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THE MIDNIGHT MAIL

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HENRY HOLT

THE MIDNIGHT MAIL

Henry Holt, one of England's leading mystery writers, joins the Crime Club with his newest and greatest thriller — the story of a strangler who stalked London for his prey.

GARDEN CITY, N. Y. PUBLISHED FOR

THE CRIME CLUB, INC.

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FIRST EDITION

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To

JOHN FARQUHARSON

Whose sincere friendship
and sound judgment have meant much
to me for many years

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CHAPTER I

SEVENTEEN MINUTES TO GO

IN HIS van next to the engine the railway guard put down his newspaper as a fresh note crept into the roar of the train—a high, clattering note which told him she was passing over Pennystone Bridge.

He looked at his watch. They were dead on time. It was seventeen minutes' run from that bridge to London. Since the last stop, at Peterborough, the driver had recovered lost ground.

The great train thundered on, with mails that were due at King's Cross by the stroke of midnight. The guard tapped the ashes out of his pipe, stowed it away in a waistcoat pocket, got up, stretched and yawned. Then he walked into the corridor of the next swaying coach and slid back the door of the nearest compartment.

"We're nearly there now, miss," he said, putting his head into the carriage, which was dimly lighted, the shade having been pulled over the lamp.

But there was no answer. The guard stepped into the compartment.

Three or four minutes later he emerged into the corridor once more, his face unnaturally white and pitted with drops of sweat.

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He peered along the corridor. At the far end of that coach a man was standing looking out of the window, apparently immersed in his own thoughts and gazing at the rushing night cinema of northern London through which the train was now travelling. The passenger started as the guard's hand touched his shoulder. A powerfully built fellow with a nervous manner and gold-rimmed spectacles behind which dark melancholy eyes shone.

"How long have you been standing there?" asked the guard, raising his voice above the noise of the train.

"Why, I don't know. Ten minutes, maybe," the man answered, staring apprehensively beyond the guard up the empty corridor. "What's wrong?"

"Did you see anybody pass this way?" demanded the guard, whose hands were shaking.

"See anybody?" the man repeated. "No, not since I've been here."

"Are you sure?"

"I think so. What—what's the matter?"

The hiss of brakes could now be heard. The train was slowing down perceptibly as the end of the journey drew near.

"You'd better wait there when we get to King's Cross," said the guard. "Something—something serious has happened, and I expect the police will want to hear what you've got to say."

Then he hastily turned his attention to the other compartments of that coach. Only two of them were occupied.

As the huge panting engine drew up at the terminus

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the guard descended on to the platform and seized a porter by the arm.

"Fetch the station master and the police quick—*quick*," he ordered.

The porter gave one puzzled glance at the guard but reacted almost immediately to the urgency in the man's voice and hurried away.

There were two or three hundred passengers getting out of the train and some of them were already streaming forward past the engine toward the exit. With an imperative gesture the guard beckoned another porter.

"Stand by the door of that compartment," he said. "There's been a——" The rest of his sentence was lost as he darted forward. The man in gold-rimmed spectacles to whom he had spoken in the corridor was mingling with the rest of the homeward-bound crowd.

"No you don't!" declared the guard, barring his way.

"What do you mean?" the other retorted.

"Didn't I tell you to stop here?" demanded the guard sternly. "If you try to move away now I'll have you arrested."

"What's all this about?" asked the passenger, visibly agitated.

But the station master and a railway policeman were approaching.

"What's the matter, Wilson?" There was a sharp note of authority in the station master's voice as he addressed the guard.

"In that front compartment, sir," replied the guard. "There's a girl . . . I don't know whether she's been

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murdered . . . and keep your eye on this man. He's already been trying to sneak away."

"Murder!" exclaimed the bespectacled passenger. "I don't know anything about——"

"If there's any doubt, my friend, you'd better stop just where you are," said the station master with a significant signal to the policeman near; and with a slight twitching of the mouth he entered the compartment about which an element of mystery was beginning to gather.

A girl lay stretched on the seat. The station master stooped over her, and held his hand near her heart.

"She isn't dead—yet," he announced. There was something about her appearance, however, which disturbed him. "What's happened, Wilson?"

"I don't know, sir," replied the guard. "I found her lying there about a quarter of an hour ago." He drew a thin blue cord from his pocket and held it out. "This was fastened around her throat. And the outer door leading down on to the track was open too!"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the station master. "This is a case for Scotland Yard, but first we must get a doctor."

Hurrying away to give necessary instructions, he pushed past a little cluster of passengers who had gathered near the door scenting some unusual incident.

At the edge of that cluster stood a man with red hair whose eyes had been roving the platform restlessly, but of a sudden he turned away and became lost in the disappearing crowd.

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CHAPTER II

SCOTLAND YARD AT WORK

THE girl in the railway carriage still breathed but was unconscious when Dr. Guthrie, a police surgeon, examined her.

"She's in a pretty bad state," he announced presently as a lean and rather casual-looking man from Scotland Yard arrived. "Hello, Silver! You handling this job?"

Detective Inspector Silver nodded as his glance took in the picture of the carriage and its inert occupant.

"What's wrong, Doctor?"

"Somebody seems to have failed in an attempt to commit murder," replied Guthrie.

"She's not dying, then?" the detective queried.

"Not at the moment. See!" He pointed to the girl's right temple. "She's had a nasty knock there, and she's been half strangled! The quicker we get her to hospital the better!"

Again Silver nodded as he stared down at the unknown passenger, a smartly dressed girl of about twenty-three, whose silk-clad legs stretched there looked pathetically awkward and lifeless.

"Who took that off?" he asked, glancing at a small hat which lay on the seat. A pair of gloves had fallen to the floor.

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"I did," explained Dr. Guthrie, "to examine the bruise."

"Anything else been moved?" the detective added, glancing at an attaché case which rested on the rack above.

"Nothing," replied the station master. "Is it all right to take her along to the ambulance now?"

"I don't want her any more," said Inspector Silver, taking down the attaché case and opening the lid with a click. The thing contained a notebook full of shorthand, two pencils, a novel, a penknife, and a few bananas.

Standing out of the way as the girl was being lifted on to a stretcher, Silver glanced around the carriage again.

"If nobody's been monkeying with things, where's her handbag?" he asked. "They all carry something like that nowadays—for their money, and powder puff, and so on."

"There was no handbag in the compartment when I found her lying there," put in the guard. "I'll swear to that. The carriage door was open though. There's the string that was fastened round her neck. I wonder who she is."

The detective took the cord into his hand and examined it. The stretcher bearers were carrying the girl along the platform now.

"Her name's probably Enid Mulholland," said Silver.

From the attaché case he had taken the novel issued by a well-known circulating library. Attached to it was

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a "tab" or book marker on which the name of the subscriber had been written.

"If you don't want me," came a petulant voice from the platform, "I should like to be going home."

Silver turned a pair of interested eyes toward the man in gold-rimmed spectacles to whom the railway police officer was still sticking closer than a brother.

"What's your trouble?" asked the detective, throwing the book back into the attaché case and stepping down to the platform.

"That man was in the corridor when I found the body—or the girl, rather," explained the guard. "He's tried to get away once, but I thought we ought to have his statement."

Silver's fingers strayed to his waistcoat pocket from which he took a packet of cigarette papers. He didn't look very efficient or dangerous to criminals, this youngish Scotland Yard man on whom Dr. Guthrie's gaze was resting. The detective had such an easy-going air. Questions did not invariably leave his lips with a snap, and his eyes were not piercing. It seemed almost impossible to visualize Silver as the man who had just sent "Larry the Rat" to the gallows, at the same time breaking up the most dangerous gang of coiners the Yard had known for years. Guthrie, however, had worked with this detective before and knew all the power that lay behind that casual manner. The two men were on very friendly terms.

"And what's your name?" asked the C.I.D. officer.

"Victor Braintree. There's my card. I'm a commercial traveller, as you see. I know nothing whatever about this beastly affair, and I want to get to bed."

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"So do I, sir," said Silver, "and I've been on duty since eight o'clock this morning, but somebody's got to do something about it when one finds a pretty girl's been half murdered on a train."

"Of course, but I——"

"Wait a minute. Guard, at what time did you discover this had happened?"

"About fourteen minutes to twelve."

"What was this man doing in the corridor?"

"Looking out of the window a dozen yards or so away from the compartment where the girl was."

Silver's eyes were taking the measure of the bespectacled Mr. Braintree.

"And what can you tell me about this affair?" the detective asked him.

"Nothing. You must remember it was difficult for me to hear owing to the noise of the train."

Silver was feeling in a pocket.

"And how long do you think you were standing there in the corridor, Mr. Braintree?"

"About ten minutes or thereabouts."

