FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

Inspector French's Greatest Case

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MURDER!

The back streets surrounding Hatton Garden, in the City of London, do not form at the best of times a cheerful or inspiring prospect. Narrow and mean, and flanked with ugly, sordid-looking buildings grimy from exposure to the smoke and fogs of the town and drab from the want of fresh paint, they can hardly fail to strike discouragement into the heart of anyone eager for the uplift of our twentieth century civilisation.

But if on a day of cheerful sunshine the outlook is thus melancholy, it was vastly more so at ten o'clock on a certain dreary evening in mid-November. A watery moon, only partially visible through a damp mist, lit up pallidly the squalid, shuttered fronts of the houses. The air was cold and raw, and the pavements showed dark from a fine rain which had fallen some time earlier, but which had now ceased. Few were abroad, and no one whose business permitted it remained out of doors.

Huckley Street, one of the narrowest and least inviting in the district, was, indeed, deserted save for a single figure. Though the higher and more ethical side of civilisation

was not obtrusive, it was by no means absent. The figure represented Law and Order, in short, it was that of a policeman on his beat.

Constable James Alcorn moved slowly forward, glancing mechanically but with practised eye over the shuttered windows of the shops and the closed doors of the offices and warehouses in his purview. He was not imaginative, the constable, or he would have rebelled even more strongly than he did against the weariness and monotony of his job. A dog's life, this of night patrol in the City, he thought, as he stopped at a cross roads, and looked down each one in turn of the four dingy and deserted lanes which radiated from the intersection. How deadly depressing it all was! Nothing ever doing! Nothing to give a man a chance! In the daytime it was not so bad, when the streets were alive and fellow creatures were to be seen, if not spoken to, but at night when there was no one to watch, and nothing to be done but wait endlessly for the opportunity which never came, it was a thankless task. He was fed up!

But though he didn't know it, his chance was at hand. He had passed through Charles Street and had turned into Hatton Garden itself, when suddenly a door swung open a little way down the street, and a young man ran wildly out into the night.

The door was directly under a street lamp, and Alcorn could see that the youth's features were frozen into an expression of horror and alarm. He hovered for a moment irresolute, then, seeing the constable, made for him at a run.

"Officer!" he shouted. "Come here quickly. There's something wrong!"

Alcorn, his depression gone, hurried to meet him.

"What is it?" he queried. "What's the matter?"

"Murder, I'm afraid," the other cried. "Up in the office. Come and see."

The door from which the young man had emerged stood open, and they hastened thither. It gave on a staircase upon which the electric light was turned on. The young man raced up and passed through a door on the first landing. Alcorn, following, found himself in an office containing three or four desks. A further door leading to an inner room stood open, and to this the young man pointed.

"In there," he directed; "in the Chief's room."

Here also the light was on, and as Alcorn passed in, he saw that he was indeed in the presence of tragedy, and he stood for a moment motionless, taking in his surroundings.

The room was small, but well proportioned. Near the window stood a roll-top desk of old-fashioned design. A leather-lined clients' armchair was close by, with behind it a well-filled bookcase. In the fireplace the remains of a fire still glowed red. A table littered with books and papers and a large Milner safe completed the furniture. The doors of this safe were open.

Alcorn mechanically noted these details, but it was not on them that his attention was first concentrated. Before the safe lay the body of a man, hunched forward in a heap, as if he had collapsed when stooping to take something out. Though the face was hidden, there was that in the attitude

which left no doubt that he was dead. And the cause of death was equally obvious. On the back of the bald head, just above the fringe of white hair, was an ugly wound, as if from a blow of some blunt but heavy weapon.

With an oath, Alcorn stepped forward and touched the cheek.

"Cold," he exclaimed. "He must have been dead some time. When did you find him?"

"Just now," the young man answered. "I came in for a book, and found him lying there. I ran for help at once."

The constable nodded.

"We'd best have a doctor anyway," he decided. A telephone stood on the top of the desk, and he called up his headquarters, asking that an officer and a doctor be sent at once. Then he turned to his companion.

"Now, sir, what's all this about? Who are you, and how do you come to be here?"

The young man, though obviously agitated and ill at ease, answered collectedly enough.

"My name is Orchard, William Orchard, and I am a clerk in this office—Duke & Peabody's, diamond merchants. As I have just said, I called in for a book I had forgotten, and I found—what you see."

"And what did you do?"

"Do? I did what anyone else would have done in the same circumstances. I looked to see if Mr. Gething was dead, and when I saw he was I didn't touch the body, but ran for help. You were the first person I saw."

"Mr. Gething?" the constable repeated sharply. "Then you know the dead man?"

"Yes. It is Mr. Gething, our head clerk."

"What about the safe? Is there anything missing from that?"

"I don't know," the young man answered. "I believe there were a lot of diamonds in it, but I don't know what amount, and I've not looked what's there now."

"Who would know about it?"

"I don't suppose anyone but Mr. Duke, now Mr. Gething's dead. He's the chief, the only partner I've ever seen."

Constable Alcorn paused, evidently at a loss as to his next move. Finally, following precedent, he took a somewhat dog's-eared notebook from his pocket, and with a stumpy pencil began to note the particulars he had gleaned.

"Gething, you say the dead man's name was? What was his first name?"

"Charles."

"Charles Gething, deceased," the constable repeated presently, evidently reading his entry. "Yes. And his address?"

"12 Monkton Street, Fulham."

