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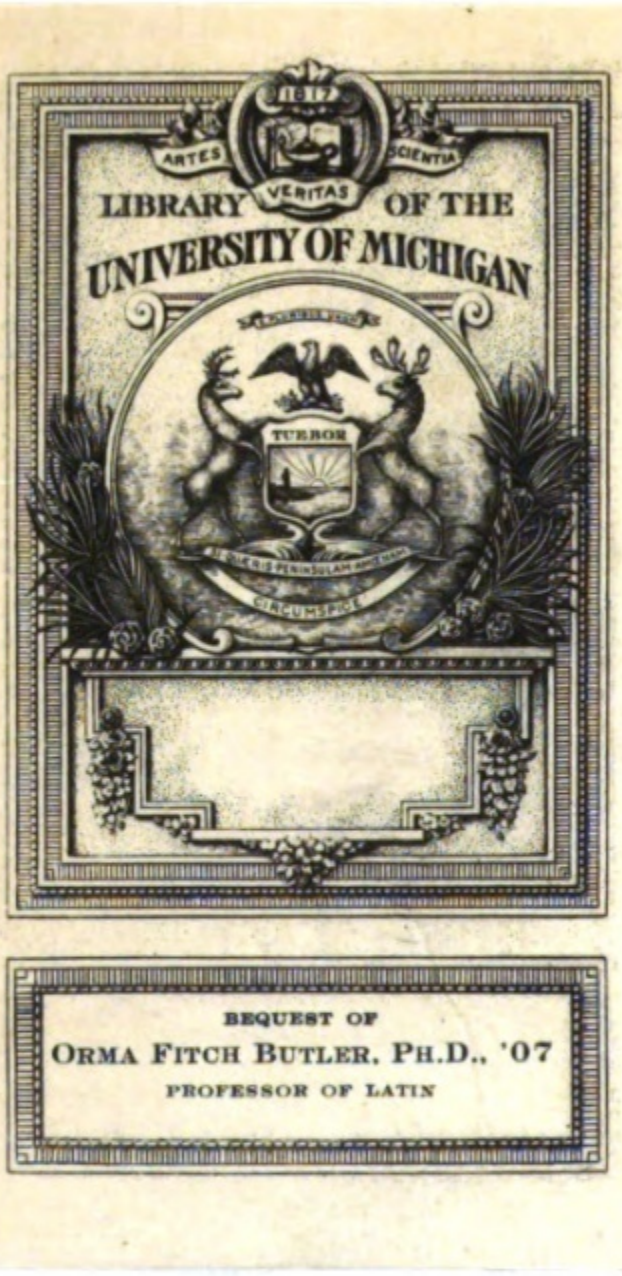

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THE MURDER ON THE BUS

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By the Same Author

THE BODY IN THE SAFE
THE THREE DAGGERS

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The
MURDER ON THE BUS

By

CECIL FREEMAN GREGG

LINCOLN MAC VEAGH
THE DIAL PRESS
NEW YORK · MCMXXX
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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I.	IN WHICH A LETTER IS DELIVERED TO SCOTLAND YARD	11
II.	IN WHICH CONSTABLE SUMMERS COMMENCES OPERATIONS	19
III.	IN WHICH A CORONER SAYS A FEW WORDS	28
IV.	IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS ASKS A FEW QUESTIONS	36
V.	IN WHICH DOCTOR PAPE VOICES AN OPINION	45
VI.	IN WHICH DOCTOR PAPE IS SURPRISED	52
VII.	IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS TAKES A BUS-RIDE	61
VIII.	IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS ENTERS AN EMPTY HOUSE	67
IX.	IN WHICH A PIECE OF WOOD COMES IN HANDY	74
X.	IN WHICH A DISCOVERY IS MADE	82
XI.	IN WHICH A YOUNG LADY IS SENT HOME	88
XII.	IN WHICH THE YOUNG LADY RETURNS	96
XIII.	IN WHICH THE INSPECTOR SHOWS HIS PACES	103
XIV.	IN WHICH HE MEETS AN OLD FRIEND	111
XV.	IN WHICH HE MEETS ANOTHER OLD FRIEND	119
XVI.	IN WHICH TWO MEN GET VERY DIRTY	128
XVII.	IN WHICH THERE IS SOME LOCAL RIVALRY	136
XVIII.	IN WHICH A CAR IS BORROWED	144

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THE MURDER ON THE BUS

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH A LETTER IS DELIVERED TO SCOTLAND YARD

A TALL, broad-shouldered, athletic-looking man walked briskly through the entrance gates of Scotland Yard, acknowledging with a smile and a quick touching of his hat the elaborate salute of the constable on duty.

"Morning!"

"Good morning, sir."

Inspector Cuthbert Higgins passed quickly through the courtyard. He was immaculately dressed as usual—his clothes seemingly a part of his personality. Everything toned. He looked more like a successful City man than what he actually was—a detective-inspector of the Metropolitan Police; yet, had Fate or his inclination been different, it is extremely probable that he would have been a success in any profession which he might have undertaken. Painstaking rather than brilliant; distrustful of intuition, yet not afraid to take a chance; preferred to wait rather than jump to a faulty conclusion; would make any sacrifice on the altar of Duty—which word he always spelled with a capital D.

His hurry was not occasioned by reason of lateness —he had risen above such petty restrictions—being merely characteristic of the man. He reached his private office,

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hung his hat upon a peg, thrust his walking-stick into a stand in the corner of the room, and leisurely removed his overcoat, flicking over the letters upon his desk interestedly whilst so doing. He hung his coat on the hook underneath his hat, then seated himself at his desk. He pulled out his pipe, which he slowly filled, took out his automatic lighter, rubbed the flint, was surprised and inwardly delighted when a tiny flame rewarded his efforts, shielded the flame as if he were trying to light the pipe in a gale of wind, puffed at the mouthpiece of his pipe at a rapid rate which slowly decreased as the tobacco burned more evenly, then shook out the flame and pulled his chair more closely to the desk.

His day had begun.

Carefully and methodically, with a dagger paper-knife (which had a history of its own) he slit the envelope of each letter until all had been opened. Then he began a perusal of the respective contents, separating the matter into subjects. Suddenly he stopped and re-read a letter extracted from a buff-coloured envelope on the top of which was printed "On His Majesty's Service," but which bore no date-stamp. He rang a bell, the button to operate which being conveniently to hand. A uniformed messenger appeared in response to his summons.

"This letter from the Dead-Letter Office. Delivered by hand. When did it arrive?"

"Ten minutes before you came, sir."

"Thanks. In future please put the time of receipt upon such letters. Send—er—what's that new man's name?"

"Summers, sir?"

"That's the fellow. Send Summers to me." He nodded dismissal to the messenger, then resumed his perusal of the letter in question. There was a timid knock at his door, and following his curt "Come in!" a man entered and stood respectfully at attention before the inspector's desk.

A tall man of about twenty-four years of age, erect

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and self-assured, intelligent-looking, yet possibly inexperienced.

"You asked for me, sir?"—respectfully.

Inspector Higgins handed the letter with its envelope to the waiting man.

"Read that. Then tell me what you make of it."

The man took the envelope and withdrew therefrom a letter with another envelope. He read the letter.

To the Metropolitan Police,
Scotland Yard, S.W.1.

Dear Sirs,

The enclosed letter, addressed to your good selves as above, was found inside another envelope which was opened by the Dead-Letter Office by reason of the insufficiency of its address. It was sealed as it is now, and, in case the matter is urgent, I am sending it to you by special messenger.

Yours faithfully,
For the Comptroller,
Dead-Letter Office,
D. R.

Constable Summers then turned his attention to the other envelope, which Inspector Higgins had already opened and the contents of which he had already digested.

To the Metropolitan Police.

I am going to do myself in. You fellers know me—Henry Hamper. I'm sick of it all. I'm sorry for what I've done but not for what I'm going to do. The address is Bulstroade's Buildings. Don't come with a naked light unless you want to meet me in hell now, instead of in a few years' time. Our meeting is, however, but deffered.

H. H.

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"Well, Summers. What d'you make of it?" queried Inspector Higgins, who had been studying the other keenly whilst he was reading the letter. Had Summers but known it, he was being tested by the astute inspector, who always thus secretly examined newcomers to the Yard.

"First of all, sir, there's the original envelope, the one misdirected. That does not appear to be here."

"Good. The Post Office people did not send it. Go on."

"Then, 'deferred' is spelled incorrectly."

Inspector Higgins nodded. "Anything else?"

"It appears to be a case of suicide, sir."

"H'm." The inspector did not seem so pleased with this contention on the part of his subordinate. "Is there no alternative?"

Constable Summers gazed at his Chief inquiringly for a moment, then:

"Surely, sir, you're not thinking of murder?"

Inspector Higgins laughed shortly. "Murder? Well, of course, that *is* an alternative, but—is there not a chance that the whole thing may turn out to be a hoax?"

"Hoax, sir? No one would dare——"

"Wouldn't they?" Higgins broke in upon the other's remarks. "Oh, wouldn't they! When you've been in the Service as long as I have, Summers, you'll realise that there is a considerable number of half-wits knocking about who seem to think that the highest form of jest is to send the police on a fool's errand. Lord! Don't we know it!" he added, almost inaudibly, yet plaintively. "Don't we just know it!"

"Do you want me to look into it, sir?"

