THE MAN WHO WAS DEAD

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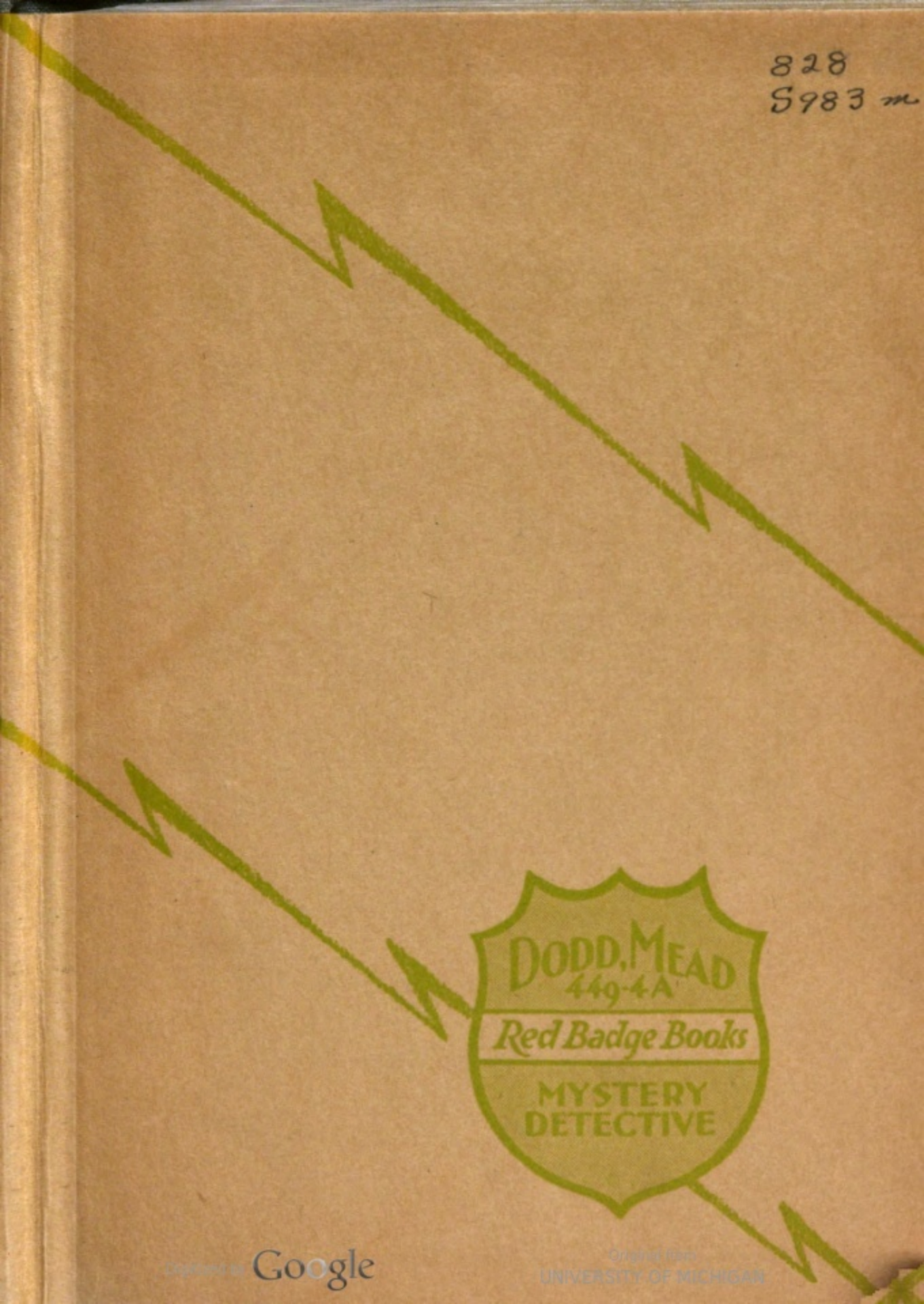

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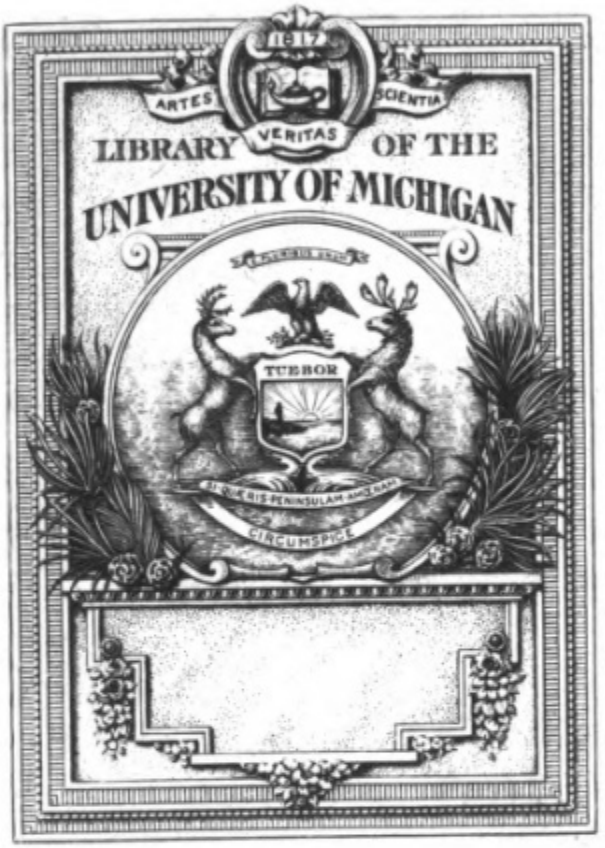

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THE MAN WHO WAS DEAD

BY W. STANLEY SYKES

When the ordinary business man is ten minutes late to his office the fact is unnoticed. When Mr. Levinsky, the money-lender, did not appear on the dot of nine, his tardiness was a matter for police investigation. With scarcely a clue to lead them, Inspectors Ridley and Drury set to work and although they lacked the divine intuition that solves fictional murders so easily, before long they had linked this mysterious disappearance to the prosaic funeral of another man and were on the track of a truly formidable murderer.

