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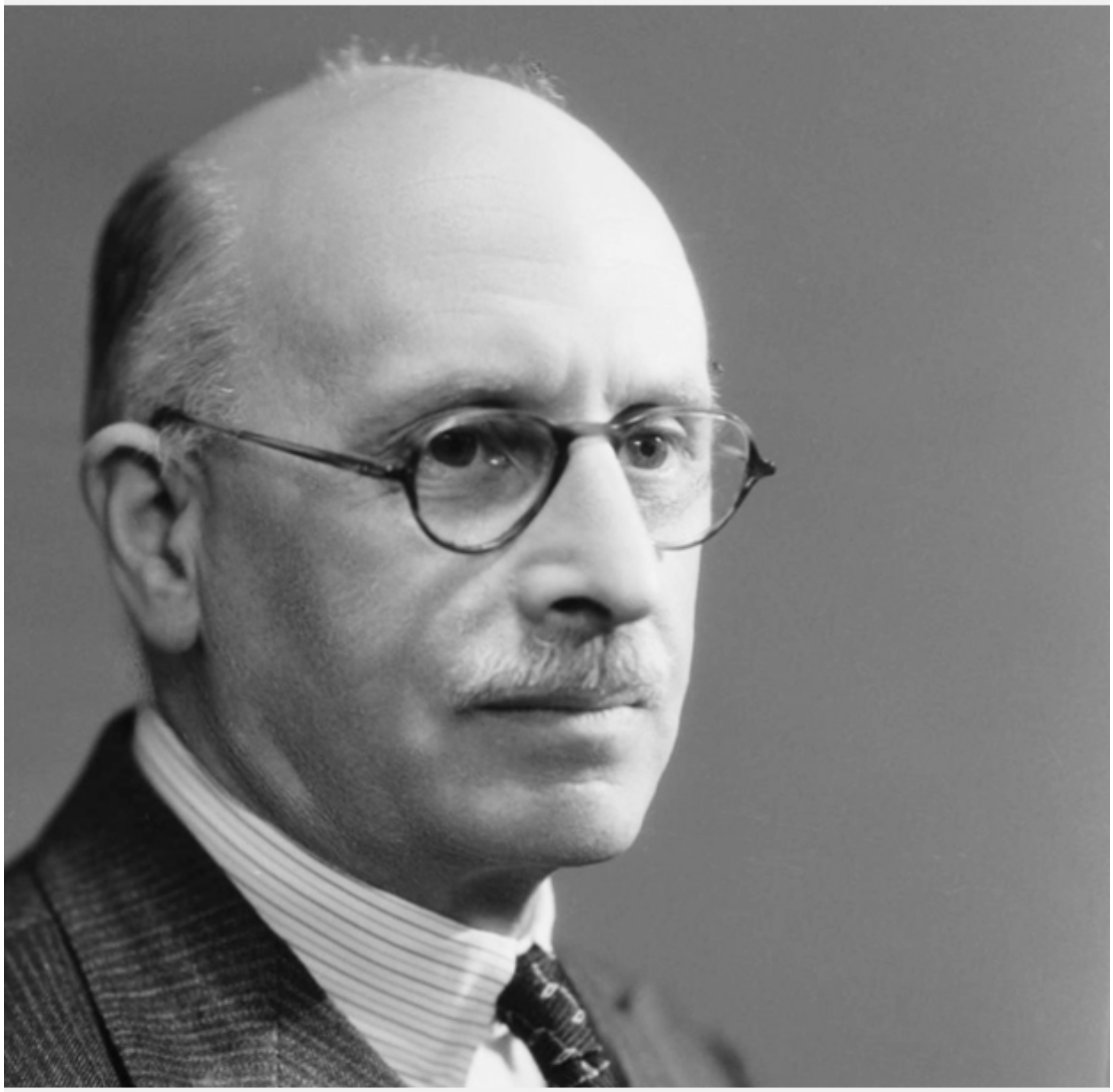
Freeman Wills Crofts

Complete Works



Series Sixteen

The Complete Works of

FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

(1879-1957)

Contents

The Cask (1920)
The Ponson Case (1921)
The Pit-Prop Syndicate (1922)
The Groote Park Murder (1923)
Young Robin Brand, Detective (1947)

The Short Story Collections

Murderers Make Mistakes (1947)
Many a Slip (1955)
The Mystery of the Sleeping Car Express and Other Stories (1956)
Uncollected Stories