"I see. And while you were there did anyone walk along the corridor?"

The detective had a tobacco pouch in his hand now and was beginning to roll a cigarette.

"I've got a hazy idea," said Braintree, "that as I came out of my compartment someone was just going down the corridor."

"You distinctly told me nobody passed that way," put in Wilson.

"You'll be accusing me next of having tried to murder the lady," said Braintree heatedly, glaring at the

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guard. "It's like this, Inspector, I had been dozing in my seat and somewhere about half-past eleven I got up to stretch. I walked out into the corridor. After a while the guard came along and asked if I'd seen anybody pass. I told him I hadn't, but since then I have been trying to force my memory back. I'm not sure, mind you, but I've got a vague recollection that I saw someone moving along the corridor. I shouldn't know him from Adam though."

"Then it wasn't a woman anyway?" suggested Silver.

Braintree made a doubting gesture with one hand.

"To tell you the honest truth," he said, "I didn't notice. I wouldn't even like to swear in court that I actually did see anybody, but you asked me and as I've told you it seems a hazy impression."

"All right," said Silver. "If there's anything else I want to know we can easily get into touch with you at this address?" He fingered the traveller's card.

"Of course."

"By the way, I see you're a smoker."

"Yes, but what's that got to do with it?" demanded Braintree.

"I was just wondering whether you'd be kind enough to lend me that cigarette case you have sticking out of your pocket. Till to-morrow, anyway."

"What on earth for?"

"I'm only asking you if you'd mind."

"Why, naturally, if you insist," the man said, taking the metal case from his pocket. "But I assure you solemnly that if you suspect me of having——"

"I don't know who did it—yet," said Silver, care-

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fully accepting the case from the man's fingers and placing it on the seat of the railway carriage.

"Now can I go?" asked Braintree.

"That's all right. Good-night!" Silver, however, was already convinced that no man who knew he had left incriminating fingerprints in that railway carriage would have held the cigarette case quite so ingenuously while handing it over to the police.

"Excuse me, Inspector," said the station master, "I don't want to hinder you at all, but this train is blocking up the main arrival platform. If you've finished examining that compartment——"

"I haven't begun yet," replied Silver. "Can't you detach the whole coach and put it into a siding?"

"Yes, easily."

"And see the doors are locked too, please. Our photographers will get busy there, but meanwhile if anyone starts poking about and interfering there'll be no traces left of anything we want."

"Well, Silver," said Dr. Guthrie, as the station master turned away, "I don't think I'll wait any longer, but give me a ring, will you, if you find any interesting development?"

"There'll be developments all right, Doctor," said Silver. "It's my unlucky day. I just chanced to look in at the Yard late to-night and *this* happened—the sort of thing I would get landed for when I'm due to go on my holidays. Good-night, Doctor. Now, Mr. Wilson," he added, turning to the guard, "we don't seem to have got much forrader so far. I'd like you to tell me the whole story."

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The two men walked into the station master's office where Silver perched his long form on the edge of a table.

"Well," Wilson began, "it was about a quarter to twelve——"

"Wait a bit, you'll have to start at the beginning," the detective interrupted. "Where did that train come from?"

"Edinburgh," said the guard. "She brings mails from the North. But I didn't join her till she reached York."

"What time does she leave there?"

"At 7:20 P. M."

Silver began to make a few notes in a pocket book.

"And the next stop?"

"She only pulls up once between York and King's Cross. That's at Peterborough, where she's due at ten-fifteen."

"Very well," said Silver. "Now tell me how long have you known this Enid Mulholland or whatever her name is?"

"I didn't even know that was her name."

"That isn't what I'm asking you." Nobody was exempt from suspicion at this stage. "How long have you known her?"

"I never saw her in my life before."

Silver was rolling another cigarette.

"All right. Go on."

"She got in at York and asked me if the train was likely to be crowded. I told her it wouldn't be. Never is on a Monday night. I don't know whether the lady

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had any heavy baggage in the van, but she only took that little attaché case you have there when she got into the carriage."

"What about her handbag? Girls never go across the street without that sort of thing."

"I didn't take particular notice whether she had one or not."

"Was that all the conversation you had with her?"

"Why no, I was talking to her for three or four minutes."

"Did you observe any signs of nervousness about her?"

"Not a bit. She was quite cheerful. A real pretty girl, I call her. Very ladylike, but sort of friendly. Told me she was tired, I remember."

"You didn't get the impression that there was anyone about whom she might know?"

The guard rubbed his chin.

"After what has happened I'm not so sure of that. I didn't think anything special of it at the time, but while I was talking to her at York she had her head out of the carriage window, and I was standing on the platform. I seem to remember now that she kept watching the people as they boarded the train. Running her eyes down the crowd on the platform, I mean, as if she might have half expected to see somebody she knew."

"But she didn't speak or nod to any other passenger?"

"Not that I'm aware of, though I can't say what happened during the last minute or so because I was busy then giving the signal to start."

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Silver blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Can you tell me if she had that compartment to herself all the way from York to London?"

"Yes, she had. There was an unusually small number of passengers on the train. A little while after we left York I had a word with her as I passed along the corridor. She asked me what time dinner would be served and I told her she'd just be right if she walked back to the dining car then."

"How far from her compartment was the dining car?"

"Some distance. The dining car was the sixth coach from the engine."

"When did you next see her?"

"Not until the train was standing at the Peterborough platform. She popped her head out of the window there and asked me if we should reach King's Cross on time. I told her I expected we should though we'd lost several minutes south of Grantham where the permanent way was under repair owing to some coal trucks having been derailed."

"Are you certain there was nobody else in that compartment when you were talking to her at Peterborough?"

"Quite. She told me she was going to sleep and asked me to be sure and rouse her a few minutes before we reached King's Cross. That's how I came to find her lying there unconscious."

"At a quarter to twelve, as you *entered* the corridor on the way to her compartment, was that man Braintree standing there looking out of the window?"

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"Yes. Besides, he admits he'd been there for some time."

"Well, from the corridor could you see into the compartment where the girl was?"

"No. That door was closed and the blinds were all pulled down. Also, the shade had been drawn over the lamp. She'd fixed things as most people do when they want to go to sleep on a night train."

"I see. You opened the door leading from the corridor?"

"Yes. And I spoke to her, but before the words were out of my mouth I had a feeling that something was wrong. She was lying on the seat but it didn't look natural. One arm was hanging down and her legs were sort of hunched up. The first thing I did was to pull the light shade back and when I caught sight of her face—well, you saw it yourself—I thought she was dead."

"What did you do?"

"I lifted her head up a bit and then I saw this piece of cord tied around her throat. The knot was in front, under her chin. I tried to unfasten it, but my fingers were shaky so I whipped out a penknife and cut it."

"And then?"

"I looked round, and that was when I noticed the outer door was unfastened—the one down on to the track."

"It wasn't unfastened while you were talking to her at Peterborough?"

"No, I should have noticed that if it had been, as a matter of habit."

"Well, go on."

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"I shut the door and spoke to that man Braintree in the corridor. By then there were only a few moments left before we were due at King's Cross. I looked into the other compartments along the coach. In one there was an old clergyman with a white beard, fast asleep, and in the other a man and his wife were gathering their things together."

Silver sniffed.

"White beard—fast asleep, eh?"

"He appeared to be."

"He *would* be if he's the man we're looking for." The detective was regarding the severed bit of blue silken cord in his hands.

"This can't have been tight or she'd have been dead."

"No it wasn't. Not very tight, I mean. It was almost as if she'd tied it herself."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, it just occurred to me, but I suppose she didn't do it really."

"Attempted suicide?" Silver sniffed again. "You mean she opened the door, pitched her purse or whatever she kept her powder puff in on to the line, tied this string round her throat, bumped her head hard on the woodwork, and then lay down on the seat to die! Ask yourself, how could she?"

"A bit of a puzzle, isn't it, Inspector? What do you make of it?"

"We haven't got much to work on yet," replied Silver. "It all depends on that open door. Who unfastened it? And why? Is it just a blind? At present it looks to me as though someone had tried to murder

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the girl, thought he'd finished the job, and then committed suicide by jumping out of the train. We shall know more anyway if a body is found on the line. Or at least," he paused reflectively, "we *might* know. Though why the murderer should take the girl's powder puff and things with him when he committed suicide beats me." He paused again. "Hold on, maybe I've got it! Did the train slow down anywhere between Peterborough and King's Cross? I mean slow down so much that a man might try to jump off without breaking his darned neck?"

"The train must have been doing seventy miles an hour most of the way," was the guard's answer. "There are a couple of curves where she might have slowed down to sixty, but that would be the minimum. As a matter of fact we came along faster than usual, because we were four minutes late on leaving Peterborough and we reached London on scheduled time."

