

Fletcher Joseph Smith

Ravensdene Court



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Fletcher J. S. Joseph Smith

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CHAPTER I

THE INN ON THE CLIFF

According to an entry in my book of engagements, I left London for Ravensdene Court on March 8th, 1912. Until about a fortnight earlier I had never heard of the place, but there was nothing remarkable in my ignorance of it, seeing that it stands on a remote part of the Northumbrian coast, and at least three hundred miles from my usual haunts. But then, towards the end of February, I received the following letter which I may as well print in full: it serves as a fitting and an explanatory introduction to a series of adventures, so extraordinary, mysterious, and fraught with danger, that I am still wondering how I, until then a man of peaceful and even dull life, ever came safely through them.

"Ravensdene Court, near Alnwick

Northumberland

February 24, 1912

"Dear Sir,

"I am told by my friend Mr. Gervase Witherby of

Monks Welborough, with whom I understand you to be well acquainted, that you are one of our leading experts in matters relating to old books, documents, and the like, and the very man to inspect, value, and generally criticize the contents of an ancient library. Accordingly, I should be very glad to secure your valuable services. I have recently entered into possession of this place, a very old manor-house on the Northumbrian coast, wherein the senior branch of my family has been settled for some four hundred years. There are here many thousands of volumes, the majority of considerable age; there are also large collections of pamphlets, manuscripts, and broadsheets – my immediate predecessor, my uncle, John Christopher Raven, was a great collector; but, from what I have seen of his collection up to now, I cannot say that he was a great exponent of the art of order, or a devotee of system, for an entire wing on this house is neither more nor less than a museum, into which books, papers, antiques, and similar things appear to have been dumped without regard to classification or arrangement. I am not a bookman, nor an antiquary; my life until recently has been spent in far different fashion, as a Financial Commissioner in India. I am, however, sincerely anxious that these new possessions of mine should be properly cared for, and I should like an expert to examine everything that is here, and to advise me as to proper arrangement and provision for the future. I should accordingly be greatly obliged to you if you could make it convenient to come here as my guest, give me the benefit of your expert knowledge, and charge me whatever fee seems

good to you. I cannot promise you anything very lively in the way of amusement in your hours of relaxation, for this is a lonely place, and my family consists of nothing but myself and my niece, a girl of nineteen, just released from the schoolroom; but you may find some more congenial society in another guest of mine, Mr. Septimus Cazalette, the eminent authority on numismatics, who is here for the purpose of examining the vast collection of coins and medals formed by the kinsman I have just referred to. I can also promise you the advantages of a particularly bracing climate, and assure you of a warm welcome and every possible provision for your comfort. In the hope that you will be able to come to me at an early date,

"I am, dear sir,

"Yours truly,

"Francis Raven.

"Leonard Middlebrook, Esq.,

"35M, Old Buildings, Lincoln's Inn, W. C."

Several matters referred to in this letter inclined me towards going to Ravensdene Court – the old family mansion – the thousands of ancient volumes – the prospect of unearthing something of real note – the chance of examining a collector's harvest – and perhaps more than anything, the genuinely courteous and polite tone of my invitation. I was not particularly busy at that time, nor had I been out of London for more than a few days now and then for several years: a change to the far-different North had its attractions. And after a brief correspondence with him, I arranged to go down to Mr. Raven

early in March, and remain under his roof until I had completed the task which he desired me to undertake. As I have said already, I left London on the 8th of March, journeying to Newcastle by the afternoon express from King's Cross. I spent that night at Newcastle and went forward next morning to Alnmouth, which according to a map with which I had provided myself, was the nearest station to Ravensdene Court. And soon after arriving at Alnmouth the first chapter of my adventures opened, and came about by sheer luck. It was a particularly fine, bright, sharply-bracing morning, and as I was under no particular obligation to present myself at Ravensdene Court at any fixed time, I determined to walk thither by way of the coast. The distance, according to my map, was about nine or ten miles. Accordingly, sending on my luggage by a conveyance, with a message to Mr. Raven that I should arrive during the afternoon, I made through the village of Lesbury toward the sea, and before long came in sight of it ... a glorious stretch of blue, smooth that day as an island lake and shining like polished steel in the light of the sun. There was not a sail in sight, north or south or due east, nor a wisp of trailing smoke from any passing steamer: I got an impression of silent, unbroken immensity which seemed a fitting prelude to the solitudes into which my mission had brought me.

I was at that time just thirty years of age, and though I had been closely kept to London of late years, my youth had been spent in lonely places, and I had an innate love of solitudes and wide spaces. I saw at once that I should fall in love with this

Northumbrian coast, and once on its headlands I took my time, sauntering along at my leisure: Mr. Raven, in one of his letters, had mentioned seven as his dinner hour: therefore, I had the whole day before me. By noon the sun had grown warm, even summer-like; warm enough, at any rate, to warrant me in sitting down on a ledge of the cliffs while I smoked a pipe of tobacco and stared lazily at the mighty stretch of water across which, once upon a time, the vikings had swarmed from Norway. I must have become absorbed in my meditations – certainly it was with a start of surprise that I suddenly realized that somebody was near me, and looked up to see, standing close by and eyeing me furtively, a man.

It was, perhaps, the utter loneliness of my immediate surroundings just then that made me wonder to see any living thing so near. At that point there was neither a sail on the sea, nor a human habitation on the land; there was not even a sheep cropping the herbage of the headlands. I think there were birds calling about the pinnacles of the cliffs – yet it seemed to me that the man broke a complete stillness when he spoke, as he quietly wished me a good morning.

The sound of his voice startled me; also, it brought me out of a reverie and sharpened my wits, and as I replied to him, I took him in from head to foot. A thick-set middle-aged man, tidily dressed in a blue serge suit of nautical cut, the sort of thing that they sell, ready-made, in sea-ports and naval stations. His clothes went with his dark skin and grizzled hair and beard, and with the

gold rings which he wore in his ears. And there was that about him which suggested that he was for that time an idler, lounging.

"A fine morning," I remarked, not at all averse to entering into conversation, and already somewhat curious about him.

"A fine morning it is, master, and good weather, and likely to keep so," he answered, glancing around at sea and sky. Then he looked significantly at my knickerbockers and at a small satchel which I carried over my shoulders. "The right sort o' weather," he added, "for gentlemen walking about the country – pleasuring."

"You know these parts," I suggested.

"No!" he said, with a decisive shake of his head. "I don't, master, and that's a fact. I'm from the south, I am – never been up this way before, and, queerly enough, for I've seen most of the world in my time, never sailed this here sea as lies before us. But I've a sort of connection with this bit of country – mother's side came from hereabouts. And me having nothing particular to do, I came down here to take a cast round, like, seeing places as I've heard of – heard of, you understand, but ain't never seen."

"Then you're stopping in the neighbourhood?" I asked.

He raised one of his brown, hairy hands, and jerked a thumb landwards.

"Stopped last night in a little place, inland," he answered. "Name of Lesbury – a riverside spot. But that ain't what I want – what I want is a churchyard, or it might be two, or it might be three, where there's gravestones what bears a name. Only I don't know where that churchyard – or, again, there may be more than

one – is, d'ye see? Except – somewhere between Alnmouth one way and Brandnell Bay, t'other."

"I have a good map, if it's any use to you," I said. He took the map with a word of thanks, and after spreading it out, traced places with the end of his thick forefinger.

"Hereabouts we are, at this present, master," he said, "and here and there is, to be sure, villages – mostly inland. And'll have graveyards to 'em – folks must be laid away somewhere. And in one of them graveyards there'll be a name, and if I see that name, I'll know where I am, and I can ask further, aiming at to find out if any of that name is still flourishing hereabouts. But till I get that name, I'm clear off my course, so to speak."

"What is the name?" I asked him.

"Name of Netherfield," he answered, slowly. "Netherfield. Mother's people – long since. So I've been told. And seen it – in old books, what I have far away in Devonport. That's the name, right enough, only I don't know where to look for it. You ain't seen it, master, in your wanderings round these parts?"

"I've only come into these parts this morning," I replied. "But – if you look closely at that map, you'll observe that there aren't many villages along the coast, so your search ought not to be a lengthy one. I should question if you'll find more than two or three churchyards between here and Brandell Bay – judging by the map."

"Aye, well, Netherfield is the name," he repeated. "Netherfield, mother's side. In some churchyards hereabouts.

And there may be some of 'em left – and again there mayn't be. My name being Quick – Salter Quick. Of Devonport – when on land."

He folded up and handed back the map, with an old-fashioned bow. I rose from the ledge of rock on which I had been resting, and made to go forward.

"I hope you'll come across what you're seeking, Mr. Quick," I said. "But I should say you won't have much difficulty. There can't be many churchyards in this quarter, and not many gravestones in any of them."

"I found nothing in that one behind," he answered, jerking his thumb towards Lesbury. "And it's a long time since my mother left these parts. But here I am – for the purpose, d'ye see, master. Time's no object – nor yet expense. A man must take a bit of a holiday some day or other. Ain't had one – me – for thirty odd year."

We walked forward, northing our course, along the headlands. And rounding a sharp corner, we suddenly came in sight of a little settlement that lay half-way down the cliff. There was a bit of a cottage or two, two or three boats drawn up on a strip of yellow sand, a crumbling smithie, and above these things, on a shelf of rock, a low-roofed, long-fronted inn, by the gable of which rose a mast, wherefrom floated a battered flag. At the sight of this I saw a gleam come into my companion's eye, and I was quick to understand it's meaning.

"Do you feel disposed to a glass of ale?" I asked. "I should say

we could get one down there."

"Rum," he replied, laconically. "Rum is my drink, master. Used to that – I ain't used to ale. Cold stuff! Give me something that warms a man."

"It's poor ale that won't warm a man's belly," I said with a laugh. "But every man to his taste. Come on, then."

He followed in silence down the path to the lonely inn; once, looking back, I saw that he was turning a sharp eye round and about the new stretch of country that had just opened before us. From the inn and its surroundings a winding track, a merely rough cartway, wound off and upward into the land; in the distance I saw the tower of a church. Salter Quick saw it, too, and nodded significantly in its direction.

"That'll be where I'll make next," he observed. "But first – meat and drink. I ate my breakfast before seven this morning, and this walking about on dry land makes a man hungry."

"Drink you'll get here, no doubt," said I. "But as to meat – doubtful."

His reply to that was to point to the sign above the inn door, to which we were now close. He read its announcement aloud, slowly.

"'The Mariner's Joy. By Hildebrand Claigue. Good Entertainment for Man and Beast,'" he pronounced. "'Entertainment' – that means eating – meat for man; hay for cattle. Not that there's much sign of either in these parts, I think, master."

We walked into the Mariner's Joy side by side, turning into a low-ceilinged, darkish room, neat and clean enough, wherein there was a table, chairs, the model of a ship in a glass case on the mantelpiece, and a small bar, furnished with bottles and glasses, behind which stood a tall, middle-aged man, clean-shaven, spectacled, reading a newspaper. He bade us good morning, with no sign of surprise at the presence of strangers, and looked expectantly from one to the other. I turned to my companion.

"Well?" I said. "You'll drink with me? What is it – rum?"