The Short Stories

List of Short Stories in Chronological Order
List of Short Stories in Alphabetical Order

The Non-Fiction

A New Zealand Tragedy (1936)
The Gorse Hall Mystery (1938)
The Four Gospels in One Story (1949)

The Delphi Classics Catalogue

Version 1

The Complete Works of

FREEMAN WILLS CROFTS

By Delphi Classics, 2026

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Complete Works of Freeman Wills Crofts

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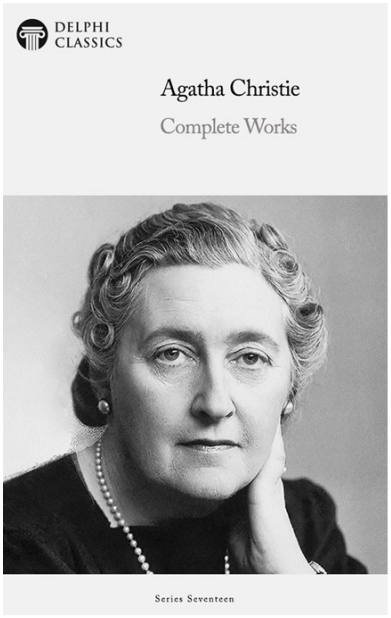
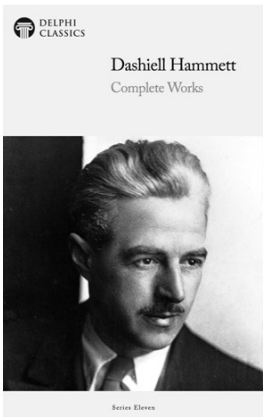
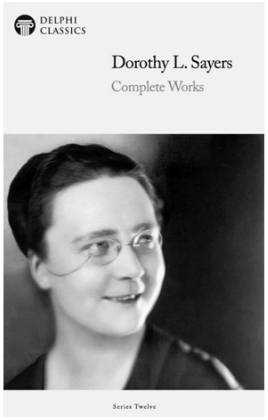
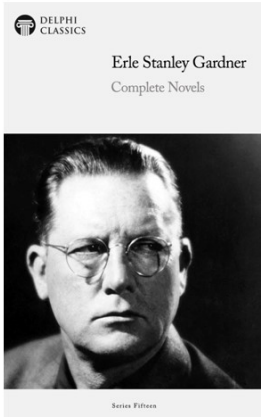
Vintage Thrillers…

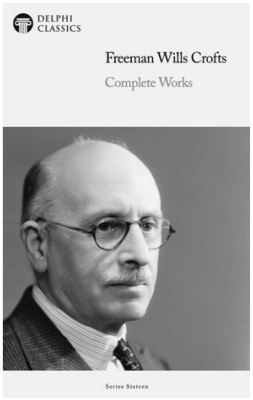


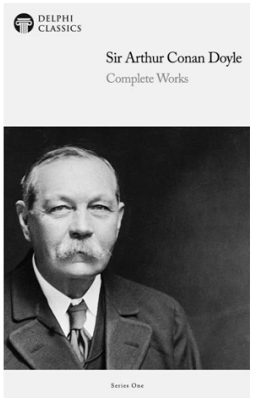


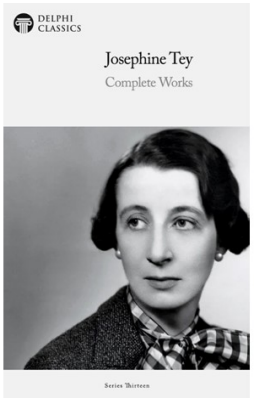




From classic detective masterpieces to edge-of-your-seat mysteries, explore [Thrillers at Delphi]







Inspector Joseph French Books

Dublin, Ireland — close to the time of Freeman Wills Crofts' birth in the city in 1879

26 Waterloo Road, Dublin – Crofts' birthplace, which serves today as the Embassy of Romania

Inspector French's Greatest Case (1924)

Freeman Wills Crofts was born in Dublin in 1879. His father, also named Freeman Wills Crofts, was a surgeon-lieutenant in the Army Medical Service, but he died of fever in Honduras before his son was born. Four years later, Crofts' mother, née Celia Frances Wise, married the Venerable Jonathan Harding, Vicar of Gilford, County Down, later Archdeacon of Dromore, and Crofts was raised in the vicarage at Gilford. He attended Methodist College and Campbell College in Belfast. At the age of seventeen, Crofts was apprenticed to his maternal uncle, Berkeley Deane Wise, who was chief engineer of the Belfast and Northern Counties Railway. A few years later he was appointed Junior Assistant on the construction of the Strabane-Derry extension of the Donegal Railway Company.

