a hurry than ever, came bustling in, to beam brightly through his spectacles at sight of his visitor.

"Mr. Brent!" he exclaimed. "Delighted, my dear sir, charmed! Not often our humble roof is extended over a distinguished visitor. Take a chair, sir—but no! stop! I've an idea." He seized Brent by the lapel of his coat and became whispering and mysterious. "Step outside," he said. "Twelve o'clock—we'll go over to Bull's."

"What's Bull's?" asked Brent, as they went out into the entry.

Peppermore laughed and wagged his finger.

"Bull's, sir?" he said. "Bull's?—centre of all the gossip in Hathelsborough. Come across there and have a quiet glass with me, and keep your eyes and ears open. I've been trying all the morning to get some news, ideas, impressions, about the sad event of last night, Mr. Brent—now, for current criticism, Bull's is the place. All the gossips of the town congregate there, sir."

"All right," agreed Brent. "Show the way!"

Peppermore led him down the narrow entry, across the market-place, and into an equally narrow passage that opened between two shops near High Cross. There Brent found himself confronted by what seemed to be a high, blank, doorless and windowless wall; Peppermore perceived his astonishment and laughed.

"Some queer, odd nooks and corners in Hathelsborough, Mr. Brent!" he said knowingly. "It would take a stranger a long time to find out all the twists and turns in this old town. But everybody knows the way to Bull's Snug—and here we are!"

He suddenly made a sharp turn to the right and into another passage, where he pushed open a door, steered his companion by the elbow through a dark entry, and thrusting aside a heavy curtain ushered him into as queer a place as Brent had ever seen. It was a big, roomy apartment, lavishly ornamented with old sporting prints and trophies of the rustic chase; its light came from the top

through a skylight of coloured glass; its floor was sawdusted; there were shadowy nooks and recesses in it, and on one side ran a bar, presided over by two hefty men in their shirt-sleeves. And here, about the bar, and in knots up and down the room and at the little tables in the corners, was a noontide assemblage, every man with a glass in his hand or at his elbow. Peppermore drew Brent into a vacant alcove and gave him a significant glance.

"I guess there isn't a man in this room, Mr. Brent, that hasn't got his own theory about what happened last night," he murmured. "I don't suppose any of 'em know you—they're not the sort of men you'd meet when you were here before—these are all chiefly tradesmen, betting men, sportsmen, and so on. But as I say, if you want the gossip of the town, here's the place! There never was a rumour in Hathelsborough but it was known and canvassed and debated and improved upon in Bull's, within an hour. Every scandalmonger and talebearer comes here—and here's," he continued, suddenly dropping his voice to a whisper, "one of the biggest of 'em—watch him, and listen to him, if he comes near us. That tall, thin man, in the grey suit, the man with the grizzled moustache. Listen, Mr. Brent; I'll tell you who that chap is, for he's one of the queerest and at the same time most interesting characters in the town. That, sir, is Krevin Crood, the ne'er-do-weel brother of Mr. Alderman Crood—watch him!"

CHAPTER V

SLEEPING FIRES

Already interested in the Crood family because of what he had seen of Simon Crood and his niece on the previous evening, Brent looked closely at the man whom Peppermore pointed out. There was no resemblance in him to his brother, the Alderman. He was a tall, spare, fresh-coloured man, apparently about fifty years of age, well-bred of feature, carefully groomed; something in his erect carriage, slightly swaggering air and defiant eye suggested the military man. Closer inspection showed Brent that the grey tweed suit, though clean and scrupulously pressed, was much worn, that the brilliantly polished shoes were patched, that the linen, freshly-laundered though it was, was far from new—everything, indeed, about Krevin Crood, suggested a well-kept man of former grandeur.

"Decayed old swell—that's what he looks like, eh, Mr. Brent?" whispered Peppermore, following his companion's thoughts. "Ah, they say that once upon a time Krevin Crood was the biggest buck in Hathelsborough—used to drive his horses and ride his horses, and all the rest of it. And now—come down to that."