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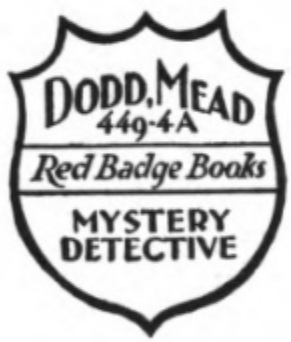

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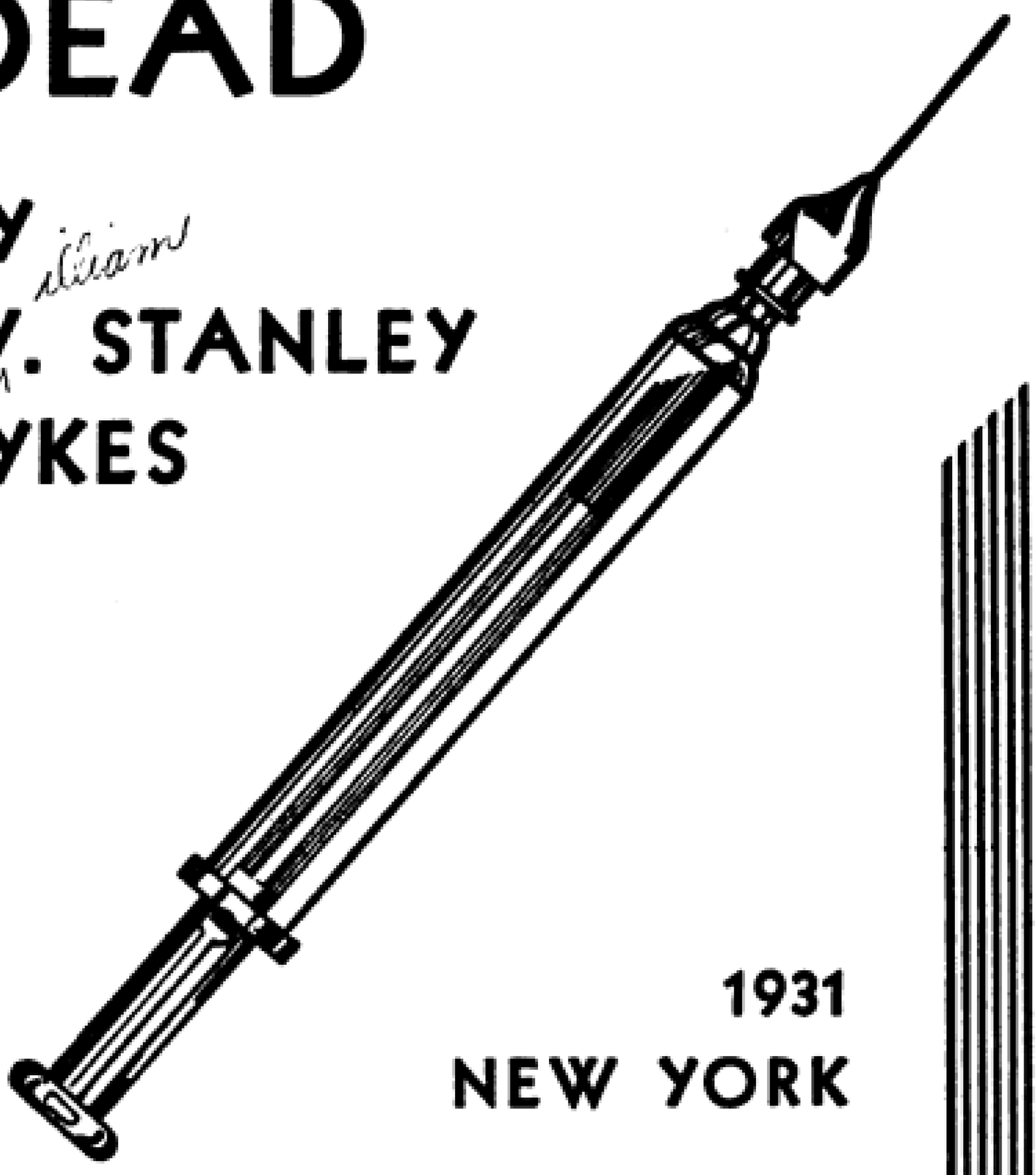

1931

NEW YORK

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	THE DEATH OF DR. LAIDLAW	1
II	WHERE IS MR. LEVINSKY?	20
III	MR. TOMLIN PUTS HIS FOOT IN IT	62
IV	THE STOLEN ADDRESS BOOK	71
V	A DISCREPANCY IN THE TIME-TABLE	84
VI	THE MAN WHO WAS DEAD	109
VII	"THE POLICE HAVE MADE AN ARREST"	132
VIII	THE EXHUMATION	149
IX	A QUESTION OF IDENTITY	159
X	THE INQUEST	173
XI	THE OPINION OF THE FOURTH ESTATE	193
XII	THE PRISONER MAKES A STATEMENT	199
XIII	HOLM LEA AGAIN	216
XIV	THE POISON THAT IS NOT A POISON	232
XV	THE RE-EXAMINATION	249
XVI	AN ANALYTICAL LOOPHOLE	266
XVII	THE OFFICE BOY'S REVENGE	277
XVIII	THE THIRD ANALYSIS	283
XIX	THE BEGINNING OF THE END	295

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CHAPTER I

THE DEATH OF DR. LAIDLAW

"THE other day one of my patients told me that he had applied for the job of public executioner," remarked Dr. James Osborne, settling himself more comfortably in his chair and lighting a much charred pipe with a demand note from the local rating authority.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed the occupant of the other arm-chair. "What a brute the man must be!"

"Not at all. He is a model husband, a good patient and quite a respectable citizen in a humble way. He has three children and is very fond of them, and he wouldn't sell his dog for all the money in your bank."

"What on earth did he do it for, then?"

"Probably he wants a spare-time job—like your insurance work or my gardening. Or perhaps he just wants a change. Most people get fed up with their own work now and then. I think you ought to have a job like that, Woods, instead of your insurance agency. It probably wouldn't be as profitable, but that doesn't matter much when it's a hobby —Art for Art's sake, you know. And just imagine

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how soothing it would be, after counting other people's money all day, to go and hang somebody before starting again next morning! Besides, you'd get about a bit more. Instead of sticking in this forsaken hole for forty-nine weeks every year and spending the other three at Scarborough you'd get to Pentonville and all sorts of thrilling places."

George Woods, bank manager and Borough Treasurer, was shocked to the depths of his conventional soul, for he was a staid and prosaic individual, as befitted his occupation. His habits were clock-like in their precision, and his ideas had crystallized into their final and unchangeable form many years before, which often caused him to be scandalized at the outrageous opinions of his irresponsible and eccentric friend—for friends they were in spite of, or perhaps because of, their differences.

Osborne was a born talker and debater, as casual and unbusiness-like as most doctors and less conventional than the majority. He wore plus fours and a soft collar even when visiting his best patients, regardless of the fact that Southbourne was rather a fashionable holiday resort. He always insisted that he wore them simply because the other doctors in the town did not, and vowed that he had no use for patients who selected their doctor because of his "gents' superfine suitings." In actual

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fact he wore them because they were comfortable and because they released him from the thraldom of the trouser-press. He was of the opinion that the inventor of these garments was one of the great intellects of all time, and that the hallmark of true genius lay in the magnificent simplicity of the discovery that it was possible to abolish baggy knees for ever by making them baggy to begin with. So ran his argument. He had a moderate private income and, in the happy position of not being wholly dependent upon his profession, could afford to indulge his little eccentricities. Owing to the natural perversity of things in general he had a very good practice, although he made no attempt whatever to conciliate public opinion or the whims of his patients. Brusque, frank and almost brutally outspoken as he was, his patients loved him and came back for more. Many neurotics whom other medical men dared not offend for financial reasons had been reduced to tears and later restored to health by his plain-speaking.

