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Chapter 21 - A Clue

By midday on the following morning London was placarded with notices, the heading of which was sensational enough to attract observation from every passer-by, young or old, rich or poor. One thousand pounds' reward for the apprehension of the murderer of either Hamilton Fynes or Richard Vanderpole! Inspector Jacks, who was amongst the first to hear the news, after a brief interview with his chief put on his hat and walked round to the Home Office. He sought out one of the underlings with whom he had some acquaintance, and whom he found ready enough, even eager, to discuss the matter.

"There wasn't a word about any reward," Inspector Jacks was told, "until this morning. We had a telephone message from the chief's bedroom and phoned you up at once. It's a pretty stiff amount, isn't it?"

"It is," the Inspector admitted. "Our chief seems to be taking quite a personal interest in the matter all at once."

"I'll lay two to one that some one was on to him at Sir Edward Bransome's reception last night," the other remarked. "I know very well that there was no idea of offering a reward yesterday afternoon. We might have come out with a hundred pounds or so, a little later on, perhaps, but there was nothing of this sort in the air. I've no desire to seem censorious, you know, Jacks," the young man went on, leaning back in his chair and lighting a cigarette, "but it does seem a dashed queer thing that you can't put your finger upon either of these fellows."

Inspector Jacks nodded gloomily.

"No doubt it seems so to you," he admitted. "You forget that we have to have a reasonable amount of proof before we can tap a man on the shoulder and ask him to come with us. It isn't so abroad or in America. There they can hand a man up with less than half the evidence we have to be prepared with, and, of course, they get the reputation of being smarter on the job. We may learn enough to satisfy ourselves easily, but to get up a case which we can put before a magistrate and be sure of not losing our man, takes time."

"So you've got your eye on some one?" The young man asked curiously.

"I did not say so," the Inspector answered warily. "By the bye, do you think there would be any chance of five minutes' interview with your chief?"

The young man shook his head slowly.

"What a cheek you've got, Jacks!" he declared. "You're not serious, are you?"

"Perfectly," Inspector Jacks answered. "And to tell you the truth, my young friend, I am half inclined to think that when he is given to understand, as he will be by you, if he doesn't know it already, that I am in charge of the investigations concerning these two murders, he will see me."

The young man was disposed to consider the point.

"Well," he remarked, "the chief does seem plaguy interested, all of a sudden. I'll pass your name in. If you take a seat, it's just possible that he may spare you a minute or two in about an hour's time. He won't be able to before then, I'm sure. There's a deputation almost due, and two other appointments before luncheon time."

The Inspector accepted a newspaper and an easy chair. His young friend disappeared and returned almost immediately, looking a little surprised.

"I've managed it for you," he explained. "The chief is going to spare you five minutes at once. Come along and I'll show you in."

Inspector Jacks took up his hat and followed his acquaintance to the private room of the Home Secretary. That personage nodded to him upon his entrance and continued to dictate a letter. When he had finished, he sent his clerk out of the room and, motioning Mr. Jacks to take a seat by his side, leaned back in his own chair with the air of one prepared to relax for a moment. He was a man of somewhat insignificant presence, but he had keen gray eyes, half the time concealed under thick eyebrows, and flashing out upon you now and then at least expected moments.

"From Scotland Yard, I understand, Mr. Jacks?" he remarked.

"At your service, sir," the Inspector answered. "I am in charge of the investigations concerning these two recent murders."

"Quite so," the Home Secretary remarked. "I am very glad to meet you, Mr. Jacks. So far, I suppose, you are willing to admit that you gentlemen down at Scotland Yard have not exactly distinguished yourselves."

"We are willing to admit that," Inspector Jacks said.

"I do not know whether the reward will help you very much," the Home Secretary continued. "So far as you people personally are concerned, I imagine that it will make no difference. The only point seems to be that it may bring you outside help which at the present time is being withheld."

"The offering of the reward, sir," Inspector Jacks said, "can do no harm, and it may possibly assist us very materially."

"I am glad to have your opinion, Mr. Jacks," the Home Secretary said.

There was a moment's pause. The Minister trifled with some papers lying on the desk before him. Then he turned to his visitor and continued,--

"You will forgive my reminding you, Mr. Jacks, that I am a busy man and that this is a busy morning. You had some reason, I presume, for wishing to see me?"

"I had, sir," the Inspector answered. "I took the liberty of waiting upon you, sir, to ask whether the idea of a reward for so large a sum came spontaneously from your department?"

The Home Secretary raised his eyebrows.

"Really, Mr. Jacks," he began,--

"I hope, sir," the Inspector protested, "that you will not think I am asking this question through any irrelevant curiosity. I am beginning to form a theory of my own as to these two murders, but it needs building up. The offering of a reward like this, if it emanates from the source which I suspect that it does, gives a solid foundation to my theories. I am here, sir, in the interests of justice only, and I should be exceedingly obliged to you if you would tell me whether the suggestion of this large reward did not come from the Foreign Office?"

The Minister considered for several moments, and then slowly inclined his head.

"Mr. Jacks," he said, "your question appears to me to be a pertinent one. I see not the slightest reason to conceal from you the fact that your surmise is perfectly accurate."

A flash of satisfaction illuminated for a moment the detective's inexpressive features. He rose and took up his hat.