He winked significantly as he glanced across the room, and Brent knew what he meant. Krevin Crood, lofty and even haughty in manner as he was, had lounged near the bar and stood looking around him, nodding here and there as he met the eye of an acquaintance.

"Waiting till somebody asks him to drink," muttered Peppermore. "Regular sponge, he is! And once used to crack his bottle of champagne with the best!"

"What's the story?" asked Brent, still quietly watching the subject of Peppermore's remarks.

"Oh, the old one," said Peppermore. "Krevin Crood was once a solicitor, and Town Clerk, and, as I say, the biggest swell in the place. Making his couple of thousand a year, I should think. Come down in the usual fashion—drink, gambling, extravagance and so on. And in the end they had to get rid of him—as Magistrates' Clerk, I mean: it was impossible to keep him on any longer. He'd frittered away his solicitor's practice too by that time, and come to the end of his resources. But Simon was already a powerful man in the town, so they—he and some others—cooked things nicely for Krevin. Krevin Crood, Mr. Brent, is one of the Hathelsborough abuses that your poor cousin meant to rid the ratepayers of—fact, sir!"

"How?" asked Brent.

"Well," continued Peppermore, "I said that Simon and some others cooked things for him. Instead of dismissing Krevin for incompetence and inattention to his duties, they retired him—with a pension. Krevin Crood, sir, draws a hundred and fifty-six pounds a year out of the revenues of this rotten little borough—all because he's Simon's brother. Been drawing that—three pounds a week—for fifteen years now. It's a scandal! However, as I say, he once had two thousand a year."

"A difference," remarked Brent.

"Ay, well, he adds a bit to his three pound," said Peppermore. "He does odd jobs for people. For one thing, he carries out all Dr. Wellesley's medicines for him. And he shows strangers round the place—he knows all about the history and antiquities of the Castle, St. Hathelswide, and St. Laurence, and the Moot Hall, and so on. A hanger-on, and a sponge—that's what he is, Mr. Brent. But clever—as clever, sir, as he's unprincipled."

"The Croods seem to be an interesting family," observed Brent. "Who is that girl that I saw last night—the Alderman's niece? Is she, by any chance, this chap's daughter?"

"Queenie," said Peppermore. "Pretty girl too, that, Mr. Brent. No, sir; she's this chap's niece, and Simon's. She's the daughter of another Crood. Ben Crood. Ben's dead—he never made anything out, either—died, I believe, as poor as a church mouse. Simon's the moneyed man of the Crood family—the old rascal rolls in brass, as they call it here. So he took Queenie out of charity, and I'll

bet my Sunday hat that he gets out of her the full equivalent of all that he gives her! Catch him giving anything for nothing!"

"You don't love Alderman Crood?" suggested Brent.

Peppermore picked up his glass of bitter ale and drank off what remained. He set down the glass with a bang.

"Wouldn't trust him any farther than I could throw his big carcase!" he said with decision. "Nor any more than I would Krevin there—bad 'uns, both of 'em. But hullo! as nobody's come forward this morning, Krevin's treating himself to a drink! That's his way—he'll get his drink for nothing, if he can, but, if he can't, he's always got money. Old cadger!"

Brent was watching Krevin Crood. As Peppermore had just said, nobody had joined Krevin at the bar. And now he was superintending the mixing of a drink which one of the shirt-sleeved barmen was preparing for him. Presently, glass in hand, he drew near a little knot of men, who, in the centre of the room, were gossiping in whispers. One of the men turned on him.

"Well, and what's Sir Oracle got to say about it?" he demanded, with something like a covert sneer. "You'll know all about it, Krevin, I reckon! What's your opinion?"

Krevin Crood looked over the speaker with a quiet glance of conscious superiority. However much he might have come down in the world, he still retained the manners of a well-bred and educated man, and Brent was not surprised to hear a refined and cultured accent when he presently spoke.

"If you are referring to the unfortunate and lamentable occurrence of last night, Mr. Spelliker," he answered, "I prefer to express no opinion. The matter is *sub judice*."