Woods afforded a complete contrast to his loquacious friend. He was a natural listener and regarded any new or unusual idea with grave suspicion. He had never even contemplated the possibility of going to his office in anything but a black coat and striped trousers, and waged constant warfare against the sartorial exuberance of the younger members of

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his staff. He was business-like in all things and always answered letters by return of post, whereas Osborne rarely answered them at all.

Osborne put his long legs up at an angle of forty-five degrees and added a few more scratches to the criss-cross pattern already engraved by his golf shoes on the painted marble of the mantelpiece.

"Did you know," he continued, "that one of the retired executioners has been publishing his reminiscences in the Sunday papers?"

"No, I did not. I never read them. I do not approve of Sunday work."

"Hear, hear! No more do I," replied Osborne, who had to work every Sunday himself. "Do you read the Monday morning papers, then?"

"Yes, of course."

"They're printed on Sunday, you know."

Mr. Woods abandoned this point and returned to the original one.

"They ought not to be allowed to publish horrible things like that," he said indignantly.

"Why not?" asked Osborne innocently.

Mr. Woods failed to perceive that he was being lured into one of their frequent arguments, in which he always had the worst of it.

"Why not?" he repeated in surprise. "Goodness knows I'm not a highbrow, but there ought to be a limit to the callousness of sensation-mongers."

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Probably, in his heart of hearts, Osborne agreed with this very proper remark, but he was quite unable to resist the temptation to do a little argumentative leg-pulling.

"And why should a hangman's autobiography be less respectable than an admiral's?"

The bank manager, as he knew very well, was rather partial to this form of literature, which supplied him vicariously with the spice of adventure which was so conspicuously lacking in his own life.

"You are surely not trying to make out that distinguished soldiers and sailors are on the same footing as a hangman?"

"Well, is there any essential difference? Wash out sentiment, prejudice, social and financial differences and everything else that has raised the prestige of the profession of arms and degraded the trade of hangman and come down to facts. They are both employed by the State, aren't they?"

"Yes, O Socrates!" replied Woods with elephantine humour.

"They both kill at the bidding of the State, don't they?"

"Y-es," admitted Woods reluctantly, seeing his argument beginning to rock upon its foundations.

"And they are both under contract to kill any person whom they are ordered to kill without being allowed to use their own judgment as to whether

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he is worthy of death. That is decided for them in advance—in one case by the law courts, and in the other by the Cabinet. So they are all square so far. The only difference to my mind," continued Osborne, allowing his feet to fall off the mantelpiece as he warmed to his task, "is that the hangman only meets in his official capacity those who have been condemned to death after a careful and very expensive trial—in other words, those who can well be spared—whereas the soldier may have to kill men who are worthy and useful citizens. One up for the hangman!"

Woods was silent for a moment. The logical arguments of his companion, even when they were only half serious and directed to the defence of the most indefensible propositions, were always difficult to meet.

"But the man must be a mere brute without a spark of feeling or imagination—offering himself to kill in cold blood," was the best retort he could raise on the spur of the moment.

"He need not be worse than other people," came the ready reply. "Suppose you were one of those Italian chappies in the Middle Ages and hired an assassin cash down to knife your hated rival, wouldn't you be guilty of murder just as much as your employé? You would. Very well, then. The hangman carries out the actual act, but he is morally

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no more responsible for the death of the criminal than the judge who pronounces the sentence, or the jury which returns the verdict. You take just as much part in every execution as he does because you, as a citizen, authorize him to do it. He is merely the instrument of the law, and the law is merely the will of the people. Uncomfortable thought, isn't it?"

"Confound you, you are so beastly plausible! I believe you could take over my job to-morrow and make people think you knew something about it!"

"I should like to try," said Osborne meditatively. "All I know about banking is that I would rather sign a cheque on the back than on the front. But there is one thing I could do rather well: I could stand behind the counter and throw the paid-in cheques over the partition beautifully! Seriously, though, I should like to change places with you for a time."

"I'd do the same cheerfully. I often think your job must be more exciting than mine."

"Exciting! It's about as dull as any professional work can be, besides being confoundedly inconvenient. You chaps do know what time you are going to finish your work. I don't. You have your week-ends free. I haven't. It must be perfectly topping to down tools at five o'clock and know there is nothing more to do till morning."

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"What about the other side of it—the horrible monotony of having to be in your office at nine every day? You can, at any rate, start your work when you like and do it when you like. And then think of all the thrilling things that happen—accidents and cases of that sort."

"Accidents aren't thrilling. They are a damned nuisance. They come at the most inconvenient times, when you are very busy doing other work or having a meal or trying to snatch a game of golf. And then what good are you when you get there? About as much use as a sick headache. The only thing that can be done by the roadside or in the neighbouring pub is first-aid—and that has always been done already by a policeman or somebody. Then you bung them off to hospital and miss all the interesting part of it. Now in your job there is always a sporting chance of somebody coming in and shooting at the place with a revolver and going off with the cash—"

"Pull yourself together, my dear man. We aren't living in Chicago. You talk as if bank robbers queued up every morning waiting for the doors to open."

"There is always the chance of somebody trying to pass a forged cheque or a dud banknote, anyhow."

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"Well, don't you ever get people trying to do you?"

"Not in that way. I suppose a bit of malingering goes on in panel practice. Some people might spin out an illness in order to draw a few bob extra Lloyd George money, as they call it—after all, there are fifteen million insured persons, and they can't all be honest—but I do hardly any panel work and private patients have no inducement to try it on. Their specialty is trying to avoid paying their doctor's bills."

Osborne got up and rummaged about among the litter on the mantelpiece. After a few minutes he found the letter he was looking for and sat down again. He looked at it almost affectionately and read it through, though he knew its contents by heart.

"Talking of paying bills, or rather of not paying them, you have heard of the famous Aberdonian, I suppose?" he resumed.

"Heard of what?" said Woods abstractedly from behind the evening paper, which he had picked up when his host started reading.

"Whom, not what," corrected Osborne. "No, don't throw things about. I mean the man who took his wooden tee to the professional to be reshafted."

"Oh, yes, I know him."

"Here's a letter from one of his relations."

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The bank manager caught the envelope thrown across to him and read the enclosure.

"Seems to have a grouse about something. What's it all about?"

"He is a patient of mine who is a confounded nuisance—not a Scotchman, by the way."

"Not really?" said Woods, turning the letter over and contemplating the neat signature, "Israel Levinsky," at the bottom of the page.

"He's owed me forty pounds for four years and hasn't paid a penny yet. He must be fairly rich—I never heard of a money-lender who wasn't. At any rate, he lives in a very nice house and keeps an expensive car and a chauffeur. He'll nurse some potty little ailment for weeks and then send for me as urgently as if he'd broken his neck. I wish he would. I should make three guineas out of his inquest if he did, and that's more than I shall ever get out of him while he's alive! Unpleasant sort of chap to visit too. He's always grumbling and complaining and invariably seems to think it is my fault he is ill. I hate the very sight of him as a patient, though I believe he is rather a decent chap in other ways. I will say this for him—he doesn't call himself Griffith Jones or Angus Macalister, like most of them do. He doesn't even hide himself behind the name of a company. A Jew as a Jew is all right, but a Jew

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who pretends he is a Gentile is a nasty bit of work."