Silver regarded the red end of his cigarette.

"Then let's get this straight. You were due at Peterborough at ten-fifteen?"

"Yes, but we didn't reach there till ten-twenty."

"And what time did you actually leave Peterborough?"

"At ten twenty-four."

"Good! Now we're getting at it. This attempted murder took place, then, between 10:24 P. M. and fourteen minutes before midnight. That gives a margin of one hour and twenty minutes. And during that time the train was making a non-stop run of at least a mile a minute."

"Yes, that's bound to be right."

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"Glad you think so. It shows you haven't had beautiful simple faith crushed out of you. When I first took on this job at the Yard I used to believe what they'd taught me at school that two and two always make four. But at school they didn't warn one that there might be a catch in it sometimes. Well, Mr. Wilson, there's a nice comfortable bed waiting for me at Streatham, and there's no more we can do to-night."

The station master entered the room with an anxious look on his face.

"A message has just come through, Inspector, from the signal box at Harley Crossing. The body of a dead man has been found on the line."

Silver blinked. Just what he had been expecting!

"Harley Crossing, eh? That's on the main route from Peterborough."

"Yes, nearly thirty miles away from King's Cross."

Silver turned to the guard.

"What time do you figure the midnight mail passed that spot?"

"At eleven thirty-two or eleven thirty-three. She'd be doing close on seventy miles an hour there."

"What have they done with the body?" Silver asked the station master.

"They rang up just now for instructions. I told them not to move it, thinking perhaps, as it appears to have some connection with the attempted murder, you'd prefer to——"

There was a suspicion of a sniff from Silver.

"It looks that way!" he said. "I'll just have a word on the telephone with the Yard first."

Fifteen minutes later a fast Scotland Yard motor

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car was rushing through the streets of London heading north to the open country.

"It's a wonderful night for a run, sir," said the driver, who looked like a naval man, yet wasn't.

"Rats!" replied Detective Inspector Silver, rolling a cigarette. But the cigarette remained unlighted between his lips. In his waistcoat pocket was a button which he had picked up from the floor of the compartment where someone had tried to murder a girl apparently called Enid Mulholland. He fully expected to find it was missing from the clothing of the man now lying dead on the track near Harley Crossing. But incidentally he was still wondering where he would find Enid Mulholland's powder puff and purse.

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CHAPTER III

COMPLICATIONS

A GIRL of perhaps twenty-four emerged from the Piccadilly Tube station and walked up Shaftesbury Avenue. It was the hour when all London was hurrying to work, but that did not prevent more than one pair of eyes from turning admiringly in her direction. She was smartly dressed, had a trim figure, and moved briskly on as shapely a pair of legs as one was likely to see all day.

Turning into a doorway, she climbed a flight of stairs and entered the offices of the Anglo-American Theatrical Syndicate, nodded to an office boy who had intelligent eyes, a bright cheeky face, and a mouth full of toffee, and pulled off her hat.

Putting down the ink well which he was cleaning, and shifting the toffee to starboard, the boy sidled up to her.

"I've got a cert. for this afternoon, miss."

"You gave me a cert. every day last week, Tim," she said, looking reproachfully at him, "and they all went down."

"But this is special, miss. Cherry Ripe, in the three-thirty race. I heard Mr. Ismay telling someone over the telephone that it could do it on three legs."

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"Mr. Ismay!" Her fine eyebrows rose a trifle. There was something almost indecent about associating Ismay with the sport of kings. You would as soon think of an archbishop eating peanuts on the top of a bus. "All right, Tim," she added, opening her purse and handing the youth a coin. "Put it on for me, but I suppose this is where another shilling goes west."

Tim slid off as the door opened and the girl's employer came in. Lawrence Bruce was a wonderfully keen, efficient business man, and she was his highly capable secretary.

"Good-morning, Miss Marsh." Bruce was dark, with crisp curly hair and steel-gray eyes that could dance with humour but could harden until the pupils seemed like pin pricks in those moments of stress when a business man needed all his courage to keep the flag flying. And such moments occurred. Nobody had a better chance of knowing that than Sally Marsh, for Lawrence Bruce was interested in several successful concerns, but he had had to fight hard for some of his victories. He was young for the position he had won —about midway in his thirties—and his brain flashed like lightning to a solution of minor problems; but where bigger issues were at stake his judgment was deliberate and sound.

Already he was running through a pile of correspondence on his desk, picking out with unerring instinct those letters which especially interested him; and for a while Sally's pencil flew over her notebook as Bruce dictated.

Suddenly he pressed a button, lifted a house telephone receiver to his ear and listened. Then, glancing

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at the little gold clock at his elbow, pressed the button once more, his eyes meanwhile racing through another letter.

"What's the matter with the thing? Miss Marsh, will you please see if Mr. Ismay is in his room? If not, ask Miss Mulholland to come here for a moment and take a message for him."

His long artistic fingers were tapping the desk impatiently by the time Sally returned.

"Neither Mr. Ismay nor Miss Mulholland has come yet, their boy says."

Again Bruce's glance shot to the clock.

"*Neither* of them! Queer!" It was nearly half-past nine. "Never mind, let's get on." There was something dynamic about Lawrence Bruce, and this sort of thing was not just an early-morning fit of energy. He was always equally full of punch.

A quarter of an hour later as an athletic-looking individual entered the room he again pressed that electric button.

"Pardon me, Bruce," said the intruder, "but I'm sort of anxious. Enid Mulholland telegraphed me from York yesterday evening saying she was coming back last night on the express which arrived at King's Cross at midnight. But she didn't come. I'm sure of that because I went to meet the train."

"Naturally." There was a good-humoured twinkle in Bruce's eyes. All the staff knew that this young American who charmed everyone into liking him was head over ears in love with Enid Mulholland. "Don't worry, Peter. I think they must have changed their

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plans at the last moment and spent the night at York. That was rather a difficult job they had there."

Peter Irwin made a dissatisfied little gesture of assent. It was almost unbelievable that Enid would not have telegraphed again or at least written when she knew her return had been delayed. She and he were in that happy stage wherein it was difficult to think of anything but one another.

And that was the moment when Tim, eyes still fixed in a fascinated fashion on the card in his hand, approached Bruce. Ordinary policemen were as common as blackberries, but to meet a real detective inspector from Scotland Yard in the flesh was an experience.

Taking the card from the boy, Bruce glanced at the letters which still had to be dealt with, almost said "Ask him to wait," and then changed his mind.

"Fetch him in," he ordered resignedly.

A moment later Silver was standing there. A quick smile of recognition came to his face as his glance fell on Sally Marsh. He had met her before, when she was working in another office. The cashier of the concern had absconded and was now making mail bags in Maidstone Gaol. Silver had never seen Sally since, but her personality had trailed across his memory many times.

"Which of us would you like to arrest, Inspector?" Bruce asked cheerfully, indicating a chair.

Silver bent in the middle, sat down, and put his hat on the desk.

"I've come to see you about a rather unpleasant business," he said.

"My God! It's Enid!" broke from Peter Irwin.

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"Something's happened to her!" And his face went white as he saw confirmation in the detective's eyes.

"You mean Enid Mulholland?" asked Silver with sudden interest.

"Quick, man!" urged Irwin, his hands tightly clenched. "Is she all right?"

"I didn't know the lady had anything to do with this office," replied the Inspector, "but that simplifies matters. No," he hesitated, sensing Irwin's real interest in the girl, "I'm afraid she's in hospital. The doctors don't know yet whether she will recover or not, but the fact is a deliberate attempt to murder her was made last night."

There was a peculiar silence in the room for several long seconds. Lawrence Bruce looked at the C.I.D. man almost unbelievingly. Sally Marsh had sprung to her feet, hands pressed to her breast, for she and Enid Mulholland were the closest of friends. Peter Irwin's face was grey and drawn. It was he who spoke first.

"Where—where is she?" he asked.

"King's Cross Hospital," said the detective.

Irwin lurched straight out of the room without another word.

"This is terrible news, Inspector," said Lawrence Bruce quietly. "Who attacked her?"

"I can't answer that question," replied Silver. "As a matter of fact, it wasn't concerning Miss Mulholland that I came here. It was about Mr. Silas Ismay that I wanted to speak to you."

Bruce's face was troubled.

"Good Lord! Don't say anything happened to *him!* He hasn't turned up here this morning."

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"Mr. Ismay never will turn up," said the detective. "He is dead."

Again there was a weighted pause.

"I—I'm greatly shocked, Inspector," said Bruce, with a visible effort at control. "Ismay—dead!" He stared straight in front of him, endeavouring to grasp this second dreadful truth. "How did it happen?"