"Latin!" sneered the questioner. "Ay! you can hide a deal o' truth away behind Latin, you old limbs o' the law! But I reckon the truth'll come out, all the same."

"It is not a legal maxim, but a sound old English saying that murder will out," remarked Krevin quietly. "I think you may take it, Mr. Spelliker, that in this case, as in most others, the truth will be arrived at."

"Ay, well, if all accounts be true, it's a good job for such as you that the Mayor is removed," said Spelliker half-insolently. "They say he was going to be down on all you pensioned gentlemen—what?"

"That, again, is a matter which I do not care to discuss," replied Krevin. He turned away, approaching a horsy-looking individual who stood near. "Good-morning, Mr. Gates," he said pleasantly. "Got rid of your brown cob yet? If not, I was talking to Simpson, the vet, yesterday—I rather fancy you'd find a customer in him."

Peppermore nudged his companion's arm. Brent leaned nearer to him.

"Not get any change out of him!" whispered Peppermore. "Cool old customer, isn't he? *Sub judice*, eh? Good! And yet—if there's a man in all Hathelsborough that's likely to know what straws are sailing on the undercurrent, Mr. Brent, Krevin Crood's the man! But you'll come across him before you're here long—nobody can be long in Hathelsborough without knowing Krevin!"

They left Bull's then, and after a little talk in the market-place about the matter of paramount importance Brent returned to the *Chancellor*, thinking about what he had just seen and heard. It seemed to him, now more assuredly than ever, that he was in the midst of a peculiarly difficult maze, in a network of chicanery and deceit, in an underground burrow full of twistings and turnings that led he could not tell whither. An idea had flashed through his mind as he looked at Krevin Crood in the broken man's brief interchange of remarks with the half-insolent tradesman: an idea which he had been careful not to mention to Peppermore. Krevin Crood, said Peppermore, was mainly dependent on his pension of three pounds a week from the borough authorities—a pension which, of course, was terminable at the pleasure of those authorities; Wallingford had let it be known, plainly and unmistakably, that he was going to advocate the discontinuance of these drains on the town's resources: Krevin Crood, accordingly, would be one of the first to suffer if Wallingford got his way, as he was likely to do. And Peppermore had said further that Krevin Crood knew all about the antiquities of Hathelsborough—knew so much, indeed, that he acted as cicerone to people who wanted to explore

the Castle, and the church, and the Moot Hall. Now, supposing that Krevin Crood, with his profound knowledge of the older parts of the town, knew of some mysterious and secret way into the Mayor's Parlour, and had laid in wait there, resolved on killing the man who was threatening by his reforming actions to deprive him of his pension? It was not an impossible theory. And others branched out of it. It was already evident to Brent that Simon Crood, big man though he was in the affairs of the borough, was a schemer and a contriver of mole's work: supposing that he and his gang had employed Krevin Crood as their emissary? That, too, was possible. Underground work! There was underground work all round.

Then, thinking of Alderman Crood, he remembered Alderman Crood's niece; her request to him; his promise to her. He had been puzzled, not a little taken aback by the girl's eager, anxious manner. She had been quiet and demure enough as she sat by Simon Crood's fire, sewing, in silence, a veritable modest mouse, timid and bashful; but in that big, gloomy hall her attitude had changed altogether—she had been almost compelling in her eagerness. And Brent had wondered ever since, at intervals, whatever it could be that she wanted with him—a stranger? But it was near three o'clock now, and instead of indulging in further surmise, he went off to meet her.

Hathelsborough Castle, once one of the most notable fortresses of the North, still remained in an excellent state of preservation. Its great Norman keep formed a landmark that could be seen over many a mile of the surrounding country; many of its smaller towers were still intact, and its curtain walls, barbican and ancient chapel had escaped the ravages of time. The ground around it had been laid out as a public garden, and its great courtyard turned into a promenade, set out with flowerbeds. It was a great place of resort for the townsfolk on summer evenings and on Sundays, but Brent, coming to it in the middle of the afternoon, found it deserted, save for a few nursemaids and children. He went wandering around it and suddenly caught sight of Queenie Crood. She was sitting on a rustic bench in an angle of the walls, a book in her hand; it needed little of Brent's perception to convince him that the book was unread: she was anxiously expecting him.