"Rum it is, master, thanking you," he replied. "But vittals, too, is what I want." He glanced knowingly at the landlord. "You ain't got such a thing as a plateful – a good plateful! – of cold beef, with a pickle – onion or walnut, 'tain't no matter. And bread – a loaf of real home-baked? And a morsel of cheese?"

The landlord smiled as he reached for the rum bottle.

"I daresay we can fit you up, my lad," he answered. "Got a nice round of boiled beef on go – as it happens. Drop of rum first, eh? And – yours sir?"

"A glass of ale if you please," said I. "And as I'm not quite as hungry as our friend here, a crust of bread and a piece of cheese."

The landlord satisfied our demands, and then vanished through a door at the back of his bar. And when he had expressed his wishes for my good health, Salter Quick tasted the rum, smacked his lips over it, and looked about him with evident approval.

"Sort of port that a vessel might put into with security and comfort for a day or two, this, master," he observed. "I reckon I'll put myself up here, while I'm looking round – this will do me very well. And doubtless there'll be them coming in here, night-time, as'll know the neighbourhood, and be able to give a man points as to his bearings."

"I daresay you'll be very comfortable here," I assented. "It's not exactly a desert island."

"Aye, well, and Salter Quick's been in quarters of that sort in his time," he observed, with a glance that suggested infinite meaning. "He has, so! But this ain't no desert island, master. I can see they ain't short of good grub and sound liquor here!"

He made his usual jerk of the thumb – this time in the direction of the landlord, who just then came back with a well-filled tray. And presently, first removing his cap and saying his grace in a devout fashion, he sat down and began to eat with an evidently sharp-set appetite. Trifling with my bread and cheese, I turned to the landlord.

"This is a very lonely spot," I said. "I was surprised to see a licensed house here. Where do you get your customers?"

"Ah, you wouldn't see it as you came along," replied the landlord. "I saw you coming – you came from Alnmouth way. There's a village just behind here – it 'ud be hidden from you by this headland at back of the house – goodish-sized place. Plenty o' custom from that, o' nights. And of course there's folks going along, north and south."

Quick, his weather-stained cheeks bulging with his food, looked up sharply.

"A village, says you!" he exclaimed. "Then if a village, a church. And if a church, a churchyard. There is a churchyard, ain't there?"

"Why, there is a church, and there's a churchyard to it," replied the landlord. "What o' that?"

Quick nodded at me.

"As I been explaining to this gentleman," he said, "churchyards is what I'm looking for. Graves in 'em, you understand. And on them graves, a name. Name of Netherfield. Now I asks you, friendly – ha' you ever seen that name in your churchyard? 'Cause if so I'm at anchor. For the time being."

"Well, I haven't," answered the landlord. "But our churchyard – Lord bless you, there's scores o' them flat stones in it that's covered with long grass – there might be that name on some of 'em, for aught I know; I've never looked 'em over, I'm sure. But –"

Just then there came into the parlour a man, who from his rough dress, appeared to be a cattle-drover or a shepherd. Claigue turned to him with a glance that seemed to indicate him as authority.

"Here's one as lives by that churchyard," he observed. "Jim! ha' you ever noticed the name of Netherfield on any o' them old gravestones up yonder? This gentleman's asking after it, and I know you mow that churchyard grass time and again."

"Never seen it!" answered the new-comer. "But – strange things! – there was a man come up to me the other night, this side o' Lesbury, and asked that very question – not o' these parts, he wasn't. But – "

He stopped at that. Salter Quick dropped his knife and fork with a clatter, and held up his right hand.

CHAPTER II

RAVENSdene COURT

It was very evident to Claigue and myself, interested spectators, that the new-comer's announcement, sudden and unexpected as it was, had had the instantaneous effect of making Quick forget his beef and his rum. Indeed, although he was only half-way through its contents, he pushed his plate away from him as if food were just then nauseous to him; his right hand lifted itself in an arresting, commanding gesture, and he turned a startled eye on the speaker, looking him through and through as if in angry doubt of what he had just said.

"What's that?" he snapped out. "What says you? Say it again – no, I'll say it for you – to make sure that my ears ain't deceiving me! You met a man – hereabouts – what asked you if you knew where there was graves with a certain name on 'em? And that name was – Netherfield? Did you say that? – I asks you serious?"

The drover, or shepherd, or whatever he was, looked from Quick to me and then to Claigue, and smiled, as if he wondered at Quick's intensity of manner.

"You've got it all right, mister," he answered. "That's just what I did say. A stranger chap, he was – never seen him in these parts before."

Quick took up his glass and drank. There was no doubt about

his being upset, for his big hand trembled.

"Where was this here?" he demanded. "Recent?"

"Two nights ago," replied the man readily. "I was coming home, lateish, from Almwick, and met with this here chap a bit this side o' Lesbury. We walked a piece of the road together, talking. And he asked me what I've told you. Did I know these parts? – was I a native hereabouts? – did I know any churchyards with the name Netherfield on gravestones? And I said I didn't, but that there was such-like places in our parts where you couldn't see the gravestones for the grass, and these might be what he was asking after. And when we came to them cross-roads, where it goes to Denwick one direction and Boulmer the other, he left me, and I ain't seen aught of him since. Nor heard."

Quick pushed his empty glass across the table, with a sign to Claigue to refill it; at the same time he pointed silently to his informant, signifying that he was to be served at his expense. He was evidently deep in thought by that time, and for a moment or two he sat staring at the window and the blue sea beyond, abstracted and pondering. Suddenly he turned again on his informant.

"What like was this here man?" he demanded.

"I couldn't tell you, mister," replied the other. "It was well after dark and I never saw his face. But, for the build of him, a strong-set man, like myself, and just about your height. And now I come to think of it, spoke in your way – not as we do in these quarters. A stranger – like yourself. Seafaring man, I took him for."

"And you ain't heard of his being about?" asked Quick.

"Not a word, mister," affirmed the informant. "He went Denwick way when he left me. That's going inland."

Quick turned to me.

"I would like to see that map of yours again, master, if you please," he said. "I ought to ha' provided myself with one before I came here." He spread the map out before him, and after taking another gulp of his rum, proceeded to trace roads and places with the point of his finger. "Denwick?" he muttered. "Aye I see that. And these places where there's a little cross? – that'll mean there's a church there?"

I nodded an affirmative, silently watching him, and wondering what this desire on the part of two men to find the graves of the Netherfields might mean. And the landlord evidently shared my wonder, for presently he plumped his customer with a direct question.

"You seem very anxious to find these Netherfield gravestones," he remarked, with good-humoured inquisitiveness. "And so, apparently, does another man. Now, I've been in these parts a good many years, and I've never heard of 'em; never even heard the name."

"Nor me!" said the other man. "There's none o' that name in these parts – 'twixt Alnmouth Bay and Budle Point. I ain't never heard it!"

"And he's a native," declared the landlord. "Born and bred and brought up here. Wasn't you, Jim?"

"Never been away from it," assented Jim, with a short laugh. "Never been farther north than Belford, south than Warkworth, west than Whittingham. And as for east, I reckon you can't get much further that way than where we are now."

"Not unless you take to the water, you can't," said Claigue. "No – we ain't heard of no Netherfields hereabouts."

Quick seemed indifferent to these remarks. He suddenly folded up the map, returned it to me with a word of thanks, and plunging a hand in his trousers' pocket, produced a fistful of gold coins.

"What's to pay?" he demanded. "Take it out o' that – all we've had, and do you help yourself to a glass and a cigar." He flung a sovereign on the table, and rose to his feet. "I must be stepping along," he continued, looking at me. "If so be as there's another man seeking for – "

But at that he checked himself, remaining silent until Claigue counted out and handed over his change; silently, too, he pocketed it, and turned to the door. Claigue stopped him with an arresting word and motion of his hand.

"I say!" he said. "No business of mine, to be sure, but – don't you show that money of yours over readily hereabouts – in places like this, I mean. There's folk up and down these roads that 'ud track you for miles on the chance of – eh, Jim?"

"Aye – and farther!" assented Jim. "Keep it close, master." Quick listened quietly – just as quietly he slipped a hand to his hip pocket, brought it back to the front and showed a revolver.

"That and me, together – eh?" he said significantly. "Bad look-out for anybody that came between us and the light."

"They might come between you and the dark," retorted Claigue. "Take care of yourself! 'Tisn't a wise thing to flash a handful of gold about, my lad."

Quick made no remark. He walked out on to the cobbled pavement in front of the inn, and when I had paid Claigue for my modest lunch, and had asked how far it was to Ravensdene Court, I followed him. He was still in a brown study, and stood staring about him with moody eyes.

"Well?" I said, still inquisitive about this apparently mysterious man. "What next? Are you going on with your search?"

He scraped the point of a boot on the cobble-stones for awhile, gazing downwards almost as if he expected to unearth something; suddenly he raised his eyes and gave me a franker look than I had so far had from him.

"Master," he said, in a low voice, and with a side glance at the open door of the inn, "I'll tell you a bit more than I've said before – you're a gentleman, I can see, and such keeps counsel. I've an object – and a particular object! – in finding them graves. That's why I've travelled all this way – as you might say, from one end of England to the other. And now, arriving where they ought to be, I find – another man after what I'm after! Another man!"

"Have you any idea who he may be?" I asked.

He hesitated – and then suddenly shook his head.

"I haven't!" he answered. "No, I haven't, and that's a fact. For a minute or two, in there, I thought that maybe I did know, or, at any rate, had a notion; but it's a fact, I haven't. All the same, I'm going Denwick way, to see if I can come across whoever it is, or get news of him. Is that your road, master?"

"No," I replied. "I'm going some way farther along the headlands. Well – I hope you'll be successful in your search for the family gravestones."

He nodded, very seriously.

"I'm not going out o' this country till I've found 'em!" he asserted determinedly. "It's what I've come three hundred miles for. Good-day, master."

He turned off by the track that led over the top of the headlands, and as long as I watched him went steadily forward without even looking back, or to the right or left of him. And presently I, too, went on my way, and rounding another corner of the cliff left the lonely inn behind me.

But as I went along, following the line of the headlands, I wondered a good deal about Salter Quick and the conversation at the Mariner's Joy. What was it that this hard-bitten, travel-worn man, one who had seen, evidently, much of wind and wave, was really after? I gave no credence to his story of the family relationship – it was not at all likely that a man would travel all the way from Devonshire to Northumberland to find the graves of his mother's ancestors. There was something beyond that – but what? It was very certain that Quick wanted to come across the

tombs of the dead and gone Netherfields, however, for whatever purpose – certain, too, that there was another man who had the same wish. That complicated matters, and it deepened the mystery. Why did two men – seafaring men, both of them – arrive in this out-of-the-way spot about the same time, unknown to each other, but each apparently bent on the same object? And what would happen if, as seemed likely, they met? It was impossible to find an answer to these questions; but the mystery was there, all the same.

The afternoon remained fine, and, for the time of year, warm, and I took advantage of it by dawdling along that glorious stretch of sea-coast, taking in to the full its rich stores of romantic scenery and suggestion of long-past ages. Sometimes I sat for a long time, smoking my pipe on the edge of the headlands, staring at the blue of the water, the curl of the waves on the brown sands, conscious most of the compelling silence, and only dimly aware of the calling of the sea-birds on the cliffs. Altogether, the afternoon was drawing to its close when, rounding a bluff that had been in view before me for some time, I came in sight of what I felt sure to be Ravensdene Court, a grey-walled, stone-roofed Tudor mansion that stood at the head of a narrow valley or ravine – dene they call it in those parts, though a dene is really a tract of sand, while these breaks in the land are green and thickly treed – through which a narrow, rock-encumbered stream ran murmuring to the sea. Very picturesque in its old-worldness it looked in the mellowing light; the very place, I thought, which a

bookman and an antiquary, such as I had heard the late owner to be, would delight to store with his collections.