"The attempt on the girl's life was made on the mail train due at King's Cross at midnight," the detective explained. "The man was found on the line over which that train had passed."

A voice cut cleanly across the silence.

"Did Ismay try to murder Enid Mulholland, Inspector?"

Both men swung around to Sally Marsh, who was standing unsteadily, one hand holding on to the back of a chair for support.

"You have a reason for saying that," came from the Scotland Yard official. "Will you please explain?"

After a second's reflection Sally spoke but her answer was a disappointment.

"I only mean"—was there just the least touch of hesitation in the way she said it?—"that if he committed suicide by jumping out of the train it looks as though he had also tried to kill Enid."

"But," Lawrence Bruce put in quickly, "why *should* Ismay have wanted to murder Enid Mulholland?"

Sally shook her head.

"I don't know," she said.

"Had there ever been any sort of love affair between those two?" Silver addressed his question directly to the girl.

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Bruce was watching her face keenly in anticipation of the answer. As far as he knew the dead man had very little interest in women. Enid had been with the Syndicate for nearly twelve months, and almost from the first she had been drawn toward Peter Irwin. But human beings were complicated creatures: you never could tell what they might do.

"You can definitely cut out any such idea as that," was Sally's reply. Which was an interesting piece of advice, but one that Silver was not yet prepared to act upon.

"I understand that Miss Mulholland boarded the mail train at York," he said. "Where was Mr. Ismay travelling from?"

"From York also," said Bruce. "They left London on Sunday, to attend to important business in York for the firm. Mr. Ismay went there, as a matter of fact, to come to an understanding with—with a gentleman in regard to certain payments, and it was Miss Mulholland's job to take a shorthand note of the interview."

"Might I ask the name of that gentleman in York?" asked Silver.

"Certainly. He is Oliver Foss, of 11a Melton Lane, in that city, a young Australian who came to England this year and has engaged in various financial enterprises."

"Has there been any unpleasantness, any ill-feeling between your firm and this Oliver Foss? I mean, from what you say I gather that the trouble was to get money out of him."

Bruce picked up a paper knife and bent it to and fro.

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"I see your drift, Inspector," he said. "We're getting on to dangerous ground, aren't we?"

"There's no danger in my knowing the truth, Mr. Bruce," said the C.I.D. man.

"Exactly," replied Bruce, "but though our relations with Foss certainly became strained, I hesitate to tell you anything which might give a false impression."

The detective was going to say something else, but checked himself, and made a note of the York man's address.

"But surely," said Bruce, "Miss Mulholland will make a statement, and her information should be of the utmost service."

"Enid Mulholland is still unconscious, and shows no signs of recovering," the detective replied.

Bruce's brows became crinkled.

"I can't for the life of me imagine what made Ismay jump out of that train," he said. "His affairs were always in order, and his health was perfect. But of course the brain plays curious tricks, though he seemed sane enough."

"There is no evidence that he wasn't sane," said Silver.

"Excepting, of course," suggested Bruce, "that a man is generally unbalanced in some way when he commits suicide."

It was no use holding the real facts back any longer, Silver decided.

"Silas Ismay," he said, "did not commit suicide. The appearance of his body shows that it must have fallen on to the track while the train was travelling very fast, but there is no doubt that he was murdered. The doc-

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tor who first saw the deceased, and also our own pathologist who made an examination this morning, both say there is no question about it. On Ismay's throat there are the marks of fingers which choked the life out of him. Quite clearly he was strangled and then thrown out of the train."

With a swift movement the C.I.D. detective rose and caught the swaying figure of Sally Marsh.

"Fetch a glass of water," he said, lowering the girl to the floor with surprising gentleness. "What on earth made her go off pop like that?"

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CHAPTER IV

DANGER

A FEW moments later Sally Marsh was sitting on a chair facing the C.I.D. man. With a gesture Silver had induced Lawrence Bruce to retire into the next room.

"Wasn't that stupid of me?" said Sally, taking another sip of water with a hand that shook slightly.

"Not—stupid," replied Silver quietly, one half of his mind concerned with the grim subject of murder, while the other half was centred on the girl herself. "What I said naturally gave you a bit of a shock."

"Yes, I suppose that was it." The faintest of tremors passed through her slender frame.

"And yet——" Silver broke off, regarding her with a slightly puzzled expression.

"And yet what?" Sally's hazel eyes were fixed directly on his.

"I don't know," replied the detective in a kindly voice. "If this had been just a case of attempted murder and suicide the thing would finish there. As it is—well, the situation is different. This is not the end, but the beginning, I am afraid. Miss Marsh, I want to ask you a straight question."

She paused for a second. Then:

"What is it?"

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"Have you at the back of your mind any suspicion against anyone in connection with this tragedy?"

"If you mean do I know who killed Mr. Ismay, no."

She had intelligence, this curiously attractive girl. For a reason which was not to dawn on him yet awhile, the man stuck to his task with some reluctance.

"My question was, have you any suspicion?" And instinctively he knew that she would not lie to him.

Of a sudden she got up and shook her head as if casting aside any lingering doubt.

"No," she said. "I have no reason to suspect anyone." And Silver, reading a little way into her thoughts, gathered that her mind was made up, at least for the present.

"Very well," he said easily. "But I am bound to remind you that the murderer is still at large. Someone who had not the slightest scruple about taking human life is not far away. I don't wish to alarm you unduly, but until that murderer is caught," he bit his lip, "there may be danger for others."

"You mean?"

"I mean this. Robbery apparently was not the motive. Ismay's wallet was in his pocket, untouched. Enid Mulholland's handbag, which contained more than fifty pounds, was found on the track, a mile nearer London than the body of Ismay. That means it was not accidentally knocked out of the compartment during a struggle. The murderer threw it a full ten yards from the train at least a minute *after* Ismay was pitched out. Why? Probably to lend colour to the idea of robbery, though if the murderer had been calmer he would have realized it would be found. What the

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real motive for the crime was I cannot guess yet, but I don't think I am far wrong when I say that there may be danger for others."

There was the faintest of smiles on Sally's face. She believed this Scotland Yard detective was really concerned about her welfare. The thought was not displeasing. She had always liked him.

"Then please do hurry up and catch the man," she said.

"I am afraid it isn't going to be a very simple matter," he told her. And then he said a queer thing. "Miss Marsh, can I count on your help?"

Her eyes widened a shade.

"*My* help! Why, yes, but I don't see what I can do."

"Nor do I—at this stage. To be honest, I haven't even formed a vague theory as to who committed this crime nor why it was done. It may have been the work of some homicidal maniac who happened to be on the train and did not know either Enid Mulholland or Mr. Ismay, but attacked them with no object except the sheer insane joy of killing. That *might* be the case, but somehow I doubt it. Such things do happen, but a homicidal maniac would have finished the job properly instead of leaving the girl alive."

"Then where do I come in?" asked Sally.

"I don't *know* that you come in at all," he answered, regarding her thoughtfully. "Miss Marsh, will you make me another promise?"

"If I can. What is it?"

"You definitely stated that you have no suspicion who killed Mr. Ismay. If you change your views on

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that subject in the slightest degree I want you to let me know immediately."

"By all means," said Sally. "But how could I possibly learn anything in connection with this business?"

"You may not. On the other hand, if that murder was not the work of a lunatic the chances are that the culprit was personally acquainted with one of his victims—or both. In which case a vital clue might exist here in the office of the Anglo-American Theatrical Syndicate."

"I—I understand," said Sally, in whose eyes an odd expression flickered for a second.

"Right," said the detective, who observed that fact, but rose to his feet. "Please don't think that I want you to lose any sleep over this affair. It's our job down at the Yard to do all the worrying. And now I must tackle Mr. Bruce. He's the man who may be able to help most."

Sally nodded. Her faith in the managing director's acumen was complete.

"If he can help you he will," she said. "Because the death of Mr. Ismay is a very serious thing for him."

"They were warm friends?"

"They got on well together, especially in business. Mr. Bruce is a brilliant man, but Ismay was a genius. As partners in business they made a wonderfully good pair. To tell you the truth, I don't quite see how this syndicate will be able to carry on without Silas Ismay. He had a perfect flair for theatrical things. We always banked on his judgment of a show or a man. I once heard Mr. Bruce say that if Ismay left the syndi-

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cate it would buckle up. The murder of Silas Ismay will be a terrible blow to him."

"I gather that Ismay was a man of considerable means?"

"Oh, yes. The Syndicate is very successful. Both the partners have made heaps of money out of it, but apart from this business Mr. Ismay was wealthy."

"Yet the scene of the tragedy was a third-class compartment," put in the detective. "Did he usually travel third?"

