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# The Middle of Things

BY J. S. FLETCHER.

Author of "Black Money," "Scarhaven Keep," etc.

## CHAPTER XVII

### The Claimant

Lord Ellingham was already there when they arrived—in conference with his solicitor, Mr. Carless.

"I say, Pawle," the latter exclaimed, turning at once to his fellow-practitioner, "this appears to be a most extraordinary business! His lordship has just been telling me all about the two calls he had yesterday—first from two men whom he'd never seen before—then from you two, who were also strangers. Sounds like a first-class mystery!"

"You forget," remarked Mr. Pawle with a glance at Lord Ellingham, "that we don't know what it was that his lordship's first callers told him."

Mr. Carless looked at his client, who nodded his head in assent.

"Well, as I'm now in possession of the facts," said he, "I'll tell you Pawle. The two men whom you saw coming away from Ellingham House were Methley and Woodlesford, two solicitors—I know of them, quite a respectable firm. Now, they came to Lord Ellingham yesterday afternoon with a most extraordinary story. They said that they had been called upon by a gentleman now staying at one of the private residential hotels in Lancaster Gate, who was desirous of legal assistance. He then told them that though he was now passing under the name of Cave, he was, in strict reality, the Lord Marketstoke who disappeared from England many years ago, and whose death had been presumed. His story seemed consistent and plausible but Methley and Woodlesford are limbs of the law. They asked two very pertinent questions. First—why had he come forward after this long interval? Second—what evidence had he to support and prove his claim? He answered as regards the first question that of late he had lost a lot of money in Australia through speculation. He replied to the second by producing certain papers and documents."

"What were the papers?" demanded Mr. Pawle.

"Oh!" replied Mr. Carless, "letters, certificates, and the like—all, according to Methley and Woodlesford, excellent proofs of identity. But now, Pawle, we come to the real point of the case. The claimant had no desire, he told Methley and Woodlesford, to recover his title, nor the estates. He wanted to go back to the country in which he had settled. But as title and estates were really his, he wanted his nephew, the present holder, to make him proper payment."

"On receipt of which, I suppose," observed Mr. Pawle dryly, "nothing would ever be heard again of the rightful owner of all that Lord Ellingham possesses? Truly an admirable spirit! I am convinced of this, Carless—that whatever the papers were which were produced by this man, they were stolen from the body of John Ashton. I'll stake all I have on that!"

Carless nodded and Mr. Pawle went on to tell of the theory he and Viner had evolved concerning Miss Wickham's parentage.

Mr. Carless suddenly bent forward. "A moment, Pawle," he said. "If this man Wickham really was the lost Lord Marketstoke, and he's dead, and he left a daughter, and the daughter's alive—then, of course, that daughter is—"

A clerk opened the door and glanced at his employer.

"Mr. Methley and Mr. Woodlesford, sir," he announced. "By appointment."

CHAPTER XVIII

### Let Him Appear

Methley and Woodlesford wasted no time in getting to the business on hand.

At Mr. Pawle's request they immediately produced the documents which were to prove their client's claim. These proofs consisted of letters, memoranda, and a will, all of which pointed to the conclusion that the claimant was indeed the long-lost Lord Marketstoke.

Mr. Carless hastily ran his eye over them.

"Very interesting, gentlemen," he remarked. "But you know that the mere fact that your man is in possession of all these documents proves nothing whatever. He may have stolen them! What else has he to prove that he's what he says he is?"

"He is fully conversant with his family history," said Woodlesford. "He can give a perfectly full and—so far as we can judge—accurate account of his early life. He evidently knows all about Ellingham Hall, Marketstoke and the surroundings."

"If your client is this man he claims to be, why didn't he come straight to Carless and Driver, whom he would remember well enough, instead of going to Methley and Woodlesford?" asked Carless.

"Obvious thing to do—if his story is a true one. For there are three persons in this office who—but wait!"

He touched a bell; presently an elderly, grey-haired man appeared.

"Our senior clerk," observed Mr. Carless, by way of introduction. "Portlethwaite, you remember the Lord Marketstoke who disappeared some thirty-five years ago?"

Mr. Portlethwaite smiled. "Quite well, Mr. Carless!" he answered.

"Do you think you'd know him again, Portlethwaite, after all these years?" asked Mr. Carless.

The elderly clerk smiled—more assuredly than before, then bent forward to whisper something in his employer's ear, and Carless suddenly laughed and nodded.

"To be sure—to be sure—I remember now!" he said aloud.

"I tell you what, gentlemen!" he went on, turning to Methley and Woodlesford. "If you will bring your client here, there are three of us in this office who can positively identify him on the instant if he is the man he claims to be. Positive, I say, and at once! There!"

"May one ask how?" said Woodlesford.

"No!" exclaimed Mr. Carless. "Bring him! I assure you—we can tell in one glance! That's a fact!"

The two solicitors went away, and Viner followed them out and hailed Methley in the corridor outside Mr. Carless's room.