"I do. Bulstroade's Buildings are in the East End somewhere. Look them up. Then ask Doctor Pape to accompany you, and if he should tender you any advice don't be above taking it. That's all."

Constable Summers placed the letters and envelopes in his pocket, bowed to his Chief and made for the door, where he halted at a word from the inspector.

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"Just a little warning. Don't take my suggestion—that the matter may be a hoax—too seriously. I shall be surprised if it isn't, but don't go bursting into the room with a lighted cigarette. The man may have committed suicide by gas-poisoning, as he suggests, and—er—we don't want to lose—er—Doctor Pape—er—do we?"

"No, sir." Constable Summers was a bit uncertain as to how to take the inspector's levity, but he added, with a grave face, "In any case, sir, I don't smoke."

The door closed, and Inspector Higgins with a smile resumed his study of his other correspondence. This matter of the letter was one which a subordinate, and an inexperienced subordinate at that, could well undertake. Higgins had a full sense of the value of his own time—and he was paid by the State. It was not that he had an exaggerated idea of his own importance, but merely that he was honest. He did not believe in "keeping a dog and barking yourself."

Constable Summers, as soon as he had left the inspector's office, had a feeling that somehow he had been placed on trial: that his conduct of this particular case would be carefully filed away in the inspector's brain for future reference. He threw back his shoulders and determined to make the most of his chance. A suicide was not much of a job, but at least it was a start.

Bulstroade's Buildings. That must be the first step. Where were they? A visit to the reference library was indicated. From the attendant he obtained a directory of immense size and of considerable weight. Quickly he turned the leaves. B . . . B . . . Bu . . . Buchanan Gardens, Bucharest Road, Buckingham Gate . . . Road . . . Street . . . Buckland Crescent, Buckley Road, Bucklersbury, Budge Row, Bullen Street . . . Getting warmer! . . . Bulstrode Street . . . Ah! Street! . . . Spelled differently, too! . . . Bunhill Row . . . B . . . Why! Damn it all! There was no such place! He turned

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back a few leaves and started again. He was quite right. Bulstroade's Buildings did not exist. He had a moment of panic when a precipitate return to Inspector Higgins seemed the only thing to do, but he pulled himself together. This would never do! On his first job, too! He consulted the attendant.

"Not there? Nothing in that. Name changed, probably —may have been a crime or something there. Remember, Crippen! Try an older directory. Here, I'll get you one. New here, eh?"

Without waiting for a reply the attendant bustled away, to return in a very short time with a similar volume of the same bulk, but with its cover a more faded crimson.

"Here y'are, chum. Try this one. It's nine years old."

Constable Summers seized the volume eagerly, and a second later was feverishly turning the leaves. He gave a sigh of relief and satisfaction—relief because the Bulstroade's Buildings appeared therein, and satisfaction because his momentary panic of a few moments before had been a near thing!

Bulstroade's Buildings, E.1. Map O.8. P.9. Summers turned to the elaborate map pasted in the cover of the directory, and opened it on the library table. The letters and the numbers related to certain squares on the map; the letters ran horizontally and the numbers vertically. He ran his finger along the top until he reached the letter O, then he followed the lines downwards until he reached the number 8 on the left. The square P.9 was thus the next square below to the right. He marvelled somewhat that such buildings should occupy two squares, then the solution came to his mind. He was quite right. Bulstroade's Buildings were on the exact spot where the lines divided O. and P., and 8 and 9. Good!

He was just making a copy of the precise location of the Buildings when a voice from the door shouted, without preamble:

"Summers?"

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He looked up. "Yes?"

"Dr. Pape's downstairs. Old Higgins told him that there was a case for him and that you were going to investigate. Dr. Pape wants to know what about it."

"All right. I'm coming."

He followed the other out of the library and thought to improve the occasion by asking what sort of a man the police surgeon was.

"Pape?" queried the other disrespectfully. "He's all right. Bit of an old woman, of course, but . . ." He shrugged his shoulders noncommittally.

"Thanks." Constable Summers hurried away, to find an irascible, middle-aged gentleman pacing impatiently up and down outside the entrance gates. A colleague pointed him out as Dr. Pape.

"I'm Summers, sir. You're the police surgeon?"

"I am. And you know it. Constable Harriss just pointed me out. I saw him. Let's get along."

"Certainly, sir." Constable Summers immediately set off at a brisk pace for the station, but was stopped by Dr. Pape.

"Not so fast, Summers—not so fast. My car's here."

"I'd better meet you at the Buildings, sir, hadn't I?"

"Don't be a fool. Jump in."

"Thank you very much, sir."

The journey to the East End was undertaken in silence. Dr. Pape appeared to be asleep or in some other state of coma, whilst the constable did not know how to cope with the police surgeon's mood, or, in fact, what to make of him at all. Had he but known that he was to journey to Bulstroade's Buildings by car he would not have troubled to have looked them up in the directory and so incurred the doctor's wrath by his delay. It would have been the chauffeur's funeral then! He did not know of the encyclopædic knowledge of London's highways and by-ways which Dr. Pape's chauffeur possessed.

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The car drew to a standstill, and the driver jumped down and opened the door.

"Bulstroade's Buildings, first turning on the right, sir. Half-way down."

"Thanks." Dr. Pape nodded to his man, then: "Come along, Summers."

They proceeded at a brisk rate down the road indicated, but had not gone very far before Summers crossed the road to consult a uniformed colleague.

"Bulstroade's Buildings, eh? Try Birkenhead Mansions. They used to be called somebody or other's Buildings."

"Thanks."

Birkenhead Mansions, whilst imposing in their bulk, were unprepossessing in their appearance. Dull, flat, uninteresting walls, badly in need of painting; rectangular windows with many a broken pane; the lower windows having boxes on the sills where bedraggled plants struggled vainly for existence. The Mansions had seen better days.

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CHAPTER II

IN WHICH CONSTABLE SUMMERS COMMENCES OPERATIONS

ALTHOUGH termed mansions, there was apparently only one entrance. This was a large brick archway with stone steps leading upwards, and with innumerable children of all ages, dirty, unkempt, yet amazingly cheerful, playing beneath its protection. Dr. Pape and Constable Summers passed through the entrance wonderingly. A bedraggled woman was leaning against the broken door of a room. To her Summers addressed himself:

"Henry Hamper live here?"

"Dunno and don' care." The woman had shifty eyes, but they did not fail to notice the hard look which had crept into the doctor's face. She hedged:

"Try next floor. All families 'ere. An' none o' that nime."

They tried the next floor, and were surprised to find that their progress was barred by a door, upon which was painted by an amateur sign-writer:

Mrs. Hick. Lodgins.

Summers knocked and pulled an old-fashioned bell at the side of the door. For a few moments there was no response, but upon his pulling the bell again they could both hear the sound of shuffling feet. The door opened.

"Well?"—uncompromisingly.

"Henry Hamper live here?"

"What d'yer want 'im for?"

"So he does live here, eh?"—quietly, from the doctor.

"I never said so."

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"Don't quibble. Show us to his room."

The woman hesitated—and was lost. Unceremoniously she was thrust aside by Constable Summers, whom Dr. Pape followed.

"His room?"

"Second door on the left up the next flight—but 'e won't answer—I've tried."

The two police officials looked at each other quickly, then looked away. They hurried up the next flight of steps—stone, as before. The second door on the left was locked on the inside, and the end of the large, old-fashioned key protruded slightly on the outside. Mrs. Hick had followed them upstairs, consumed with curiosity. Summers turned to her.

"You have a duplicate key of this room, eh? Then fetch it." The woman shuffled away. Constable Summers bent and tried to peer through the keyhole. Was it imagination or could he detect a faint smell of gas? With the tips of his forefinger and thumb he twiddled the end of the key until the blade was perpendicular; then he produced from the cover of his pocket diary a pencil, thin but strong. A little pressure, a slight adjustment of the key, and he felt it move. A moment later it dropped into the room with a musical rattle. An asthmatic sound behind him made Constable Summers turn. Mrs. Hick had returned, and had brought a key with her. She was much out of breath.

"These stairs," she panted, "'ll be the death o' me."

Summers took the key and inserted it into the keyhole, then he turned to the waiting landlady.

"That'll be all, thank you."

"Ho. Will it! It's my 'ouse, I'll 'ave you know. An' 'oo are you ter order me abaht in me own 'ouse, I'd like ter know." She folded her arms on her ample bosom and glared defiance.

Constable Summers produced a card—an official card—

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one of a hundred he had had printed a few weeks before, and none of which he had yet had the opportunity of using.

EDWIN SUMMERS
Metropolitan Police.

Criminal Investigation Department,
Scotland Yard. S.W.1.

Terse and to the point. It did not give away too much information. He might, from such a card, be either the Commissioner or a Commissionaire.

He was both surprised and gratified at the result. The woman visibly wilted, then retreated backwards slowly, as if contact with the police officials might contaminate her.

"Sorry, gents, I'm sure. I'd better be goin'." She went.

"Now then, Summers, you'd better be careful." Dr. Pape was still smiling at the woman's discomfiture. "I think perhaps that I'd better go in first and open the windows and so on, you see——"

"No, no, sir. It's all right. After all, sir, it's my job, and——"

The police surgeon shrugged his shoulders.

"As you please, but take a tip from me: put a handkerchief over your nose and mouth; walk in quickly, turn off the gas-tap and open the window; then come straight out, and close the door after you."