A path that led inland from the edge of the cliffs took me after a few minutes' walking to a rustic gate which was set in the boundary wall of a small park; within the wall rose a belt of trees, mostly oak and beech, their trunks obscured by a thick undergrowth. Passing through this, I came out on the park itself, at a point where, on a well-kept green, a girl, whom I immediately took to be the niece, recently released from the schoolroom, of whom Mr. Raven had spoken in his letter, was studying the lie of a golf ball. Behind her, carrying her bag of sticks, stood a small boy, chiefly remarkable for his large boots and huge tam-o'-shanter bonnet, who, as I appeared on the scene, was intently watching his young mistress's putter, wavering uncertainly in her slender hands before she ventured on what was evidently a critical stroke. But before the stroke was made the girl caught sight of me, paused, seemed to remember something, and then, swinging her club, came lightly in my direction – a tallish, elastic-limbed girl, not exactly pretty, but full of attraction because of her clear eyes, healthy skin, and general atmosphere of life and vivacity. Recently released from the schoolroom though she might be, she showed neither embarrassment nor shyness on meeting a stranger. Her hand went out to me with ready frankness.

"Mr. Middlebrook?" she said inquiringly. "Yes, of course – I might have known you'd come along the cliffs. Your luggage came this morning, and we got your message. But you must be

tired after all those miles? I'll take you up to the house and give you some tea."

"I'm not at all tired, thank you," I answered. "I came along very leisurely, enjoying the walk. Don't let me take you from your game."

"Oh, that's all right," she said carelessly, throwing her putter to the boy. "I've had quite enough; besides, it's getting towards dusk, and once the sun sets, it's soon dark in these regions. You've never seen Ravensdene Court before?"

"Never," I replied, glancing at the house, which stood some two or three hundred yards before us. "It seems to be a very romantically-situated, picturesque old place. I suppose you know all its nooks and corners?"

She gave her shoulders – squarely-set, well-developed ones – a little shrug, and shook her head.

"No, I don't," she answered. "I never saw it before last month. It's all that you say – picturesque and romantic enough. And queer! I believe it's haunted."

"That adds to its charm," I remarked with a laugh. "I hope I shall have the pleasure of seeing the ghost."

"I don't!" she said. "That is, I hope I shan't. The house is odd enough without that! But – you wouldn't be afraid?"

"Would you?" I asked, looking more closely at her.

"I don't know," she replied. "You'll understand more when you see the place. There's a very odd atmosphere about it. I think something must have happened there, some time. I'm not

a coward, but, really, after the daylight's gone – "

"You're adding to its charms!" I interrupted. "Everything sounds delightful!"

She looked at me half-inquiringly, and then smiled a little.

"I believe you're pulling my leg," she said. "However – we'll see. But you don't look as if you would be afraid – and you're not a bit like what I thought you'd be, either."

"What did you think I should be?" I asked, amused at her candour.

"Oh, I don't know – a queer, snuffy, bald-pated old man, like Mr. Cazalette," she replied. "Booky, and papery, and that sort of thing. And you're quite – something else – and young!"

"The frost of thirty winters have settled on me," I remarked with mock seriousness.

"They must have been black frosts, then!" she retorted. "No! – you're a surprise. I'm sure Uncle Francis is expecting a venerable, dry-as-dust sort of man."

"I hope he won't be disappointed," I said. "But I never told him I was dry as dust, or snuffy, or bald – "

"It's your reputation," she said quickly. "People don't expect to find such learning in ordinary young men in tweed suits."

"Am I an ordinary young man, then?" I demanded. "Really – "

"Oh, well, you know what I mean!" she said hastily. "You can call me a very ordinary young woman, if you like."

"I shall do nothing of the sort!" said I. "I have a habit of always calling things by their right names, and I can see already that you

are very far from being an ordinary young woman."

"So you begin by paying me compliments?" she retorted with a laugh. "Very well – I've no objection, which shows that I'm human, anyhow. But here is my uncle."

I had already seen Mr. Francis Raven advancing to meet us, a tall, somewhat stooping man with all the marks of the Anglo-Indian about him: a kindly face burnt brown by equatorial suns, old-fashioned, grizzled moustache and whiskers; the sort of man that I had seen more than once coming off big liners at Tilbury and Southampton, looking as if England, seen again after many years of absence, were a strange country to their rather weary, wondering eyes. He came up with outstretched hands; I saw at once that he was a man of shy, nervous temperament.

"Welcome to Ravensdene Court, Mr. Middlebrook!" he exclaimed in quick, almost deprecating fashion. "A very dull and out-of-the-way place to which to bring one used to London; but we'll do our best – you've had a convoy across the park, I see," he added with a glance at his niece. "That's right!"

"As charming a one as her surroundings are delightful, Mr. Raven," I said, assuming an intentionally old-fashioned manner. "If I am treated with the same consideration I have already received, I shall be loth to bring my task to an end!"

"Mr. Middlebrook is a bit of a tease, Uncle Francis," said my guide. "I've found that out already. He's not the paper-and-parchment person you expected."

"Oh, dear me, I didn't expect anything of the sort!" protested

Mr. Raven. He looked from his niece to me, and laughed, shaking his head. "These modern young ladies – ah!" he exclaimed. "But come – I'll show Mr. Middlebrook his rooms."

He led the way into the house and up the great stair of the hall to a couple of apartments which overlooked the park. I had a general sense of big spaces, ancient things, mysterious nooks and corners; my own rooms, a bed-chamber and a parlour, were delightful. My host was almost painfully anxious to assure himself that I had everything in them that I was likely to want, and fussed about from one room to the other, seeing to details that I should never have thought of.

"You'll be able to find your way down?" he said at last, as he made for the door. "We dine at seven – perhaps there'll be time to take a little look round before then, after we've dressed. And I must introduce Mr. Cazalette – you don't know him personally? – oh, a remarkable man, a very remarkable man indeed – yes!"

I did not waste much time over my toilet, nor, apparently did Miss Marcia Raven, for I found her, in a smart gown, in the hall when I went down at half-past-six. And she and I had taken a look at its multifarious objects before Mr. Raven appeared on the scene, followed by Mr. Cazalette. One glance at this gentleman assured me that our host had been quite right when he spoke of him as remarkable – he was not merely remarkable, but so extraordinary in outward appearance that I felt it difficult to keep my eyes off him.

CHAPTER III

THE MORNING TIDE

Miss Raven had already described Mr. Cazalette to me, by inference, as a queer, snuffy bald-pated old man, but this summary synopsis of his exterior features failed to do justice to a remarkable original. There was something supremely odd about him. I thought, at first, that my impression of oddity might be derived from his clothes – he wore a strangely-cut dress-coat of blue cloth, with gold buttons, a buff waistcoat, and a frilled shirt – but I soon came to the conclusion that he would be queer and uncommon in any garments. About Mr. Cazalette there was an atmosphere – and it was decidedly one of mystery. First and last, he looked uncanny.

Mr. Raven introduced us with a sort of old-world formality (I soon discovered, as regards him, that he was so far unaware that a vast gulf lay between the manners and customs of society as they are nowadays and as they were when he left England for India in the 'seventies: he was essentially mid-Victorian) and in order to keep up to it, I saluted Mr. Cazalette with great respect and expressed myself as feeling highly honoured by meeting one so famous as my fellow-guest. Somewhat to my surprise, Mr. Cazalette's tightly-locked lips relaxed into what was plainly a humorous smile, and he favoured me with a knowing look that

was almost a wink.

"Aye, well," he said, "you're just about as well known in your own line, Middlebrook, as I am in mine, and between the pair of us I've no doubt we'll be able to reduce chaos into order. But we'll not talk shop at this hour of the day – there's more welcome matters at hand."

He put his snuff box and his gaudy handkerchief out of sight, and looked at his host and hostess with another knowing glance, reminding me somehow of a wicked old condor which I had sometimes seen at the Zoological Gardens, eyeing the keeper who approached with its meal.

"Mr. Cazalette," remarked Miss Raven, with an informing glance at me, "never, on principle, touches bite or sup between breakfast and dinner – and he has no great love of breakfast."

"I'm a disciple of the justly famed and great man, Abernethy," observed Mr. Cazalette. "I'd never have lived to my age nor kept my energy at what, thank Heaven, it is, if I hadn't been. D'ye know how old I am, Middlebrook?"

"I really don't, Mr. Cazalette," I replied.

"Well I'm eighty years of age," he answered with a grin. "And I'm intending to be a hundred! And on my hundredth birthday, I'll give a party, and I'll dance with the sprightliest lassie that's there, and if I'm not as lively as she is I'll be sore out of my calculations."

"A truly wonderful young man!" exclaimed Mr. Raven. "I veritably believe he feels – and is – younger than myself – and

"I'm twenty years his junior."

So I had now discovered certain facts about Mr. Cazalette. He was an octogenarian. He was uncannily active. He had an almost imp-like desire to live – and to dance when he ought to have been wrapped in blankets and saying his last prayers. And a few minutes later, when we were seated round our host's table, I discovered another fact – Mr. Cazalette was one of those men to whom dinner is the event of the day, and who regard conversation – on their own part, at any rate – as a wicked disturbance of sacred rites. As the meal progressed (and Mr. Raven's cook proved to be an unusually clever and good one) I was astonished at Mr. Cazalette's gastronomic powers and at his love of mad dishes: indeed, I never saw a man eat so much, nor with such hearty appreciation of his food, nor in such a concentrated silence. Nevertheless, that he kept his ears wide open to what was being said around him, I soon discovered. I was telling Mr. Raven and his niece of my adventure of the afternoon, and suddenly I observed that Mr. Cazalette, on the other side of the round table at which we sat, had stopped eating, and that, knife and fork still in his queer, claw-like hands, he was peering at me under the shaded lamps, his black, burning eyes full of a strange, absorbed interest. I paused – involuntarily.

"Go on!" said he. "Did you mention the name Netherfield just then?"

"I did," said I. "Netherfield."

"Well, continue with your tale," he said. "I'm listening. I'm a

silent man when I'm busy with my meat and drink, but I've a fine pair of ears."

He began to ply knife and fork again, and I went on with my story, continuing it until the parting with Salter Quick. When I came to that, the footman who stood behind Mr. Cazalette's chair was just removing his last plate, and the old man leaned back a little and favoured the three of us with a look.

"Aye, well," he said, "and that's an interesting story, Middlebrook, and it tempts me to break my rule and talk a bit. It was some churchyard this fellow was seeking?"

"A churchyard – in this neighbourhood," I replied. "Or – churchyards."

"Where there were graves with the name Netherfield on their stones or slabs or monuments," he continued.

"Aye – just so. And those men he foregathered with at the inn, they'd never heard of anything at that point, nor elsewhere?"

"Neither there nor elsewhere," I assented.