"Never. Always first. I remember discussing that with Enid a few weeks ago. Sometimes, though not very often, she had to go away with Mr. Ismay on business journeys such as that last trip to York. I think in the circumstances the office would have allowed her first-class expenses, simply so that she could travel with Mr. Ismay, but Enid was not anxious to be with him in that way."

Silver looked at Sally Marsh quickly.

"Indeed!" he remarked. "Do you mind telling me why?"

The girl did not answer immediately.

"In view of what has happened, Mr. Silver, you won't jump to a wrong conclusion if I tell you?"

"I will try not to. I think you may safely answer my question."

"Very well. Enid worked loyally for Mr. Ismay, because it was her job. She was well paid and needed the money, otherwise I think she might have found another situation. But personally she was not—was not attracted by Mr. Ismay."

"You mean she disliked him?"

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"If you put it that way, yes, I suppose she did."

"I am sorry to press you on a subject that you evidently don't want to discuss, but I wish you would tell me why Enid Mulholland disliked Silas Ismay."

"He was always very considerate, both to her and to me," said Sally reflectively, "but have you never had to rub shoulders with anyone who was inclined to give you the creeps for no apparent reason?"

"I've arrested lots of 'em," agreed the detective, "though to be truthful that was generally after I had found out why they gave me the creeps. What I can't understand, Miss Marsh, especially after your explanation, is what Mr. Ismay was doing in Enid Mulholland's third-class compartment. And it is only logical to conclude that he *was* there."

"He might have walked along the corridor to ask her some question—perhaps about the interview of which she had taken notes."

"If so," said Silver, "that cost him his life. Was Ismay given to sudden or violent impulses?"

"On the contrary. I have only seen him angry once or twice and in my opinion he was quite justified on those occasions. No, he was much calmer than most people. Didn't show his feelings. It—it was almost uncanny. I remember Enid once told me that he didn't seem to be real flesh and blood. I believe it was that which made him give Enid the creeps."

Silver sat staring at the inkwell in silence for a space. Then:

"I'm much obliged to you for your frankness, Miss Marsh. Now would you mind asking Mr. Bruce if I can have a few minutes with him?"

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As Jimmy Silver, Inspector of the C.I.D., watched Miss Marsh cross the room, the emotions within him were curious and contradictory. There was a whole lot that he admired about the girl. He was no mean expert at reading human character, and the detective knew she was straight as a razor edge. But somehow he was not altogether satisfied.

That sudden question of hers as to whether Ismay had tried to kill Enid Mulholland, and more particularly the note in her voice at the time, still lingered in his memory. It was obvious to Silver also that she had had to think twice before declaring that she had no suspicion. Moreover, though she was greatly distressed by the news about her girl friend, it was not until he actually mentioned the fact that Ismay had been murdered that she was bowled over. The last straw, perhaps. That might be a reasonable explanation, Silver told himself dubiously.

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CHAPTER V

FRAGMENTARY CLUES

"Now Mr. Bruce, I want you to give me half an hour or so," the detective began.

"I am entirely at your service for as long as you like," said Bruce. He was grave, alert, and purposeful as ever. "Nothing is as important as the terrible news you have brought."

"Well, to be frank," Silver declared, "I badly need your help as I'm more or less up against a blank wall at the moment." He drew from his pocket the button which he had picked up in the railway compartment. "That, so far, constitutes the only tangible clue we have, and perhaps it was lying on the floor even before the train reached York, in which case it has nothing to do with the tragedy."

Bruce took the thing in his hand and examined it with interest.

"Off a man's coat, isn't it?" he suggested. "Interesting, but I'm afraid not very helpful."

"And yet more insignificant trifles than that have led to an execution," observed Silver. "As a matter of fact, until I knew Mr. Ismay had been murdered I quite expected to find it had come off his coat. But no button is missing from his clothing."

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"There must be countless thousands of buttons like that in the country," observed Bruce. "How can it help you?"

"One can never tell. Things have a way of fitting in which seems extraordinary, but which, as a matter of fact, is really quite natural. The peculiar thing would be if they didn't fit in, once you come to the heart of a problem. For instance, you might have a similar button missing from your coat now. There would be nothing really incriminating about that. But if eventually we found other clear evidence against you, that little button might turn the scales. It is the kind of button used by the best class of tailor, which is as far as I have got yet, but extensive inquiries are being made, though actually I haven't much hope in that direction."

"Any clues in the railway compartment?" Bruce asked thoughtfully.

"I'm afraid not. Until something crops up I fancy this very office is as good a starting point as any for my investigation. Forgive me, Mr. Bruce, because I know it is all rather painful for you, but apart from this Oliver Foss in York, can you think of anyone who might be regarded as an enemy either of Silas Ismay or of Enid Mulholland, or both? I want you to think carefully."

Lawrence Bruce was entirely calm now, and characteristically efficient.

"As far as Miss Mulholland is concerned," he answered after a moment's reflection, "I can answer definitely. I know of nobody who has the slightest grudge against her. She is a very likeable girl, good at

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her work and on the best of terms with everyone. She is the last person in the world to have enemies."

"What about the American gentleman I saw here? The one who dashed off to the hospital. Exactly how does he stand with her?"

"Irwin? You can dismiss him from your mind in connection with this unfortunate affair. He is genuinely fond of Enid. Besides, he couldn't possibly have been on that train, because he and I dined together in London last night."

"Very well. Now what about the possibility of Silas Ismay having enemies?"

Bruce's fingers drummed on the arm of his chair.

"Ismay's position," he explained, "was rather different from that of the girl. He has fought some very hard battles in the world of business, and though many of those tussles were settled in a more or less friendly spirit he naturally made some enemies, as we all do in the scramble for a large bank balance."

"Did you ever hear Mr. Ismay express the fear of being murdered?"

"Never. I don't think the idea ever entered his head."

Silver stroked his chin.

"He was never threatened by this Mr. Oliver Foss of York?"

"Not exactly threatened," Bruce answered carefully. "They certainly had words. Some bitter things were said, I understand, the last time they met in London."

"Exactly what was this disagreement about?" asked the detective.

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"Foss undertook certain financial responsibilities and when he was called upon to sign a check for about two thousand pounds a week ago, here in London, he tried to wriggle out of it. Ismay rarely lost his temper except when he was up against a crook. There is the whole thing in a nutshell."

"This man Foss, then, is crooked?"

"He is what I should call very tricky. Turned yellow when it became necessary to face the music."

"Did anybody hear what was said at that interview between him and Mr. Ismay a week ago in London?"

"No, but Ismay told me afterwards that he had got hot under the collar. Whether they had another row or not in York yesterday I do not know."

"Fortunately there will be no doubt on that point in another few hours," observed the detective.

Lawrence Bruce looked puzzled.

"I don't quite understand."

"Enid Mulholland's shorthand is very clear," said Silver. "Our expert is at this moment transcribing the girl's notes of the interview."

"Ah! I'd forgotten about that possibility," said Bruce.

"Of course the most valuable evidence will be obtained when the injured girl recovers consciousness—if she ever does," Silver went on. "The doctors are a bit doubtful about her. That blow on her head was serious. She might remain insensible for days, and every hour gives the murderer a better chance to make his getaway."

"Yes," agreed Bruce, "but even if he evades you

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now you'll get him as soon as Enid Mulholland can tell you who he is."

Silver was thinking of the hazel-eyed girl whom he had caught as she was fainting—a girl whose position in regard to this midnight mail mystery puzzled him curiously. He remembered a look in those eyes of hers which did not fit in with all that she had said; which did not tally with the detective's reading of her character. It was as if some form of fear lurked within her. Was it fear for her own safety? With that new thought Silver's brow furrowed. He sharply resented the idea.

"Is Miss Marsh's work entirely confined to your department?"

"Not entirely," Bruce explained. "Sometimes she would help Ismay if he was extra busy and if I didn't need her. Similarly Enid Mulholland would occasionally take a batch of letters for me if Ismay was away. It was an elastic arrangement."

The detective's face was blank. Here, it seemed, was the explanation of how Sally Marsh might have come into possession of information which was now causing her vague uneasiness. That she was uneasy—he could not think of a better word—Silver was convinced. When pressed for a frank statement she had declared that there were no grounds for suspecting anybody. Unless his estimate of her character was all wrong that merely meant she was uncertain and hesitated to express an opinion.

"But you think she couldn't know any more than you or me about this murder?" said Silver.

"Oh, no, no," Lawrence Bruce declared emphati-

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cally. "I'm afraid you're tackling this problem at the wrong end, Inspector. Remember, she has been my right hand in the office for eighteen months. That sort of thing gives one an excellent insight into a girl's mentality. She could not possibly be mixed up in anything of that sort, even indirectly."

"And yet," observed Silver quietly and deliberately, "you can take it from me that when the murderer of Silas Ismay stands in the dock Sally Marsh will probably be an important witness for the prosecution."

