

The Middle Temple Murder

by J.S. Fletcher

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CHAPTER ONE

THE SCRAP OF GREY PAPER

As a rule, Spargo left the *Watchman* office at two o'clock. The paper had then gone to press. There was nothing for him, recently promoted to a sub-editorship, to do after he had passed the column for which he was responsible; as a matter of fact he could have gone home before the machines began their clatter. But he generally hung about, trifling, until two o'clock came. On this occasion, the morning of the 22nd of June, 1912, he stopped longer than usual, chatting with Hacket, who had charge of the foreign news, and who began telling him about a telegram which had just come through from Durazzo. What Hacket had to tell was interesting: Spargo lingered to hear all about it, and to discuss it. Altogether it was well beyond half-past two when he went out of the office, unconsciously puffing away from him as he reached the threshold the last breath of the atmosphere in which he had spent his midnight. In Fleet Street the air was fresh, almost to sweetness, and the first grey of the coming dawn was breaking faintly around the high silence of St. Paul's.

Spargo lived in Bloomsbury, on the west side of Russell Square. Every night and every morning he walked to and from the *Watchman* office by the same route—Southampton Row, Kingsway, the Strand, Fleet Street. He came to know several faces, especially amongst the police; he formed the habit of exchanging greetings with various officers whom he encountered at regular points as he went slowly homewards, smoking his pipe. And on this morning, as he drew near to Middle Temple Lane, he saw a

policeman whom he knew, one Driscoll, standing at the entrance, looking about him. Further away another policeman appeared, sauntering. Driscoll raised an arm and signalled; then, turning, he saw Spargo. He moved a step or two towards him. Spargo saw news in his face.

“What is it?” asked Spargo.

Driscoll jerked a thumb over his shoulder, towards the partly open door of the lane. Within, Spargo saw a man hastily donning a waistcoat and jacket.

“He says,” answered Driscoll, “him, there—the porter—that there’s a man lying in one of them entries down the lane, and he thinks he’s dead. Likewise, he thinks he’s murdered.”

Spargo echoed the word.

“But what makes him think that?” he asked, peeping with curiosity beyond Driscoll’s burly form. “Why?”

“He says there’s blood about him,” answered Driscoll. He turned and glanced at the oncoming constable, and then turned again to Spargo. “You’re a newspaper man, sir?” he suggested.

“I am,” replied Spargo.

“You’d better walk down with us,” said Driscoll, with a grin. “There’ll be something to write pieces in the paper about. At least, there may be.” Spargo made no answer. He continued to look down the lane, wondering what secret it held, until the other policeman came up. At the same moment the porter, now fully clothed, came out.

“Come on!” he said shortly. “I’ll show you.”

Driscoll murmured a word or two to the newly-arrived constable, and then turned to the porter.

“How came you to find him, then?” he asked

The porter jerked his head at the door which they were leaving.

“I heard that door slam,” he replied, irritably, as if the fact which he mentioned caused him offence. “I know I did! So I got up to look around. Then—well, I saw that!”

He raised a hand, pointing down the lane. The three men followed his outstretched finger. And Spargo then saw a man’s foot, booted, grey-socked, protruding from an entry on the left hand.

“Sticking out there, just as you see it now,” said the porter. “I ain’t touched it. And so—”

He paused and made a grimace as if at the memory of some unpleasant thing. Driscoll nodded comprehendingly.

“And so you went along and looked?” he suggested. “Just so—just to see who it belonged to, as it might be.”

“Just to see—what there was to see,” agreed the porter. “Then I saw there was blood. And then—well, I made up the lane to tell one of you chaps.”

“Best thing you could have done,” said Driscoll. “Well, now then—”

The little procession came to a halt at the entry. The entry was a cold and formal thing of itself; not a nice place to lie dead in, having glazed white tiles for its walls and concrete for its flooring; something about its appearance in that grey morning air suggested

to Spargo the idea of a mortuary. And that the man whose foot projected over the step was dead he had no doubt: the limpness of his pose certified to it.

For a moment none of the four men moved or spoke. The two policemen unconsciously stuck their thumbs in their belts and made play with their fingers; the porter rubbed his chin thoughtfully—Spargo remembered afterwards the rasping sound of this action; he himself put his hands in his pockets and began to jingle his money and his keys. Each man had his own thoughts as he contemplated the piece of human wreckage which lay before him.