"Why do you attend him if you are so fed up with him?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose I have been too slack with him. I hate dunning people for money, but something will have to be done about this. He encloses my last two bills and deduces from the difference between them that he was charged ten and sixpence for the one visit he had last quarter. Quite right too, and dirt cheap at the price. He called me out of bed at two o'clock in the morning in midwinter and it would have done just as well next day, or next week for that matter. Well, you can tell how serious it was when he told me at the end of the visit that I needn't call again unless he sent for me. Can you imagine any one having the cheek to write and complain about a bill that ought to have been paid long since? The fellow must have a hide like a rhinoceros. I'm going to settle him once and for all. I bet he doesn't give his creditors four years' grace."

Dr. Osborne took his fountain-pen from his pocket and a writing-pad from the top of the coal-box and relapsed into silence.

"How will this do?" he asked at length, signing his name with an emphasis that nearly drove the pen through the paper.

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"SIR:

"You complain that you were charged half a guinea for a visit, and request details. Said details herewith. This very moderate fee was charged for services of at least three or four times that value. In the first place, the night call was quite unnecessary. Secondly, although the actual time spent at your house was short, a much-needed night's rest was completely spoilt. Thirdly, in addition to my expenditure of time and loss of sleep there are my motoring expenses for nearly three miles. For this alone a taxi-driver would charge you as much at 2 a.m. Fourthly, you had the benefit of a professional man's ten years' experience and twenty years' expensive education, which you cannot expect to have for the price of unskilled labour. Finally, my books show that you have already had four years' medical attention for nothing. It therefore seems to me to be immaterial to you whether you are charged ten shillings or ten guineas a visit. If there are any details I have inadvertently omitted in this explanation they will be gladly furnished on request."

"Jove, that's a bit strong, isn't it?" ejaculated Woods. "Won't it do your practice a lot of harm?"

"Not it. I shall lose him as a patient of course, and a good job too, but he's not likely to tell anybody else about it. He won't broadcast the news that he's been turned down because he doesn't pay.

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This letter is going off to-night. Where's a stamp?"

Just as Osborne got up from his chair the bell rang. A few moments later footsteps came down the passage and a maid entered the room.

"A lady wants you to go to Holm Lea, Castle Road, sir."

"To-night?"

"Yes, sir. She said it was urgent."

"They all do. What sort of a case is it?"

"She didn't say, sir, except that it was a doctor who was ill."

"I'll go and see her in a moment."

"Very good, sir. I'll tell her."

The maid left the room and Osborne knocked out his pipe viciously.

"Doctor?" he said. "Don't know any doctors in Castle Road. What the devil does she want to come at this time for, anyway? Damn all patients!" He went out, still grumbling, and slammed the door behind him.

Woods smiled tolerantly. He had heard it all before on many occasions. Osborne invariably looked upon it as a personal insult if he was asked to go out in the evening, but he very rarely refused to go. In a few minutes he put his head round the door corner again.

"Sorry I have to go out, Woods. I shall be back in half an hour, so don't go unless you want to."

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On the way to Castle Road the lady, Mrs. Laidlaw by name, told him that her husband had had an attack of influenza a few weeks previously, from which he had not recovered very well.

"He tried to start working again," she explained, "but he could not manage it. You see, we live in a manufacturing town and the practice is a very hard one. If it had been summer I think he could have managed, but the influenza epidemic was more than he could cope with, so I persuaded him to keep on the locum and come here for a rest. We took a furnished house for a month, and the first week seemed to do him a lot of good."

"When did he start being ill?" asked Osborne, whose irritation had now somewhat subsided.

"Yesterday morning. He began with a bad headache, but neither of us thought much about it at first. He thought his glasses might want altering—he wears glasses for reading—so he gave up reading and took some aspirins. They relieved the pain a bit; but he got worse and worse in himself and I got really frightened just before I came for you. He seemed very feverish and I couldn't get a sensible answer out of him at all. He didn't seem to know me."

Mrs. Laidlaw talked very rapidly and excitedly in a high-pitched rather metallic voice. Osborne was surprised to find that she was so emotional, because

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his first impression of her had been that of a very self-controlled woman. She had a strong-featured face which would have been strikingly handsome if it had not been for her lips, which were too thin for beauty and which gave her an expression of latent cruelty and hardness. This was belied, however, by her evident concern for her husband. When they arrived at the house, which was within five minutes' walk, she took Osborne upstairs at once, only waiting for him to remove his coat in the hall. As they entered the bedroom a girl in housemaid's uniform got up from a chair by the fire.

"You can go now, Elsie," said Mrs. Laidlaw. "Don't go to bed though until we know whether there is any medicine to fetch."

The girl left the room and Osborne went up to the bedside. A single glance showed that the patient's wife had ample cause for anxiety. The man looked ill—very ill. He was lying on his side with his head thrown back to an unnatural angle, and his wide-open eyes roamed restlessly to and fro with an unseeing stare. His florid, bloated face proclaimed him to be a drinker, but a moment's examination showed that something more than mere drunkenness was present. As Osborne switched on the shaded bedlight he noticed that the pupils of the eyes were unequal. One of them was normal in size, the other was widely dilated like that of a cat at night. He

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gave vent to a little noiseless whistle of professional interest and sat on the bed the better to examine the ominous inequality.

"I've brought the doctor to see you, dear," said Mrs. Laidlaw, leaning over and touching her husband lightly on the shoulder.

There was no answer.

"Speak to me, Harry," she whispered. Her voice had lost all its harshness and become softly and attractively tender. "He has been unconscious like that for two hours," she continued, turning to Osborne, who was unhooking his stethoscope from his braces.

The examination of the unconscious patient was interrupted by a violent attack of sickness, which drained all the colour from the unfortunate man's face and left it pale and damp. After this had passed off Osborne took a thermometer out of his pocket and was about to insert it under the tongue when Mrs. Laidlaw, who was watching anxiously, intervened.

"He has been grinding his teeth a good deal this evening, doctor. I tried to take his temperature and he nearly bit the thermometer in two."

"Thanks very much. In that case it must go under his arm." On removal it registered 104.4°.

"Your husband is very ill, I'm afraid," said Osborne seriously. "The temperature, the eyes, the

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position of the head and the sickness all point to meningitis."

"That's very dangerous, isn't it?"

"Yes. Of course he has a chance of recovery" (a better one if he didn't booze so much, thought Osborne to himself). "Things are by no means hopeless, but it is undoubtedly dangerous. I think we ought to get a nurse in to-night and get a consultant to see him as soon as possible in the morning. I should like a second opinion on the case, not because there is any doubt about the diagnosis, but on account of the danger."

"I was a nurse before we were married, doctor, so I can manage for a day or two if you give me instructions."