In 1900 Crofts became District Engineer at Coleraine for the Northern Counties Committee of the London, Midland and Scottish Railway. One of the projects he worked on was the design of the Bleach Green Viaduct in Whiteabbey, close to his Jordanstown home. This was a significant ten-arch reinforced concrete viaduct approved in 1927 and completed in 1934. It carried a new loop line which eliminated the need for trains between Belfast and the northwest to reverse at Greenisland. Croft continued his engineering career until 1929, when he decided to concentrate on his writing career. In his final task as engineer, he was commissioned by the Government of Northern Ireland to chair an inquiry into the Bann and Lough Neagh Drainage Scheme.

In 1919, during an absence from work due to a long illness, Crofts wrote his first novel, *The Cask* (1920), which established him as a new master of detective fiction. From then on, he continued to write steadily, producing a book almost every year for thirty years, in addition to a number of short stories and plays.

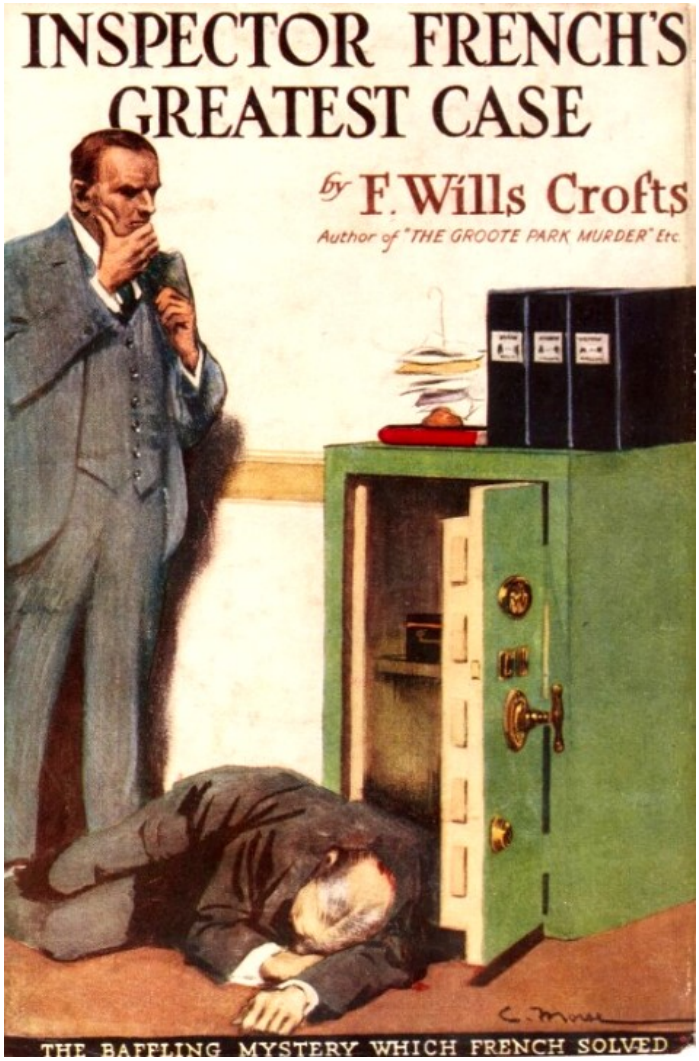
Of course, he is best remembered today for his creation of Inspector Joseph French, a Scotland Yard detective of the Golden Age of detective fiction, who was introduced in his fifth book, *Inspector French's Greatest Case* (1924). Inspector French always solves the mysteries presented him in a workmanlike, precise manner, which sets him apart from many other fictional sleuths of the period. The majority of novels in the French series feature a plot that mixes the traditional form of the puzzle mystery with that of a police procedural. In this first instalment, French has to study carefully the railway and shipping timetables and crack a challenging cipher in order to solve his case.