"Thank you, sir." Now that he was not to be robbed of the privilege of being the first to enter the room, Constable Summers was all affability, and—what was it Inspector Higgins had said? If Dr. Pape should tender any advice, don't be above taking it. Well, he wouldn't be above taking it, and in any case such advice was in the doctor's own sphere.

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He pulled out his handkerchief and covered his nose and mouth, and the police surgeon did likewise. Summers seized the handle of the door, opened it gingerly, then flung open the door and rushed into the room.

He gave one glance at a still figure upon the floor, immediately noted a tube leading from it to a gas-bracket on the wall, stepped quickly over the recumbent figure to reach the bracket, and promptly turned off the tap. Then, as advised, he gave his attention to the window. The spaces between the frames and the woodwork were stuffed with newspaper, which he tore away with his free hand. A moment later he had released the window-catch and flung up the lower frame. Then, precipitately, he retired from the room, slammed the door after him and gulped into his lungs such air as was allowed to percolate from the passage below.

"Phew!" He now utilised his handkerchief to mop his brow, which was gleaming with sweat. "How long, Doctor?"

"Better wait five minutes. It was no hoax, eh?"

"No, sir. It was not." Constable Summers' words were emphatic, for in spite of the inspector's words he had never really believed that anyone would dare to hoax the Yard. He now considered his beliefs completely vindicated.

The five-minute wait seemed long—and Summers was impatient.

"Suppose the poor devil's still alive, sir? We ought to do something."

"If he killed himself when he posted that letter, then he's been dead many hours. In any case, I presume you've turned off the gas, so he's stopped inhaling any more poison, and we can do nothing till we can breathe with comfort. Come along. Time's up." Dr. Pape stood aside for the other to precede him. He was a man of discernment, and realised how keen the other was to set about this, his first case.

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As soon as he was inside the room, Constable Summers drew a tentative breath. The opening of the window had apparently had the desired effect, for the air was, if anything, sweeter than that of the passage outside. Then, together with Dr. Pape, he walked to the body lying upon the floor. It was of a man, small—almost puny—with the head enveloped in a pillow-case which had apparently been taken from the bed against the opposite wall. A piece of rubber tubing connected the gas-bracket with the pillow-case, which the doctor carefully removed. The man's head was lying upon the pillow inside the case, which had been unbuttoned first and rebuttoned round his chin.

"Dead as a door-knocker," murmured the police surgeon, and for some reason Summers was inexpressibly shocked. "Been dead a couple o' days, I should think. Be able perhaps to tell better later on. H'm."

Summers gazed round the room, leaving Dr. Pape to his ruminations.

The furniture consisted of a table (upon which rested a hat and a pair of gloves), two chairs and the bed. Also upon the table was a piece of candle set in its own grease, and on the floor was a newspaper.

The man had taken care to seal all the cracks between the window-panes with paper, most of which the constable had removed when he entered the room for the first time, but he had made no attempt to cover a ventilator near the ceiling. There was a small cupboard in one corner, to which Summers now turned his attention. He opened the door.

"Mother Hubbard?" queried the doctor, looking up from his gruesome task and noting the bare shelves.

"Yessir."

"H'm. Better send for the ambulance. Then lock the room and take the key away."

"That's exactly what I was thinking of doing, sir," replied the constable mendaciously. "That is, of course,

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if you wouldn't mind waiting here whilst I telephone. I don't suppose there's an instrument in this benighted hole."

"Right. I'll wait. Tell the ambulance men that I'm here, will you? They'll understand."

"Certainly, sir."

Constable Summers then made his exit, carefully closing the door behind him, to find the passage outside the door completely blocked by children and adults from the floors below, who eyed him with expectancy. Mrs. Hick was not in evidence, but he shrewdly guessed that she was not far away. He cleared a passage with difficulty, but was chagrined to find that he was followed downstairs by the inquisitive children. He shook them off, however, when he entered a near-by post office, where he telephoned for an ambulance and gave Dr. Pape's message.

His return journey was still in the nature of a procession, as he was quickly recognised by the children waiting outside the post office. He pushed his way through the crowded stairways and started to open the door. Then he thought that it was about time he exercised his authority with the recalcitrant neighbours. He turned quickly:

"Well! What the deuce do you think you all want? Clear off! Clear off, or I'll run some of you in." There was not the slightest move, and for the moment he was nonplussed. Then he pulled out his diary, removed that selfsame pencil which had ejected the key of the lock a short while before, and walked up to one of the waiting women who, arms akimbo, was taking up more than her fair share of space.

"Your name and address, please. Obstruction of police. Serious crime."

He waited expectantly, and the woman shuffled uneasily, then made for the stairs. "Or-right! Or-right!

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I'm agoin'!" Constable Summers watched her retreat, then cast his eye round for another victim. One and all they evaded his gaze. Five minutes later the passage was entirely cleared, and Summers re-entered the tragic room with a sigh of satisfaction.

Dr. Pape looked up quickly, then resumed his abstracted gaze at the wallpaper, placidly smoking a cigarette.

"All clear?"

"Yes, sir," replied the constable. "They'll be along shortly."

"Good." Dr. Pape gazed thoughtfully round the room. "Doesn't seem to be much about here. There's one thing you must do before you let the ambulance men take him away—if you'll—er—excuse my making a suggestion."

"It's kind of you to help, sir. What must I do?" Constable Summers thought furiously, for, as far as he was aware, there was nothing further to be done.

"Well—for one thing—you must have that landlady here to identify him."

"Do you think, then, that he might not be the Henry Hamper person?"

"I don't think anything of the sort, but it's our job to be certain. This is his room, right enough—if we are to believe the admirable Mrs. Hick—but we don't know that *this* is actually Henry Hamper. And another tip" —Dr. Pape looked at the constable quizzically, and the other nodded eagerly.

"Yessir?"

The doctor continued with a smile: "Take his finger-prints. According to the letter which Hig—er—Inspector Higgins read to me over the telephone, this Hamper is known at the Yard, and this will help identification. The inspector may ask for them, and you want to be prepared."

"Thank you, sir. I'll do it at once."

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It was, however, more easily said than done, and it was not until the doctor had suggested a little soot from the chimney as a means of obtaining the prints that the difficulty was overcome. The constable was surprised to find the chimney stopped up with paper. Apparently Henry Hamper when he decided to take his life also resolved to make a good job of it!

A little soot; two or three pages from his diary; and the matter, albeit very repugnant to the constable's sensibilities, was accomplished.

The sharp, incisive clang of a bell in the street below presaged the arrival of the police ambulance, and a few moments later the men could be heard tramping up the stone steps.

Constable Summers went to the door and opened it. The crowd, if anything, was bigger than before, and he glared round to frighten some of its members into retreat. It had not the slightest effect. He gave it up as a bad job, and beckoned the attendants into the room.

"Hallo, Doc! Here we are again!" The man in charge greeted the police surgeon cheerily, then gazed down thoughtfully at the deceased Hamper. "H'm. Another of 'em! Simple way out, I suppose. No mess. No fuss. No nothing! Ah well! Finished with him, Doc?" Dr. Pape nodded affirmatively. "And you?" He turned to Constable Summers, who gave a start at being so addressed, forgetting for the moment that he was ostensibly in charge of the case.

"Er—yes, yes."

"Righto! Come along, boys. Gently now. Lord! He don't weigh above an ounce. Mind the door."

Summers rushed and held the door open, then noticed the inquisitive crowd: "Make way there! Make way!"

No one took the slightest notice. Then the cheery attendant took up the cudgels. He apparently had some experience in these matters. He glared aggressively at the crowd. Then in a stentorian voice bellowed:

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"Clear out the blarsted way, some of yer, can't yer! What the hell d'yer think——"

The crowd slowly began to melt. The cheery one turned and winked to his helpers.

Ten minutes later the ambulance was on its way to the mortuary.

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CHAPTER III

IN WHICH A CORONER SAYS A FEW WORDS

"WELL?" Dr. Pape looked at the constable quizzically and interrogatively, and such was the concentration of his gaze that the eyes of the other wavered uncomfortably.

"What, sir?"

"So, after all, you are satisfied as to the deceased's identity."

"Gosh, sir, I forgot all about what you said! Lord! I'm a fool. It was that ambulance man. He got me rattled when he asked me whether I had finished." And from his agitation Constable Summers was obviously still rattled!

"Ah well. It's your funeral. I'm off back to the Yard. Is there anything I can do for you on the way or when I get there?"

Summers made a gallant attempt to pull himself together. He knew that he was not cutting a very heroic figure on this his first case. He had a few moments of intense thought, then:

"Yes, sir, there is. If you would be so kind, will you please take these prints to the Records Department and ask them whether the deceased has ever passed through our hands." A wealth of pride in the possessive "our."

"Certainly, Summers—certainly. Anything else?"

"No, sir. Unless, of course, you have anything to suggest yourself, sir."

"No. The fingerprints were all I had in mind. Well, I'll be pushing along." With a nod of his head the police surgeon left the room, and Summers remained perfectly

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still until he could no longer hear the retreating footsteps. Gosh! He was now on his own. What was the first step? Ah! An interview with Mrs. Hick, the landlady. He left the room, having closed the window, then locked the door behind him and pocketed the key.

Sundry heads from adjacent doors peered out enquiringly, and his journey down the flight of steps was followed inquisitively by many pairs of eyes.

"Mrs. Hick! Mrs. Hick!" he shouted on reaching the dividing door. There was no response. He shouted again with the same result, then turned to one of the tenants.