Osborne discussed the treatment fully, promised to call again early in the morning and then returned to his fireside.

"Anything exciting?" queried Woods sleepily.

"Not a bit. Interesting from a medical point of view, because there were signs of meningitis with normal knee-jerks and abdominal reflexes, if you know what they are. But thrilling, no."

"I do not know what abdominal reflexes are, and I do not want to know," replied the Borough Treasurer with fictitious austerity. "They sound disgusting and it is time to go to bed."

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Twelve hours later Dr. Laidlaw was slightly better and the idea of obtaining a further opinion was abandoned.

A second visit in the evening found the improvement maintained, and Osborne began to be a little more hopeful, though he still thought there was great danger, and said as much to the patient's wife.

"You really must get a nurse to-morrow," was his parting injunction. "Nobody can work twenty-four hours a day, even for their husbands."

Mrs. Laidlaw looked exhausted with worry and want of sleep. She said that she had been up for two days and two nights, and she certainly looked like it. Her beautiful grey eyes had dark shadows beneath them and her face was drawn and white. She gave a definite promise to get the nurse.

But, as it happened, its fulfilment was not necessary. Early next morning she was the first arrival at the doctor's.

"What's the matter? Is he worse?" asked Osborne, somewhat startled by her appearance.

"He died at eight o'clock this morning," she sobbed, sinking down into the consulting-room chair and burying her face in her handkerchief.

"I am very sorry indeed to hear it," he replied awkwardly. Like most medical men he could never overcome a feeling of embarrassment and professional disappointment on these occasions in spite of

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their frequency. "I don't think it would have made any difference if we had had further advice," he continued. "It was a severe attack and the risk was very considerable right from the beginning."

"I know. Please don't think that I am dissatisfied in any way, doctor. I am sure you did everything that could be done for him, and I am very grateful to you. He had rather a quieter night and then got worse suddenly about half-past six. That awful sickness came on again, and this time it seemed to be too much for his heart and his pulse got weaker and stopped. I hadn't time to send for you until it was too late, it all happened so quickly; and then, when he was dead, I knew it was no good bothering you during breakfast-time."

Osborne mentally blessed the good sense of the woman, which stood out in sharp contrast to the occasional idiots who woke him up in the middle of the night to inform him that an expected death had taken place. He murmured a few words of sympathy as he took the death certificate book out of its drawer and began to fill in the details.

This formality completed, the newly made widow departed with her copy and he turned his attention to the demands of the living, who were beginning to accumulate in the waiting-room.

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CHAPTER II

WHERE IS MR. LEVINSKY?

MR. ROSENBAUM, clerk to the firm of Levinsky & Co., Financiers, halted at the top of the second flight of steps in Union Bank Chambers, pinched off the lighted end of his cigarette and stowed the remainder carefully away for future use. From another pocket he took his latch-key and opened the door of the office where for thirty years he had spent most of his waking hours. As he entered he looked through the window at the Town Hall clock, which stood at five minutes to nine, and then he took off his somewhat seedy coat and replaced it by a still seedier one, polished to extreme shininess by years of friction. He next fetched the letters and arranged them in a neat pile on the table.

This was his invariable routine—the after-breakfast cigarette was always half-finished when he arrived, he inevitably looked at the Town Hall clock directly he entered, although he knew perfectly well it was five minutes to nine, and he never took out the letters before changing his coat. In all things he was a creature of habit; consequently he was still a clerk after thirty years' service.

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He uncovered the typewriter and began his day's work with the slow and dignified touch of one whose employer has not yet arrived. When he had typed about half a page he heard footsteps coming up the stairs and the rattling of the keys increased in speed and then stopped suddenly as the bell rang. He got up and opened the door.

"Is Mr. Levinsky in?" asked the man standing outside.

"Not yet," said Mr. Rosenbaum. "But he will be here in a minute or two. Will you come in and wait?"

The visitor came in and sat down and the clerk went on with his work. The clicking of the typewriter was very intermittent, because its operator kept stopping to turn round and consult the clock. Really it was very extraordinary, and Mr. Rosenbaum could not understand it at all. When he told the man at the door that his employer would be only a few minutes he believed it with the same unquestioning faith that he believed the sun would rise in the morning. Mr. Levinsky was a man who made a fetish of punctuality, priding himself on never missing a meal or an appointment, and he had never been known to be late or away from the office without due notice.

A quarter past nine chimed and the waiting client became restive. He had a hard and uncomfortable

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chair to sit on and there was nothing to read within reach except the "Stock Exchange Handbook" for 1907. Dirty yellow distemper on the walls and threadbare linoleum on the floor, assisted by the barren hideousness of thirty-year-old office furniture, absorbed most of the feeble rays of spring sunlight which contrived to filter through the smeared and streaky windows. It was a dispiriting environment for a man who was already sufficiently depressed. Not many people visit a money-lender's office in a joyful, care-free frame of mind, and this particular client was no exception to the general rule.

"Hey, young man," he said at length, "I thought you said your boss would be here by now?"

Mr. Rosenbaum looked worried.

"So he ought to be," he replied. "He always comes at nine, and he's never been as late as this before."

"He told me to come at nine and said he'd have the money ready. Can't you let me have it? I don't want to wait here all day."

"I can't possibly. I haven't got the key of the safe."

The little clerk, who feared responsibility almost as much as he feared physical pain, would never have dared to hand over the money in any case, but was pleased to have a good excuse. At this point another prospective borrower arrived for his promised loan

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and was also persuaded to wait. Rosenbaum fussed about in a paroxysm of indecision, made worse by the fact that he had nothing to do. He had finished his typing—arrears of work from the previous day—and could do nothing for the borrowers. His usual routine was to begin with the replies to the morning's letters, but even this was denied him in the absence of his employer.

He went backwards and forwards from the door to the window, but there was no sign of Mr. Levinsky in either direction. The Town Hall clock chimed a quarter to ten, and Mr. Rosenbaum made up his mind to telephone for information or instructions. It was with some hesitation that he made even this decision, because he knew that the head of the firm made it a rule never to transact business of any kind at home.

"Hallo. Can I speak to Mr. Levinsky?" he said to the answering voice.

"I don't think he will be in, but if you wait a minute I'll go and see."

He waited several minutes, and then the same voice spoke again:

"He isn't in, Mr. Rosenbaum."

"Not in? Then, where is he?"

"At the office, I should think."

"Of course he isn't. What do you think I'm ringing up for?"

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"It's very funny. I'll go and have another look. He wasn't downstairs and there was no answer when I knocked at his door, but I'll look in the bedroom this time. He may be ill."

Another wait, and the housemaid again replied:

"There's nobody there and the bed hasn't been slept in. And the breakfast tray is still just where I put it, and it hasn't been touched. Whatever's happened, Mr. Rosenbaum?"

"I know nothing about it, except that he hasn't turned up, nor sent any message. I'll wait for him a bit longer and telephone again if he doesn't come."