"May I have a word with you?" he asked, drawing him aside. "I saw you the other night in the parlor of the Grey Mare in Notting Hill. I heard you ask the landlord a question about a gentleman whom you used to meet there sometimes. You never knew that man's name, nor who he was. He was John Ashton, the man who was murdered in Lonsdale Passage!"

Viner was watching his man with all the keenness of which he was capable, and he saw that this announcement fell on Methley as an absolute surprise.

"God bless me!" he exclaimed. "You don't mean it! Dear me, dear me! A very pleasant, genial fellow. I'm astonished, Mr. Viner."

Viner resolved on a bold step—he would take it without consulting Mr. Pawle or anybody. He drew Methley further aside, and explained his interest in the Ashton murder, and his conviction that the papers Methley's client had were those for which Ashton had been murdered.

Methley was utterly taken aback and after declaring that he and his partner were in this transaction in good faith, he went away promising to do his best to find out the truth.

Viner returned to Mr. Carless's room. The three men he had left there were deep in conversation, and as he entered, Mr. Carless smote his hand on the desk before him.

"This is certain!" he exclaimed. "We must have the Miss Avise Wickham here—at once!"

## CHAPTER XIX

### Under Examination

In a few words Mr. Pawle acquainted Lord Ellingham with his suspicions concerning Miss Wickham's parentage.

Mr. Carless explained that if these suspicions were well founded, Miss Wickham was Countess of Ellingham in her own right.

"Well," remarked Lord Ellingham, "I confess I should like to meet my cousin."

"Your Lordship takes it admir-

ably!" exclaimed Mr. Carless. "But, 'pon my honor, it's most odd! One claimant disposed of, another, a more formidable one, comes on!"

"But we have not disposed of the first, have we?" suggested Lord Ellingham.

"I don't anticipate any trouble in that quarter," answered Mr. Carless. "The real Lord Marketstoke, if he were alive can easily be identified. He lost a finger when a mere boy."

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Pawle. "Good—excellent! Best bit of evidence I've heard of. Well, we shall see you at three."

"Remember," warned Carless, "Miss Wickham must know nothing of your conclusions, until they are proved."

Three o'clock found Miss Wickham at the office of Carless and Driver.

Viner remained in the background, quietly watching, while Mr. Pawle effected the necessary introductions.

He was at once struck by what seemed to him an indisputable fact—between Lord Ellingham and Miss Wickham there was an unmistakable family likeness.

"By Jove!" Carless whispered to Pawle. "I shouldn't wonder if you're right."

Then he placed Miss Wickham in an easy-chair on his right hand, and cast a preliminary benevolent glance on her.

"Mr. Pawle," he began, "has told us of your relationship with the late Mr. Ashton—you always regarded him as your guardian?"

"He was my guardian," answered Miss Wickham. "My father left me in his charge."

"How long, so far as you remember, did you live with Mr. Ashton in Melbourne?"

"Not very long, I think. For a little time before we sailed, I lived with Mrs. Roscombe, with whom I came to England. She was the widow of some government official, and she was returning to England in consequence of his death. She used to visit me regularly at school, every week, and I used to spend my holidays with her until she died."

"What school did you attend?" asked Carless.

"Ryedene School."

"Ryedene! That's one of the most expensive schools in England. Now, did Mr. Ashton never tell you anything much about your father?"

"No, he never did. But I have an idea that he meant to tell me something—what, I, of course, don't know. He once or twice—hinted that he would tell me something, some day."

"One or two other questions," said Mr. Carless. "Do you know who your mother was?"

"Only that she was some one whom my father met in Australia."

"Do you know what her maiden name was?"

"No, only her Christian name; that was Catherine. She and my father are buried together."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Carless. "That is something else I was going to ask. You know where they are buried?"

"Oh, yes! Because, before we sailed, Mrs. Roscombe took me to the churchyard, or cemetery, to see my father's and mother's grave."

"Well," Carless concluded, "I think that's all. Much obliged to you, Miss Wickham. You won't understand all this, but you will, later. Now, one of my clerks will get you a car, and we'll escort you down to it."

"No," said Lord Ellingham, promptly jumping to his feet. "Allow me—I'm youngest. If Miss Wickham will let me—"

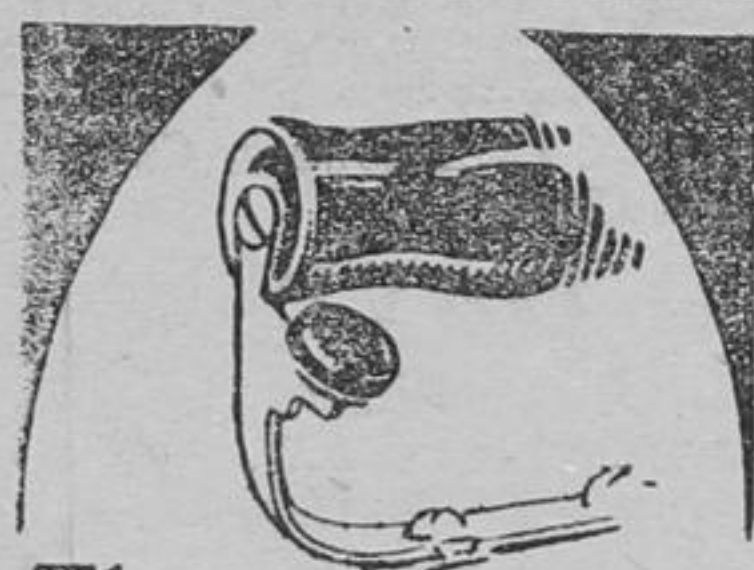
The two young people went out of the room together, and the three men left behind looked at each other. There was a brief and significant silence.