"Where's the landlady?"

"Gorn!"

"What d'you mean, 'Gorn'?" Summers was startled.

"Gorn aht!"

"I know what you mean! But where?"

" 'Ow sh'd I know?"

"Well. Make a guess."

The other grinned. "Better try the public bar o' the 'Three Daggers.' "

Constable Summers breathed a sigh of relief. For one brief moment he had thought that the woman had bolted, hiding some guilty secret.

"And where's that?"

"Rahnd the corner," replied the other in some surprise. Fancy anyone not knowing where the nearest pub was!

"Thanks."

Constable Summers hurried to the hostelry in question, entered the public bar, and there he found Mrs. Hick, surrounded by cronies, and slightly under the weather. All were animatedly discussing the suicide of her lodger, and stout and gin were flowing freely. The constable walked up to the landlady and touched her on the shoulder. She looked round, grinned impishly when she discovered who it was accosting her (strong drink had ap-

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parently given her courage), and then flung out her arms, exclaiming dramatically:

"Pinched!"

A roar of laughter from her satellites greeted this sally, and Summers began to feel uncomfortable.

"No, Mrs. Hick. You're not under arrest——" He paused for effect, then: "—yet," he added.

The woman sobered instantly.

"What d'yer mean?" she demanded truculently, yet with a tinge of apprehension.

"Nothing. But I want you to return to your house with me so that we can have a little chat."

"Or-right," she acquiesced with ill grace, waved a grimy hand to the bar in general, then followed submissively at the constable's heels.

Once clear of the atmosphere of the bar, the comparatively fresh air of the street, whilst it cleared some of the fog from Mrs. Hick's brain, seemingly pinned shackles to her feet, and she clung to the arm of Constable Summers for support, much to the amusement of all the onlookers. It must have been years since Mrs. Hick had had such a presentable escort, and she made the most of it.

Arrived back at the house, they ran the gauntlet of the tenants of the first floor until they reached the dividing door. There Mrs. Hick produced a large doorkey from beneath her apron and opened the door, where the pair immediately became the cynosure of the eyes of Mrs. Hick's lodgers.

"Upstairs," commanded Summers. "To *his* room."

"Lawks! Won't me own do?"

"All right. As you please."

They walked to the end of the passage, and the landlady threw open the furthermost door and preceded the constable into the room.

She collapsed thankfully into a well-worn wicker chair, whilst Summers produced his official notebook.

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"Your name, please."

"Martha Hick."

"You live here?"

" 'Course I do." The constable looked up sharply. "Yes, sir," she promptly amended her reply, denuding it of any semblance of truculence.

"What was the name of your lodger upstairs?"

" 'Enry 'Amper."

" 'Ow long—ahem." (This dropping of aspirates was becoming infectious!) "How long has he been a tenant of yours?"

"Three weeks." (She giggled, having recently read a book with a similar title.) " 'E paid three months' rent, so I didn't need no reference."

Summers smiled sardonically. "What do you know of him?"

" 'E weren't a mucher. Came 'ome tight before 'e'd bin 'ere a week. I'd 'a give 'im notice only 'e promised not ter do it agen." (A look of virtue comic in its gravity!) "Then 'e come 'ome tight agen on Sunday night. Brought 'ere in a keb by a pal and a slop—I mean a policeman. I banged on 'is door on Monday mornin' and told 'im 'e could sling 'is 'ook. Lawks! I s'pose it was me bein' so 'ard-'arted in turnin' 'im aht 'o 'ouse an' 'ome that made 'im do 'isself in. Oh, deary, deary!" The woman began to shed maudlin tears, and Constable Summers, who had been assiduously making notes of her comments, decided to end his catechism.

"Oh, I dunno, missis. Anyhow, I want you to come with me to the mortuary. Just to see if you can identify him as your lodger."

"Lawks, sir! I don't 'ave ter go, do I?"

"I'm afraid so. I'm sorry. I'll make it worth your while."

The landlady brightened visibly, and Summers decided that the half-crown he would give her would not be a legitimate item to go upon his expense sheet, but

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that he would treat it as a fine upon himself for neglecting Dr. Pape's advice prior to the removal of the deceased from the premises. "Come along, then. We'd best be going. And, meanwhile, let me warn you not to try and re-let that room until we've done with it. In any case, as Mr. Hamper paid three mouths' rent in advance you cannot honestly do so yet awhile. Come along."

The journey by bus to the mortuary was completed in silence, and the formality was soon over. Without a doubt, the deceased was Henry Hamper, or, to be meticulously exact, the man who had taken the room in Bulstroade's Buildings under that name. Summers gave the woman the promised reward together with her return fare, and warned her that she would be wanted for the inquest, due notice of which would be given. Then he returned to Scotland Yard.

. . . . . .

Sergeant Mercier, in charge of the Records Department of Scotland Yard, was, without doubt, a quick worker. It was his proud boast that he could find any required information in fifteen seconds, and, although this was an exaggerated statement, he had a commendable reputation for the speed with which his department produced replies to any question of fact. He also had a reputation for wit, which was not quite so commendable. In fact, not to put a fine point upon it, it was deplorable. His humour was generally antiquated, always personal, and sometimes vulgar. To give him his due, he was, years before, actually funny, until he acquired this reputation for wit. Then the original fount of humour dried up and became forced. Human nature!

When Dr. Pape had returned to Scotland Yard and presented to Mercier the fingerprints of the deceased Hamper, the sergeant was put upon his mettle.

"It'll be ready in fifteen seconds, sir. I'll let you know —provided, of course, that he is represented in our

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academy of those with burglarious instincts—his name, rank or rating. What he did: how he did it——"

"Fifteen seconds!" Dr. Pape cut short the harangue. "That should be time enough. Constable Summers will not be wanting the information for a couple of hours or so," he continued dryly. He nodded adieu and left the department, whilst Sergeant Mercier gazed after him, if not exactly open-mouthed, at least in utter bewilderment.

Thus, when Constable Summers returned to Scotland Yard, having settled with Mrs. Hick, Sergeant Mercier had only just recovered his equanimity.

"Hullo, Constable. I've had this information waiting for you for hours." (Constable Summers blinked, but refrained from comment.) "The prints you sent me were those of Henry Hamper. Three years for attempted blackmail just after the war. Been a good boy since. At least, he's been lucky—no subsequent convictions."

"Thank you, Sergeant. Any family?"

"One. Boy. Used to visit his old man in quod. Name of Thomas. Went to Canada, I believe. No—wait a minute—here's the kid's address: Fetter Street, Camberwell. Anything wrong with the old man?"

"Dead, that's all."

"H'm. Well, I must get along with my job. Anything further you may require from us—a word to me and it shall be done!" The sergeant was out to impress this novitiate of the Yard.

"Thank you, Sergeant. Fetter Street, eh? I must go and break the sad news, I suppose."

Fetter Street was not exactly in a salubrious neighbourhood, at least as regards its immediate vicinity, and was very similar in appearance to the street in which Birkenhead Mansions were situated. Summers had to wait until the son of Henry Hamper returned from work, which, as was carefully explained to him by a

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neighbour, depended on the state of trade. Thomas Hamper was a vendor of vegetables from a barrow, in short, a costermonger, and his day finished when his wares were sold. A little judicious pumping, and the constable ascertained that the young Hamper was straight, a good kid, and likely to have a little shop of his own when he got spliced, which would be in the near future.

Trade must have been good, for Thomas Hamper returned to his home about five o'clock. He was of medium size, about nineteen years of age, with a pleasing open countenance. His dress was merely ordinary, save that he wore a muffler instead of the more customary collar and tie. His voice was somewhat hoarse, probably as a result of his calling (using both meanings of the word), and he had a little trouble with his aspirates, being apt to stress rather than omit.

Summers broke the news as gently as he could. The boy took it stoically.

"Dead, eh? Suicide?" He looked up at the constable. "You know what he was, I suppose?" Summers nodded affirmatively. "Well. That's past and done with. He wasn't a bad sort to me. Suicide!" He shook his head from side to side. "I can't hardly believe it!"

. . . . . .

In due course the inquest was held.

Mrs. Hick, resplendent in her best garb and crowned with a hat decorated with an immense feather, identified the deceased as her lodger. Thomas Hamper also identified him as his father. The evidence of Dr. Pape and Constable Summers as to the finding of the body was given early in the brief proceedings. Death was pronounced by the police surgeon to be caused by gas-poisoning. The coroner interspersed a few remarks, unintelligible to most of his audience, as to the deadly properties of coal-gas and the efforts of the great gas undertakings to find a means of circumventing the—er—apparent—er—popularity of gas as a means of—er—ending one's

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miserable existence. The three years' imprisonment of the deceased was duly commented upon. A suggested motive for the deceased taking his own life was remorse for his past misdeeds, although the coroner carefully explained that such of his misdeeds as were known had been duly expiated by the afore-mentioned term of imprisonment.