The clerk rang off, astounded at this unexpected news. It was so completely at variance with the habits of a lifetime that he was seriously alarmed and resolved to wait no longer. He took up the receiver again and asked for the police station, regardless of the fact that one of the waiting clients melted silently away as he did so. This in itself showed his extreme agitation, for in addition to his salary he received a microscopic commission on business done, and a prospective borrower never escaped empty-handed without being buttonholed by Mr. Rosenbaum.

The policeman at the other end of the wire was also startled out of his official calm by the story, but for different reasons. That the station should be informed merely because a business man was late at

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his office seemed to him to savour of a practical joke, but the earnest entreaties of the money-lender's clerk finally induced him to switch the call through to his superior.

Inspector Ridley was not at all impressed by what he heard until the untouched bed and breakfast were mentioned. These, combined with the emphasis laid on the missing man's clock-work habits, appeared to rouse his interest, and he consented to come round to the office in person.

Ten minutes later he arrived, half expecting that his time was being wasted. He found, however, that the office was still occupied only by the clerk and the one remaining client, whose business was apparently as urgent as his conscience was clear.

"No more news yet?" asked the inspector.

"No, inspector."

"You don't know of any reason why Mr. Levinsky hasn't come?"

"None at all. I've never known it happen before, and I've been with him for thirty years. If he had known he was going to be late he would have let me know. He always did."

"Perhaps he has been called away suddenly on business," said Ridley, half to himself, thinking at the same time that he ought to have made this inquiry before leaving the station.

"He wasn't the sort of man to do that without

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preparations. When he went away he always told me beforehand for business reasons."

Ridley thought for a moment. He did not want to appear melodramatic, but the prosaic possibilities of the situation were well-nigh exhausted, so after slight hesitation he continued his catechism:

"Has he received any threatening letters lately?"

"Well, hardly that. He has had one or two abusive ones, but that's not altogether unusual. Money-lenders aren't always popular with their business customers, you know, although I must say our firm is pretty reasonable, considering the risk we take. Anyway, we've only been taken to court once on a plea of a harsh and unconscionable bargain, and we won our case. The only letter out of the ordinary is one we received a few days ago from a local doctor. I can show you that."

Rosenbaum went to a filing cabinet and came back with the letter which Dr. Osborne had written. The inspector read it and smiled.

"Did Mr. Osborne owe your firm any money?"

"No. He was Mr. Levinsky's doctor, and the boot was on the other leg according to this. I'm pretty certain the doctor didn't borrow from us."

"Has the firm been losing money lately?"

"Not that I know of. Of course Mr. Levinsky keeps his private books in the safe, and I really couldn't say for certain. I only deal with customer's

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accounts. But business has been quite good, and he hasn't seemed at all worried."

The inspector made a mental note to inquire into the financial state of the firm, if the case came to anything, and also to go through the letter files for evidence of threats. These two reasons appeared to him to be the most likely causes of a sudden disappearance.

"Did the office look quite normal this morning?" was his next question.

"Just as usual," replied the clerk. "There was nothing disarranged or out of place at all. Stop a minute, though. There was one thing which I noticed, but I don't suppose it is anything important."

"Doesn't matter whether you thought it was important or not," interrupted Ridley. "What was it?"

"That door was unfastened." He pointed to the private office which led out of the room in which they stood. "The boss is always very careful to lock it before he goes home, but he must have forgotten it last night."

"He was here yesterday, then?"

"Yes. He left at his usual time—half-past four."

"Did you notice that he had left the door unlocked?"

"Not at the time. I heard him and the charwoman come out, but I didn't take any particular

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notice. You see, he insists on keeping his private room locked when he is not in, and he never gives the key to anybody else, so it has to be dusted when he is there. The charwoman generally comes late in the afternoon when he has finished the more important work."

"You haven't a key, then?"

"No, not for this door. Only for the outer one."

The inspector went to the door and examined the lock. It did not appear to have been damaged or tampered with in any way, so he opened it and went in, followed by Mr. Rosenbaum.

The money-lender's private office was a pleasant room, comfortably furnished, and it seemed luxurious in comparison with the ante-chamber occupied by the clerk. There was a flat-topped desk facing the fire-place with a revolving arm-chair in front of it, another arm-chair by its side, a filing cabinet opposite the door and a very large safe let into the wall. By the side of the safe was a tin of metal polish and some cleaning rags. The floor was carpeted and the electric light subdued by a large and expensive alabaster bowl. Evidently Mr. Levinsky liked to work among comfortable surroundings.

Ridley turned to his companion as soon as he saw the cleaning rags.

"Is the charwoman available?"

"I should think so. She seems to spend most of

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her time in the building. She will probably be in one of the other offices. I'll go and get her if you like."

He went out on his errand and the inspector made a general survey of the room. First he went to the safe, and noticed that the door was shut and apparently locked. The handles and fittings were of bright brass, the body of the safe painted dull green, and it formed a handsome and imposing piece of furniture. He was about to try the knob when a sudden thought struck him and he refrained. Bending forward he looked at the glittering metal intently. There on its surface was a distinct finger-print, showing quitely plainly without the aid of dusting powder.

"Good job I didn't touch it," he said to himself. "I don't suppose it is anything important, but you never know. It can't be of any value, surely," he continued. "This is not a case of burglary, and anyhow it was probably left by the charwoman when she was cleaning."

In spite of these arguments, however, he did not touch the knob. He had long since learnt not to condemn anything as worthless on theoretical grounds. At this moment the clerk came back with the charwoman, a corpulent lady with a figure like an imperfectly filled sack of flour and a habit of wiping her hands on the piece of G.P.O. sacking which served her for an apron.

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"This is Mrs. Kenrick, inspector. She cleans all these offices."

Ridley devoted a few minutes to explaining to the flustered woman that he only wanted to ask her a few questions, and succeeded in convincing her that she was not going to be arrested. Experience had taught him that it saved time and temper in dealing with people of this type.

"Now, Mrs. Kenrick," he said, "you cleaned this office yesterday, I think?"

"Yes, I did," she replied in a bellicose tone. "And I don't see why you want to find fault with it."

"I'm not finding fault," he soothed. "I only want to know a few details. Did you clean this knob as well?"

"Yes, sir, and I'd like to know who's been putting their dirty fingers on it."

"So would I," commented Ridley. "You don't think you left that mark there by any chance?"

"What, just after I'd cleaned it? No fear!"

Mrs. Kenrick stepped forward and picked up her polishing rags with the evident intention of making a further onslaught on the offending knob there and then, but the inspector stopped her just in time.

"Not now, please. We may want it. What happened yesterday, Mrs. Kenrick, when you were in this room?"

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"I came in here about three o'clock, sir, and washed the windows first of all. Inside, of course. The outsides is done by the window-cleaners, and they come once a fortnight, and what with taking all the hot water they are more bother than they are worth. And that boy of theirs is that cheeky—"

"What was Mr. Levinsky doing while you were doing this?"

"He was writing at the desk. He did a lot of writing. He always seemed to be doing it whenever I came in. It beats me what he found to write about, but then I'm no scholar, nor never was. I left school when I was nine, I did—"

Further reminiscences of Mrs. Kenrick's infancy were cut short.