"Here I am!" he said, with an encouraging smile, as he sat down beside her. "Punctual to the minute, you see!"

He looked closely at her. In the clearer light of day he saw that she was not only a much prettier girl than he had fancied the night before, but that she had more fire and character in her eyes and lips than he had imagined. And though she glanced at him with evident shyness as he came up, and the colour came into her cheeks as she gave him her hand, he was quick to see that she was going to say whatever it was that was in her mind. It was Brent's way to go straight to the point.

"You wanted to speak to me," he said, smiling again. "Fire away!—and don't be afraid."

The girl threw her book aside, and turned to him with obvious candour.

"I won't!" she exclaimed. "I'm not a bit afraid—though I don't know whatever you'll think of me, Mr. Brent, asking advice from a stranger in this barefaced fashion!"

"I've had to seek advice from strangers more than once in my time," said Brent, with a gentle laugh. "Go ahead!"

"It was knowing that you came from London," said Queenie. "You mightn't think it but I never met anybody before who came from London. And—I want to go to London. I will go!"

"Well," remarked Brent slowly, "if young people say they want to go to London, and declare that they will go to London, why, in my experience they end up by going. But, in your case, why not?"

The girl sat silent for a moment, staring straight in front of her at the blue smoke that circled up from the quaint chimney stacks of the town beneath the Castle. Her eyes grew dreamy.

"I want to go on the stage," she said at last. "That's it, Mr. Brent."

Brent turned and looked at her. Under his calm and critical inspection she blushed, but as she blushed she shook her head.

"Perhaps you think I'm one of the stage-struck young women?" she said. "Perhaps you're wondering if I can act? Perhaps—"

"What I'm wondering," interrupted Brent, "is—if you know anything about it? Not about acting, but about the practical side of the thing—the profession? A pretty stiff proposition, you know."

"What I know," said Queenie Crood determinedly, "is that I've got a natural talent for acting. And I'd get on—if only I could get away from this place. I will get away!—if only somebody would give me a bit of advice about going to London and getting—you know—getting put in the way of it. I don't care how hard the life is, nor how hard I'd have to work—it would be what I want, and better than this anyway!"

"You aren't happy in this town?" suggested Brent.

Queenie gave an eloquent glance out of her dark eyes.

"Happy!" she exclaimed scornfully. "Shut up in that house with Simon Crood! Would you be? You saw something of it last night. Would you like to be mewed up there, day in, day out, year in, year out, with no company beyond him and those two cronies of his, who are as bad as himself—mean, selfish, money-grubbers! Oh!"

"Isn't your uncle good to you?" asked Brent with simple directness.

"He's been good enough in giving me bed and board and clothing since my father and mother died six years ago," answered the girl, "and in return I've saved him the wages of the two servants he ought to have. But do you think I want to spend all my life there, doing that sort of thing? I don't—and I won't! And I thought, when I heard that you were a London man, and a journalist, that you'd be able to tell me what to do—to get to London. Help me, Mr. Brent!"

She involuntarily held out her hands to him, and Brent just as involuntarily took them in his. He was a cool and not easily impressed young man, but his pulses thrilled as he felt the warm fingers against his own.

"By George!" he exclaimed. "If—if you can act like that—"

"I'm not acting!" she said quickly.

"Well, well, I didn't say you were," he answered with a laugh. "Only if you could—but of course I'll help you! I'll find out a thing or two for you: I don't know much myself, but I know people who do know. I'll do what I can."

The girl pressed his hands and withdrew her own.

"Thank you, thank you!" she said impulsively. "Oh, if you only knew how I want to get away—and breathe! That house—"

"Look here," interrupted Brent, "you're very candid. I like that—it suits me. Now, frankly you don't like that old uncle of yours? And just why?"