"For the prosecution!" Bruce repeated the three words and stared at the C.I.D. man. It was Silver's job to understand this kind of thing, and though the detective might be wrong he was not likely to make a statement of that kind unless he was tolerably sure he knew what he was talking about. "You astound me, Inspector. May I ask why you say that?"

"Because if she doesn't exactly know who strangled Ismay she knows something which will probably help to send the murderer to the scaffold."

"But what gives you that impression?"

"It isn't always easy to put these things into words," said the detective. "I shouldn't like to try in this case, but I think I'm right. You'll remember I told you this office was as good a starting point as any. That's why I have taken you into my confidence."

"I am glad you have. This is a nasty business, Inspector, apart from the complications which Ismay's death will create."

"Now I want you to put your wits at work, Mr. Bruce," said the detective. "And I want you to speak quite freely, without fear of incriminating an innocent

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person. We must have something to start on. Can you think of anyone in any way acquainted with Ismay who might also have been travelling from the north on that train yesterday?"

Bruce shook his head slowly.

"That question has been worrying me already," he said, "because we can safely assume that the murderer was not in London yesterday. At least not in the afternoon."

"I won't go quite as far as that," the detective corrected, "though you're probably right. He might even have joined the midnight mail at Peterborough."

Bruce opened a drawer and took out a railway timetable.

"That point we can settle immediately," he said, turning over the leaves. "Here we are. The midnight mail, I see, leaves Peterborough for London at 10:24 P.M. To pick that up one would have to leave King's Cross at six thirty-seven."

"That's a fair argument," agreed Silver, "though I'm inclined for the present to think the murderer may have travelled down from York."

"Why?" Lawrence Bruce was beginning to take a peculiar interest in that part of a detective's work which involved clear reasoning.

"Well, in the first place the number of people in London who could possibly have known that Ismay and the Mulholland girl were on the midnight mail, or would probably be on it, is extremely small."

"Wait a moment," Bruce put in. "Ismay might have sent a telegram to someone in London announcing his return."

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"A bright thought!" declared Silver, taking out his pocket book and making a note. "We'll get the York police to deal with that question at once. And by the way, I must not forget to ask the American, Mr. Irwin, if he informed anyone that Enid Mulholland was returning on that train."

"Meanwhile," said Bruce, "what about Sally Marsh? I mean, in view of what you think, her position is rather serious, is it not? I feel a certain moral responsibility, as you can easily understand. I should hate anything to go wrong so that she stood the slightest risk of being accused as an accessory. You see my point?"

"I see your point all right, Mr. Bruce. But leave her to me. That girl will speak when she thinks the moment has come, and if necessary I believe I could persuade her to talk sooner. I have one or two cards up my sleeve."

He had reached for his hat and was ready to go, but paused, dallying with a question which he was reluctant to put, though it was important to know the answer.

"Sally Marsh never had an 'affair' with any man in this office, did she?" he asked.

"Certainly not," replied Bruce with assurance. "There is no question of it."

"You're dead sure?"

"Such a thing could hardly escape one's notice. Yes, I'll swear to it."

"All right. I shall have to trouble you again on this job, Mr. Bruce, I expect, but I must go now. By the

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way," he paused on his way to the door, "who do you know called 'Nobby'?"

Bruce's expression was blank.

"Never heard the name, Inspector, but it sounds intriguing in the circumstances. Please tell me, is this one of the cards you have up your sleeve?"

"Well, yes. Though I don't know yet whether it is a card which will win a trick so I'd better leave it where it is for the present."

"You almost make me wish I were a detective," said Lawrence Bruce with undisguised interest. "Look me up again soon, will you? Meanwhile I'm going to make a few inquiries myself, though I don't promise any spectacular results."

"Anything you find out—*anything*, however trifling—may help us tremendously. Good-morning."

Sitting on the top of a bus returning to Scotland Yard, Jimmy Silver hummed as he rolled a cigarette. It was an unconscious trick of his to hum that way when his spirits needed jacking up. This case was developing into the kind of mystery which fascinated him, yet it was unsatisfying to know that the murderer had twelve hours' start and could already be on his way to some such place as Honolulu.

Then Silver stopped humming. He was coldly reviewing the fragmentary suggestions of clues that had accumulated in twelve hours, clues which led off in many different directions.

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CHAPTER VI

WANTED!

THE detective's first thought on entering Scotland Yard was to read through the typescript which had been prepared from the shorthand notes taken at that interview with Oliver Foss at York.

It covered a dozen pages of foolscap. Silver settled in a chair in his office prepared as a matter of duty to wade through the record of a dull business talk. But within two minutes his interest was aroused.

At an early stage the interview had degenerated into a row. There had been no mincing of words by either of the men.

Three times Silver read through the last two paragraphs faithfully taken down by the girl who was now lying unconscious in King's Cross Hospital:

> *Ismay:* I shall not let you get away with this. You are nothing better than a common little twister.
>
> *Foss:* Get out of here or I'll swing for you, and by God I mean that!

On this pleasing note the interview had evidently ended, for there the shorthand notes abruptly broke

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off, leaving the reader to imagine an entire lack of tenderness in the farewell that followed.

Ten minutes later Silver was speaking direct to the headquarters of the York police.

"Now understand," he said in conclusion, "if this Oliver Foss cannot account for his movements between seven o'clock last night and early this morning, we want him. Take him inside, hold him on suspicion, and put a hurry call through to Scotland Yard."

Hanging up the receiver, Jimmy Silver rolled and lighted a cigarette as an aid to thought. He was more perplexed than ever.

That hectic interview, with its climax which definitely consisted of a threat of murder, would at least have indicated a promising line of inquiry had it stood alone. But there were one or two other loose ends in connection with the midnight mail mystery which would have to be explained before Silver could begin to see daylight.

In a couple of hours or so the York end of the problem would either be cleared up or there would be what the newspapers call "sensational developments." Meanwhile that did not explain the poignant anguish which Silver had heard in Sally Marsh's voice when the cry rose involuntarily from her lips: "Did Ismay try to murder Enid Mulholland?"

After all, *did he?* For the twentieth time Inspector Silver asked himself that question. Since Sally Marsh seemed to have some inscrutable reason for propounding the problem one should give it due consideration.

There was nothing hysterical about Sally. On the contrary he had always thought of her as an essen-

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tially level-headed girl. She would not leap to such a conclusion without a definite reason. In one vital second he had sensed that hidden truths lay behind her eager query—truths which she believed concerned Silas Ismay and which she had kept bottled up in her soul.

The C.I.D. man smoked hard for ten minutes. Already he had set a smart officer on the task of digging up the real history of Silas Ismay. It might take Sergeant Gorringe days to unveil the dead man's past, and the facts that he unearthed might be of no consequence, but it was one of those cases in which surprises might crop up anywhere.

Then Silver drew from his wallet a single sheet of paper. The letters which he had found in Enid Mulholland's attaché case were without significance, but this one, of which you could not say the same, she had kept in her handbag, that peculiar portable safe of modern woman, which had been picked up on the railway track.

He unfolded the sheet of paper, smoothed it out, and propped it up in front of him. No wonder she had not left it lying about in the attaché case. The letter ran:

Wednesday.

DEAR ENID,

If you don't want me to go to prison send me fifty pounds. Borrow or beg or steal it, because the police are after me and if they catch me I shall get ten years' penal servitude.

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I want to clear out of the country and go straight. I mean it this time.

NOBBY.

On first reading this Silver had chuckled. It was easy. Obviously a gentleman known as Nobby had indiscreetly done something that had a ten years' stretch attached to it and the police were aware of the fact. There is a department of Scotland Yard which, from the criminal point of view, has a much too efficient way of handing out information in emergencies such as this.

But for once the department's system hadn't worked. There were "Nobbies" by the score in the underworld, some of whom were at present behind prison bars and some of whom would no doubt in due course again earn that respite from the struggle for a livelihood. But at the moment the Yard was not offering hospitality for a lengthy period to any particular crook known in their records by that name.

The door of the office opened and Dr. Guthrie came in. Silver, whose feet were comfortably planted on the desk, nodded. The room was thick with tobacco smoke.

"They don't supply you with enough cushions here," commented Guthrie dryly. "You can't be expected to sleep properly like that."

"So you got my message, Doctor," the C.I.D. man replied. "You'd asked me to let you know——"

"What's the news?" It was not in a professional capacity that the doctor had come here to the Yard,

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but because of his interest in this branch of police work. Also he particularly liked to be behind the scenes when Silver was on such a case. The reality of it appealed to him infinitely more than did, for example, the flickering of shadows on a movie screen. He liked to share with this capable detective the piecing together of these human jigsaw puzzles.