"Then if there is such a place," said he, "it'll be one of those disused burial-grounds of which there are examples here in the north, and not a few."

"You know of some?" suggested Mr. Raven.

"I've seen such places," answered Mr. Cazalette. "Betwixt here – the sea-coast – and the Cheviots, westward, there's a good many spots that Goldsmith might have drawn upon for his deserted village. The folks go – the bit of a church falls into ruins – its graveyard gets choked with weeds – the stones are covered

with moss and lichen – the monuments fall and are obscured by the grass – underneath the grass and the weed many an old family name lies hidden. And what'll that man be wanting to find any name at all for, I'd like to know!"

"The queer thing to me," observed Mr. Raven, "is that two men should be wanting to find it at the same time."

"That looks as if there were some very good reason why it should be found, doesn't it?" remarked his niece. "Anyway, it all sounds very queer – you've brought mystery with you, Mr. Middlebrook! Can't you suggest anything, Mr. Cazalette? I'm sure you're good at solving problems."

But just then Mr. Cazalette's particular servant put a fresh dish in front of him – a curry, the peculiar aroma of which evidently aroused his epicurean instinct. Instead of responding to Miss Raven's invitation he relapsed into silence, and picked up another fork.

When dinner was over I excused myself from sitting with the two elder men over their wine – Mr. Cazalette, whom by that time I, of course, knew for a Scotchman, turned out to have an old-fashioned taste for claret – and joined Miss Raven in the hall, a great, roomy, shadowy place which was evidently popular. There was a great fire in its big hearth-place with deep and comfortable chairs set about it; in one of these I found her sitting, a book in her hand. She dropped it as I approached and pointed to a chair at her side.

"What do you think of that queer old man?" she asked in a

low voice as I sat down. "Isn't there something almost – what is it? – uncanny? – about him?"

"You might call him that," I assented. "Yes – I think uncanny would fit him. A very marvellous man, though, at his age."

"Aye!" she exclaimed, under her breath. "If I could live to see it, it wouldn't surprise me if he lived to be four hundred. He's so queer. Do you know that he actually goes out early – very early – in the morning and swims in the open sea?"

"Any weather?" I suggested.

"No matter what the weather is," she replied. "He's been here three weeks now, and he has never missed that morning swim. And sometimes the mornings have been Arctic – more than I could stand, anyway, and I'm pretty well hardened."

"A decided character!" I said musingly. "And somehow, he seems to fit in with his present surroundings. From what I have seen of it, Mr. Raven was quite right in telling me that this house was a museum."

I was looking about me as I spoke. The big, high-roofed hall, like every room I had so far seen, was filled from floor to ceiling with books, pictures, statuary, armour, curiosities of every sort and of many ages. The prodigious numbers of the books alone showed me that I had no light task in prospect. But Miss Raven shook her head.

"Museum!" she exclaimed. "I should think so! But you've seen nothing – wait till you see the north wing. Every room in that is crammed with things – I think my great-uncle, who left all

this to Uncle Francis recently, must have done nothing whatever but buy, and buy, and buy things, and then, when he got them home, have just dumped them down anywhere! There's some order here," she added, looking round, "but across there, in the north wing, it's confusion."

"Did you know your great-uncle?" I asked.

"I? No!" she replied. "Oh, dear me, no! I'd never been in the north until Uncle Francis came home from India some months ago and fetched me from the school where I'd been ever since my father and mother died – that was when I was twelve. No, except my father, I never knew any of the Raven family. I believe Uncle Francis and myself are the very last."

"You must like living under the old family roof?" I suggested.

She gave me a somewhat undecided look.

"I'm not quite sure," she answered. "Uncle Francis is the very soul of kindness – I think he's the very kindest person, man or woman, I ever came across, but – I don't know."

"Don't know – what?" I asked.

"Don't know if I really like this place," she said. "As I said to you this afternoon, this is a very odd house altogether, and there's a strange atmosphere about it, and I think something must have happened here. I – well, personally, I feel as if I were something so very small and insignificant, shut up in immensity."

"That's because it's a little strange, even now," I suggested. "You'll get used to it. And I suppose there's society."

"Uncle Francis is a good deal of a recluse," she answered. "It's

really a very good thing that I'm fond of outdoor life, and that I take an interest in books, too. But I'm very deficient in knowledge in book matters – do teach me something while you're here! – I'd like to know a good deal about all these folios and quartos and so on."

I made haste to reply that I should be only too happy to put my knowledge at her disposal, and she responded by saying that she would like to help me in classifying and inspecting the various volumes which the dead-and-gone great-uncle had collected. We got on very well together, and I was a little sorry when my host came in with his other guest – who, a loop-hole being given him, proceeded to give us a learned dissertation on the evidences of Roman occupation of the North of England as evidenced by recent and former discoveries of coins between Trent and Tweed: it was doubtless very interesting, and a striking proof of Mr. Cazalette's deep and profound knowledge of his special subject, and at another time I should have listened to it gladly. But – somehow I should just then have preferred to chat quietly in the corner of the hearth with Miss Raven.

We all retire early – that, Mr. Raven informed me with a shy laugh, as if he were confessing a failing, was the custom of the house. But, he added, I should find a fire in my sitting-room, so that if I wanted to read or write, I should be comfortable in my retirement. On hearing that, I begged him to countermand any such luxuries on my account in future; it was my invariable habit, I assured him, to retire to bed at ten o'clock, wherever I was –

reading or writing at night, I said, were practices which I rigidly tabooed. Mr. Cazalette, who stood by, grimly listening, nodded approval.

"Wise lad!" he said. "That's another reason why I'm what I am. Don't let any mistake be made about it! – the old saw, much despised and laughed at though it is, has more in it than anybody thinks for. Get to your pillow early, and leave it early! – that's the sure thing."

"I don't think I should like to get up as early as you do, though," remarked Mr. Raven. "You certainly don't give the worms much chance!"

"Aye, and I've caught a few in my time," assented the old gentleman, complacently. "And I hope to catch a few more yet. You folk who don't get up till the morning's half over don't know what you miss."

I slept soundly that night – a strange bed and unfamiliar surroundings affect me not at all. Just as suddenly as I had dropped asleep, I woke. My windows face due east – I was instantly aware that the sun had either risen or was just about to rise. Springing out of bed and drawing up the blind of one of the three tall, narrow windows of my room, I saw him mounting behind a belt of pine and fir which stretched along a bluff of land that ran down to the open sea. And I saw, too, that it was high tide – the sea had stolen up the creek which ran right to the foot of the park, and the wide expanse of water glittered and coruscated in the brilliance of the morning glory.

My watch lay on the dressing-table close by; glancing at it, I saw that the time was twenty-five minutes to seven. I had been told that the family breakfasted at nine, so I had nearly two-and-a-half hours of leisure. Of course, I would go out, and enjoy the freshness of the morning. I turned to the window again, just to take another view of the scenery in front of the house, and to decide in which direction I would go. And there, emerging from a wicket-gate that opened out of an adjacent plantation, I caught sight of Mr. Cazalette.

It was evident that this robust octogenarian had been taking that morning swim of which Miss Raven had told me the previous evening. He was muffled up in an old pea-jacket; various towels were festooned about his shoulders; his bald head shone in the rising sun. I watched him curiously as he came along the borders of a thick yew hedge at the side of the gardens. Suddenly, at a particular point, he stopped, and drawing something out of his towels, thrust it, at the full length of his arm, into the closely interwoven mass of twig and foliage at his side. Then he moved forward towards the house; a bushy clump of rhododendron hid him from my sight. Two or three minutes later I heard a door close somewhere near my own; Mr. Cazalette had evidently re-entered his own apartment.

I was bathed, shaved, and dressed by a quarter past seven, and finding my way out of the house went across the garden towards the wicket-gate through which I had seen Mr. Cazalette emerge – as he had come from the sea that way, it was, I concluded, the

nearest way to it. My path led by the yew-hedge which I have just mentioned, and I suddenly saw the place where Mr. Cazalette had stood when he thrust his arm into it; thereabouts, the ground was soft, mossy, damp: the marks of his shoes were plain. Out of mere curiosity, I stood where he had stood, and slightly parting the thick, clinging twigs, peeped into the obscurity behind. And there, thrust right in amongst the yew, I saw something white, a crumpled, crushed-up lump of linen, perhaps a man's full-sized pocket-handkerchief, whereon I could make out, even in that obscurity (and nothing in the way of hedges can be thicker or darker than one of old, carefully-trimmed yew) brown stains and red stains, as if from contact with soil or clay in one case, with blood in the other.

I went onward, considerably mystified. But most people, chancing upon anything mysterious try to explain it to their own satisfaction. I came to the conclusion that Mr. Cazalette, during his morning swim – no doubt in very shallow waters – had cut hand or foot against some sharp pebble or bit of rock, and had used his handkerchief as a bandage until the bleeding stopped. Yet – why thrust it away into the yew-hedge, close to the house? Why carry it from the shore at all, if he meant to get rid of it? And why not have consigned it to his dirty-linen basket and have it washed?

"Decidedly an odd character," I mused. "A man of mystery!"

Then I dismissed him from my thoughts, my mind becoming engrossed by the charm of my surroundings. I made my way

down to the creek, passed through the belt of pine and fir over which I had seen the sun rise, and came out on a little, rock-bound cove, desolate and wild. Here one was shut out from everything but the sea in front: Ravensdene Court was no longer visible; here, amongst great masses of fallen cliff and limpet-encrusted rock, round which the full strength of the tide was washing, one seemed to be completely alone with sky and strand.

But the place was tenanted. I had not taken twenty paces along the foot of the overhanging cliff before I pulled myself sharply to a halt. There, on the sand before me, his face turned to the sky, his arms helplessly stretched, lay Salter Quick. I knew he was dead in my first horrified glance. And for the second time that morning, I saw blood – red, vivid, staining the shining particles in the yellow, sun-lighted beach.

CHAPTER IV

THE TOBACCO BOX

My first feeling of almost stupefied horror at seeing a man whom I had met only the day before in the full tide of life and vigour lying there in that lonely place, literally weltering in his own blood and obviously the victim of a foul murder speedily changed to one of angry curiosity. Who had wrought this crime? Crime it undoubtedly was – the man's attitude, the trickle of blood from his slightly parted lips across the stubble of his chin, the crimson stain on the sand at his side, the whole attitude of his helpless figure, showed me that he had been attacked from the rear and probably stricken down by a deadly knife thrust through his shoulders. This was murder – black murder. And my thoughts flew to what Claigue, the landlord, had said, warningly, the previous afternoon, about the foolishness of showing so much gold. Had Salter Quick disregarded that warning, flashed his money about in some other public house, been followed to this out of the way spot and run through the heart for the sake of his fistful of sovereigns? It looked like it. But then that thought fled, and another took its place – the recollection of the blood-stained linen, rag, bandage, or handkerchief, which that queer man Mr. Cazalette had pushed into hiding in the yew-hedge. Had that – had Cazalette himself – anything to do with this crime?

The instinctive desire to get an answer to this last question made me suddenly stoop down and lay my fingers on the dead man's open palm. I was conscious as I did so of the extraordinary, appealing helplessness of his hands – instead of being clenched in a death agony as I should have expected they were stretched wide, they looked nerveless, limp, effortless. But when my fingers came to the nearest one – the right hand – I found that it was stiff, rigid, stone-cold. I knew then that Salter Quick had been dead for several hours; had probably been lying there, murdered, all through the darkness of the night.