Then the question of the state of his mind at the time of his death. It was a moot point whether or not all criminals were not—er—mentally unbalanced. The coroner liked the phrase and repeated it:

"Mentally unbalanced. Then we come to this last letter written by the deceased. It may tend to show the state of his mind when we remember that it was enclosed in another envelope which was insufficiently addressed. In fact, the word 'insufficiently' but baldly describes the matter, for we know that the original envelope did not bear any address at all. The Dead-Letter Office naturally assumed that the letter had been posted by an absent-minded person who had forgotten to place thereon the addressee's—er—address. But upon the envelope being opened a further envelope was found inside addressed to our good friends—the Metropolitan Police—two of whose representatives we have here to-day." The coroner bowed formally to the police surgeon and Constable Summers. "The substance of that letter you know. Mr. Thomas Hamper, who has my deepest sympathy, cannot say definitely that it is his father's handwriting, which, considering that he has no sample, and has not seen any of his father's handwriting since he was a mere boy, is not surprising. From the substance of that letter it is apparent that the deceased intended to take his own life, and warns the police about a naked light. I pass over his—er—ribald reference to meeting some of the Force in the—er—nether regions. . . ."

"Suicide whilst of unsound mind."

Thus ended Constable Summers' first case.

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CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS ASKS A FEW QUESTIONS

INSPECTOR HIGGINS lay back in his chair, his right ankle resting upon his left knee, his thumbs thrust into the armholes of his waistcoat, whilst his fingers beat a continuous tattoo upon his chest. He sucked meditatively at his pipe and gazed at the ceiling, waiting for the other to finish. Eventually:

"Thank you, Summers. Clear and concise. So it was suicide, and not a hoax. Hand in your written report to Sergeant Mercier." He nodded dismissal to the other, who instantly retired; then the inspector reached for his hat and coat. He had decided to call it a day!

It was a cold November day, yet, in spite of this and of the fact that he lived over five miles from the Yard, he decided to walk home. He was an athletic man, and walking was his only exercise. It was eight o'clock when he arrived home, and nine before he rose from the table having finished the huge meal prepared for him by his landlady. Then he settled himself in his comfortable armchair before a blazing fire, a large whisky-and-soda conveniently to hand and opened the first page of the latest thriller. He did not read this type of fiction for its educational value, for no novelist could teach him his own job; nor, strangely enough, did he read it for amusement—although some of the fictional detectives caused him to smile either at their obtuseness or at their infallibility; as a matter of fact he read this type of book mainly because it interested him without any mental effort, and—contradictorily—because he obtained a little mental exercise in trying to find the criminal or other-

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wise elucidating the mystery. He was invariably correct in his choice of criminal, but he cheated! Not that he looked at the last chapter before reading the first. Oh no! He merely picked on the most unlikely character, who preferably had an unassailable alibi and was miles away from the scene of the crime at the time of its commission. If he had not discovered the criminal before he was half-way through the book it had his commendation. But the novelist had to play fair. No suppressing of a vital clue until the last page. Many a time Higgins had flung down a book in disgust for this very reason.

The book he was reading at this time was certainly a thriller! Modesty forbids us to disclose its name. It was such a thriller that Inspector Higgins woke with a start! It was his telephone bell ringing. He stretched his cramped limbs and hurried to the instrument.

"Hallo! Hallo! Yes. Higgins speaking. Oh! Is that you, Chief? . . . Yes, yes. I see. I'll go at once. Goodbye, sir."

Higgins replaced the receiver with a sigh. There would be no bed for him to-night!

Five minutes later he closed his side-door, wheeling his bicycle to the kerb. It was just his luck that the little two-seater which he had recently purchased should already be laid up for repairs, but . . .

He arrived at the bus terminus at half-an-hour after midnight, and presented his card to the man at the gate.

"Inspector Higgins? Step straight through, please. In the corner over there."

The direction thus given was entirely superfluous, for in the corner was a small group of men, bus drivers and conductors mostly, with the tall helmet of a policeman standing out from the centre of the group. Higgins strode quickly to the corner, and the men looked round at his approach. The policeman, a constable, breathed a sigh of relief, thankful to get the job lifted from his shoulders.

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"Inspector Higgins, sir? This is a rum business, sir."

The men stood back to give him passage, then reformed as he passed through. In the centre of the group stood the constable, and at his feet the body of a man, of huge proportions, but soberly dressed. The man had been shot throught the back of the neck, and the bullet had passed through his throat. It was not a pleasant sight. In spite of his familiarity with death in varied forms, Inspector Higgins could not suppress a shudder of repulsion.

"Awful sight, ain't he, sir?"

"He certainly is. Doctor been?"

"And gone, sir."

"Gone?"

"Yes, sir. Called away almost as soon as he got here. Urgent case."

"H'm. Should've thought this was urgent enough."

"That's what I thought, sir, but the doctor said that whereas this poor chap was dead, his other patient was not."

"H'm." Inspector Higgins considered this for a moment, then: "Well, what did he say?"

The constable pulled from his tunic pocket a well-thumbed notebook. "Nothing much, sir," he mumbled, quickly turning the leaves. "Dead, of course, but . . . Ah! Here we are! Spinal cord severed, death instantaneous. Been dead about an hour, and——"

"What time did he examine this man?"

"About three-quarters of an hour ago, sir."

"Then two hours ago this"—indicating the still form with the forefinger of his right hand—"was alive?"

"Er—yessir. I s'pose so."

"H'm. And we're wasting time here." Higgins looked up sharply. "Where did you find him?"

"On top of a bus, sir."

"On—top—of—a—what?"

"Bus, sir."

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"Bus, eh? Then he's been moved?"

"'Course 'e 'as." A gratuitous comment from one of the onlookers. Inspector Higgins turned to the interrupter, his eyebrows raised in interrogation.

"And what, exactly, do you mean by that?"

"It's all very well for you 'tecs to talk about not movin' 'im, but we 'appen to be 'uman beings." The man spluttered, somewhat ill at ease, Higgins having taken him up so sharply, yet he continued: "'Course 'e's bin moved. We didn't know the poor devil was dead, an' we 'ad to do the best we could for 'im."

"I see." Privately, Inspector Higgins thought the man's explanation perfectly reasonable, but such is the fetish at the Yard never to move a case in the hope of preserving possible clues that his official soul was shocked. "And the bus?" He turned once more to the waiting constable.

"This one, sir."

Inspector Higgins viewed the vehicle indicated. It was an old-fashioned two-decker, and, unlike the majority of the company's buses, open at the top. The more modern type was covered-in and had six wheels with balloon tyres. This had only four wheels and the tyres were solid.

"Come along, Constable. I'd like to view the bus-top first. You can show me where he was."

This last instruction, however, was completely unnecessary, for, once on the top deck, there was no doubt as to where the unfortunate man had been sitting, for one of the seats was covered with blood.

It was the back seat of the near side. Higgins surveyed it with a thoughtful frown upon his forehead, then he turned to the constable.

"The back seat, Constable?"

The man nodded. "Yessir."

"And he was shot in the *back* of the neck," Higgins ruminated audibly.

The significance of his remark dawned upon the constable's intelligence.

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"Gosh, sir! I hadn't thought of that!"

Inspector Higgins made no comment. A pause, then the constable ventured a suggestion.

"He may have been turning round when he was shot, sir, or—or something," he finished lamely.

The inspector nodded abstractedly, still frowning at the bloodstained seat. There was the sound of voices in the garage below.

"Now then, you chaps. Ain't you got no 'omes?"

Higgins gazed down from the top of the bus, to find a caretaker or night-watchman endeavouring to herd the inquisitive bus-men from the garage. He leaned over the side and called down:

"I would be obliged if the driver and conductor of this bus would stay behind. I may want to talk to them."

"That's all right, sir. We had no intention of going," a cheerful voice replied.

"Thanks." Once more Higgins resumed his study of the back seat. He leaned right over the back and inspected the destination board. It was certainly weather-beaten, but bore no marks of a recent bullet. Then he turned his attention to the seat in front. No marks. Then, with great care, he searched the floor of the bus. No signs of a bullet! This was getting beyond him. Had the man been shot before he came on the bus? This seemed the only solution. Unless, of course, the bullet, having passed through the man's neck, failed to lodge in any part of the structure. This seemed impossible, for the man was found in the back seat, and was shot from behind. The shot must therefore have come from above the route board, and the bullet should be either in the seat in front, or in the floor. Yet it was not!

"Who is the deceased?" He turned to the constable.

"Dunno, sir. Nothing in his pockets to identify him, sir. Plenty o' money, but nothing else."

"H'm. Let's have a good look at him." The pair descended the omnibus steps and walked to the dead man.

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The watchman had apparently been successful in his efforts to disperse the employees for, barring two, the garage was now deserted.

The dead man was big boned and big limbed, and to the best of Higgins's judgment about forty-five years of age. Cleanshaven, with greying hair, there was little outstanding about him save his size.

Higgins felt gingerly in the man's coat for a tailor's tab, but it had been removed. The trousers buttons were perfectly plain, and bore no impress of the tailor's name, as one would have expected from the style and material of the suit. From his cursory inspection it appeared to Inspector Higgins that a deliberate attempt had been made to suppress the man's identity. He turned to the two bus-men, who were interested spectators, and addressed the conductor.

"You found him, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir."

Inspector Higgins pulled out a huge gunmetal contraption which served to keep him cognisant of the flight of time, and consulted its dial.

"Where was the bus between—er—ten forty-five and say eleven fifteen this—er—evening?"

The conductor consulted his timesheet and ticket-record—that mysterious sheet upon which a conductor enters periodically the distinctive numbers of his tickets—and then replied:

"I clocked on at stage number fourteen—Glasswell Street, Horton—at ten forty, so at ten forty-five I must have been——"

"That doesn't matter," interrupted Higgins. "Ten forty is near enough for my purpose. And at eleven fifteen?"