"What did you do next?"

"Lor', inspector, you do take me up sharp. I was telling you what I was doing. I washed the oilcloth next and dusted round the room, and then I gives them brasses a rub with Shino and was just polishing them when he got up to go, all in a hurry like, and I had to go too. He never lets me stop to finish anything. If it isn't done when he wants to go it has to wait till next day. Dirty 'abit, I calls it."

"You actually saw him leave, then?"

"I did that. I went out of the door with me bucket and floor-cloth and didn't have no time to go back for them polishing rags, and he came straight

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out after me so quick that he nearly shut the floor-cloth in the door."

"Did he lock it?"

"Yes. Catch him forgetting a thing like that!"

"Are you sure of that?"

"Certain."

Ridley was by now thoroughly interested. This latest discovery meant one of two things. Either the owner of the office had come back again, re-opened the door and forgotten to lock it, which was improbable in a person of his orderly and methodical habits, or some other person had paid an unauthorized visit to the room since he left. If so, the finger-print on the knob of the safe might be valuable.

"Phone to the police station," he said to Rosenbaum, "and ask them to get hold of a photographer and bring him along here straight away. Tell them it is for finger-prints."

He realized that he was drawing a bow at a venture. The marks might have been made by Mrs. Kenrick when she was cleaning the brasswork, in spite of her denials, which could easily be ascertained by taking prints of her hands and comparing them. They might also have been made by the owner of the safe on his lawful occasions, but in his absence Ridley did not see how this could be proved or disproved, unless by chance the prints could be identified by Scotland Yard as belonging to some one

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known to the police. It was obvious, however, that no matter what happened in the future it was essential to get a permanent record of them at once.

Meanwhile he returned to the interrogation of the charwoman, with special reference to the problem of whether the owner of the office had returned to it after he left. Mrs. Kenrick had by now quite recovered from her nervousness and was thrilled with the anticipation of an evening's gossip, with herself as the heroine of the story. The extraction of information was easy; it flowed from her in irrelevant verbosity on the slightest provocation. The difficulty was to stem the torrent and keep her to the point.

"What time did you leave here?"

"Half-past four. I noticed that because I looked at the clock. You can see the Town Hall nicely from this window, though me sight isn't as good as it was; and I'm not one of those who are always watching the clock, anyway. But I wanted to see if there was time to do any more work or whether it was time to go home."

"Oh, and did you go home?"

"No, sir; I went across to Hetherington's office."

"That is the firm who have the rooms on the other side of the landing," interposed Mr. Rosenbaum, who had returned from the telephone.

Ridley at once asked to see these rooms, where-

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upon the three crossed the outer office and went out.

"Now, tell me exactly what you did when you got here."

Mrs. Kenrick opened Hetherington's door with a flourish.

"All I did was to scrub the floor in this passage. It has to be done twice a week because there's always such a lot of folks going in and out."

"Did you have the door open all the time?"

"Yes, sir; there isn't enough light if you don't. They keep all these office doors shut and expect me to get the passage clean whether I can see or not. I'd like some of them there young hussies who work them trypewriter things to scrub it for a bit. With their silk stockings and their bobbed 'air." Mrs. Kenrick sniffed loudly and then, as an additional precaution, wiped her nose on her apron.

"How long were you there?"

"Till it was time to stop work."

"Yes, yes; but what time was that?"

The charwoman looked at the inspector with a pitying smile.

"Five o'clock," she condescended to reply.

"We know, then, that you saw Mr. Levinsky leave his private office. Did you see him leave his offices altogether?"

"Yes. I saw him speak to Mr. Rosenbaum here and then go straight downstairs."

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"Quite right," agreed that gentleman. "And I left about five minutes afterwards."

"Now, listen, Mrs. Kenrick—this is important—when you were across in these offices with the door open you could see or hear anybody who got into or tried to get into Levinsky's, couldn't you?"

"Ay, I could have done if anybody had done, but I didn't see nobody nor nothing."

The inspector ploughed his way through this sea of negatives and arrived at its true meaning. This proved that the missing man had not returned to his office up to 5 p.m., at any rate.

At that moment steps were heard coming up the stairs and a plain clothes sergeant, accompanied by a photographer, arrived. Ridley instructed them to photograph the finger-prints he had found, and also to persuade Mrs. Kenrick to have her prints taken. He then made a note of her address, ejected the disappointed borrower and left the men in charge of the office.

"Come round with me to his house," he said to the clerk. "How long has he been in Southbourne, by the way?"

"He came to live here about five years ago, and opened this office then. He brought me with him when he sold his Bradford business."

"Why did he do that?"

"What? Bring me with him? I suppose he

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didn't want to get another clerk who knew nothing about the business."

"No. I mean why did he sell it?"

"Well, I think—though, mind you, he would never admit it—that he had made as much money as he wanted, and he simply started this new concern in order to have something to do."

On arrival at Croft Villa there was no need to ring the bell. The front door opened as they were approaching it and an apprehensive housemaid admitted them. It was obvious from her expression that her master had not yet turned up, and Ridley plunged straight away into the task of following up the information received from the charwoman.

"What time did Mr. Levinsky get home last night?" he asked.

"Just before five o'clock, sir."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he always gets in at that time and I should have noticed it if he hadn't. He has tea at five, and it has to be punctual or there is an awful fuss about it."

"Rather late, isn't it?"

"Well, it isn't afternoon tea, sir. He calls it high tea, and he doesn't have dinner in the evening." The maid, who was South Country born and bred, was slightly supercilious. "He lived in Yorkshire most of his life," she added in extenua-

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tion, "and he often used to say that he liked Yorkshire ways best."

"What did he do after tea?"

"He stayed in all the evening, sir. I took his supper into the dining-room at nine, and he was there till ten to my certain knowledge."

"What happened then?"

"I went to bed at ten, so I don't know. I was asleep in a few minutes."

"I see. Thanks very much. Now, what about the cook? I should like to ask her a few questions if she is anywhere about."

The cook appeared round the door corner with suspicious suddenness and then tried to look as if her presence was purely coincidental.

"Do you know what your master did last night?" said Ridley, concealing his amusement.

"Well, sir, I'm not such a good sleeper as Edith," she began. It was evident that she had not missed much of Edith's interview. "I heard the front door bell ring soon after ten, and then a bit later the car went out of the garage."

"Did you hear it come back again?"

"No, sir."

"Do you happen to know who rang the bell?"

"No, sir. My bedroom is a long way from the door and I can only just hear it."

The money-lender's bedroom was next visited, but

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yielded nothing of interest. The bed had not been disturbed in any way. The pyjamas were laid out, and a pair of slippers placed by the bedside. Ridley turned back the clothes and found a stone-cold rubber bottle still there. He crossed over to the side window and looked out. The room overlooked the garage and the tennis lawn, and almost directly below the window the chauffeur was cleaning the car under a glass-roofed washing shed. The swish of water from the hosepipe and the clumping of his heavy washing clogs could be heard distinctly even through the glass. Ridley looked down at the two-seater with some interest. As far as his information went it had been taken out, presumably by its owner, shortly after he was last seen, so it promised to be a suitable field for investigation. He left the house and went across to the shed.