The plot reveals how a robbery of a safe of a diamond merchant in London's Hatton Garden leaves one of the firm's veteran employees dead. Summoned to handle the case, Inspector French pursues disparate clues over a number of weeks with some of the trails turning out to be dead ends. His travels take him from the capital to Southampton and a variety of destinations on the Continent, including Amsterdam, the Swiss Alps, Barcelona and Le Havre. Eventually, he believes he has hit on the solution involving a liner soon heading for South America…

Crofts helped fundamentally transform the detective fiction genre in the 1920's and 1930's. Through his enduring series character Inspector Joseph French, who would appear in 29 novels and numerous short stories, Crofts pioneered the 'police procedural' and introduced a level of grounded realism that contrasted sharply with the flamboyant, intuitive sleuths of his era. Before Crofts, Golden Age detective fiction was dominated by brilliant amateurs like Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot.

These characters relied on flashes of genius, psychological intuition, or esoteric knowledge. Crofts shifted the focus from individual eccentricity to methodical, realistic police work. French never solves crimes through sudden inspiration. Instead, he relies on routine teamwork, while utilizing the full machinery of Scotland Yard. He also relies on meticulous paperwork, sifting through ledgers, passenger lists, and receipts. Another important factor of his work is physical stamina, as French conducts endless, exhausting interviews with the witnesses. By highlighting the mundane, day-to-day realities of police investigations, Crofts laid the foundational blueprint for the modern police procedural. This influence directly echoes in the later works of leading crime authors like Ed McBain, P. D. James and Ian Rankin.

By stripping away the myth of the infallible superhuman sleuth, Crofts made the detective character much more relatable to post-war readers. He proved to his ever-growing audience that patience and dogged persistence were just as compelling as eccentric genius. Although Crofts' prose was often criticised for being dry and utilitarian, his structural innovations permanently altered the development of crime fiction. He proved that the mechanics of a real investigation could hold a reader's interest. By blending the intellectual puzzle of the Golden Age with the gritty realism of police routine, Crofts bridged the gap between the romanticised detective stories of the nineteenth century and the realistic crime fiction of the modern era.



The first edition

CONTENTS

Hatton Garden, London's principal diamond and jewellery quarter, in the 1920's — a key setting of the novel

CHAPTER I. MURDER!

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

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

Huckley Street, one of the narrowest and least inviting in the district, was, indeed, deserted save for a single figure. Though the higher and more ethical side of civilisation was not obtrusive, it was by no means absent. The figure represented Law and Order, in short, it was that of a policeman on his beat.

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

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

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

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

Alcorn, his depression gone, hurried to meet him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alcorn mechanically noted these details, but it was not on them that his attention was first concentrated. Before the safe lay the body of a man, hunched forward in a heap, as if he had collapsed when stooping to take something out. Though the face was hidden, there was that in the attitude which left no doubt that he was dead. And the cause of death was equally obvious. On the back of the bald head, just above the fringe of white hair, was an ugly wound, as if from a blow of some blunt but heavy weapon.

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

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

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

The constable nodded.

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

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

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

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

"And what did you do?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Who would know about it?"

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

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

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

"Charles."

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

"12 Monkton Street, Fulham."

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

Slowly the tedious catechism proceeded. The two men formed a contrast. Alcorn calm and matter of fact, though breathing heavily from the effort of writing, was concerned only with making a satisfactory statement for his superior. His informant, on the other hand, was quivering with suppressed excitement, and acutely conscious of the silent and motionless form on the floor. Poor old Gething! A kindly old fellow, if ever there was one! It seemed a shame to let his body lie there in that shapeless heap, without showing even the respect of covering the injured head with a handkerchief. But the matter was out of his hands. The police would follow their own methods, and he, Orchard, could not interfere.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The doctor crossed the room and knelt by the remains.

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

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

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

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

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

“We shall have to send round word. You go, Carson.” He turned to one of the two other members of his quartet, constables in uniform. “Don’t tell the old lady. If the daughter’s not there, wait until she comes in. And put yourself at her disposal. If she wants her sister sent for, you go. You, Jackson, go down to the front door and let the

Yard man up. Alcorn, remain here." These dispositions made, he rang up the Yard and delivered his message, then turned once more to the young clerk.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Ah, Superintendent, how are you?" he exclaimed, holding out his hand cordially. "It's some time since we met. Not since that little episode in the Limehouse hairdresser's. That was a nasty business. And now you've some other scheme for keeping a poor man from his hard-earned rest, eh?"

The Superintendent seemed to find the other's easy familiarity out of place.

"Good-evening, Inspector," he answered with official abruptness. "You know Dr. Jordan? — Inspector French of the C.I.D. And this is Mr. Orchard, a clerk in this office, who discovered the crime."