"Nearly here, sir. This is the last bus on this route, and we're due back here at twenty to twelve, so I must have been near Shoreditch then."

"H'm." Higgins stared thoughtfully at the concrete

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floor of the garage. This case was unique in his experience. As a general rule the place where a body was found afforded some slight indication as to where the criminal was at the time of the crime, nothing being harder to move successfully and without comment than a dead body. Yet this man might have been shot anywhere between Glasswell Street, Horton, and Shoreditch. A matter of four miles of bricks and mortar, which possibly housed sixty thousand souls. He turned abruptly to the constable. "Ring up Primrose 44523 and ask Dr. Pape if he would mind coming along. Give him my name, and tell him that the other doctor is not available at the moment, and that I'd like an official opinion."

"Right, sir." The constable moved off to an instrument attached to the garage wall, and Inspector Higgins once more gave his attention to the conductor.

"Do you remember him getting on?"

"As a matter of fact, I do, sir."

Ah! This was better!

"Well?"

"It was at Glasswell Street, sir. Whilst I was clocking on. He surprised me by going on top—there being plenty of room inside."

"Ah! And where did he book to?"

"Threepenny fare, sir. All the way."

"Did you go up to the top again?"

"Once, sir. Penny fare this time."

"And he was all right then?"

"Yes, sir."

"Was your second fare a man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did *he* get on?"

"The 'Fox and Hounds,' Horton."

"And where did he alight?"

"A hundred yards farther on, sir."

"What?" Higgins almost shouted in his surprise.

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"Yes, sir. He muttered something about having forgotten something. He—he looked—well—er—frightened, sir."

"What was he like?"

"He held a handkerchief to his face, sir. Like as if he had a bad cold. I didn't notice him much getting on, and he got off in such a hurry that I hardly had time to notice him at all."

"His height, man?"

"Well, sir . . ." The other broke off in an effort at recollection.

"Tall? Short? Medium? Was he as big as me?"

"No, sir. He wasn't as tall as you are."

"As big as your caretaker or whatever he calls himself over there?"

"What, Shorty, sir?" The other smiled. "No, sir. He was taller than him—a good bit taller, sir." He looked round at the driver of the bus, then: "I sh'd think he was about George's size, sir."

Inspector Higgins looked at the driver. "Five foot eight?" he queried.

"And a half, sir," responded the other.

"Right. Five feet eight and a half. Dressed?"

"Trilby hat, sir. Overcoat, collar turned up. And—er—yessir, with brown boots."

Higgins turned to the constable, who had returned from ringing up the police surgeon. "Got that? Right. 'Phone the Yard these particulars. Last seen at the 'Fox and Hounds,' Horton, at——" A glance at the conductor.

"About five to eleven, sir."

"Thanks. To be held for enquiry into this business. Jump to it!"

The constable proceeded to the telephone at the double.

"I don't think the second fare knew anything about it, sir," ventured the conductor.

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"Oh?" An inflection in his voice, resentful of this comment.

"No, sir. You see, sir, I looked up the steps again after the other chap had got off, and this bloke was all right then."

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CHAPTER V

IN WHICH DOCTOR PAPE VOICES AN OPINION

INSPECTOR HIGGINS stared at the man for a moment without making any comment, and debating in his mind whether or no he should countermand his instructions to Scotland Yard *re* the second fare. For one reason, he did not wish to use the vast organisation at his disposal without good cause, and for another, at the moment both Press and public alike were very unforgiving in the event of a mistake. He could well imagine the flaring headlines were the second fare to be apprehended and prove to be innocent of any connection with the case. "SCOTLAND YARD BLUNDERS AGAIN." "ANOTHER INNOCENT MAN QUESTIONED."

Such thoughts were not pleasant, and in any event his would be the head on the charger. Higgins sighed. Ah well! He would have to chance it, for the second fare seemed his only clue. He continued to stare at the conductor, and the man fidgeted under his surveillance.

"So this chap was all right just before eleven, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"And what made you look up the steps to see if he was all right?"

"Well, sir, I don't know really. It was this second chap what upset me, so to speak. He got on and then got off, after paying his fare, and I knew that this poor chap here was the only other chap on the top deck. I thought perhaps that something was up or—or—something." The man broke off, apparently unable to express his thoughts at the time.

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"This second man looked frightened, you say?"

"Yes, sir. Though what there was to frighten him I don't know." The conductor paused, then: "'Course, if this cove had been like he is now I could understand it."

"So could I; but according to you he was still alive. Sure?"

"Positive, sir. He was putting something inside his jacket pocket."

"Aha!" Higgins turned to the constable. "And what did you find in that inside pocket, Constable?"

"A wad o' notes, sir. Here it is, sir. All one-ers."

Inspector Higgins took the bunch of Treasury notes from the constable. He picked out two or three notes haphazard from the bundle and examined each carefully. They seemed genuine enough. He placed the notes in his inside pocket.

"I'll take charge of these, Constable." Once more he resumed his questioning of the conductor. "Anyone else on top of the bus from the time this man got on and your discovery of him dead?"

"No, sir."

"And when did you find out he was dead?"

"Not until we drove into the garage here, sir. Then George here noticed there was a bloke who hadn't got off. We—er—thought that perhaps he was tight or something."

"'Or something' was right, seemingly."

"I went up the steps and was just going to tap him on the shoulder when I saw the blood on his coat, sir. It was awful. I called up George and the two of us carried him down. One of the bus inspectors fetched a doctor, and we called in the constable here who was on duty outside."

"H'm. Now then, I would like you and—er—George here to show me how exactly the man was—er—seated when you found him."

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"Certainly, sir." They moved off towards the bus, but the inspector stopped them.

"Not that bus, chapsies. Too—er—too messy. Show me on one of the other buses."

The two bus-men then proceeded to a vehicle of similar type to that on which the man had been found, and, closely followed by the inspector, mounted the steps.

"This is how he was, sir." The conductor suited the action to the word, and seated himself on the back seat to the left at the top of the steps. He slumped in the corner at the side of the bus, and let his hands lie limply on the seat. His legs he stretched out underneath the seat in front, and sagged his chin upon his chest.

"That right, George?"

The driver surveyed with critical eye the ensemble, standing well back to obtain a better view, and turning his head from side to side as though studying the perspective. He stepped forward and placed the conductor's peak-cap more over his eyes, stood back again, then once more moved forward to make a slight adjustment. The conductor grinned sheepishly.

"That's as he was, sir, as far as I can recollect."

Inspector Higgins nodded his thanks, and frowned thoughtfully. Barring the one or two minor adjustments by the driver, both bus-men seemed to agree as to the precise position of the deceased man when found. Yet, if they were right, where was the bullet? It certainly was not in the bus, unless he had overlooked it, which, in all humility, he considered most unlikely. He looked at the posing conductor once more in an effort to gauge the probable flight of the bullet. Yes. It must have been fired from above the level of the top of the bus, and consequently its flight would have been downwards. The bullet must be found in order to establish the type of weapon from which it was fired.

The sudden ringing of an electric bell completely startled the group. Higgins swung round quickly, the

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conductor jumped up from the seat, and the driver gave a muttered: " 'Strewth!"

The caretaker, Shorty, could be heard clamping towards the garage door, which he laboriously unbolted and flung open. The inspector immediately recognised the voice of the caller.

"Come along in, Doc," he called out from the top of the bus, leaning over the side. Dr. Pape entered and looked up.

"Hallo, Higgins! Nice time of night to get a respectable citizen out of bed, I *must* say!"

"Sorry, Doc. But when duty calls, you know!" He hurried down the steps and ran to the doctor with extended hand. "Anyhow, I'm much obliged to you for turning out so quickly. I've got something to show you." He led the police surgeon to the body of the unfortunate fare, which the uniformed constable had covered with a dust sheet borrowed from the caretaker. Higgins flung back the sheet.

"I would like your opinion of this."

"Golly!" Dr. Pape snorted his distaste.

"Right, Doc. You get on with your examination whilst I finish with these chaps here." He turned to the bus. "Come along down, you chaps." The two bus-men slowly descended the steps, then hurried to the inspector.

"Reverting once more to this second fare of yours, Conductor. Are you sure his expression could be termed 'frightened'?"

The conductor thought carefully for a moment, then:

"If it wasn't fright, sir, it might have been—well—anger."

"H'm. Sure you're not letting your imagination run away with you? No, no! Don't misunderstand me, please," as the conductor bridled. "You may, both of you, be old enough to be my father, but when you've had my experience in these matters you will realise that the hardest thing in the world is to avoid jumping to conclusions—to prevent, as it were, the wish being father to the thought.

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Now, take the case of your second fare. Your first impression—generally right, by the way—was that on coming down the steps his face—er—what is that American word? Oh yes—his face registered fear. This would have been perfectly understandable had this poor fellow here been dead, but he wasn't. Now take it a step further, although considering that this man was alive after your second fare had alighted I don't really see how it *is* a step further. You take another think and say now that the second man's expression might have been anger. But why anger?"

"Ask me another. Anyhow, sir, I'm sticking to what I said, for I believe it to be the truth."

"And might it not be reasonable, sir," suggested the driver. "The conductor says that he got off almost as soon as he got on. I dunno about you, but speaking for meself, I sh'd've been pretty wild if I'd forgotten something and had to get off in a hurry."

"H'm." Higgins considered this explanation, and, coupled with the muttered explanation of the man when alighting, it seemed to hold water.