Silver yawned. He had spent exactly one hour in bed since yesterday.

"The police have obtained an important clue," he said with mock solemnity, "and are expecting to make an arrest immediately—or sooner—I don't think!"

"So it's as bad as that!"

"The machinery of Scotland Yard, Doctor, cannot—er—cannot be hurried. It moves slowly but relentlessly. When it has once set itself a task the remorseless wheels——"

"I gather from your airy prattle that you don't yet know who attacked the girl."

"No, nor, as our American friends would put it, who bumped off Silas Ismay."

"I never heard of him."

"Your education has been neglected, Doctor. You don't read the evening papers." He threw a midday sporting edition across. "Improve your mind. They've got the facts fairly correct there."

The doctor scanned the two columns of murder sensation under splash headlines, then whistled softly.

"What," the C.I.D. man asked, "are the chances that Enid Mulholland will die?"

"Can't tell a bit," replied Guthrie, seating himself on the table as the only other chair looked rickety. "I

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had a word this morning with Warburton, the house surgeon, who is an old pal of mine. He says it's a miracle she was still alive when they took her in. But as she's hung on till now there's a sporting chance."

"Well, it will make quite a difference in my young life if they fix her up so that she can talk for thirty seconds. By the way," he handed over the letter that had been propped up in front of him, "what do you make of that?"

"Who is Nobby?" Guthrie asked, after reading it.

"I'll buy the best dinner in London for anyone who can tell me," said Silver, and explained how the records at Scotland Yard had failed.

"Perhaps Nobby is a plain liar," Guthrie suggested, "who does not mind belittling his reputation in the glorious and blessed hope of getting fifty pounds. Many a man would do the same for ten shillings—or less."

"He came darned near to getting the fifty, too," said the detective. "She had borrowed it or got it somehow for Mr. Nobby, you may be sure, but she was hanging on to it, chewing the matter over, probably. Wasn't quite decided about the chap. Fifty pounds is a whole lot of money to a girl working in an office. Observe that phrase of his: 'I mean it this time.' She'd had some of that stuff before, evidently."

"Do you believe Nobby committed the murder?" asked Guthrie.

"Why not? He'll have to go through it once I get my hands on him. If he can't prove he wasn't on that train, and if that button is off his coat, he'll be a poor insurance prospect."

"Wait a moment," said the doctor. "That handbag

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containing the money Nobby was so anxious to obtain was thrown out of the train a full minute after the murderer had pitched Ismay out. Wouldn't Nobby have——"

"Yes, I agree he'd have pinched the money first if he didn't lose his head in the excitement. And unless the case for the prosecution was otherwise clear, that's where he might get off. Anyway I'm not sure our friend Nobby did it, but," he tapped the letter with his fingers, "one can't help thinking that a link exists between this piece of paper and the things which happened on the train."

A telephone at his elbow rang.

"Oh, York! Good!" Guthrie heard him say; and having plenty of his own affairs to attend to, the doctor walked out.

A while later Silver's feet were on the desk again and the cigarette ends around him were growing more numerous. Was Nobby going to the gallows after all?

The detective picked up the telephone receiver, and presently was speaking to the office of the *Daily Budget* in Fleet Street.

"I want to speak to Mr. Collinson. He's one of your reporters—the crime expert. . . . Hello, Collinson. This is Silver. Jump into a taxi and shoot down here, will you? I want your advice about a little swift publicity. . . . What's that? Oh, yes, there's a 'story' in it all right."

Then he settled back into his comfortable position, rolled another cigarette, and was still there when Andy Collinson was ushered in. Silver shook hands. For several reasons he was not sorry to see this

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journalist who, off his own bat, some months ago, had hunted down the famous Ace of Spades, and had long been recognized in the newspaper world as a shining light at the crime game.

"What is it, Silver? The midnight mail case?"

Silver grunted assent.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Bit of a teaser, isn't it? I was just thinking of going down to Tiverton where there's been a gorgeous bank robbery that looks like the work of the Spider's gang, but this midnight mail thing seems more promising."

"It's a queer affair. Got any brain waves about it?" the detective asked.

Andy Collinson was filling his faithful companion, a briar pipe.

"I haven't seriously tackled the case yet. Hadn't been at the office long when you rang me up. All I know is what the *Evening News* says. A snappy account rushed into print for the first edition."

"Well, who did the train job?"

"What about the man who was standing in the corridor all the time?" asked Collinson.

"Suspect number one. Guess again. We're trailing him, and if we can discover that there's one single thing that has previously connected him with either of the victims, in he comes for a quiet chat and he won't get out again quite so easily."

"Right. Well, there's Wilson, the guard," the journalist suggested. "He *could* have done it; only railway guards, in England at least, don't strangle their passengers and heave them out on the line. They

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may in Mexico, but not here, unless they've suddenly gone nutty with answering too many fool questions. There's an idea for you, Silver. Personally, if I had their job I'm sure I should do a few passengers in just to relieve my feelings."

"Suspect number two," said Silver, sticking to the point. "The guard is as sane as I am though that may not be saying much. Cross him right out. Next?"

"Well, incidentally, there's no evidence, is there, that the attempt to kill Enid Mulholland and the actual murder of Ismay were the work of the same person?"

The C.I.D. man screwed up his eyes.

"That's getting a bit complicated, isn't it?" he said. "But still, go ahead."

"It could easily have been a two-man job," explained Collinson. "For instance the girl had fifty pounds on her. Ismay was aware of that and——"

"Hold on. Fifty pounds would have been a drop in the ocean to a man like Silas Ismay."

"If that's so he's a lucky bloke—or at least he was. But are you sure?"

"Lord, yes! At that game he and his partner handled thousands as we look at shillings. No, Ismay was a rich man. Your theory won't hold water."

"We'll agree, then," said Andy Collinson, "that it wasn't her money he was after. Maybe his affection was not appreciated."

"She's in love with a very decent young American."

"Fine! We're going ahead now. Ismay was crazy for her——"

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"I'm told he never showed any interest in women."

"We don't all wear our hearts on our sleeves, Silver. Let's suppose for the sake of argument that he was secretly longing to possess the lady, church wedding included if you like, but she turned him down flat there on the train. He couldn't stand the idea of anyone else getting her, so resolved to make sure of it. He hit her on the head and was in the act of tightening up that cord round her throat when some stranger butted in, as any right-minded stranger would if he saw a girl being murdered. How's that?"

"Quite fair. Go on."

"Well, the valiant Mr. Smith—let's give our right-minded stranger a name—in a fit of virtuous indignation enthusiastically strangled Ismay. Then, finding he had gone rather further than was his original intention, to the point of being a murderer himself, he was very properly embarrassed, as I myself should have been in the circumstances. You agree it was rather an awkward predicament for him, don't you?"

The detective was listening intently, but said nothing.

"A snappy idea came to Mr. Smith's rescue," Andy went on. "Why not bundle the corpse out of the door while the train was rushing through the night and give the verisimilitude of suicide? Right! Away goes the late Silas Ismay, but Mr. Smith still has a touch of cold feet. He sees the handbag, and having no idea that it contains fifty perfectly good jimmy o' goblins, which would barely have been adequate recompense for all his trouble anyway, he slings this away on to

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the line also, to suggest the robbery idea. Then he cleared out. I see one or two weak points, but how about it?"

Silver thoughtfully straightened the blotting pad on his desk.

"Maybe you're right, up to a point," he agreed. "Your idea's ingenious but it doesn't quite measure up. Would your Mr. Smith have clutched on to Ismay's throat long enough to cause death when all he really wanted was to save the girl?"

"It's debatable," said Andy Collinson. "He wasn't used to strangling folk, so he didn't quite know when to stop."

"But," the detective went on, "as Mr. Smith was actuated by the highest of motives, would he, after all, have walked away leaving the girl with a cord tied round her throat? It would at least have been considerate to have unfastened it."

"That's true, but he didn't notice the cord. One is never at one's best just after committing a murder."

"Your Mr. Smith certainly wasn't or he would have realized that throwing the bag out on to the track wouldn't even deceive a newspaper crime expert."

Andy grinned.

"Well, Sherlock, perhaps you'll give me some of the real dope. One makes rotten bricks without straw."

Silver was still pensive.

"I'm not so sure that you haven't got somewhere near the truth," he commented. "I'm not going to turn your idea down entirely. However, read that letter."

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It was the communication from Nobby. Andy glanced through it.

"That makes a difference," said the newspaper man quickly. "I don't quite see how, at the moment, but there might easily be some sort of connection. Was *this* what you rang me up about?"

"No. And by the way, I don't want a hint about that letter of Nobby's to appear in print yet. Understand? Now, where you can help me is this. We've just had a surprising statement from the York police and I want to obtain the widest possible publicity for it without delay."