There were no signs of any struggle. At this point the sands were unusually firm and for the most part, all round and about the body, they remained unbroken. Yet there were footprints, very faint indeed, yet traceable, and I saw at once that they did not extend beyond this spot. There were two distinct marks; one there of boots with nails in the heels; these were certainly made by the dead man; the other indicated a smaller, very light-soled boot, perhaps a slipper. A yard or so behind the body these marks were mingled; that had evidently been done when the murderer stole close up to his victim, preparatory to dealing the fatal thrust.

Carefully, slowly, I traced these footsteps. They were plainly traceable, faint though they were, to the edge of the low cliff, there a gentle slope of some twelve or fifteen feet in height; I traced them up its incline. But from the very edge of the cliff the land was covered by a thick wire-like turf; you could have run a heavy gun over it without leaving any impression. Yet it

was clear that two men had come across it to that point, had then descended the cliff to the sand, walked a few yards along the beach, and then – one had murdered the other.

Standing there, staring around me, I was suddenly startled by the explosion of a gun, close at hand. And then, from a coppice, some thirty yards away, a man emerged, whom I took, from his general appearance, to be a gamekeeper. Unconscious of my presence he walked forward in my direction, picked up a bird which his shot had brought down, and was thrusting it into a bag that hung at his hip, when I called to him. He looked round sharply, caught sight of me, and came slowly in my direction, wondering, I could see, who I was. I made towards him. He was a middle-aged, big-framed man, dark of skin and hair, sharp-eyed.

"Are you Mr. Raven's gamekeeper?" I asked, as I got within speaking distance. "Just so – I am staying with Mr. Raven. And I've just made a terrible discovery. There is a man lying behind the cliff there – dead."

"Dead, sir?" he exclaimed. "What – washed up by the tide, likely."

"No," I said. "He's been murdered. Stabbed to death!"

He let out a short, sibilant breath, looking at me with rapidly dilating eyes: they ran me all over, as if he wondered whether I were romancing.

"Come this way," I continued, leading him to the edge of the cliff. "And mind how you walk on the sand – there are footmarks there, and I don't want them interfered with till the police have

examined them. There!" I continued, as we reached the edge of the turf and came in view of the beach. "You see?"

He gave another exclamation of surprise: then carefully followed me to the dead man's side where he stood staring wonderingly at the stains on the sand.

"He must have been dead for some hours," I whispered. "He's stone-cold – and rigid. Now, this is murder! You live about here, no doubt? Did you see or hear anything of this man in the neighbourhood last night – or in the afternoon or evening?"

"I, sir?" he exclaimed. "No, sir – nothing!"

"I met him yesterday afternoon on the headlands between this and Alnmouth," I remarked.

"I was with him for a while at the Mariner's Joy. He pulled out a big handful of gold there, to pay for his lunch. The landlord warned him against showing so much money. Now, before we do more, I'd like to know if he's been murdered for the sake of robbery. You're doubtless quicker of hand than I am – just slip your hand into that right-hand pocket of his trousers, and see if you feel money there."

He took my meaning on the instant, and bending down, did what I suggested. A smothered exclamation came from him.

"Money?" he said. "His pocket's full o' money!"

"Bring it out," I commanded.

He withdrew his hand; opened it; the palm was full of gold. The light of the morning sun flashed on those coins as if in mockery. We both looked at them – and then at each other with

a sudden mutual intelligence.

"Then it wasn't robbery!" I exclaimed. "So – "

He thrust back the gold, and pulling at a thick chain of steel which lay across Quick's waistcoat, drew out a fine watch.

"Gold again, sir!" he said. "And a good 'un, that's never been bought for less than thirty pound. No, it's not been robbery."

"No," I agreed, "and that makes it all the more mysterious. What's your name?"

"Tarver, sir, at your service," he answered, as he rose from the dead man's side. "Been on this estate a many years, sir."

"Well, Tarver," I said, "the only thing to be done is that I must go back to the house and tell Mr. Raven what's happened, and send for the police. Do you stay here – and if anybody comes along, be very careful to keep them off those footmarks."

"Not likely that there'll be anybody, sir," he remarked. "As lonely a bit of coast, this, as there is, hereabouts. What beats me," he added, "is – what was he – and the man as did it – doing, here? There's naught to come here for. And – it must ha' happened in the night, judging by the looks of him."

"The whole thing's a profound mystery," I answered. "We shall hear a lot more of it."

I left him standing by the dead man and went hurriedly away towards Ravensdene Court. Glancing at my watch as I passed through the belt of pine, I saw that it was already getting on to nine o'clock and breakfast time. But this news of mine would have to be told: this was no time for waiting or for ceremony.

I must get Mr. Raven aside, at once, and we must send for the nearest police officer, and —

Just then, fifty yards in front of me, I saw Mr. Cazalette vanishing round the corner of the long yew-hedge, at the end nearest to the house. So — he had evidently been back to the place whereat he had hidden the stained linen, whatever it was? Coming up to that place a moment later, and making sure that I was not observed, I looked in amongst the twigs and foliage. The thing was gone.

This deepened the growing mystery more than ever. I began, against my will, to piece things together. Mr. Cazalette, returning from the beach, hides a blood-stained rag — I, going to the beach, find a murdered man — coming back, I ascertain that Mr. Cazalette has already removed what he had previously hidden. What connection was there — if any at all — between Mr. Cazalette's actions and my discovery? To say the least of it, the whole thing was queer, strange, and even suspicious.

Then I caught sight of Mr. Cazalette again. He was on the terrace, in front of the house, with Mr. Raven — they were strolling up and down, before the open window of the morning room, chatting. And I was thankful that Miss Raven was not with them, and that I saw no sign of her near presence.

I determined to tell my gruesome news straight out — Mr. Raven, I felt sure, was not the man to be startled by tidings of sudden death, and I wanted, of set purpose, to see how his companion would take the announcement. So, as I walked up

the steps of the terrace, I loudly called my host's name. He turned, saw from my expression that something of moment had happened, and hurried toward me, Cazalette trotting in his rear. I gave a warning look in the direction of the house and its open windows.

"I don't want to alarm Miss Raven," I said in a low voice, which I purposely kept as matter-of-fact as possible. "Something has happened. You know the man I was telling you of last night – Salter Quick? I found his dead body, half-an-hour ago, on your beach. He has been murdered – stabbed to the heart. Your gamekeeper, Tarver, is with him. Had you not better send for the police?"

I carefully watched both men as I broke the news. Its effect upon them was different in both cases. Mr. Raven started a little; exclaimed a little: he was more wonder-struck than horrified. But Mr. Cazalette's mask-like countenance remained immobile; only, a gleam of sudden, almost pleased interest showed itself in his black, shrewd eyes.

"Aye?" he exclaimed. "So you found your man dead and murdered, Middlebrook? Well, now, that's the very end that I was thinking the fellow would come to! Not that I fancied it would be so soon, nor so close at hand. On one's own doorstep so to speak. Interesting! Very interesting!"

I was too much taken aback by his callousness to make any observation on these sentiments; instead, I looked at Mr. Raven. He was evidently too much surprised just then to pay any

attention to his elder guest: he motioned me to follow him.

"Come with me to the telephone," he said. "Dear, dear, what a very sad thing. Of course, the poor fellow has been murdered for his money? You said he'd a lot of gold on him."

"It's not been for robbery," I answered. "His money and his watch are untouched. There's more in it than that."

He stared at me as if failing to comprehend.

"Some mystery?" he suggested.

"A very deep and lurid one, I think," said I. "Get the police out as quickly as possible, and bid them bring a doctor."

"They'll bring their own police-surgeon," he remarked, "but we have a medical man closer at hand. I'll ring him up, too. Yet – what can they do?"

"Nothing – for him," I replied. "But they may be able to tell us at what hour the thing took place. And that's important."

When we left the telephone we went to the morning-room, to get a mouthful of food before going down to the beach. Miss Raven was there – so was Cazalette. I saw at once that he had told her the news. She was sitting behind her tea and coffee things, staring at him: he, on his part, a cup of tea in one hand, a dry biscuit in the other, was marching up and down the room sipping and munching, and holding forth, in didactic fashion, on crime and detection. Miss Raven gave me a glance as I slipped into a place at her side.

"You found this poor man?" she whispered. "How dreadful for you!"

"For him, too – and far more so," I said. "I didn't want you to know until – later. Mr. Cazalette oughtn't to have told you."

She arched her eyebrows in the direction of the odd, still orating figure.

"Oh!" she murmured. "He's no reverence for anything – life or death. I believe he's positively enjoying this: he's been talking like that ever since he came in and told me of it."

Mr. Raven and I made a very hurried breakfast and prepared to join Tarver. The news of the murder had spread through the household; we found two or three of the men-servants ready to accompany us. And Mr. Cazalette was ready, too, and, I thought, more eager than any of the rest. Indeed, when we set out from the house he led the way, across the gardens and pleasure-grounds, along the yew-hedge (at which he never so much as gave a glance) and through the belt of pine wood. At its further extremity he glanced at Mr. Raven.

"From what Middlebrook says, this man must be lying in Kernwick Cove," he said. "Now, there's a footpath across the headlands and the field above from Long Houghton village to that spot. Quick must have followed it last night. But how came he to meet his murderer – or did his murderer follow him? And what was Quick doing down here? Was he directed here – or led here?"

Mr. Raven seemed to think these questions impossible of immediate answer: his one anxiety at that moment appeared to be to set the machinery of justice in motion. He was manifestly

relieved when, as we came to the open country behind the pines and firs, where a narrow lane ran down to the sea, we heard the rattle of a light dog-cart and turned to see the inspector of police and a couple of his men, who had evidently hurried off at once on receiving the telephone message. With them, seated by the inspector on the front seat of the trap, was a professional-looking man who proved to be the police-surgeon.

We all trooped down to the beach, where Tarver was keeping his unpleasant vigil. He had been taking a look round the immediate scene of the murder, he said, during my absence, thinking that he might find something in the way of a clue. But he had found nothing: there were no signs of any struggle anywhere near. It seemed clear that two men had crossed the land, descended the low cliffs, and that one had fallen on the other as soon as the sands were reached – the footmarks indicated as much. I pointed them out to the police, who examined them carefully, and agreed with me that one set was undoubtedly made by the boots of the dead man while the other was caused by the pressure of some light-footed, lightly-shoed person. And there being nothing else to be seen or done at that place, Salter Quick was lifted on to an improvised stretcher which the servants had brought down from the Court and carried by the way we had come to an outhouse in the gardens, where the police-surgeon proceeded to make a more careful examination of his body. He was presently joined in this by the medical man of whom Mr. Raven had spoken – a Dr. Lorrimore, who came hurrying up in

his motor-car, and at once took a hand in his fellow-practitioner's investigations. But there was little to investigate – just as I had thought from the first. Quick had been murdered by a knife-thrust from behind – dealt with evident knowledge of the right place to strike, said the two doctors, for his heart had been transfixed, and death must have been instantaneous.

Mr. Raven shrank away from these gruesome details, but Mr. Cazalette showed the keenest interest in them, and would not be kept from the doctor's elbows. He was pertinacious in questioning them.