Queenie looked round. There was no one near them, no one indeed in sight, except a nursemaid who wheeled a perambulator along one of the paths, but she sunk her voice to something near a whisper.

"Mr. Brent," she said, "Simon Crood's the biggest hypocrite in this town—and that's implying a good deal more than you'd ever think. He and those friends of his, Mallett and Coppinger, who are always there with him—ah, they think I know nothing, and understand nothing, but I hear their schemings and their talk, veiled as it is. They're deep and subtle, those three—and dangerous. Didn't you see last night that if you'd sat there till midnight or till morning you'd never have had a word out of them—a word, that is, that you wanted? You wouldn't!—they knew better!"

"I got nothing out of them," admitted Brent. He sat thinking in silence for a time. "Look here," he said at last, "you know what I want to find out—who killed my cousin. Help me! Keep your eyes and ears open to anything you see and hear—understand?"

"I will!" answered Queenie. "But you've got a big task before you! You can be certain of this—if the Mayor was murdered for what you called political reasons—"

"Well?" asked Brent, as she paused. "Well?"

"It would all be arranged so cleverly that there's small chance of discovery," she went on. "I know this town—rotten to the core! But I'll help you all I can, and—"

A policeman suddenly came round the corner of the wall, and at sight of Brent touched his peaked cap.

"Looking for you, Mr. Brent," he said. "I heard you'd been seen coming up here. The superintendent would be obliged if you'd step round, sir; he wants to see you at once, particularly."

"Follow you in a moment," answered Brent. He turned to Queenie as the man went away. "When shall I see you again?" he asked.

"I always come here every afternoon," she answered. "It's the only change I get. I come here to read."

"Till to-morrow—or the next day, then," said Brent. He nodded and laughed. "Keep smiling! You'll maybe play Juliet, or some other of those old games, yet."

The girl smiled gratefully, and Brent strode away after the policeman. In a few minutes he was in Hawthwaite's office. The superintendent closed the door, gave him a mysterious glance, and going over to a cupboard produced a long, narrow parcel, done up in brown paper.

"A discovery!" he whispered. "It occurred to me this afternoon to have all the heavy furniture in the Mayor's Parlour examined. No light job, Mr. Brent—but we found this."

And with a jerk of his wrist he drew from the brown paper a long, thin, highly polished rapier, the highly burnished steel of which was dulled along half its length, as if it had been first dimmed and then hastily rubbed.

"I make no doubt that this was what it was done with," continued Hawthwaite. "We found it thrust away between the wainscoting and a heavy bookcase which it took six men to move. And our deputy Town Clerk says that a few days ago he saw this lying on a side table in the Mayor's Parlour—his late Worship observed to him that it was an old Spanish rapier that he'd picked up at some old curiosity shop cheap."

"You'll go into that, and bring it in evidence?" suggested Brent.

"You bet!" replied Hawthwaite grimly. "Oh, we're not going to sleep, Mr. Brent—we'll get at something yet! Slow and sure, sir, slow but sure."

Brent went away presently, and calling on Tansley, the solicitor, walked with him to Wallingford's rooms. During the next two hours they carefully examined all the dead man's private papers. They found nothing that threw any light whatever on his murder. But they came upon his will. Wallingford had left all he possessed to his cousin, Richard Brent, and by the tragedy of the previous night Brent found that he had benefited to the extent of some fifteen thousand pounds.

CHAPTER VI

THE ANCIENT OFFICE OF CORONER

The discovery of Wallingford's will, which lay uppermost amongst a small collection of private papers in a drawer of the dead man's desk, led Brent and Tansley into a new train of thought. Tansley, with the ready perception and acumen of a man trained in the law, was quick to point out two or three matters which in view of Wallingford's murder seemed to be of high importance, perhaps of deep significance. Appended to the will was a schedule of the testator's properties and possessions, with the total value of the estate estimated and given in precise figures—that was how Brent suddenly became aware that he had come into a small fortune. Then the will itself was in holograph, written out in Wallingford's own hand on a single sheet of paper, in the briefest possible fashion, and witnessed by his two clerks. And, most important and significant of all, it had been executed only a week previously.