"Twelve—Monkton—Street—Fulham. Yes. And your name is William Orchard?"

Slowly the tedious catechism proceeded. The two men formed a contrast. Alcorn calm and matter of fact, though breathing heavily from the effort of writing, was concerned only with making a satisfactory statement for his superior. His informant, on the other hand, was quivering with sup-

pressed excitement, and acutely conscious of the silent and motionless form on the floor. Poor old Gething! A kindly old fellow, if ever there was one! It seemed a shame to let his body lie there in that shapeless heap, without showing even the respect of covering the injured head with a handkerchief. But the matter was out of his hands. The police would follow their own methods, and he, Orchard, could not interfere.

Some ten minutes passed of question, answer, and laborious caligraphy, then voices and steps were heard on the stairs, and four men entered the room.

"What's all this, Alcorn?" cried the first, a stout, clean-shaven man with the obvious stamp of authority, in the same phrase that his subordinate had used to the clerk, Orchard. He had stepped just inside the door, and stood looking sharply round the room, his glance passing from the constable to the body, to the open safe, with inimical interest to the young clerk, and back again to Alcorn.

The constable stiffened to attention, and replied in a stolid, unemotional tone, as if reciting formal evidence in court.

"I was on my beat, sir, and at about ten-fifteen was just turning the corner from Charles Street into Hatton Garden, when I observed this young man," he indicated Orchard with a gesture, "run out of the door of this house. He called me that there was something wrong up here, and I came up to see, and found that body lying as you see it. Nothing has been touched, but I have got some information here for you." He held up the notebook.

The newcomer nodded and turned to one of his companions, a tall man with the unmistakable stamp of the medical practitioner.

"If you can satisfy yourself the man's dead, Doctor, I don't think we shall disturb the body in the meantime. It'll probably be a case for the Yard, and if so we'll leave everything for whoever they send."

The doctor crossed the room and knelt by the remains.

"He's dead all right," he announced, "and not so long ago either. If I could turn the body over I could tell you more about that. But I'll leave it if you like."

"Yes, leave it for the moment, if you please. Now, Alcorn, what else do you know?"

A few seconds sufficed to put the constable's information at his superior's disposal. The latter turned to the doctor.

"There's more than murder here, Dr. Jordan, I'll be bound. That safe is the key to the affair. Thank the Lord, it'll be a job for the Yard. I shall phone them now, and there should be a man here in half an hour. Sorry, Doctor, but I'm afraid you'll have to wait." He turned to Orchard. "You'll have to wait, too, young man, but the Yard inspector probably won't keep you long. Now, what about this old man's family? Was he married?"

"Yes, but his wife is an invalid, bedridden. He has two daughters. One lives at home and keeps house, the other is married and lives somewhere in town."

"We shall have to send round word. You go, Carson." He turned to one of the two other members of his quartet, constables in uniform. "Don't tell the old lady. If the daughter's

not there, wait until she comes in. And put yourself at her disposal. If she wants her sister sent for, you go. You, Jackson, go down to the front door and let the Yard man up. Alcorn, remain here." These dispositions made, he rang up the Yard and delivered his message, then turned once more to the young clerk.

"You say, Mr. Orchard, that no one could tell what, if anything, is missing from the safe, except Mr. Duke, the sole active partner. We ought to have Mr. Duke here at once. Is he on the phone?"

"Gerard, 1417B," Orchard answered promptly. The young man's agitation had somewhat subsided, and he was following with interest the actions of the police, and admiring the confident, competent way in which they had taken charge.

The official once again took down the receiver from the top of the desk, and put through the call. "Is Mr. Duke there?... Yes, say a superintendent of police." There was a short silence, and then the man went on. "Is that Mr. Duke?... I'm speaking from your office in Hatton Garden. I'm sorry, sir, to tell you that a tragedy has taken place here. Your chief clerk, Mr. Gething, is dead.... Yes, sir. He's lying in your private office here, and the circumstances point to murder. The safe is standing open, and—Yes, sir, I'm afraid so—I don't know, of course, about the contents.... No, but you couldn't tell from that.... I was going to suggest that you come down at once. I've phoned Scotland Yard for a man.... Very good, sir, we shall be here when you come." He replaced the receiver and turned to the others.

"Mr. Duke is coming down at once. There is no use in our standing here. Come to the outer office and we'll find ourselves chairs."

It was cold in the general office, the fire evidently having been out for some time, but they sat down there to wait, the Superintendent pointing out that the furniture in the other room must not be touched. Of the four, only the Superintendent seemed at ease and self-satisfied. Orchard was visibly nervous and apprehensive and fidgeted restlessly, Constable Alcorn, slightly embarrassed by the society in which he found himself, sat rigidly on the edge of his chair staring straight in front of him, while the doctor was frankly bored and anxious to get home. Conversation languished, though spasmodic attempts were made by the Superintendent to keep it going, and none of the quartet was sorry when the sound of footsteps on the stairs created a diversion.

Of the three men who entered the room, two, carrying black leather cases, were obviously police constables in plain clothes. The third was a stout man in tweeds, rather under middle height, with a clean-shaven, good-humoured face and dark blue eyes which, though keen, twinkled as if at some perennially fresh private joke. His air was easygoing and leisurely, and he looked the type of man who could enjoy a good dinner and a good smoke-room story to follow.

"Ah, Superintendent, how are you?" he exclaimed, holding out his hand cordially. "It's some time since we met. Not since that little episode in the Limehouse hairdresser's.