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In the Mayor's Parlour

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Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: J. S. (Joseph Smith) Fletcher

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin - Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8472-2269-9

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N THE MAYOR'S

I -- PARLOUR --

By J. S. FLETCHER

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LIMITED

LONDON MCMXXII

SECOND EDITION

Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner, Frome and London.

IN THE MAYOR'S PARLOUR

CHAPTER I

THE MAYOR'S PARLOUR

Hathelsborough market-place lies in the middle of the town—a long, somewhat narrow parallelogram, enclosed on its longer side by old gabled houses; shut in on its western end by the massive bulk of the great parish church of St. Hathelswide, Virgin and Martyr, and at its eastern by the ancient walls and high roofs of its mediæval Moot Hall. The inner surface of this space is paved with cobble-stones, worn smooth by centuries of usage: it is only of late years that the conservative spirit of the old borough has so far accommodated itself to modern requirements as to provide foot-paths in front of the shops and houses. But there that same spirit has stopped; the utilitarian of to-day would sweep away, as being serious hindrances to wheeled traffic, the two picturesque fifteenth-century erections which stand in this market-place; these, High Cross and Low Cross, one at the east end, in front of the Moot Hall, the other at the west, facing the chancel of the church, remain, to the delight of the archæologist, as instances of the fashion in which our forefathers [Pg 2] built gathering places in the very midst of narrow thoroughfares.

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

infants in comparison with the age of the stones and bricks and timbers about them, grey and fragrant with the antiquity of at least three hundred years.

Of all this mass of venerable material, still sound and uncrumbled, the great tall-towered church at one end of the market-place, and the square, heavily fashioned Moot Hall at the other, go farthest back, through association, into the mists of the Middle Ages. The church dates from the thirteenth century and, though it has been skilfully restored on more than one occasion, there is nothing in its cathedral-like proportions that suggests modernity; the Moot Hall, erected a hundred years later, remains precisely as when it was first fashioned, and though it, too, has passed under the hand of the restorer its renovation has only taken the shape of strengthening an already formidably strong building. Extending across nearly the whole eastern end of the market-place, and flanked [Pg 3] on one side by an ancient dwelling-house—once the official residence of the Mayors of Hathelsborough—and on the other by a more modern but still old-world building, long used as a bank, Hathelsborough Moot Hall presents the appearance of a mediæval fortress, as though its original builders had meant it to be a possible refuge for the townsfolk against masterful Baron or marauding Scot. From the market-place itself there is but one entrance to it; an arched doorway opening upon a low-roofed stone hall; in place of a door there are heavy gates of iron, with a smaller wicket-gate set in their midst; from the stone hall a stone stair leads to the various chambers above; in the outer walls the windows are high and narrow; each is filled with old painted glass. A strong, grim building, this; and when the iron gates are locked, as they are every night when the curfew bell—an ancient institution jealously kept up in Hathelsborough—rings from St. Hathelswide's tower, a man might safely wager his all to nothing that only modern artillery could effect an entrance to its dark and gloomy interior.

On a certain April evening, the time being within an hour of curfew—which, to be exact, is rung in Hathelsborough every night, all the year round, sixty minutes after sunset, despite the fact that it is nowadays but a meaningless if time-honoured ceremony—Bunning, caretaker and custodian of the Moot Hall, stood without its gates, smoking his pipe and looking around him. He was an ex-Army

man, Bunning, who had seen service in many parts of the world, and was frequently heard to declare that although he had set eyes on many men and many [Pg 4] cities he had never found the equal of Hathelsborough folk, nor seen a fairer prospect than that on which he now gazed. The truth was that Bunning was a Hathelsborough man, and having wandered about a good deal during his military service, from Aldershot to Gibraltar, and Gibraltar to Malta, and Malta to Cairo, and Cairo to Peshawar, was well content to settle down in a comfortable berth amidst the familiar scenes of his childhood. But anyone who loves the ancient country towns of England would have agreed with Bunning that Hathelsborough market-place made an unusually attractive picture on a spring evening. There were the old gabled houses, quaintly roofed and timbered; there the lace-like masonry of High Cross; there the slender proportions of Low Cross; there the mighty bulk of the great church built over the very spot whereon the virgin saint suffered martyrdom; there, towering above the gables on the north side, the well-preserved masonry of the massive Norman Keep of Hathelsborough Castle; there a score of places and signs with which Bunning had kept up a close acquaintance in youth and borne in mind when far away under other skies. And around the church tower, and at the base of the tall keep, were the elms for which the town was famous; mighty giants of the tree world, just now bursting into leaf, and above them the rooks and jackdaws circling and calling above the hum and murmur of the town.