"And what sort of a weapon was it, d'y'e suppose that the assassin used?" he asked. "That'll be an important thing to know, I'm thinking."

"It might have been a seaman's knife," said the police-surgeon. "One of those with a long, sharp blade."

"Or," said Dr. Lorrimore, "a stiletto – such as foreigners carry."

"Aye," remarked Mr. Cazalette, "or with an operating knife – such as you medicos use. Any one of those fearsome things would serve, no doubt. But we'll be doing more good, Middlebrook, just to know what the police are finding in the man's pockets."

The police-inspector had got all Quick's belongings in a little heap. They were considerable. Over thirty pounds in gold and silver. Twenty pounds in notes in an old pocket-book. His watch – certainly a valuable one. A pipe, a silver match-box, a tobacco-

box of some metal, quaintly chased and ornamented. Various other small matters – but, with one exception, no papers or letters. The one exception was a slightly torn, dirty envelope addressed in an ill-formed handwriting to Mr. Salter Quick, care of Mr. Noah Quick, The Admiral Parker, Haulaway Street, Devonport. There was no letter inside it, nor was there another scrap of writing anywhere about the dead man's pockets.

The police allowed Mr. Cazalette to inspect these things according to his fancy. It was very clear to me by that time that the old gentleman had some taste for detective work, and I watched him with curiosity while he carefully examined Quick's money, his watch (of which he took particular notice, even going so far as to jot down its number and the name of its maker on his shirt cuff), and the rest of his belongings. But nothing seemed to excite his interest very deeply until he began to finger the tobacco-box; then, indeed, his eyes suddenly coruscated, and he turned to me almost excitedly.

"Middlebrook!" he whispered, edging me away from the others. "Do you look here, my lad! D'y'e see the inside of the lid of this box? There's been something – a design, a plan, something of that sort, anyway – scratched into it with the point of a nail, or a knife. Look at the lines – and see, there's marks and there's figures! Now I'd like to know what all that signifies? What are you going to do with all these things?" he asked, turning suddenly on the inspector. "Take them away?"

"They'll all be carefully sealed up and locked up till the

inquest, sir," replied the inspector. "No doubt the dead man's relatives will claim them."

Mr. Cazalette laid down the tobacco-box, left the place, and hurried away in the direction of the house. Within a few minutes he came hurrying back, carrying a camera. He went up to the inspector with an almost wheedling air.

"Ye'll just indulge an old man's fancy?" he said, placatingly. "There's some queer marking inside the lid of that bit of a box that the poor man kept his tobacco in. I'd like to take a photograph of them. Man! you don't know that an examination of them mightn't be useful."

CHAPTER V

THE NEWS FROM DEVONPORT

The police-inspector, a somewhat silent, stolid sort of man, looked down from his superior height on Mr. Cazalette's eager face with a half-bored, half-tolerant expression; he had already seen a good deal of the old gentleman's fussiness.

"What is it about the box?" he demanded.

"Certain marks on it – inside the lid – that I'd like to photograph," answered Mr. Cazalette. "They're small and faint, but if I get a good negative of them I can enlarge it. And I say again, you don't know what one mightn't find out – any little detail is of value in a case of this sort."

The inspector picked up the metal tobacco-box from where it lay amidst Quick's belongings and looked inside the lid. It was very plain that he saw nothing there but some – to him meaningless scratches and he put the thing into Mr. Cazalette's hands with an air of indifference.

"I see no objection," he said. "Let's have it back when you've done with it. We shall have to exhibit these personal properties before the coroner."

Mr. Cazalette carried his camera and the tobacco-box outside the shed in which the dead man's body lay and began to be busy. A gardener's potting-table stood against the wall; on this, backed

by a black cloth which he had brought from the house, he set up the box and prepared to photograph it. It was evident that he attached great importance to what he was doing.

"I shall take two or three negatives of this, Middlebrook," he observed, consequentially. "I'm an expert in photography, and I've got an enlarging apparatus in my room. Before the day's out, I shall show you something."

Personally, I had seen no more in the inner lid of the tobacco-box than the inspector seemed to have seen – a few lines and scratches, probably caused by thumb or finger-nail – and I left Mr. Cazalette to his self-imposed labours and rejoined the doctors and the police who were discussing the next thing to be done. That Quick had been murdered there was no doubt; there would have to be an inquest, of course, and for that purpose his body would have to be removed to the nearest inn, a house on the cross-roads just beyond Ravensdene Court; search would have to be set up at once for suspicious characters, and Noah Quick, of Devonport, would have to be communicated with.

All this the police took in hand, and I saw that Mr. Raven was heartily relieved when he heard that the dead man would be removed from his premises and that the inquest would not be held there. Ever since I had first broken the news to him, he had been upset and nervous: I could see that he was one of those men who dislike fuss and publicity. He looked at me with a sort of commiseration when the police questioned me closely about my knowledge of Salter Quick's movements on the previous day, and

especially about his visit to the Mariner's Joy.

"Yet," said I, finishing my account of that episode, "it is very evident that the man was not murdered for the sake of robbery, seeing that his money and his watch were found on him untouched."

The inspector shook his head.

"I'm not so sure," he remarked. "There's one thing that's certain – the man's clothes had been searched. Look here!"

He turned to Quick's garments, which had been removed, preparatory to laying out the body in decent array for interment, and picked up the waistcoat. Within the right side, made in the lining, there was a pocket, secured by a stout button. That pocket had been turned inside out; so, too, had a pocket in the left hip of the trousers, corresponding to that on the right in which Quick had carried the revolver that he had shown to us at the inn. The waistcoat was a thick, quilted affair – its lining, here and there, had been ripped open by a knife. And the lining of the man's hat had been torn out, too, and thrust roughly into place again: clearly, whoever killed him had searched for something.

"It wasn't money they were after," observed the inspector, "but there was an object. He'd that on him that his murderer was anxious to get. And the fact that the murderer left all this gold untouched is the worst feature of the affair – from our point of view."

"Why, now?" inquired Mr. Raven.

"Because, sir, it shows that the murderer, whoever he was, had

plenty of money on him," replied the inspector grimly. "And as he had, he'd have little difficulty in getting away. Probably he got an early morning train, north or south, and is hundreds of miles off by this time. But we must do our best – and we'll get to work now."

Leaving everything to the police – obviously with relief and thankfulness – Mr. Raven retired from the scene, inviting the two medical men and the inspector into the house with him, to take, as he phrased, a little needful refreshment; he sent out a servant to minister to the constables in the same fashion. Leaving him and his guests in the morning-room and refusing Mr. Cazalette's invitation to join him in his photographic enterprise, I turned into the big hall and there found Miss Raven. I was glad to find her alone; the mere sight of her, in her morning freshness, was welcome after the gruesome business in which I had just been engaged. I think she saw something of my thoughts in my face, for she turned to me sympathetically.

"What a very unfortunate thing that this should have happened at the very beginning of your visit!" she exclaimed. "Didn't it give you an awful shock, to find that poor fellow? – so unexpectedly!"

"It was certainly not a pleasant experience," I answered. "But – I was not quite as surprised as you might think."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because – I can't explain it, quite – I felt, yesterday, that the man was running risks by showing his money as foolishly as he did," I replied. "And, of course, when I found him, I thought he'd

been murdered for his money."

"And yet he wasn't!" she said. "For you say it was all found on him. What an extraordinary mystery! Is there no clue? I suppose he must really have been killed by that man who was spoken of at the inn? You think they met?"

"To tell you the truth," I answered, "at present I don't know what to think – except that this is merely a chapter in some mystery – an extraordinary one, as you remark. We shall hear more. And, in the meantime – a much pleasanter thing – won't you show me round the house? Mr. Raven is busy with the police-inspector and the doctors, and – I'm anxious to know what the extent of my labours may be."

She at once acquiesced in this proposition, and we began to inspect the accumulations of the dead-and-gone master of Ravensdene Court. As his successor had remarked in his first letter to me, Mr. John Christopher Raven, though obviously a great collector, had certainly not been a great exponent of system and order – except in the library itself, where all his most precious treasures were stored in tall, locked book-presses, his gatherings were lumped together anyhow and anywhere, all over the big house – the north wing was indeed a lumber-house – he appeared to have bought books, pamphlets, and manuscripts by the cart-load, and it was very plain to me, as an expert, that the greater part of his possessions of these sorts had never even been examined. Before Miss Raven and I had spent an hour in going from one room to another I had arrived at two definite

conclusions – one, that the dead man's collection of books and papers was about the most heterogeneous I had ever set eyes on, containing much of great value and much of none whatever; the other, that it would take me a long time to make a really careful and proper examination of it, and longer still to arrange it in proper order. Clearly, I should have to engage Mr. Raven in a strictly business talk, and find out what his ideas were in regard to putting his big library on a proper footing. Mr. Raven at last joined us, in one of the much-encumbered rooms. With him was the doctor, Lorrimore, whom he had mentioned to me as living near Ravensdene Court. He introduced him to his niece, with, I thought, some signs of pleasure; then to me, remarking that we had already seen each other in different surroundings – now we could foregather in pleasanter ones.

"Dr. Lorrimore," he continued, glancing from me to Miss Raven and then to the doctor with a smile that was evidently designed to put us all on a friendly footing, "Dr. Lorrimore and I have been having quite a good talk. It turns out that he has spent a long time in India. So we have a lot in common."

"How very nice for you, Uncle Francis!" said Miss Raven. "I know you've been bored to death with having no one you could talk to about curries and brandy-pawnees and things – now Dr. Lorrimore will come and chat with you. Were you long in India, Dr. Lorrimore?"

"Twelve years," answered the doctor. "I came home just a year ago."

"To bury yourself in these wilds!" remarked Miss Raven. "Doesn't it seem quite out of the world here – after that?"

Dr. Lorrimore glanced at Mr. Raven and showed a set of very white teeth in a meaning smile. He was a tall, good-looking man, dark of eye and hair; moustached and bearded, apparently under forty years of age – yet, at each temple, there was the faintest trace of silvery grey. A rather notable man, too, I thought, and one who was evidently scrupulous about his appearance – yet his faultlessly cut frock suit of raven black, his glossy linen, and smart boots looked more fitted to a Harley Street consulting-room than to the Northumbrian cottages and farmsteads amongst which his lot must necessarily be cast. He transferred his somewhat gleaming, rather mechanical smile to Miss Raven.

"On the contrary," he said in a quiet almost bantering tone, "this seems – quite gay. I was in a part of India where one had to travel long distances to see a white patient – and one doesn't count the rest. And – I bought this practice, knowing it to be one that would not make great demands on my time, so that I could devote myself a good deal to certain scientific pursuits in which I am deeply interested. No! – I don't feel out of the world, Miss Raven, I assure you."

"He has promised to put in some of his spare time with me, when he wants company," said Mr. Raven. "We shall have much in common."

"Dark secrets of a dark country!" remarked Dr. Lorrimore,

with a sly glance at Miss Raven. "Over our cheroots!"

Then, excusing himself from Mr. Raven's pressing invitation to stay to lunch, he took himself off, and my host, his niece, and myself continued our investigations. These lasted until the lunch hour – they afforded us abundant scope for conversation, too, and kept us from any reference to the grim tragedy of the early morning.