Silver continued speaking for a while and Collinson puffed away at his pipe.

Half an hour later tape machines were clicking out the following message in every newspaper office:

A dramatic development has occurred regarding the murder and attempted murder, already reported, on the mail train due at King's Cross at midnight.

Silas Ismay, who was found strangled on the line, was returning to London from York where he had been having a business interview with an Australian named Oliver Foss. Ismay left Foss's house at 4 P.M. and caught the seven-twenty London express.

To-day when a detective called at Foss's rooms in York he was informed that the Australian had not been seen since 5 P.M., that is to say, an hour after he and Ismay parted. Foss was in a state of considerable agitation when his landlady last

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spoke to him, and she is anxious about his welfare.

In view of the tragedy which occurred on the mail train the police desire to make sure that Foss has not also been the victim of foul play.

His description is as follows: Height about five feet ten, age 32, blue eyes, dark hair, and closely clipped moustache. Wearing a brown suit and soft felt hat.

Any information concerning this man should be given to the police without delay.

Sliding the tape through his fingers at the office of the *Daily Budget*, Andy Collinson smiled oddly. That delicate reference to the solicitude of the police on behalf of Oliver Foss was his artistic effort.

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CHAPTER VII

MRS. ELM'S FEARS

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR SILVER jumped off a bus in King's Road, Chelsea, near Cheyne Terrace. Turning into Welland Street, he knocked at the door of No. 17 and make a swift inspection of the woman who appeared before him. A tired-looking faded, middle-aged body who had obviously been crying.

"Mrs. Elm?"

"That's my name, sir," she said in a low voice.

"I believe Miss Mulholland has rooms here. You got a message from the police saying what has happened?"

The woman winced visibly.

"That's right, sir."

"I'd like to ask you a few questions. I'm from Scotland Yard."

"You'd better come in." She opened a door. "This is, or rather was, her sitting room," the woman added, leading the way.

"I shouldn't distress myself too much if I were you, Mrs. Elm," said the detective. "The girl may recover."

"But that doesn't alter the fact that the poor soul's been half murdered, does it?" the woman answered with a touch of motherly fierceness.

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"She'd been with you a long time?"

"Over two years." Mrs. Elm dabbed her eyes. "As nice a girl as I ever met in my life, too."

"So I understand. Had she many friends?"

"Miss Mulholland wasn't a girl to go about a lot," replied the woman.

"But people used to come and see her here sometimes, I suppose?"

"Young ladies she played tennis with occasionally. Then," her eyes hardened a shade, which fact Silver quietly observed, "there was her young man. He called now and then during the last few months."

"You know his name?"

"Irwin. I say," she went on eagerly, "you don't think he did it, do you?"

"Do you know anything against him?"

"No, I can't exactly say that I do. In fact I've hardly spoken to the man. But I understand he's a foreigner."

"Well, anyway, he's American," said Silver with a reassuring smile.

"I don't trust foreigners, sir. That's why I asked if you thought he'd done it."

"As a matter of fact I don't," the detective declared. "I have every reason to believe that Irwin dined here in London with Mr. Lawrence Bruce on the night of the tragedy."

Mrs. Elm looked relieved.

"I hope whoever did it will get caught, sir," she said, bristling with loyalty.

"Now, Mrs. Elm, I want you to cast your mind

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back. Is there any other man who has come here occasionally?"

"No, I'm sure of that."

"You and Miss Mulholland often used to chat, I suppose?"

"Many a time."

"Has she ever said anything which has now been brought back to your memory by this outrage?"

Mrs. Elm regarded the detective oddly.

"Well, nothing that she *said*, exactly."

"No, but there was something, wasn't there?" Inspector Silver's tone was peculiarly smooth.

"I've noticed she's had a good cry sometimes."

"You mean, perhaps, after she had received a letter?"

"It's funny you saying that, sir. It's just what I do mean."

"And when did you last notice this?"

"Let me see—yes, on Friday. I took her a cup of tea and a letter before she got out of bed. And her eyes were all red when she came down to breakfast."

"Did you happen to observe the postmark of that letter?"

"I didn't think of looking, sir."

"Have you any idea who the letter was from?"

"No, sir."

Silver could have relieved his feelings by swearing.

"It is a pity, Mrs. Elm, because that might have been very useful."

The woman leaned forward a little, and lowered her voice.

"There was somebody Miss Mulholland knew who

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was no good. She sort of admitted that to me about six weeks ago."

"Can you remember what her words were?"

"Well, I was telling her that I've had a hard life, my husband having died in prison. I recollect exactly what she said then. 'I can sympathize with you, Mrs. Elm, because I also have——' Then she broke off just like that."

"As if she'd gone a bit too far?" Silver suggested.

"Yes, but I knew pretty well what she meant, as you can see for yourself. There's somebody she's connected with who's done time. At first I thought maybe she'd got a husband who'd been locked up, though of course she's taken on with this Mr. Irwin. Not that a thing like that nowadays means that she hasn't got a husband somewhere, 'specially if he's doing a long stretch."

Silver was barely listening now. If Enid Mulholland had a gaol bird for a husband, and if she declined to live with him, it might well be his fingers which had tightened about the throat of that man and girl on the midnight mail.

"Did Miss Mulholland ever say anything which led you to believe she was afraid of this man you are speaking of?" asked Silver.

"She never mentioned him, sir, excepting that once, and I've told you all she said."

"Who," he asked in his most casual was, "was Nobby?"

"Nobby? I never heard the name," she answered, and Silver thought it reasonable to suppose that the woman was telling the truth.

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He walked away from the house slowly. If Nobby had committed the murder, why had Oliver Foss disappeared off the face of the earth in such a strange fashion? Were Nobby and Oliver Foss one and the same? If so a strong chain of circumstantial evidence against the man was forming.

That certainly was an interesting thought. Silver's step quickened. He knew, however, the danger of allowing imagination to run away with him. Letters from Foss would be filed away at the office of the Anglo-American Theatrical Syndicate. Nobby's writing was loose and rather sprawling. If, on being compared, they were identical, several pieces of the puzzle on which he was engaged would automatically drop into place.

It was not entirely by chance that presently he was sitting next to Sally Marsh in a popular restaurant near her office. That, actually, was the third place which he had explored before he happened to find her. Here Jimmy Silver confirmed a previous impression that Sally Marsh was an extremely nice girl. Also that she had brains. There was some attractive quality, too, about her voice. He wondered what her hair was like before she had allowed them to cut it off. Not that a shingle didn't look smart in her case, but . . .

Silver checked that train of thought reluctantly. Peculiarly interesting though he personally found them, such reflections had no bearing upon his business of the moment.

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CHAPTER VIII

SILVER MAKES A JOURNEY

BY THE time Inspector Silver again reached his own quarters in Scotland Yard he was in a mood to shut himself up and do a little mental stock taking. That bright idea of his about Nobby and Oliver Foss being one and the same person was apparently all wrong. The letters from Foss which had been shown to him at the office of the Anglo-American Theatrical Syndicate were in small precise writing, utterly different from that of Nobby.

Silver smoked cigarettes for a while, gazing at the ceiling, with his feet in their usual place on the desk, and reviewed the situation generally. One after another he ticked off the people who had come under his notice since the midnight mail case had been put into his hands. Then, reaching for a scribbling pad, he began to reduce his thoughts to black and white. That proceeding sometimes had a clarifying effect. Jerkily, his pencil moved over the paper as he wrote:

Motive. Apparently not robbery. When found, Ismay still had a considerable sum of money and a valuable watch in his possession. The girl's handbag

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had not been looted either. Revenge or jealousy might have been the motive if Ismay and Enid Mulholland had been conducting a love affair, but there is no evidence that they were.

Peter Irwin. If jealousy was the motive he would have been a suspect except for the fact that he dined in London on the evening the murder was committed. And that seems to let him out.

Lawrence Bruce automatically ruled out, because he dined with Irwin. Besides, Bruce has everything to lose through the murder, Ismay being a vital factor in their very successful business.

The Guard. Not worth considering, unless he is a homicidal maniac. Must look into his family history.

Victor Braintree, the man in the corridor, had every opportunity of committing the crime. Will pull him in if I can trace any previous association between him and the girl or the dead man. Didn't act like a murderer, but that might mean nothing. Might have been wearing gloves when he committed the crime, which would explain his indifference about leaving fingerprints on the cigarette case.

Nobby. Definitely a suspect. If he himself did not commit the murder he probably was an accessory. Must find him anyhow. This man was certainly after the money that Enid Mulholland had in her bag. He might have got cold feet after thinking he had killed them both, and threw the handbag away in a panic. Probably he didn't know Ismay had a wad of money in his wallet.

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