"Did either of you hear a shot?"

The conductor spoke first, immediately the question had been asked. "No, sir. Of that I'm absolutely positive. In fact, I've been waiting for you to ask me that, and I'm dead sure I didn't."

"What about you, George?"

"Too busy to notice, sir. In any case, I should have taken it for a backfire or something."

"Say, Higgins." It was Dr. Pape speaking. "Did you know this poor devil had been shot twice?"

"What?"

"Yes. Through the neck and in the foot. Look!"

Inspector Higgins looked. There was no doubt about it. In fact the bullet was still in the foot, and——

"Got it! It's the same bullet, Doc. No wonder I couldn't find it. I've been looking all over the bus for that bullet, trying to find where it had gone. Yes. If fired from above

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it's quite in accordance with the facts to find it in his foot. Good Lord! I'm getting slow. I never thought of that."

"Glad you're pleased about it," remarked the police surgeon, dryly. "Personally, if I had your job, I would have preferred to find the bullet in the woodwork of the bus. Then at least you could have been sure that the man was killed whilst riding on the bus. Now, for all you know, he may simply have been dumped there."

"Some job that would be, Doc. Come and have a look at the bus. That may make you alter your mind."

"Certainly. But it can't make me alter my mind very well—I haven't made it up yet."

Together they mounted the steps of the bus and the police surgeon gazed at the bloodstained seat for a moment. Then:

"You're right, Higgins. That poor fellow must have been seated here when he was shot. It is obvious. And from the angle of flight it would appear that the shot must have been fired from a height of about—well—say twice the height of the bus. First or possibly second floor of a house on the route, I sh'd say."

"How long's he been dead?"

"About five or six hours, at a rough guess."

Inspector Higgins pulled out his watch and stared at it with surprise.

"Good Lord! I had no idea it was as late as this. Half-past four! I'd better let these poor chaps get along home. Then we want an ambulance." He hurried down the bus steps.

"Constable, take the names and addresses of the driver and conductor, please. Tell them they'll be wanted in due course for the inquest. Also apologise for having kept them so long. Then telephone for an ambulance. Then give me the other contents of the pockets of the deceased."

The constable hurried to carry out his instructions, whilst Inspector Higgins called the caretaker.

"I would like to see the company's records, and get

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some other particulars. Can you oblige me with the address of the manager or of someone in authority?"

"Certainly, sir. But if you wait here another half an hour the morning manager will be here. Our company doesn't sleep long, sir. The first buses run out of here just after five."

"Right. I'll be here in any case. Now then, Doc, let's hear what you've got to say."

"Nothing much, Higgins. There's no signs of scorching, so it is fairly apparent that the man was shot from a distance of more than six feet. Then the wound. Caused by a rifle-shot I should say, but I can tell better after I've extracted the bullet. I think I'm right in suggesting that it is not a revolver."

"H'm. Couldn't have been shot from the steps, then."

"I don't think so."

"That lets out the conductor, then. I'm not exactly suspicious of him, but I'm careful. He was pretty quick to deny having heard a shot. Too quick, in my opinion. And—could the shot have been fired from another bus, do you think?"

"Hardly. You forget he was seated on the near side."

"H'm. Your theory of a house seems the most likely up to now. I must look into it." There was a sound of a whistle, then the clanging of doors as the huge garage gates were flung open by the caretaker, and the score of men entered the premises. One and all they made for the still form in the corner. News of the tragedy had already reached them, seemingly. Higgins shrugged his shoulders. They could do no harm provided they did not touch the body, which was most unlikely, and might do some good. He walked over to them.

"Anybody recognise him?"

A man in the uniform of a conductor stepped closer to the body and peered at it intently, then turned with a startled expression on his face.

"Blimey! Yus!"

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CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH DOCTOR PAPE IS SURPRISED

INSPECTOR HIGGINS looked sharply at the man who had thus asserted his recognition of the body. Like the conductor of the other bus, he was getting on in years, having a seamed, weatherbeaten face with twinkling, intelligent eyes. Higgins felt instinctively that the man could be trusted.

"You recognise him, eh? Well, who is he?"

"I dunno who he is, sir. But I've seen him before—on my bus—once or twice. Funny sort of cove, in my opinion. Gardener or something, I should say. Anyhow, he often wears a buttonhole."

Higgins smiled at this assumption, for if everyone who wore a buttonhole was a gardener, then they must be two a penny!

"Often?"

"Well, sir, he's wore one each time I've seen him. If he hasn't had it on when he's got on the bus, he's put one on during the journey."

Strange! Higgins pondered this for a moment, then:

"How many times in all do you think you've seen him?"

"Three or four."

"H'm. I like your 'often'!" Higgins commented dryly. "And you said once or twice just now." He paused thoughtfully for a moment, then:

"Now think carefully. On those occasions when you *have* seen him, what time of day was it?"

The man considered this for a moment before replying, then answered slowly:

"Latish, sir. Latish."

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"Can you be more definite than that?"

"Well, sir, as far as I can recollec', I sh'd say it was when I've had charge of the last bus."

"Ah!" The last bus! He peered intently at the man. "Sure?"

"No, sir. I'm not. But that's the sort o' idea I've got."

And with this Inspector Higgins had to be content. The last bus! What, if anything, was the peculiar significance of this? Would the last bus on this route be crowded or not? Generally speaking, the last bus on any route was full. The manager might be able to enlighten him on this point. And the buttonhole business, and the absence of any clue as to the man's identity—was this deliberate or accidental? There were many lines of investigation open to him, none of which would seem to lead anywhere. This man would be posted as missing by his anxious relatives very soon, and this, to Inspector Higgins, seemed his best bet. Unless, of course, anything came of that second fare.

Whilst the inspector was thus cogitating, the ambulance drew into the garage yard, and with all due solemnity and with the utmost reverence the unfortunate victim was conveyed to the mortuary. As the ambulance left the garage, the car of the manager pulled into the yard, and a short, fussy, well-dressed man stepped therefrom.

"An accident?" he queried, of no one in particular.

"Not exactly, sir," replied Higgins, walking towards the car.

"What d'ye mean 'Not exactly'! And who the deuce are you?"

Inspector Higgins produced his official card, which the other accepted with a flourish.

"Inspector Higgins. Ah! H'm! Step inside, please." He preceded the inspector to a small office, the door of which he opened with a key from a bunch taken from his pocket, and ushered him into a chair. Then he lit the gas-fire, closed the window, turned up his coat-collar, shuddered, and turned to Higgins.

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"Brrrh! It's damned cold. Well, what can I do for you, sir?"

Briefly the inspector outlined the tragedy, and unfolded his story without interruption, save for sundry "Tut-tuts," and "Dear me's," from the manager. When he had finished:

"And what, exactly, do you want from me, Inspector?"

"First of all, sir, particulars of this bus-route. X87. Is it a busy route, for instance?"

"X87, eh? No, sir. It is *not* a busy route. Far from it. It doesn't pay, sir. It doesn't pay. It is what we call an easy route. Every conductor on this route is within a year or two of his pension. Elderly fellows glad of the rest. Few passengers, sir. Ruinous route, I call it."

"Then why operate it, sir?"

"Why?" the manager shouted, his eyes protruding with the intensity of his feelings. "Why? Because we have to. If we only ran the routes which paid, half the buses would be taken off the London streets. But we supply service, sir. And service is not always remunerative. Yet these slack routes have one good aspect. It enables us to give some of our older employees an easier task."

Higgins had been an interested auditor of this peroration. For the first time in his life he realised that the London Transport Corporation had a soul—that this vast organisation was human enough to give its old servants easier jobs. Then he wondered whether the fact that it was an easy route had any bearing on its use by the murdered man. Did he travel on the top deck to avoid contact with other passengers? He must make a note of that.

"Now, sir. A further question or two. The conductor in question, Charles Northcote—what can you tell me of him?"

"Northcote—Northcote. H'm." The manager pulled open the drawer of a card-index and "walked" down the

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tabulated letters with the first and second fingers of his right hand until the letter N was reached. A moment's search, then he withdrew a card. "Here we are, Inspector. Northcote. Born 18—— Good Lord! Due for his pension next year! More expense! Still, a good man. Served us faithfully and well since we started. H'm. Good Lord! I wonder whether we are liable for damages if a fellow gets murdered on one of our buses. I must look up the point. Dear me! I hadn't thought of that. Inspector, this is serious!"

Higgins surveyed the man for a moment amusedly. For the first time since its recital the tale seemed to have struck home at the manager, and through the pocket of his company. He smiled.

"You're quite right, sir. It *is* serious. Now then, sir. It's easy enough to calculate the average rate of progress of the bus during its journey from Glasswell Street to the garage here, but can you tell me the greatest rate at which the bus would travel on that journey?"

"Twelve miles per hour, Inspector," replied the manager promptly. "You see, under your Police Regulations" —he bowed formally—"we are forbidden to exceed this speed. Of course, some of our drivers might do so, but we are not responsible for that."

"Thank you, sir. That is all the information I require."

Inspector Higgins left the manager's office to find Dr. Pape waiting impatiently outside.

"Come along, Higgins. I've been waiting in case you want a lift back to the Yard."

"That's very kind, Doc. Shan't keep you a moment."

The inspector then gave a few instructions to the constable, and arranged with the responsible official that the bus of the tragedy should not be sent into service for a few days. Then, having gathered up the few worldly possessions of the murdered man, he called to the police surgeon, and a few seconds later was bowling westwards in

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his car. For the first few minutes there was silence, then:

"Well, Higgins, old top, I'd sooner it were you than me."