Inspector French greeted them genially. Behind his back at the Yard they called him "Soapy Joe" because of the reliance he placed on the suavity of his manners. "I know your name, of course, Doctor, but I don't think we have ever met. Pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Orchard." He subsided into a chair and went on: "Perhaps, Superintendent, you would just give me a hint of what this is all about before we go any further."

The facts already learned were soon recited. French listened carefully, and annexing the constable's notebook, complimented that worthy on his industry. "Well," he beamed on them, "I suppose we'd better have a look round inside before Mr. Duke turns up."

The party moved to the inner room, where French, his hands in his pockets, stood motionless for some minutes, surveying the scene.

"Nothing has been touched, of course?" he asked.

"Nothing. From what they tell me, both Mr. Orchard and Constable Alcorn have been most circumspect."

"Excellent; then we may go ahead. Get your camera rigged, Giles, and take the usual photos. I think, gentlemen, we may wait in the other room until the photographs are taken. It won't be long."

Though French had tactfully bowed his companions out, he did not himself follow them, but kept prowling about the inner office, closely inspecting its contents, though touching nothing. In a few minutes the camera was ready, and a number of flashlight photographs were taken of the body, the safe, every part of both offices, and even the stairs and hall. In the amazing way in which tales of disaster travel, news of the crime had already leaked out, and a small crowd of the curious hung, open-mouthed, about the door.

Scarcely had the camera been put away, when the proceedings were interrupted by a fresh arrival. Hurried steps were heard ascending the stairs, and a tall, thin, extremely well-dressed old gentleman entered the room. Though evidently on the wrong side of sixty, he was still a handsome man, with strong, well-formed features, white hair, and a good carriage. Under normal circumstances he would have presented a dignified and kindly appearance, but now his face was drawn into an expression of horror and distress, and his hasty movements also betokened his anxiety. On seeing so many strangers, he hesitated. The Inspector stepped forward.

"Mr. Duke, sir? I am Inspector French of the Criminal Investigation Department of New Scotland Yard. I very much regret to confirm the news which you have already heard, that your head clerk, Mr. Gething, has been murdered, and I fear also that your safe may have been burgled."

It was evident that the old gentleman was experiencing strong emotion, but he controlled it and spoke quietly enough.

"This is terrible news, Inspector. I can hardly believe that poor old Gething is gone. I came at once when I heard. Tell me the details. Where did it happen?"

French pointed to the open door.

"In here, sir, in your private office. Everything is still exactly as it was found."

Mr. Duke moved forward, then on seeing the body, stopped and gave a low cry of horror.

"Oh, poor old fellow!" he exclaimed. "It's awful to see him lying there. Awful! I tell you, Inspector, I've lost a real friend, loyal and true and dependable. Can't he be lifted up? I can't bear to see him like that." His gaze passed on to the safe. "And the safe! Merciful heavens, Inspector! Is anything gone? Tell me at once, I must know! It seems heartless to think of such a thing with that good old fellow lying there, but after all I'm only human."

"I haven't touched the safe, but we'll do so directly," the Inspector answered. "Was there much in it?"

"About three-and-thirty thousand pounds' worth of diamonds were in that lower drawer, as well as a thousand in notes," groaned the other. "Get the body moved, will you, and let us look."

French whistled, then he turned to his men.

"Get that table cleared outside there, and lift the body on to it," he ordered; then to the doctor he added, "Perhaps, Doctor, you could make your examination now?"

The remains were lifted reverently and carried from the room. Mr. Duke turned impatiently to the safe, but the Inspector stopped him.

"A moment, sir, if you please. I am sorry to ask you to stretch your patience a little longer, but before you touch the safe I must test it for finger prints. You see the obvious necessity?"

"I would wait all night if it would help you to get on the track of the scoundrels who have done this," the old gentleman answered grimly. "Go on in your own way. I can restrain myself."

With a word of approval, Inspector French fetched one of the cases brought by his assistants, and producing little boxes of French chalk and of lampblack, he proceeded to dust over the smooth portions of the safe, using white powder on a dark background and vice versa. On blowing off the surplus powder, he pointed triumphantly to a number of finger prints, explaining that the moisture deposited from the skin held the powder, which otherwise dropped off. Most of the marks were blurred and useless, but a few showed clearly the little loops and whorls and ridges of thumbs and fingers.

"Of course," French went on, "these may all be quite useless. They may be those of persons who had a perfect right to open the safe — your own, for instance. But if they belong to the thief, if there was one, their importance may be incalculable. See here now, I can open this drawer without touching any of them."