Mr. Cazalette made no appearance at lunch. I heard a footman inform Miss Raven, in answer to her inquiry, that he had just taken Mr. Cazalette's beef-tea to his room and that he required nothing else. And I did not see him again until late that afternoon, when, as the rest of us were gathered about the tea-table in the hall, before a cheery fire, he suddenly appeared, a smile of grim satisfaction on his queer old face. He took his usual cup of tea and dry biscuit and sat down in silence. But by that time I was getting inquisitive.

"Well, Mr. Cazalette," I said, "have you brought your photographic investigations to any successful conclusion?"

"Yes, Mr. Cazalette," chimed in Miss Raven, whom I had told of the old man's odd fancy about the scratches on the lid of the tobacco-box. "We're dying to know if you've found out anything. Have you – and what is it?"

He gave us a knowing glance over the rim of his tea-cup.

"Aye!" he said. "Young folks are full of curiosity. But I'm not going to say what I've discovered, nor how far my investigations have gone. Ye must just die a bit more, Miss Raven, and maybe

when ye're on the point of demise I'll resuscitate ye with the startling news of my great achievements."

I knew by that time that when Mr. Cazalette relapsed into his native Scotch he was most serious, and that his bantering tone was assumed as a cloak. It was clear that we were not going to get anything out of him just then. But Mr. Raven tried another tack, fishing for information.

"You really think those marks were made of a purpose, Cazalette?" he suggested. "You think they were intentional?"

"I'll not say anything at present," answered Mr. Cazalette. "The experiment is in course of process. But I'll say this, as a student of this sort of thing – yon murderer was far from the ordinary."

Miss Raven shuddered a little.

"I hope the man who did it is not hanging about!" she said.

Mr. Cazalette shook his head with a knowing gesture.

"Ye need have no fear of that, lassie!" he remarked. "The man that did it had put a good many miles between himself and his victim long before Middlebrook there made his remarkable discovery."

"Now, how do you know that, Mr. Cazalette?" I asked, feeling a bit restive under the old fellow's cock-sureness. "Isn't that guess-work?"

"No!" said he. "It's deduction – and common-sense. Mine's a nature that's full of both those highly admirable qualities, Middlebrook."

He went away then, as silently as he had come. And when, a few minutes later, I, too, went off to some preliminary work that I had begun in the library, I began to think over the first events of the morning, and to wonder if I ought not to ask Mr. Cazalette for some explanation of the incident of the yew-hedge. He had certainly secreted a piece of blood-stained, mud-discoloured linen in that hedge for an hour or so. Why? Had it anything to do with the crime? Had he picked it up on the beach when he went for his dip? Why was he so secretive about it? And why, if it was something of moment, had he not carried it straight to his own room in the house, instead of hiding it in the hedge while he evidently went back to the house and made his toilet? The circumstance was extraordinary, to say the least of it.

But on reflection I determined to hold my tongue and abide my time. For anything I knew, Mr. Cazalette might have cut one of his feet on the sharp stones on the beach, used his handkerchief to staunch the wound, thrown it away into the hedge, and then, with a touch of native parsimony, have returned to recover the discarded article. Again, he might be in possession of some clue, to which his tobacco-box investigations were ancillary – altogether, it was best to leave him alone. He was clearly deeply interested in the murder of Salter Quick, and I had gathered from his behaviour and remarks that this sort of thing – investigation of crime – had a curious fascination for him. Let him, then, go his way; something, perhaps, might come of it. One thing was very sure, and the old man had grasped it readily – this

crime was no ordinary one.

As the twilight approached, making my work in the library impossible, and having no wish to go on with it by artificial light, I went out for a walk. The fascination which is invariably exercised on any of us by such affairs led me, half-unconsciously, to the scene of the murder. The tide, which had been up in the morning, was now out, though just beginning to turn again, and the beach, with its masses of bare rock and wide-spreading deposits of sea-weed, looked bleak and desolate in the uncertain grey light. But it was not without life – two men were standing near the place where I had come upon Salter Quick's dead body. Going nearer to them, I recognized one as Claigue, the landlord of the Mariner's Joy. He recognized me at the same time, and touched his cap with a look that was alike knowing and confidential.

"So it came about as I'd warned him, sir!" he said, without preface. "I told him how it would be. You heard me! A man carrying gold about him like that! – and showing it to all and sundry. Why, he was asking for trouble!"

"The gold was found on him," I answered. "And his watch and other things. He wasn't murdered for his property."

Claigue uttered a sharp exclamation. He was evidently taken aback.

"You hadn't heard that, then?" I suggested.

"No," he replied. "I hadn't heard that, sir. Bless me! his money and valuables found on him. No! we've heard naught except that

he was found murdered, here, early this morning. Of course, I concluded that it had been for the sake of his money – that he'd been pulling it out in some public-house or other, and had been followed. Dear me! that puts a different complexion on things. Now, what's the meaning of it, in your opinion, sir?"

"I have none," I answered. "The whole thing's a mystery – so far. But, as you live hereabouts, perhaps you can suggest something. The doctors are of the opinion that he was murdered – here – yesterday evening: that his body had been lying here, just above high-water mark, since, probably, eight or nine o'clock last night. Now, what could he be doing down at this lonely spot? He went inland when he left your house."

The man who was with Claigue offered an explanation. There was, he said, a coast village or two further along the headlands; it would be a short cut to them to follow the beach.

"Yes," said I, "but that would argue that he knew the lie of the land. And, according to his own account, he was a complete stranger."

"Aye!" broke in Claigue. "But he wasn't alone, sir, when he came here! He'd fallen in with somebody, somewhere, that brought him down here – and left him, dead. And – who was it?"

There was no answering that question, and presently we parted, Claigue and his companion going back towards his inn, and I to Ravensdene Court. The dusk had fallen by that time, and the house was lighted when I came back. Entering by the big hall, I saw Mr. Raven, Mr. Cazalette, and the police-

inspector standing in close conversation by the hearth. Mr. Raven beckoned me to approach.

"Here's some most extraordinary news from Devonport – where Quick came from," he said. "The inspector wired to the police there this morning, telling them to communicate with his brother, whose name, you know, was found on him. He's had a wire from them this afternoon – read it!"

He turned to the inspector, who placed a telegram in my hand. It ran thus:

"Noah Quick was found murdered at lonely spot on riverside near Saltash at an early hour this morning. So far no clue whatever to murderer."

CHAPTER VI

SECRET THEFT

I handed the telegram back to the police-inspector with a glance that took in the faces of all three men. It was evident that they were thinking the same thought that had flashed into my own mind. The inspector put it into words.

"This," he said in a low voice, tapping the bit of flimsy paper with his finger, "this throws a light on the affair of this morning. No ordinary crime, that, gentlemen! When two brothers are murdered on the same night, at places hundreds of miles apart, it signifies something out of the common. Somebody has had an interest in getting rid of both men!"

"Wasn't this Noah Quick mentioned in some paper you found on Salter Quick?" I asked.

"An envelope," replied the inspector. "We have it, of course. Landlord – so I took it to mean – of the Admiral Parker, Haulaway Street, Devonport. I wired to the police authorities there, telling them of Salter Quick's death and asking them to communicate at once with Noah. Their answer is – this!"

"It'll be at Devonport that the secret lies," observed Mr. Cazalette suddenly. "Aye – that's where you'll be seeking for news!"

"We've got none here – about our affair," remarked the

inspector. "I set all my available staff to work as soon as I got back to headquarters this forenoon, and up to the time I set off to show you this, Mr. Raven, we'd learned nothing. It's a queer thing, but we haven't come across anybody who saw this man after he left you, Mr. Middlebrook, yesterday afternoon. You say he turned inland, towards Denwick, when he left you after coming out of Claigue's place – well, my men have inquired in every village and at every farmstead and wayside cottage within an area of ten or twelve miles, and we haven't heard a word of him. Where did he go? Whom did he come across?"

"I should say that's obvious," said I. "He came across the man of whom he heard at the Mariner's Joy – the man who, like himself, was asking for information about an old churchyard in which people called Netherfield are buried."

"We've heard all about that from the man who told him – Jim Gelthwaite, the drover," replied the inspector. "He's told us of his meeting with such a man, a night or two ago. But we can't get any information on that point, either. Nobody else seems to have seen that man, any more than they've seen Salter Quick!"

"I suppose there are places along this coast where a man might hide?" I suggested.

"Caves, now?" put in Mr. Cazalette.

"There may be," admitted the inspector. "Of course I shall have the coast searched."

"Aye, but ye'll not find anything – now!" affirmed Mr. Cazalette. "Yon man, that Jim the drover told of, he might be

hiding here or there in a cave, or some out o' the way place, of which there's plenty in this part, till he did the deed, but when it was once done, he'd be away! The railway's not that far, and there's early morning trains going north and south."

"We've been at the railway folk, at all the near stations," remarked the inspector. "They could tell nothing. It seems to me," he continued, turning to Mr. Raven, and nodding sidewise at Mr. Cazalette, "that this gentleman hits the nail on the head when he says it's to Devonport that we'll be turning for explanations – I'm coming to the conclusion that the whole affair has been engineered from that quarter."

"Aye!" said Mr. Cazalette, laconically confident. "Ye'll learn more about Salter when ye hear more about Noah. And it's a very bonny mystery and with an uncommonly deep bottom to it!"

"I've wired to Devonport for full particulars about the affair there," said the inspector. "No doubt I shall have them by the time our inquest opens tomorrow."

I forget whether these particulars had reached him, when, next morning, Mr. Raven, Mr. Cazalette, the gamekeeper Tarver, and myself walked across the park to the wayside inn to which Salter Quick's body had been removed, and where the coroner was to hold his inquiry. I remember, however, that nothing was done that morning beyond a merely formal opening of the proceedings, and that a telegram was received from the police at Devonport in which it was stated that they were unable to find out if the two brothers had any near relations – no one there

knew of any. Altogether, I think, nothing was revealed that day beyond what we knew already, and so far as I remember matters, no light was thrown on either murder for some time. But I was so much interested in the mystery surrounding them that I carefully collected all the newspaper accounts concerning the murder at Saltash and that at Ravensdene Court, and pasted the clippings into a book, and from these I can now give something like a detailed account of all that was known of Salter and Noah Quick previous to the tragedies of that spring.

Somewhere about the end of the year 1910, Noah Quick, hailing, evidently, from nowhere in particular, but, equally evidently, being in possession of plenty of cash, became licensee of a small tavern called the Admiral Parker, in a back street in Devonport. It was a fully-licensed house, and much frequented by seamen. Noah Quick was a thick-set, sturdy, middle-aged man, reserved, taciturn, very strict in his attention to business; a steady, sober man, keen on money matters. He was a bachelor, keeping an elderly woman as housekeeper, a couple of stout women servants, a barmaid, and a potman. His house was particularly well-conducted; it was mentioned at the inquest on him that the police had never once had any complaint in reference to it, and that Noah, who had to deal with a rather rough class of customers, was peculiarly adept in keeping order – one witness, indeed, said that having had opportunities of watching him, he had formed the opinion that Noah, before going into the public-house business, had held some position of authority and was

accustomed to obedience. Everything seemed to be going very well with him and the Admiral Parker, when, in February, 1912, his brother, Salter Quick, made his appearance in Devonport.