To Bunning's right and left, going away from the eastern corner of the market-place, lay two narrow streets, called respectively River Gate and Meadow Gate—one led downwards to the little river on the [Pg 5] southern edge of the town; the other ran towards the wide-spread grass-lands that stretched on its northern boundary. And as he stood looking about him, he saw a man turn the corner of Meadow Gate—a man who came hurrying along in his direction, walking sharply, his eyes bent on the flags beneath his feet, his whole attitude that of one in deep reflection. At sight of him Bunning put his pipe in his pocket, gave himself the soldier's shake and, as the man drew near, stood smartly to attention. The man looked up—Bunning's right hand went up to his cap in the old familiar

fashion; that was how, for many a long year of service, he had saluted his superiors.

There was nothing very awe-compelling about the person whom the caretaker thus greeted with so much punctilious ceremony. He was a little, somewhat insignificant-looking man—at first sight. His clothes were well-worn and carelessly put on; the collar of his under-coat projected high above that of his overcoat; his necktie had slipped round towards one ear; his linen was frayed; his felt hat, worn anyway, needed brushing; he wore cotton gloves, too big for him. He carried a mass of papers and books under one arm; the other hand grasped an umbrella which had grown green and grey in service. He might have been all sorts of insignificant things: a clerk, going homeward from his work; a tax-gatherer, carrying his documents; a rent-collector, anxious about a defaulting tenant—anything of that sort. But Bunning knew him for Mr. Councillor John Wallingford, at that time Mayor of Hathelsborough. He knew something else too—that Wallingford, in [Pg 6] spite of his careless attire and very ordinary appearance, was a remarkable man. He was not a native of the old town; although he was, for twelve months at any rate, its first magistrate, and consequently the most important person in the place, Hathelsborough folk still ranked him as a stranger, for he had only been amongst them for some twelve years. But during that time he had made his mark in the town—coming there as managing clerk to a firm of solicitors, he had ultimately succeeded to the practice which he had formerly managed for its two elderly partners, now retired. At an early period of his Hathelsborough career he had taken keen and deep interest in the municipal affairs of his adopted town and had succeeded in getting a seat on the Council, where he had quickly made his influence felt. And in the previous November he had been elected—by a majority of one vote—to the Mayoralty and had so become the four hundred and eighty-first burgess of the ancient borough to wear the furred mantle and gold chain which symbolized his dignity. He looked very different in these grandeurs to what he did in his everyday attire, but whether in the Mayoral robes or in his carelessly worn clothes any close observer would have seen that Wallingford was a sharp, shrewd man with all his wits about him—a close-seeing,

concentrated man, likely to go through, no matter what obstacles rose in his path, with anything that he took in hand.

Bunning was becoming accustomed to these evening visits of the Mayor to the Moot Hall. Of late, Wallingford had come there often, going upstairs to the Mayor's Parlour and remaining there alone until [Pg 7] ten or eleven o'clock. Always he brought books and papers with him; always, as he entered, he gave the custodian the same command—no one was to disturb him, on any pretext whatever. But on this occasion, Bunning heard a different order.

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

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

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

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

Presently came along another Corporation official, [Pg 8] whom Bunning knew as well as he knew the Mayor, an official who, indeed, was known all over the town, and familiar to everybody, from the mere fact that he was always attired in a livery the like of which he and his predecessors had been wearing for at least two hundred years. This was Spizey, a consequential person who, in the borough

rolls for the time being, was entered as Bellman, Town Crier, and Mace Bearer. Spizey was a big, fleshy man, with a large solemn face, a ponderous manner, and small eyes. His ample figure was habited at all seasons of the year in a voluminous cloak which had much gold lace on its front and cuffs and many capes about the shoulders; he wore a three-cornered laced hat on his bullet head, and carried a tall staff, not unlike a wand, in his hand. There were a few—very few—progressive folk in Hathelsborough who regarded Spizey and his semi-theatrical attire as an anachronism, and openly derided both, but so far nobody had dared to advocate the abolition of him and his livery. He was part and parcel of the high tradition, a reminder of the fact that Hathelsborough possessed a Charter of Incorporation centuries before its now more popular and important neighbouring boroughs gained theirs, and in his own opinion the discontinuance of his symbols of office would have been little less serious than the sale of the Mayor's purple robe and chain of solid gold: Spizey, thus attired, was Hathelsborough. And, as he was not slow to remind awe-stricken audiences at his favourite tavern, Mayors, Aldermen and Councillors were, so to speak, creatures of the moment—the Mayor, for example, was His Worship for twelve months and plain Mr. Chipps the [Pg 9] grocer ever after—but he, Spizey, was a Permanent Institution, and not to be moved.