"Good morning, sir. Needs cleaning, doesn't she?" said the chauffeur, touching his cap.

Ridley nodded. The bodywork was muddy and the tyres and mudguards badly splashed with tar, which the man was endeavouring to remove with a patent cleaner.

"Was it messed up like this yesterday?"

"No, sir. I left it clean when I went home. It must have been out during the evening."

"Have you any idea where it went?"

"Not the slightest. Mr. Levinsky often drives

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it himself. More often than I do, to tell you the truth. I clean it and oil it and do odd jobs about the house and garden, but I don't do much driving. I hope nothing serious has happened to him, sir."

"Don't know yet," said the inspector shortly, opening the off-side door and glancing at the trip speedometer. It registered three miles and two-tenths.

The chauffeur nodded his head approvingly. "That will tell you how far he went, sir, because I reset it to zero myself yesterday afternoon when I was polishing the dashboard. But it won't tell you where he went, and more's the pity. Still, I don't see that it matters. Wherever he went he came back here again."

Ridley remained silent. His more critical mind, trained by police and court procedure to differentiate between facts and assumptions, perceived the fallacy in the other's statement. The fact that the car had come back did not necessarily prove that its owner had returned. Neither did he dismiss the speedometer so lightly as a useless clue. He went back to the house and took up the telephone receiver, which was in the dining-room, and gave the number of the Town Hall, which had a private branch exchange.

"Hallo. Put me through to the Borough Engineer's office, please. . . . Is that Mr. Holland? Inspector Ridley speaking. I want to know whereabouts you were tarring roads yesterday. Yes, I'll

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hold the wire. . . . What's that? Four different places. Yes, I can hear you. I want the names of the streets. Burley Road, Marlton Avenue, top end of Castle Road and . . . what was the last one? Oh, Parkside Place. Thanks very much. Quite certain that were no others? Right. No, it's nothing to do with any of your men."

"That's lucky," he thought as he rang off. "We can wash out three of these places at once. They are all at the other end of the town and more than two miles away. Castle Road is about the right distance, though, so we might be able to find out where he went after all. Anyhow we know he did not go back to the office between half-past four and ten. The charwoman and the maids are quite definite about that. It isn't likely that he went after ten. The office is nearly three miles away, so he didn't go in the car, unless he reset the speedometer, and there is no reason why he should walk when he had the car handy. And if he didn't go somebody else did. I hope that finger-print turns up trumps."

Ridley went back to the chauffeur, who was still trying to remove the tar-stains.

"I want you to take me out in this car," he said. "I will take full responsibility for borrowing it."

"Right you are, sir," replied the man cheerfully, kicking off his washing clogs.

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"Put that speedometer back to zero, then, and drive to Castle Road."

The man obeyed in mystified silence and drove off. It added to his bewilderment to see that his passenger was taking no interest in his surroundings, but was leaning forward with his eyes fixed on the dashboard. The car turned into Castle Road, and about a quarter of a mile further on Ridley heard what he was waiting for—the spattering of granite chips on the mudguards.

"Slow down," he directed, without raising his eyes.

The chauffeur changed into second and the car crawled along another hundred yards.

"Stop," was the next order, as the speedometer figures clicked from one mile and five-tenths to one mile and six-tenths.

"Now," thought the inspector, "this ought to be the place. It is the right distance, allowing for the return journey, and the tar-spraying makes it nearly a certainty."

Castle Road was a newly developed residential district on the outskirts of Southbourne. It still contained a goodly number of vacant plots filled with nettles and notice boards, but at the point where the car stopped there was a row of houses called Wingrave Terrace on one side of the road, and two or three "desirable semi-detached residences" on the other. The whole area had an air of raw newness.

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Blatant red tiles and glaring white stucco proclaimed its infancy as plainly as the sharp unweathered edges of the bricks and the intact state of the shoddy mortar. Heaps of builders' materials and rubbish still cumbered the ground and formed pitfalls for the unwary, and the general impression left upon the beholder's mind was that Castle Road would be a good place to live in fifty years hence, when it had matured.

Ridley got out of the car and walked slowly round it, looking at each of the tyres in turn. He noted that three of them were Dunlops, and the fourth a Michelin, of the older high-pressure type. He then told the driver to go to the nearest post office and borrow the voters' list. While the man was away he filled in the time by searching the gaps between the houses, but could find no traces of the tyre marks he was looking for. This disproved nothing; if the car had been here the night before it might very well have been parked in the road.

The chauffeur returned with the list and took him back to the house, where Rosenbaum was waiting anxiously. There was still no news. Ridley telephoned to the station while the cook was preparing a hurried lunch and ordered a plain clothes officer to make inquiries at Wingrave Terrace and at the houses opposite. Also the constable on duty in the

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charge room was to ring up all the hospitals in the district and the local station-master in addition.

After the meal Ridley and the clerk returned to the office. The former picked out from the voters' list the names of the inhabitants of the houses in Castle Road, while the latter looked up each of them in his ledgers. None of them had ever dealt with the firm, as far as he could ascertain, but he admitted that this was not absolutely conclusive because the names of the borrowers did not all pass through his hands.

This done, the inspector walked back to the Town Hall. He found that the man in the charge room had nearly finished his task. None of the local hospitals had admitted any unidentified accident or loss of memory cases during the last twenty-four hours, and a few minutes after Ridley entered the station-master rang up and reported that Mr. Levinsky had not been seen by any of the ticket collectors, booking clerks or porters, many of whom knew him by sight. An hour later the plain clothes man returned from Castle Road and went to the inspector's office immediately, according to his orders.

"All quite straightforward, Roberts?" queried Ridley. "Were they speaking the truth, or was there anything fishy about any of them?"

Ten out of the eleven visits, it appeared, were absolutely straightforward, a simple question meeting

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with an equally simple negative answer. The eleventh house was the only one which aroused any interest whatever.

"All the blinds were down at this place, sir," explained Roberts. "And the door was opened by a lady who seemed to be very upset. She had dark rings round her eyes and her hair was all untidy, and she looked as if she had been crying. I told her that I was making inquiries about Mr. Levinsky, who was thought to have been somewhere in the neighbourhood about 10 p.m. yesterday—"

"Go on, man. I know all that. You're not in the witness-box now. What happened?"

"She stared at me, sir, as if she'd seen a ghost, and fainted without saying a word. Just collapsed all in a heap on the front door mat. Well, I picked her up and carried her into the first room I came to and put her down on the couch. I then rang the bell hard and knocked, but nobody came, so I went into the kitchen. There wasn't anybody there, so I got a glass of water and took it back to the room. She was still unconscious, so I ran upstairs and looked round to try and find somebody, but she was alone in the house except for a corpse in the front bedroom."

"Wasn't old Levinsky, by any chance?" said the inspector with a smile.

"Not a bit like him, sir. I know him well and

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