Nobody knew anything about Salter Quick, except that he was believed to have come to Devonport from Wapping or Rotherhithe, or somewhere about those Thames-side quarters. He was very like his brother in appearance, and in character, except that he was more sociable, and more talkative. He took up his residence at the Admiral Parker, and he and Noah evidently got on together very well: they were even affectionate in manner toward each other. They were often seen in Devonport and in Plymouth in company, but those who knew them best at this time noted that they never paid visits to, nor received visits from, any one coming within the category of friends or relations. And one man, giving evidence at the inquest on Noah Quick, said that he had some recollection that Salter, in a moment of confidence, had once told him that he and Noah were orphans, and hadn't a blood-relation in the world.

According to all that was brought out, matters went quite smoothly and pleasantly at the Admiral Parker until the 5th of March, 1912 – three days, it will be observed, before I myself left London for Ravensdene Court. On that date, Salter Quick, who had a banking account at a Plymouth bank (to which he had been introduced by Noah, who also banked there), cashed a check for sixty pounds. That was in the morning – in the early afternoon, he went away, remarking to the barmaid at his brother's inn that

he was first going to London and then north. Noah accompanied him to the railway station. As far as any one knew, Salter was not burdened by any luggage, even by a handbag.

After he had gone, things went on just as usual at the Admiral Parker. Neither the housekeeper, nor the barmaid, nor the potman, could remember that the place was visited by any suspicious characters, nor that its landlord showed any signs of having any trouble or any extraordinary business matters. Everything was as it should be, when, on the evening of the 9th of March (the very day on which I met Salter Quick on the Northumbrian coast), Noah told his housekeeper and barmaid that he had to go over to Saltash, to see a man on business, and should be back about closing-time. He went away about seven o'clock, but he was not back at closing-time. The potman sat up for him until midnight: he was not back then. And none of his people at the Admiral Parker heard any more of him until just after breakfast next morning, when the police came and told them that their employer's body had been found at a lonely spot on the bank of the river a little above Saltash, and that he had certainly been murdered.

There were some points of similarity between the murders of Salter Quick and Noah Quick. The movements and doings of each man were traceable up to a certain point, after which nothing whatever could be discovered respecting them. As regards Noah Quick he had crossed the river between Keyham and Saltash by the ferry-boat, landing just beneath the great

bridge which links Devon with Cornwall. It was then nearly dark, but he was seen and spoken to by several men who knew him well. He was seen, too, to go up the steep street towards the head of the queer old village: there he went into one of the inns, had a glass of whisky at the bar, exchanged a word or two with some men sitting in the parlour, and after awhile, glancing at his watch, went out – and was never seen again alive. His dead body was found next morning at a lonely spot on an adjacent creek, by a fisherman – like Salter, he had been stabbed, and in similar fashion. And as in Salter's case, robbery of money and valuables had not been the murderer's object. Noah Quick, when found, had money on him, gold, silver; he was also wearing a gold watch and chain and a diamond ring; all these things were untouched, as if the murderer had felt contemptuous of them. But here again was a point of similarity in the two crimes – Noah Quick's pocket's had been turned out; the lining of his waistcoat had been slashed and slit; his thick reefer jacket had been torn off him and subjected to a similar search – its lining was cut to pieces, and it and his overcoat were found flung carelessly over the body. Close by lay his hard felt hat – the lining had been torn out.

This, according to the evidence given at the inquests and to the facts collected by the police at the places concerned, was all that came out. There was not the slightest clue in either case. No one could say what became of Salter Quick after he left me outside the Mariner's Joy; no one knew where Noah Quick

went when he walked out of the Saltash inn into the darkness. At each inquest a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons unknown was returned, and the respective coroners uttered some platitudes about coincidence and mystery and all the rest of it. But from all that had transpired it seemed to me that there were certain things to be deduced, and I find that I tabulated them at the time, writing them down at the end of the newspaper clippings, as follows:

1. Salter and Noah Quick were in possession of some secret.
2. They were murdered by men who wished to get possession of it for themselves.
3. The actual murderers were probably two members of a gang.
4. Gang – if a gang – and murderers were at large, and, if they had secured possession of the secret would be sure to make use of it.

Out of this arose the question – what was the secret? Something, I had no doubt whatever, that related to money. But what, and how? I exercised my speculative faculties a good deal at the time over this matter, and I could not avoid wondering about Mr. Cazalette and the yew-hedge affair. He never mentioned it; I was afraid and nervous about telling him what I had seen. Nor for some time did he mention his tobacco-box labours – indeed, I don't remember that he mentioned them directly at all. But, about the time that the inquests on the two murdered men came to an end, I observed that Mr. Cazalette, most of whose time

was devoted to his numismatic work, was spending his leisure in turning over whatever books he could come across at Ravensdene Court which related to local history and topography; he was also studying old maps, charts and the like. Also, he got from London the latest Ordnance Map. I saw him studying that with deep attention. Yet he said nothing until one day, coming across me in the library, alone, he suddenly plumped me with a question.

"Middlebrook!" said he, "the name which that poor man mentioned to you as you talked with him on the cliff was – Netherfield?"

"Netherfield," said I. "That was it – Netherfield."

"He said there were Netherfields buried hereabouts?" he asked.

"Just so – in some churchyard or other," I answered. "What of it, Mr. Cazalette?"

He helped himself to a pinch of snuff, as if to assist his thoughts.

"Well," said he presently, "and it's a queer thing that at the time of the inquest nobody ever thought of inquiring if there is such a churchyard and such graves."

"Why didn't you suggest it?" I asked.

"I'd rather find it out for myself," said he, with a knowing look. "And if you want to know, I've been trying to do so. But I've looked through every local history there is – and I think the late John Christopher Raven collected every scrap of printed stuff relating to this corner of the country that's ever left a press – and

I can't find any reference to such a name."

"Parish registers?" I suggested.

"Aye, I thought of that," he said. "Some of 'em have been printed, and I've consulted those that have, without result. And, Middlebrook, I'm more than ever convinced that yon dead man knew what he was talking about, and that there's dead and gone Netherfields lying somewhere in this quarter, and that the secret of his murder is, somehow, to be found in their ancient tombs! Aye!"

He took another big pinch of snuff, and looked at me as if to find out whether or no I agreed with him. Then I let out a question.

"Mr. Cazalette, have you found out anything from your photographic work on that tobacco-box lid?" I asked. "You thought you might."

Much to my astonishment, he turned and shuffled away.

"I'm not through with that matter, yet," he answered. "It's – progressing."

I told Miss Raven of this little conversation. She and I were often together in the library; we often discussed the mystery of the murders.

"What was there, really, on the lid of the tobacco-box?" she asked. "Anything that could actually arouse curiosity?"

"I think Mr. Cazalette exaggerated their importance," I replied, "but there were certainly some marks, scratches, which seemed to have been made by design."

"And what," she asked again, "did Mr. Cazalette think they might mean?"

"Heaven knows!" I answered. "Some deep and dark clue to Quick's murder, I suppose."

"I wish I had seen the tobacco-box," she remarked. "Interesting, anyway."

"That's easy enough," said I. "The police have it – and all the rest of Quick's belongings. If we walked over to the police-station, the inspector would willingly show it to you."

I saw that this proposition attracted her – she was not beyond feeling something of the fascination which is exercised upon some people by the inspection of the relics of strange crimes.

"Let us go, then," she said. "This afternoon?"

I had a mind, myself, to have another look at that tobacco-box; Mr. Cazalette's hints about it, and his mysterious secrecy regarding his photographic experiments, made me inquisitive. So after lunch that day Miss Raven and I walked across country to the police-station, where we were shown into the presence of the inspector, who, in the midst of his politeness, frankly showed his wonder at our pilgrimage.

"We have come with an object," said I, giving him an informing glance. "Miss Raven, like most ladies, is not devoid of curiosity. She wishes to see that metal tobacco-box which was found on Salter Quick."

The inspector laughed.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "The thing that the old gentleman

– what's his name? Mr. Cazalette? – was so keen about photographing. Why, I don't know – I saw nothing but two or three surface scratches inside the lid. Has he discovered anything?"

"That," I answered, "is only known to Mr. Cazalette himself. He preserves a strict silence on that point. He is very mysterious about the matter. It is his secrecy, and his mystery, that makes Miss Raven inquisitive."

"Well," remarked the inspector, indulgently, "it's a curiosity that can very easily be satisfied. I've got all Quick's belongings here – just as they were put together after being exhibited before the coroner." He unlocked a cupboard and pointed to two bundles – one, a large one, was done up in linen; the other, a small one, in a wrapping of canvas. "That," he continued, pointing to the linen-covered package, "contains his clothing; this, his effects: his money, watch and chain, and so on. It's sealed, as you see, but we can put fresh seals on after breaking these."

"Very kind of you to take so much trouble," said Miss Raven. "All to satisfy a mere whim."

The inspector assured her that it was no trouble, and broke the seals of the small, carefully-wrapped package. There, neatly done up, were the dead man's effects, even down to his pipe and pouch. His money was there, notes, gold, silver, copper; there was a stump of lead-pencil and a bit of string; every single thing found upon him had been kept. But the tobacco-box was not there.

"I – I don't see it!" exclaimed the inspector. "How's this?"

He turned the things over again, and yet again – there was no tobacco-box. And at that, evidently vexed and perplexed, he rang a bell and asked for a particular constable, who presently entered. The inspector indicated the various properties.

"Didn't you put these things together when the inquest was over?" he demanded. "They were all lying on the table at the inquest – we showed them there. I told you to put them up and bring them here and seal them."

"I did, sir," answered the man. "I put together everything that was on the table, at once. The package was never out of my hands till I got it here, and sealed it. Sergeant Brown and myself counted the money, sir."

"The money is all right," observed the inspector. "But there's a metal box – a tobacco-box – missing. Do you remember it?"

"Can't say that I do, sir," replied the constable. "I packed up everything that was there."

The inspector nodded a dismissal; when we were alone again, he turned to Miss Raven and me with a queer expression.

"That box has been abstracted at the inquest!" he said, "Now then! – by whom? – and why?"

CHAPTER VII

YELLOWFACE

It was very evident that the inspector was considerably puzzled, not to say upset, by the disappearance of the tobacco-box, and I fancied that I saw the real reason of his discomfiture. He had poohpoohed Mr. Cazalette's almost senile eagerness about the thing, treating his request as of no importance; now he suddenly discovered that somebody had conceived a remarkable interest in the tobacco-box and had cleverly annexed it – under his very eyes – and he was angry with himself for his lack of care and perception. I was not indisposed to banter him a little.

"The second of your questions might be easily answered," I said. "The thing has been appropriated because somebody believes, as Mr. Cazalette evidently does, or did, that there may be a clue in those scratches, or marks, on the inside of the lid. But as to who it was that believed this, and managed to secrete the box – that's a far different matter!"

He was thinking, and presently he nodded his head.

"I can call to mind everybody who sat round that table, where these things were laid out," he remarked, confidently. "There were two or three officials, like myself. There was our surgeon and Dr. Lorrimore. Two or three of the country gentlemen – all magistrates; all well known to me. And at the foot of the table

there were a couple of reporters: I know them, too, well enough. Now, who, out of that lot, would be likely to steal – for that's what it comes to – this tobacco-box? A thing that had scarcely been mentioned – if at all – during the proceedings!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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