Spizey was on his way to his favourite tavern now, to smoke his pipe—which it was beneath his dignity to do in public—and drink his glass amongst his cronies, but he stopped to exchange the time of day with Bunning, whom he regarded with patronizing condescension, as being a lesser light than himself. And having remarked that this was a fine evening, after the usual fashion of British folk, who are for ever wasting time and breath in drawing each other's attention to obvious facts, he cocked one of his small eyes at the stairs behind the iron gates.

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

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

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

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

"Make of what?" demanded the caretaker.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Precedent!" retorted Spizey. "Ain't never been done before—never! Haven't I been in the office I hold nigh on to forty years? Seen a many mayors, aldermen and common councillors come and go in my time. But never do I remember a Mayor coming here to this Moot Hall of a night, with books and papers—which is dangerous matters at any time, [Pg 11] except in their proper place, such as

my proclamations and the town dockyments—and sitting there for hours, doing—what?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Bless me!" he exclaimed.

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"To be sure!" said Spizey. "It's beyond comprehension! To abolish me!—what, in a manner of speaking, has existed I don't know how long. I ain't a man—I'm a office! Who'd cry things that was lost—at that there Cross? Who'd pull the big bell on great occasions, and carry round the little 'un when there was proclamations to be made? Who'd walk in front o' the Mayor's procession, with the Mace—

what was give to this here town by King Henry VII, his very self? Abolish me? Why, it's as bad as talking about abolishing the Bible!"

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

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

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

"Pension!" exclaimed Spizey. "That's a detail!—it's the office I'm a-considering of. What this here [Pg 13] free and ancient borough 'ud look like, without me, I cannot think!"

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

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

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

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

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

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CHAPTER II

THE CAMBRIC HANDKERCHIEF

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

"Murder! The Mayor's been murdered!"

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

"For God's sake, Mr. Brent, don't touch him!" he exclaimed. "Let him be, sir, till the police——" He paused, staring round the gloomy, oak-panelled [Pg 15] room from the walls of which the portraits of various dignitaries looked down. "Who on earth can have done it?" he muttered. "It's—it's not three-quarters of an hour since he came up here!"

"Alone?" asked Brent.

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

Brent disregarded the caretaker's admonition and laid a finger on the dead man's forehead. But Bunning pointed to a dark stain, still

spreading, on the back of the Mayor's coat—a well-worn garment of grey tweed.

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

"Who should murder him?" demanded Brent.

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

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

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

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

He hurried out of the room, and Brent, left alone with the dead man, looked at him once again wonderingly. [Pg 16] Cousins though they were, he and Wallingford knew little of each other: their acquaintance, such as it was, had not been deep enough to establish any particular affection between them. But since Wallingford's election as Mayor of Hathelsborough Brent, by profession a journalist in London, had twice spent a week-end with him in the old town, and had learnt something of his plans for a reform of certain matters connected with the administration of its affairs. They had discussed these things on the occasion of his last visit, and now, as he stood by the dead man, Brent remembered certain words which Wallingford had spoken.

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

That was now four months since, but Brent remembered. And as he stood there, waiting for help which would be useless, he began

to wonder if Wallingford, eager for reform, had attempted anything likely to bring him into personal danger. Certainly, from all that Brent knew of him, he was the sort of man who, having set himself to a task, would let nothing stop him in accomplishing it; he was the sort of man too, Brent thought, who had a genius for making enemies: such men always have. But murder? Cold-blooded, deliberate, apparently well-planned murder! Yet there it was, before him. The Mayor of Hathelsborough had walked up into that room, sacred to his official uses and suggestive in its atmosphere and furniture of his great dignity, and had settled down [Pg 17] to his desk, only to be assassinated by some enemy who had taken good care to perform his crime with swiftness and thoroughness.

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

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

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

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

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

"About three-quarters of an hour before Mr. Brent came, sir," replied Bunning. "He came up to me as I was standing outside the gates, smoking my pipe, and said that he was going up to the Mayor's Parlour, and nobody was to be allowed to disturb him, but that if his cousin, Mr. Brent, came, he was [Pg 18] to be shown up.

Mr. Brent came and I brought him up, and we found his Worship as you see."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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