“You’ll notice,” suddenly observed Driscoll, speaking in a hushed voice, “You’ll notice that he’s lying there in a queer way—same as if—as if he’d been put there. Sort of propped up against that wall, at first, and had slid down, like.”

Spargo was taking in all the details with a professional eye. He saw at his feet the body of an elderly man; the face was turned away from him, crushed in against the glaze of the wall, but he judged the man to be elderly because of grey hair and whitening whisker; it was clothed in a good, well-made suit of grey check cloth—tweed—and the boots were good: so, too, was the linen cuff which projected from the sleeve that hung so limply. One leg was half doubled under the body; the other was stretched straight out across the threshold; the trunk was twisted to the wall. Over the white glaze of the tiles against which it and the shoulder towards which it had sunk were crushed there were gouts and stains of blood. And Driscoll, taking a hand out of his belt, pointed a finger at them.

“Seems to me,” he said, slowly, “seems to me as how he’s been struck down from behind as he came out of here. That blood’s from his nose—gushed out as he fell. What do you say, Jim?” The other policeman coughed.

“Better get the inspector here,” he said. “And the doctor and the ambulance. Dead—ain’t he?”

Driscoll bent down and put a thumb on the hand which lay on the pavement.

“As ever they make ’em,” he remarked laconically. “And stiff, too. Well, hurry up, Jim!”

Spargo waited until the inspector arrived; waited until the hand-ambulance came. More policemen came with it; they moved the body for transference to the mortuary, and Spargo then saw the dead man’s face. He looked long and steadily at it while the police arranged the limbs, wondering all the time who it was that he gazed at, how he came to that end, what was the object of his murderer, and many other things. There was some professionalism in Spargo’s curiosity, but there was also a natural dislike that a fellow-being should have been so unceremoniously smitten out of the world.

There was nothing very remarkable about the dead man’s face. It was that of a man of apparently sixty to sixty-five years of age; plain, even homely of feature, clean-shaven, except for a fringe of white whisker, trimmed, after an old-fashioned pattern, between the ear and the point of the jaw. The only remarkable thing about it was that it was much lined and seamed; the wrinkles were many and deep around the corners of the lips and the angles of the eyes;

this man, you would have said to yourself, has led a hard life and weathered storm, mental as well as physical.

Driscoll nudged Spargo with a turn of his elbow. He gave him a wink. "Better come down to the dead-house," he muttered confidentially.

"Why?" asked Spargo.

"They'll go through him," whispered Driscoll. "Search him, d'ye see? Then you'll get to know all about him, and so on. Help to write that piece in the paper, eh?"

Spargo hesitated. He had had a stiff night's work, and until his encounter with Driscoll he had cherished warm anticipation of the meal which would be laid out for him at his rooms, and of the bed into which he would subsequently tumble. Besides, a telephone message would send a man from the *Watchman* to the mortuary. This sort of thing was not in his line now, now—

"You'll be for getting one o' them big play-cards out with something about a mystery on it," suggested Driscoll. "You never know what lies at the bottom o' these affairs, no more you don't."

That last observation decided Spargo; moreover, the old instinct for getting news began to assert itself.

"All right," he said. "I'll go along with you."

And re-lighting his pipe he followed the little cortège through the streets, still deserted and quiet, and as he walked behind he reflected on the unobtrusive fashion in which murder could stalk about. Here was the work of murder, no doubt, and it was being quietly carried along a principal London thoroughfare, without fuss

or noise, by officials to whom the dealing with it was all a matter of routine. Surely—

“My opinion,” said a voice at Spargo’s elbow, “my opinion is that it was done elsewhere. Not there! He was put there. That’s what I say.” Spargo turned and saw that the porter was at his side. He, too, was accompanying the body.

“Oh!” said Spargo. “You think—”

“I think he was struck down elsewhere and carried there,” said the porter. “In somebody’s chambers, maybe. I’ve known of some queer games in our bit of London! Well!—he never came in at my lodge last night—I’ll stand to that. And who is he, I should like to know? From what I see of him, not the sort to be about our place.”

“That’s what we shall hear presently,” said Spargo. “They’re going to search him.”

But Spargo was presently made aware that the searchers had found nothing. The police-surgeon said that the dead man had, without doubt, been struck down from behind by a terrible blow which had fractured the skull and caused death almost instantaneously. In Driscoll’s opinion, the murder had been committed for the sake of plunder. For there was nothing whatever on the body. It was reasonable to suppose that a man who is well dressed would possess a watch and chain, and have money in his pockets, and possibly rings on his fingers. But there was nothing valuable to be found; in fact there was nothing at all to be found that could lead to identification—no letters, no papers, nothing. It was plain that whoever had struck the dead man down had subsequently stripped him of whatever was on him. The only clue to possible identity lay

in the fact that a soft cap of grey cloth appeared to have been newly purchased at a fashionable shop in the West End.