"Do you know how that strikes me?" observed Tansley in a low voice, as if he feared to be overheard. "It just looks to me as if Wallingford had anticipated that something was about to happen. Had he ever given you any idea in his letters that he was going to do this?"

"Never!" replied Brent. "Still—I'm the only very near relative that he had."

"Well," said Tansley, "it may be mere coincidence, but it's a bit odd that he should be murdered within a week of that will's being made. I'd just like to know if he'd been threatened—openly, anonymously, any way. Looks like it."

"I suppose we shall get into things at the inquest?" asked Brent.

Tansley shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe," he answered. "I've no great faith in inquests myself. But sometimes things do come out. And our coroner, Seagrave, is a painstaking and thorough-going sort of old chap—the leading solicitor in the town too. But it all depends on what evidence can be brought forward. I've always an uneasy feeling, as regards a coroner's inquiry, that the very people who really could tell something never come forward."

"Doesn't that look as if such people were keeping something back that would incriminate themselves?" suggested Brent.

"Not necessarily," replied Tansley. "But it often means that it might incriminate others. And in an old town like this, where the folk are very clannish and closely connected one with another by, literally, centuries of intermarriage between families, you're not going to get one man to give another away."

"You think that even if the murderer is known, or if some one suspected, he would be shielded?" asked Brent.

"In certain eventualities, yes," answered Tansley. "We all know that rumours about your cousin's murder are afloat in the town now—and spreading. Well, the more they spread, the closer and more secretive will those people become who are in the know; that is, of course, if anybody is in the know. That's a fact!"

"What do you think yourself?" said Brent suddenly. "Come now?"

"I think the Mayor was got rid of—and very cleverly," replied Tansley. "So cleverly that I'm doubtful if to-morrow's inquest will reveal anything. However, it's got to be held."

"Well, you'll watch it for me?" said Brent. "I'm going to spare no expense and no pains to get at the truth."

He sat at Tansley's side when the inquest was opened next morning in the principal court of the old Moot Hall. It struck him as rather a curious fact that, although he had followed the profession of journalist for several years, he had never until then been present at the holding of this—one of the most ancient forms of inquiry known to English law. But he was familiar with the history of the

thing—he knew that ever since the days of Edward IV the Coroner had held his sitting, *super visum corporis*, with the aid of at least twelve jurymen, *probi et legales homines*, there was scarcely in all the range of English legal economy an office more ancient. He inspected the Coroner and his jury with curious interest—Seagrave, Coroner of the Honour of Hathelsborough, was a keen-faced old lawyer, whose astute looks were relieved by a kindly expression; his twelve good men and true were tradesmen of the town, whose exterior promised a variety of character and temperament, from the sharply alert to the dully unimaginative.

There were other people there in whom Brent was speedily interested, and at whom he gazed with speculative attention in the opening stages of the proceedings. The court was crowded: by the time Seagrave, as Coroner, took his seat, there was not a square foot of even standing space. Brent recognized a good many folk. There was Peppermore, with his sharp-eyed boy assistant; there, ranged alongside of them, were many other reporters, from the various county newspapers, and at least one man whom Brent recognized as being from the Press Association in London. And there was a big array of police, with Hawthwaite at its head, and there were doctors, and officials of the Moot Hall, and, amongst the general public, many men whom Brent remembered seeing the previous day in Bull's Snug. Krevin Crood was among these; in a privileged seat, not far away, sat his brother, the Alderman, with Queenie half-hidden at his side, and his satellites, Mallett and Coppinger, in close attendance. And near them, in another privileged place, sat a very pretty woman, of a distinct and superior type, attired in semi-mourning, and accompanied by her elderly female companion. Brent was looking at these two when Tansley nudged his elbow.

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