Mr. Duke was clearly at the end of his patience, and he kept fidgeting about, clasping and unclasping his hands, and showing every sign of extreme impatience and uneasiness. As the drawer opened, he stepped forward and plunged in his hand.

"Gone!" he cried hoarsely. "They're all gone! Thirty-three thousand pounds' worth! Oh, my God! It means ruin." He covered his face with his hands, then went on unsteadily. "I feared it, of course. I thought it must be the diamonds when the officer rang me up. I have been trying to face it ever since. I shouldn't care for myself. It's my daughter. To think of her exposed to want! But there. It is wicked of me to speak so who have only lost money, while poor old Gething has lost his life. Don't mind me, Inspector. Carry on. What I want most now is to hear of the arrest of the murderer and thief. If there is anything I can do to help in that, command me."

He stood, a little stooped and with haggard face, but dignified even in his grief. French in his pleasant, kindly way tried to reassure him.

"Now, you don't need to give up heart, sir," he advised. "Diamonds are not the easiest things to dispose of, and we're right on to the loss at once. Before the thief can pass them on we shall have all the channels under observation. With any ordinary luck, you'll get them back. They were not insured?"

"Part of them only. About nineteen thousand pounds' worth were insured. It was my cursed folly that the rest were not. Gething advised it, but I had never lost anything, and I wanted to save the money. You understand our trade has been difficult since the war, and our profits were not the same as formerly. Every little has counted, and we have had to economise."

"At worst, then, that is £14,000 gone?"

"If the insurance companies pay in full, that is all, besides the thousand in notes. But, Inspector, it is too much. To meet my share of the loss will beggar me." He shook his head despondently. "But never mind my affairs in the meantime. Don't, I beg of you, lose any time in getting after the criminal."

"You are right, sir. If, then, you will sit down there for a few minutes I'll get rid of the others, and then I shall ask you for some information."

The old gentleman dropped wearily into a chair while French went to the outer office. The policeman who had been sent to inform Gething's family of the tragedy had just returned. French looked at him inquiringly.

"I called, sir, at the address you gave me," he reported. "Miss Gething was there, and I told her what had occurred. She was considerably upset, and asked me if I could get a message to her sister and brother-in-law at 12 Deeley Terrace, Hawkins Street, in Battersea. I said I would fetch them for her. The brother-in-law, name of Gamage, was from home in Leeds, being a traveller for a firm of fur dealers, but Mrs. Gamage was there and I took her across. It seemed the old lady had wanted to know what was up, and Miss Gething had told her, and she had got some kind of stroke. They asked me to call a doctor, which I did. The two daughters say they can't get across here on account of being occupied with the mother."

"So much the better," French commented, and having added the names and addresses of Mr. and Mrs. Gamage to his list, he turned to the doctor.

"Well, Doctor," he said pleasantly, "how do you get on?"

The doctor straightened himself up from his position over the corpse.

"I've done all I can here," he answered. "I don't think there's any doubt the man was killed instantaneously by the blow on the head. The skull is fractured, apparently by some heavy, blunt weapon. I should think it was done from behind while the old fellow was stooping, possibly working at the safe, though that, perhaps, is your province."

"I'm glad of the hint anyway. Now, gentlemen, I think that's all we can do to-night. Can your men remove the body, Superintendent? I want to stay for a moment to take a few measurements. You'll let me know to-morrow about the inquest? Mr. Orchard, you might stay a moment also; there is a question or two I want to ask you."

The Superintendent had sent one of his men for a stretcher, and the remains were lifted on and carried slowly down to the waiting taxi. With an exchange of good-nights, the local men withdrew, leaving Inspector French, Mr. Duke, Orchard, and the two plain-clothes men from the Yard in charge of the premises.

CHAPTER II. THE FIRM OF DUKE AND PEABODY

WHEN INSPECTOR FRENCH ushered the clerk, Orchard, into the inner office, they found Mr. Duke pacing the floor with an expression of utter mystification imprinted on his features.

"I say, Inspector, here's a puzzle," he cried. "I happened to look behind the safe door, and I find it has been opened with a key. I thought at first it had been broken or forced or the lock somehow picked. But I see it is unlocked."

"Yes, I noticed that, sir," French answered. "But I don't follow you. What is the mystery about that?"

"Why, the key, of course. To my certain knowledge there were only two keys in existence. One I keep on my ring, which is chained to my belt and never leaves me day nor night. There it is. The other is lodged with my bankers, where no one could possibly get at it. Now, where did the thief get the key that is now in the lock?"

