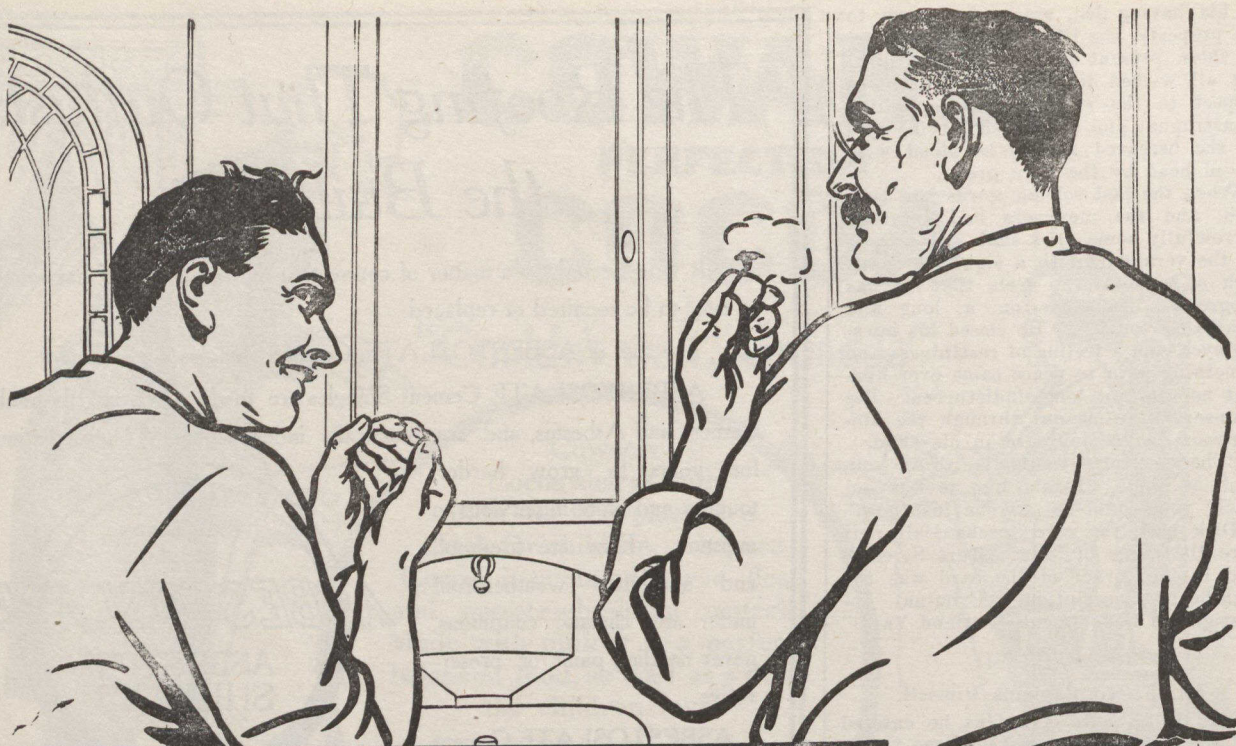




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Dick flung himself impatiently into a chair facing his visitor, and waited for the other to continue; the crumpled up paste-board escaped from his nervous fingers, and dropped unheeded to the floor, as he beat an impatient tattoo upon the table by his side.

Mr. Screed was not a man to be hurried—the signs of restiveness shown by his companion only caused him to affect a greater deliberation of manner and speech.

"My card," he said, "will already have told you who I am. The circumstances attending your father's death, Mr. Emberson, being somewhat out of the common, Scotland Yard sent me down to watch the case. I was present at the inquest."

He paused—leant back in his chair, and folded his arms as if awaiting some comment on his announcement.

"I know; I saw you there," remarked Dick. "I should like to take you by the throat and shake what you have to say out of you," was his added but inward reflection as the other drawled slowly—

"Ah—ye-es. Well, I am sure you will agree with me when I say that nothing quite so scandalously inefficient as that inquiry, and no one quite so dense as your worthy coroner has ever come under my notice."

"I don't agree with you at all!" said Dick explosively, glad of an excuse for venting the irritation which seethed within him. "Mr. Jelf is an old friend of mine—and, to my mind, he showed a tactful delicacy—a consideration for the feelings of those involved in this unhappy catastrophe, which it would be well for others to emulate."

"Not being so easily satisfied as the worthy Mr. Jelf, I have been making independent inquiries; these, so far, have only served to increase the suspicions I had already formed; and I naturally come to you, as the person most likely to be able to assist me in my investigations."

"Of what nature are your investigations?" asked Dick, grasping the two arms of the big lounge chair in which he sat so tightly that the knuckles stood out white and prominent.

"I am pretty sure to begin with that the fire at Ardwell Court was not the result of accident, but incendiarism," was the reply.

"Ridiculous! Impossible!"

With an impatient movement the young man twisted his chair round so that his back was towards the window, and his face therefore less plainly visible to his companion. The manoeuvre, though skilfully effected, was perfectly transparent to Mr. Screed, who smiled again—somewhat grimly this time.

"Neither one nor the other as I will show you later," he said, "but, with your permission, we will put that point aside for the moment whilst I ask you a straight question. What proof have you that the body you have interred to-day is really that of your father?"

"Good God, man; who else could it be?"

The sudden start, the wheel round, the eyes widened with a half-stupefied amazement indicated either that Mr. Richard Emberson was a consummate actor, or that this was a question for which he had been totally unprepared. The detective was not quite sure which hypothesis to accept, he was slightly disappointed at the effect of his bomb-shell: it had not been just what he anticipated.

"Ah, that I can't say at present," he answered reflectively; "but I will tell you this much. If Mr. Emberson really lost his life in the fire which burnt his house to the ground, certain traces should be found to prove his identity. These are conspicuous by their absence."

"I left my father at ten o'clock in his own bedroom when all the rest of the household had retired; he and he alone failed to make his escape when the alarm of fire was raised; in the face of that well authenticated fact, the presence or absence of traces you might expect to find signifies little or nothing!"

The young man spoke with considerable heat; but Mr. Screed's judicial calm was quite unruffled as he replied—

"I differ from you entirely, to my mind it is extremely significant. I will show you how; you cannot be sure that after you had left your father he did not privately introduce a visitor; he had already had one interview in the afternoon with two strangers; he might