Spargo went home; there seemed to be nothing to stop for. He ate his food and he went to bed, only to do poor things in the way of sleeping. He was not the sort to be impressed by horrors, but he recognized at last that the morning's event had destroyed his chance of rest; he accordingly rose, took a cold bath, drank a cup of coffee, and went out. He was not sure of any particular idea when he strolled away from Bloomsbury, but it did not surprise him when, half an hour later he found that he had walked down to the police station near which the unknown man's body lay in the mortuary. And there he met Driscoll, just going off duty. Driscoll grinned at sight of him.

"You're in luck," he said. "'Tisn't five minutes since they found a bit of grey writing paper crumpled up in the poor man's waistcoat pocket—it had slipped into a crack. Come in, and you'll see it."

Spargo went into the inspector's office. In another minute he found himself staring at the scrap of paper. There was nothing on it but an address, scrawled in pencil:—Ronald Breton, Barrister, King's Bench Walk, Temple, London.

CHAPTER TWO

HIS FIRST BRIEF

Spargo looked up at the inspector with a quick jerk of his head. “I know this man,” he said.

The inspector showed new interest.

“What, Mr. Breton?” he asked.

“Yes. I’m on the *Watchman*, you know, sub-editor. I took an article from him the other day—article on ‘Ideal Sites for Campers-Out.’ He came to the office about it. So this was in the dead man’s pocket?”

“Found in a hole in his pocket, I understand: I wasn’t present myself. It’s not much, but it may afford some clue to identity.”

Spargo picked up the scrap of grey paper and looked closely at it. It seemed to him to be the sort of paper that is found in hotels and in clubs; it had been torn roughly from the sheet.

“What,” he asked meditatively, “what will you do about getting this man identified?”

The inspector shrugged his shoulders.

“Oh, usual thing, I suppose. There’ll be publicity, you know. I suppose you’ll be doing a special account yourself, for your paper, eh? Then there’ll be the others. And we shall put out the usual notice. Somebody will come forward to identify—sure to. And—”

A man came into the office—a stolid-faced, quiet-mannered, soberly attired person, who might have been a respectable tradesman out for a stroll, and who gave the inspector a sidelong nod as he approached his desk, at the same time extending his hand towards the scrap of paper which Spargo had just laid down.

“I’ll go along to King’s Bench Walk and see Mr. Breton,” he observed, looking at his watch. “It’s just about ten—I daresay he’ll be there now.”

“I’m going there, too,” remarked Spargo, but as if speaking to himself. “Yes, I’ll go there.”

The newcomer glanced at Spargo, and then at the inspector. The inspector nodded at Spargo.

“Journalist,” he said, “Mr. Spargo of the *Watchman*. Mr. Spargo was there when the body was found. And he knows Mr. Breton.” Then he nodded from Spargo to the stolid-faced person. “This is Detective-Sergeant Rathbury, from the Yard,” he said to Spargo. “He’s come to take charge of this case.”

“Oh?” said Spargo blankly. “I see—what,” he went on, with sudden abruptness, “what shall you do about Breton?”

“Get him to come and look at the body,” replied Rathbury. “He may know the man and he mayn’t. Anyway, his name and address are here, aren’t they?”

“Come along,” said Spargo. “I’ll walk there with you.”

Spargo remained in a species of brown study all the way along Tudor Street; his companion also maintained silence in a fashion which showed that he was by nature and custom a man of few

words. It was not until the two were climbing the old balustrated staircase of the house in King's Bench Walk in which Ronald Breton's chambers were somewhere situate that Spargo spoke.

"Do you think that old chap was killed for what he may have had on him?" he asked, suddenly turning on the detective.

"I should like to know what he had on him before I answered that question, Mr. Spargo," replied Rathbury, with a smile.

"Yes," said Spargo, dreamily. "I suppose so. He might have had—nothing on him, eh?"

The detective laughed, and pointed to a board on which names were printed.

"We don't know anything yet, sir," he observed, "except that Mr. Breton is on the fourth floor. By which I conclude that it isn't long since he was eating his dinner."