"Well, Carless?" said Pawle at last. "How now?"

"'Pon my honor," answered Mr. Carless, "I shouldn't wonder if you're right!"

(To be continued)

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### Thrills.

I hear some pleasure seeker say: "I haven't had a thrill to-day." So much of late the word is used. By many a careless lip abused, That some, I fear, begin to think A thrill is only born to drink Or bordering so close to sin That dizzy heads must topple in.

Now thrills there are of various kinds To suit the many sorts of minds, And one can feel his pulses beat With pleasure gloriously sweet, For life is not so flat and tame That thrills must only come from shame, For many a thrill of splendor springs From beautiful and lovely things.

I've felt my pulses thrill to see The blossoms on an apple tree; The martins back once more to take The house I've reared for friendship's sake.

A robin on my window sill Gives me a summer morning thrill; While every friend along the way Always has something new to say.

I feel a tingle of delight To romp with those I love at night, Within my baby's laughing eyes A thrill that's most entrancing lies. I need no stimulus to see The joy of life, whatever it be; So many charms God's bounty spills, I'd say the world is full of thrills.

—Edgar A. Guest.

### Innocence.

An old lady being shown round Rochester Cathedral by one of the vergers, arrived at a tablet in the nave in memory of Charles Dickens.

"Oh," she said, "I never knew that Dickens was killed here."

"He wasn't, madam," replied the verger.

"But it says here, 'This tablet was erected by his executors.'"

### Humane Killing at Sea.

The British minister of agriculture has ordered that every vessel in which any animal is carried shall carry a proper killing instrument discharging a bullet or captive bolt, and approved by the ministry.

### Improvement.

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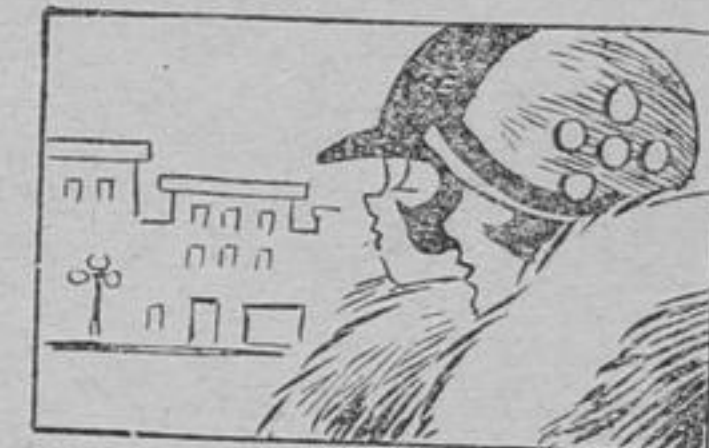
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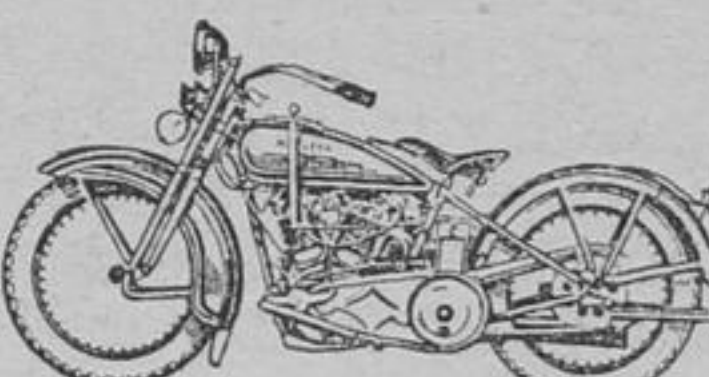
Not Real Thing. "Did she marry money?" "If she did, she got a counterfeit bill."

Minard's Liniment for burns.

### A Mystery.

The teacher explained to the class about the sun and its doings "What I can't understand, miss, said one youngster, impressed by the story of millions of miles distance from the earth, 'is how the sun's light manages to get here so early in the morning without travelling at night.'"

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Thus scoring all the cares That fate or fortune brings. He makes the heaven his book, His wisdom heavenly things.

Good thoughts his only friends, His wealth a well-spent age, The earth his sober inn, And quiet pilgrimage.

—Thomas Campion, about 1600.

### Japanese Etiquette.

According to true Japanese etiquette a fan must never be used in the presence of cut flowers.



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