"I am very much obliged to you, sir," he said. "The information which you have given me is extremely valuable."

"I am glad to hear you say so," the Home Secretary declared. "You understand, of course, that it is within the province of my department to assist at all times and in any possible way the course of justice. Is there anything more I can do for you?"

Inspector Jacks hesitated.

"If you would not think it a liberty, sir," he said, "I should be very glad indeed if you would give me a note which would insure me an interview with Sir Edward Bransome."

"I will give it you with pleasure," the Secretary answered, "although I imagine that he would be quite willing to see you on your own request."

He wrote a few lines and passed them over. Inspector Jacks saluted, and turned towards the door.

"You'll let me know if anything turns up?" the Home Secretary said.

"You shall be informed at once, sir," the Inspector assured him, as he left the room.

Sir Edward Bransome was just leaving his house when Inspector Jacks entered the gate. The latter, who knew him by sight, saluted and hesitated for a moment.

"Did you wish to speak to me?" Sir Edward asked, drawing back from the step of his electric brougham.

The Inspector held out his letter. Sir Edward tore it open and glanced through the few lines which it contained. Then he looked keenly for a moment at the man who stood respectfully by his side.

"So you are Inspector Jacks from Scotland Yard," he remarked.

"At your service, sir," the detective answered.

"You can get in with me, if you like," Sir Edward continued, motioning toward the interior of his brougham. "I am due in Downing Street now, but I dare say you could say what you wish to on the way there."

"Certainly, sir," Inspector Jacks answered. "It will be very good of you indeed if you can spare me those few minutes."

The brougham glided away.

"Now, Mr. Jacks," Sir Edward said, "what can I do for you? If you want to arrest me, I shall claim privilege."

The Inspector smiled.

"I am in charge, sir," he said, "of the investigations concerning the murder of Mr. Hamilton Fynes and Mr. Richard Vanderpole. The news of the reward came to us at Scotland Yard this morning. Its unusual amount led me to make some inquiries at the Home Office. I found that what I partly expected was true. I found, sir, that your department has shown some interest in the apprehension of these two men."

Sir Edward inclined his head slowly.

"Well?" he said.

"Sir Edward Bransome," the Inspector continued, "I have a theory of my own as to these murders, and though it may take me some time to work it out, I feel myself day by day growing nearer the truth. These were not ordinary crimes. Any one can see that. They were not even crimes for the purpose of robbery--not, that is to say, for robbery in the ordinary sense of the word. That is apparent even to those who write for the Press. It has been apparent to us from the first. It is beginning to dawn upon me now what the nature of the motive must be which was responsible for them. I have in my possession a slight, a very slight clue. The beginning of it is there, and the end. It is the way between which is tangled."

Sir Edward lit a cigarette and leaned back amongst the cushions. With a little gesture he indicated his desire that Inspector Jacks should proceed.

"My object in seeking for a personal interview with you, sir," Inspector Jacks continued, "is to ask you a somewhat peculiar question. If I find that my investigations lead me

in the direction which at present seems probable, it is no ordinary person whom I shall have to arrest when the time comes. The reward which has been offered is a large one, and it is not for me to question the bona fide nature of it. I would not presume, sir, even to ask you whether it was offered by reason of any outside pressure, but there is one question which I must ask. Do you really wish, sir, that the murderer or murderers of these two men shall be brought to justice?"

Sir Edward looked at his companion in steadfast amazement.

"My dear Inspector," he said, "what is this that you have in your mind? I hold no brief for any man capable of such crimes as these. Representations have been made to us by the American Government that the murder of two of her citizens within the course of twenty-four hours, and the absence of any arrest, is somewhat of a reflection upon our police service. It is for your assistance, and in compliment to our friends across the Atlantic, that the reward was offered."

Inspector Jacks seemed a little at a loss.

"It is your wish, then, sir," he said slowly, "that the guilty person or persons be arrested without warning, whoever they may be?"

"By all means," Sir Edward affirmed. "I cannot conceive, Inspector, what you have in your mind which could have led you for a moment to suspect the contrary."

The brougham had come to a standstill in front of a house in Downing street. Inspector Jacks descended slowly. It was hard for him to decide on the spot how far to take into his confidence a person whose attitude was so unsympathetic.

"I am exceedingly obliged to you for your answer to my question, sir," he said, saluting. "I hope that in a few days we shall have some news for you."

Sir Edward watched him disappear as he mounted the steps of the Prime Minister's house.

"I wonder," he said to himself thoughtfully, "what that fellow can have in his mind!"

Inspector Jacks did not at once return to Scotland Yard. On his way there he turned into St. James' Square, and stood for several moments looking at the corner house on the far side. Finally, after a hesitation which seldom characterized his movements, he crossed the road and rang the bell. The door was opened almost at once by a Japanese butler.

"Is your master at home?" the Inspector asked.

"His Highness does not see strangers," the man replied coldly.

"Will you take him my card?" the Inspector asked.

The man bowed, and showed him into an apartment on the ground floor. Then with the card in his hand, he turned reluctantly away.

"His Highness shall be informed that you are here," he said. "I fear, however, that you waste your time. I go to see."

Inspector Jacks subsided into a bamboo chair and looked out of the window with a frown upon his forehead. It was certain that he was not proceeding with altogether his usual caution. As a matter of tactics, this visit of his might very well be fatal!