"Oh, he's young—he's quite young," said Spargo. "I should say he's about four-and-twenty. I've met him only—"

At that moment the unmistakable sounds of girlish laughter came down the staircase. Two girls seemed to be laughing—presently masculine laughter mingled with the lighter feminine.

"Seems to be studying law in very pleasant fashion up here, anyway," said Rathbury. "Mr. Breton's chambers, too. And the door's open."

The outer oak door of Ronald Breton's chambers stood thrown wide; the inner one was well ajar; through the opening thus made Spargo and the detective obtained a full view of the interior of Mr. Ronald Breton's rooms. There, against a background of law books,

bundles of papers tied up with pink tape, and black-framed pictures of famous legal notabilities, they saw a pretty, vivacious-eyed girl, who, perched on a chair, wigged and gowned, and flourishing a mass of crisp paper, was haranguing an imaginary judge and jury, to the amusement of a young man who had his back to the door, and of another girl who leant confidentially against his shoulder.

“I put it to you, gentlemen of the jury—I put it to you with confidence, feeling that you must be, must necessarily be, some, perhaps brothers, perhaps husbands, and fathers, can you, on your consciences do my client the great wrong, the irreparable injury, the—the—”

“Think of some more adjectives!” exclaimed the young man. “Hot and strong ’uns—pile ’em up. That’s what they like—they—Hullo!”

This exclamation arose from the fact that at this point of the proceedings the detective rapped at the inner door, and then put his head round its edge. Whereupon the young lady who was orating from the chair, jumped hastily down; the other young lady withdrew from the young man’s protecting arm; there was a feminine giggle and a feminine swishing of skirts, and a hasty bolt into an inner room, and Mr. Ronald Breton came forward, blushing a little, to greet the interrupter.

“Come in, come in!” he exclaimed hastily. “I—”

Then he paused, catching sight of Spargo, and held out his hand with a look of surprise.

“Oh—Mr. Spargo?” he said. “How do you do?—we—I—we were just having a lark—I’m off to court in a few minutes. What can I do for you, Mr. Spargo?”

He had backed to the inner door as he spoke, and he now closed it and turned again to the two men, looking from one to the other. The detective, on his part, was looking at the young barrister. He saw a tall, slimly-built youth, of handsome features and engaging presence, perfectly groomed, and immaculately garbed, and having upon him a general air of well-to-do-ness, and he formed the impression from these matters that Mr. Breton was one of those fortunate young men who may take up a profession but are certainly not dependent upon it. He turned and glanced at the journalist.

“How do you do?” said Spargo slowly. “I—the fact is, I came here with Mr. Rathbury. He—wants to see you. Detective-Sergeant Rathbury—of New Scotland Yard.”

Spargo pronounced this formal introduction as if he were repeating a lesson. But he was watching the young barrister’s face. And Breton turned to the detective with a look of surprise.

“Oh!” he said. “You wish—”

Rathbury had been fumbling in his pocket for the scrap of grey paper, which he had carefully bestowed in a much-worn memorandum-book. “I wished to ask a question, Mr. Breton,” he said. “This morning, about a quarter to three, a man—elderly man—was found dead in Middle Temple Lane, and there seems little doubt that he was murdered. Mr. Spargo here—he was present when the body was found.”

“Soon after,” corrected Spargo. “A few minutes after.”

“When this body was examined at the mortuary,” continued Rathbury, in his matter-of-fact, business-like tones, “nothing was found that could lead to identification. The man appears to have been robbed. There was nothing whatever on him—but this bit of torn paper, which was found in a hole in the lining of his waistcoat pocket. It’s got your name and address on it, Mr. Breton. See?”

Ronald Breton took the scrap of paper and looked at it with knitted brows.

“By Jove!” he muttered. “So it has; that’s queer. What’s he like, this man?”

Rathbury glanced at a clock which stood on the mantelpiece.

“Will you step round and take a look at him, Mr. Breton?” he said. “It’s close by.”

“Well—I—the fact is, I’ve got a case on, in Mr. Justice Borrow’s court,” Breton answered, also glancing at his clock. “But it won’t be called until after eleven. Will—”

“Plenty of time, sir,” said Rathbury; “it won’t take you ten minutes to go round and back again—a look will do. You don’t recognize this handwriting, I suppose?”

Breton still held the scrap of paper in his fingers. He looked at it again, intently.

“No!” he answered. “I don’t. I don’t know it at all—I can’t think, of course, who this man could be, to have my name and address. I thought he might have been some country solicitor, wanting my

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