"That is one of the things we have to find out," French replied. "You may perhaps think it strange, but a point of that kind, which at first seems to deepen the mystery, often proves a blessing in disguise. It provides another point of attack, you understand, and frequently it narrows down the area of inquiry. You haven't touched the key, I hope?"

"No. I remembered what you said about finger prints."

"Good. Now, gentlemen, if you will please sit down, I want to ask you a few questions. I'll take you first, Mr. Orchard. I have your name, and your address is Bloomsbury Square. Now tell me, is that your home?"

The young fellow answered the questions without hesitation, and French noted approvingly his direct glance and the evident candour with which he spoke. The Bloomsbury Square address, it appeared, was that of a boarding house, the clerk's home being in Somerset. He had left the office at about half-past five that afternoon, Mr. Gething being then almost ready to follow. Mr. Gething was usually the last out of the office. Orchard had noticed nothing unusual in his manner that day, though for the last two or three weeks he had seemed somewhat moody and depressed. Orchard had gone from the office to Liverpool Street, where he had caught the 5.52 to Ilford. There he had had supper with a friend, a man called Forrest, a clerk in a shipping office in Fenchurch Street. He had left about 9.30, getting back to town a little before 10.00. The rain had stopped, and as he did not get as much exercise as he could have wished, he resolved to walk home from the station. Hatton Garden was but little out of his way, and as he approached it he remembered that he had left in his desk a book he had changed at the library at lunch time. He had decided to call in and get it, so as to read for a while before going to sleep. He had done so, and had found Mr. Gething's body, as he had already explained. The outer street door had been closed, and he had opened it with his latch key. Both the office doors were open, that between the landing and the outer office and that of Mr. Duke's room. The lights were on everywhere, except that in the outer office only the single central bulb was burning, the desk lamps being off. He had seen no one about the offices.

French, having complimented the young fellow on his clear statement, bade him good-night and sent him home. But as he passed out of the room he whispered to one of his men, who promptly nodded and also disappeared. French turned to Mr. Duke.

“That seems a straightforward young fellow,” he observed. “What is your opinion of him?”

“Absolutely straightforward.” The acting partner spoke with decision. “He has been with me for over four years, and I have always found him most conscientious and satisfactory. Indeed. I have been very fortunate in my whole staff. I think I could say the same of them all.”

“I congratulate you, Mr. Duke. Perhaps now you would tell me something about your firm and your various employees.”

Mr. Duke, though still extremely agitated, was controlling his emotion and answered in calm tones.

“The business is not a large one, and at the present time is virtually controlled by myself. Peabody, though not so old as I am, has been troubled by bad health and has more or less gone to pieces. He seldom comes to the office, and never undertakes any work. The junior partner, Sinnamond, is travelling in the East, and has been for some months. We carry on the usual trade of diamond merchants, and have a small branch establishment in Amsterdam. Indeed, I divide my own time almost equally between London and Amsterdam. We occupy only these two rooms which you have seen. Our staff in the outer office consists, or rather consisted, of five, a chief and confidential clerk, the poor man who has just been killed, a young man called Harrington, who is qualifying for a partnership, Orchard, a girl typist, and an office boy. Besides them, we employ an outside man, a traveller, a Dutchman named Vanderkemp. He attends sales and so on, and when not on the road works in the Amsterdam branch.”

Inspector French noted all the information Mr. Duke could give about each of the persons mentioned.

“Now this Mr. Gething,” he resumed. “You say he has been with you for over twenty years, and that you had full confidence in him, but I must ask the question, Are you sure that your confidence was not misplaced? In other words, are you satisfied that he was not himself after your diamonds?”

Mr. Duke shook his head decisively.

“I am positive he was not,” he declared warmly and with something of indignation showing in his manner. “I should as soon accuse my own son, if I had one. No, I’d stake my life on it, Gething was no thief.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that, Mr. Duke,” the other returned smoothly. “Now, then, your office staff eliminated, tell me is there any one that you suspect?”

“Not a creature!” Mr. Duke was equally emphatic. “Not a single creature! I can’t imagine any one who would have done such a thing. I wish I could.”

The Inspector hesitated.

“Of course, sir, you understand that if you were to mention a name it would not in any way bias me against that person. It would only mean that I should make inquiries. Don’t think you would be getting any one into trouble.”