Inspector Higgins awoke from his reverie with a start, but responded good-naturedly:

"What-d'you mean, Doc?"

"This murder. Nothing much to go on, as far as I can make out."

"Oh, I dunno! Might be better, of course: then again, it might be a dam' sight worse."

"I'm glad you're so cheery about it."

"It doesn't do to give up hope so early in the game, Doc. If we did we should never get anywhere. Take this case, for instance. We know the chap was killed from a hundred yards or so past the 'Fox and Hounds,' Horton, to the garage. Somewhere in between, I mean. Now, according to the first doctor, who saw the man within half an hour of the bus's return to the garage, he had been dead about an hour. The bus returned at eleven forty-five. It follows, therefore, that the poor fellow was shot about a quarter past eleven. Right! Now then—we must make due allowances for the doctor's estimate of the time of death. After all, it is so very easy to say one hour when perhaps fifty minutes would have been nearer the mark. In any case, with all due respect, you doctors can only be approximate—I mean to say, you cannot be definite enough—you cannot say without fear of contradiction that a man died at exactly eleven and a half minutes past the hour—or some similar time." He paused, but the police surgeon made no comment, then resumed: "Now where were we? Oh, I know! This poor chap died between say eleven and eleven-fifteen. He was all right at eleven when the conductor took the trouble to go up the steps to see. The man was shot in the back of the neck. What does that tell us? That the murderer was a good shot. Must have been, with a moving target. Then again—it was the last bus. It was dark, and to hit any target requires light. We

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may therefore safely assume that the shot was fired just after the bus had passed a lamp-post."

"I wonder"—casually from Dr. Pape.

"Why?"

"What about the lamp on the bus which lights up the indicator board at the rear?"

"A good point, Doc, but it won't hold water. I've tried that. There is a lamp at the back of the bus, but it will not illuminate the head and shoulders of anyone sitting in the rear seat."

"I see."

"To resume: According to your theory, the shot was fired from the first or second floor of a house on the route. From eleven to eleven-fifteen the bus travelled about a mile, attaining at various points a speed not exceeding twelve miles an hour. In that mile there are possibly sixty lamp-posts. Of these say thirty are on the left-hand side—the side the man was sitting. We cannot, of course, rule out the others, but we'll deal with these thirty first. We can therefore assume that the man or woman who fired the shot was in a room of a house almost level with one of these thirty lamp-posts. Again: it is more than likely that whoever fired the shot was not an exceptionally fine marksman—therefore he would need to be in a house, near a lamp, just before or just after a recognised stop on the route—where the bus has slowed down or has not yet picked up its speed. Our search is now considerably narrowed."

"Excellent, Higgins. Sounds almost too easy. I suppose there can't be more than half a dozen of such houses which meet with all your requirements." He paused for a moment, then: "But why return to the Yard if you've progressed so far?"

"I'm not, Doc. I asked your chauffeur to drop me at the police station, and here we are. Thank you very much." Without more ado, Inspector Higgins nodded to the police surgeon, opened the door of the car, and alighted.

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"Well, of all the damned cheek!" Dr. Pape muttered weakly, then relapsed into the comfortably upholstered seat of his car.

. . . . . .

Five minutes later Inspector Higgins had completed his explanations to the superintendent of the police station, and arrangements for an intensive search of certain houses along the route were quickly made. Two police cars were placed at the inspector's disposal, and, with a dozen plain-clothes men, at once proceeded to the "Fox and Hounds," Horton, which was to be the rendezvous. Following the route of the X87 buses, Inspector Higgins carried into effect his theory of the lamps, and dropped his men in pairs at such of the houses which seemed to fulfil his requirements: *i. e.*, near a lamp and just before or just after a recognised stop on the route.

The men had definite instructions. Had anyone on the first or second floor a sporting rifle or other gun? Had they a licence? Serious matter to carry a gun without a licence! As a matter of fact someone had reported that a shot had been fired late last night, and they had been sent to clear the matter up. Any information would be paid for. Names and addresses of all the tenants were to be obtained, and all other available particulars which might be of use in an investigation. Anyone filling the bill to be taken to the station for enquiry.

Having stationed his men, Inspector Higgins returned to the "Fox and Hounds" to await developments, and a long and dreary wait it was! In due course the men drifted back to the rendezvous—each pair reporting failure. A considerable amount of information as to the sundry tenants had, however, been accumulated, and—having returned with the men to the station, thanked the superintendent for his assistance, and left instructions for the remaining houses on the route to be investigated—Inspector Higgins returned with this information to Scotland Yard for it to be thoroughly sifted.

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On such a job Sergeant Mercier was invaluable. Before the day was over he had reported to the inspector that, whilst some of the tenants were not exactly desirable citizens, each one was what he purported to be. Inspector Higgins turned over to a subordinate the questioning of such of the tenants as Sergeant Mercier suggested were 'doubtful,' and gave instructions that he was not to be disturbed.

Then he lit his pipe and reviewed the case from the comfort of his office chair. There was, indeed, little to go upon. Mercier had reported that the murdered man was not on the files at the Yard, so seemingly he had been respectable—or lucky. (This was Higgins the cynic!) There was no means of identification, yet—half a mo'! The stuff found on him. This had been looked over by the constable who had first arrived at the garage, but had not yet been officially enquired into by Scotland Yard. Inspector Higgins walked to his overcoat and removed a parcel therefrom. This he carefully unwrapped and strewed its contents upon his desk in front of him.

A packet of cigarettes of a well-known brand, a matchbox with seven matches in it, two bus tickets, the wad of notes, one half-crown, one shilling, and fivepence in coppers. (At the inquest this identical list was published, save that the word "bronze" was substituted for the word "coppers." Sergeant Mercier always insisted that this substitution was accounted for by the reluctance of policemen to use the word "coppers"!)

The wad of notes. According to the conductor, when he mounted the steps after the mysterious second fare had alighted, the murdered man was putting something inside his jacket pocket. And this wad of notes had been found therein! Was there any connection between the two men? Would the frightened expression of the second fare be accounted for by the fact that he had seen the murdered man handling this bundle of notes, and, being hard up,

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had decided to "flee from temptation"? The theory was ingenious, if weak-kneed.

The bundle was at least half-an-inch thick, and the notes were old Treasury notes, still legal tender, although the new Bank of England notes were well in circulation. Mechanically, Inspector Higgins started to count them . . . ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, one hundred!

One hundred pounds exactly.

"Rum!" muttered the inspector.

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CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH INSPECTOR HIGGINS TAKES A BUS-RIDE

INSPECTOR HIGGINS opened the right-hand drawer of his desk and took out a rubber band, which he stretched round the bundle of notes. Then he turned his attention to the bus-tickets. One was quite new, and underneath its distinctive number at the top was printed in small type: "Service X87." This was obviously the ticket purchased by the unfortunate man the previous evening, for it was punched at the fare stage—Glasswell Street to Garage. Further proof of his journey, if any were required.

The other ticket was old and badly rubbed, as though it had been left in the man's pocket for a considerable time. Higgins picked it up, and was mildly surprised to find that the ticket related to the same bus service, X87, and was punched for the identical journey. What could be deduced from this? It was obvious that the journey had been undertaken before, so one might assume that the business for which it was undertaken was also the same. Then the place where the man had boarded the bus, Glasswell Street—could one assume that this was near to the home of the deceased? Either that or it was his nearest point of contact with Route No. X87. Was Glasswell Street near a railway station, and, if so, what was the line? Worth looking into. And another thing . . .

Inspector Higgins nodded in his chair, and a few moments later was sound asleep, which, considering that he had not retired at all the previous night, was not surprising.

. . . . . .

He awoke with a start, his limbs cramped and chilled to

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the marrow. His instructions that he was not to be disturbed had been faithfully carried out. He stood up, walked to the switch on the opposite wall near to the door, avoiding by instinct the chair near his desk, and turned on the electric light. The resultant glare dazzled his eyes for a brief moment, and he frowned portentously; then, his eyes becoming accustomed to the light, he pulled out his gun-metal watch and stared at the dial unbelievingly.

"Great Pontius Pilate!"

A quarter to ten! He had been asleep for—goodness knows how long! He shook his head shudderingly, striving to collect his scattered thoughts. He glanced at his desk. At least no one had pinched the bundle of notes whilst he had been asleep! One must be thankful for small mercies. The bus-tickets, too. Again he glanced at his watch, but this time merely to make a mental calculation of the time it should take for him to reach Glasswell Street. Yes! He could do it comfortably.

Inspector Higgins removed his hat and coat from a peg on the wall of his room, then, having locked the money in his desk, together with the bus-tickets, he gave a final glance round the room, then closed the door.

His exit from the Yard was not entirely without incident, for his unexpected passage through the waiting-room caused consternation to four constables seated at a table therein, and broke up, precipitously, what looked suspiciously like an unauthorised game of cards. However, his curt "Good-night" and his apparent obliviousness of the untoward happening not only closed the incident, but sent up his stock, in the minds of the constables, at least fifty per cent.

Inspector Higgins had, from long experience, become convinced that a crime was best solved on the spot. Theorising in the armchair of his room helped, of course, but to obtain results it was necessary to be on the actual place where the crime was committed. Thus, when he found that he had slept so long, he at once decided that, being more or

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