Mr. Duke smiled grimly.

“You needn’t be afraid. If I had any suspicion I should be only too glad to tell you, but I have none.”

“When, sir, did you last see your late clerk?”

“About half-past four this evening. I left the office at that time, about an hour earlier than usual, because I had a business appointment for a quarter to five with Mr. Peters, of Lincoln’s Inn, my solicitor.”

“And you did not return to the office?”

“No. I sat with Mr. Peters for about half an hour, then as my business was not finished and he wanted to square up for the night, we decided to dine together at my

club in Gower Street. It was not worth while going back to my own office, so I went straight from Peters' to the club."

"And you did not notice anything peculiar about Mr. Gething?"

"Not specially on that night. He seemed absolutely as usual."

"How do you mean, not specially on that night?"

"He had been, I thought, a little depressed for two or three weeks previously, as if he had some trouble on his mind. I asked when first I noticed it if there was anything wrong, but he murmured something about home troubles, about his wife not being so well — she is a chronic invalid. He was not communicative, and I did not press the matter. But he was no worse this afternoon than during the last fortnight."

"I see. Now, what brought him back to the office to-night?"

Mr. Duke made a gesture of bewilderment.

"I have no idea," he declared. "There was nothing! Nothing, at least, that I know of or can imagine. We were not specially busy, and as far as I can think, he was well up to date with his work."

"Is there a postal delivery between half-past four and the time your office closes?"

"There is, and of course there might have been a telegram or a caller or a note delivered by hand. But suppose there had been something important enough to require immediate attention, Gething would never have taken action without consulting me. He had only to ring me up."

"He knew where you were, then?"

"No, but he could have rung up my home. They knew there where I was, as when I had decided to dine at the club, I 'phoned home to say so."

"But were you in your club all the evening? Excuse my pressing the matter, but I think it's important to make sure the man did not try to communicate with you."

"I see your point. Yes, I stayed chatting with Mr. Peters until almost 9.30. Then, feeling tired from a long day's thought about business, I decided a little exercise would be pleasant, and I walked home. I reached my house a minute or two after ten."

"That seems conclusive. All the same, sir, I think you should make sure when you reach home that no call was made."

"I shall do so certainly, but my parlourmaid is very reliable in such matters, and I am certain she would have told me of any."

Inspector French sat for a few seconds lost in thought, and then began on another point.

"You tell me that you had £33,000 worth of diamonds in the safe. Is not that an unusually large amount to keep in an office?"

"You are quite right; it is too large. I consider myself very much to blame, both for that and in the matter of the insurance. But I had not meant to keep the stones there long. Indeed, negotiations for the sale of the larger portion were actually in progress. On the other hand, it is due to myself to point out that the safe is of a very efficient modern pattern."

"That is so, sir. Now can you tell me who, besides yourself, knew of the existence of those stones?"

"I'm afraid," Mr. Duke admitted despondently, "there was no secret about it. Gething knew, of course. He was entirely in my confidence about such matters. Vanderkemp, my outdoor man, knew that I had made some heavy purchases recently, as he not only conducted the negotiations, but personally brought the stones to the office. Besides, there were letters about them, accessible to all the staff. I am afraid you may take it that every one in the office knew there was a lot of stuff there, though probably not the exact amount."

"And the staff may have talked to outsiders. Young people will brag, especially if they are 'keeping company,' as the Irish say."

"I fear that is so," Mr. Duke agreed, as if deprecating the singular habits of the young.

The Inspector changed his position uneasily, and his hand stole to his pipe. But he checked himself and resumed his questioning. He obtained from Mr. Duke a detailed list of the missing stones, then turned to a new point.

"About that thousand pounds in notes. I suppose you haven't got the numbers?"

"No, unfortunately. But the bank might know them."

"We shall inquire. Now, Mr. Duke, about the key. That is another singular thing."

"It is an amazing thing. I absolutely cannot understand where it came from. As I said, this one never leaves, nor has left, my personal possession, and the other, the only other one, is equally inaccessible in my bank."

"You always personally opened or closed the safe?"

"Always, or at least it was done by my instructions and in my presence."

"Oh, well, that is not quite the same thing, you know. Who has ever opened or closed it for you?"

"Gething; and not once or twice, but scores, I suppose I might say hundreds of times. But always in my presence."

"I understand that, sir. Any one else besides Mr. Gething?"

Mr. Duke hesitated.

"No," he said slowly, "no one else. He was the only one I trusted to that extent. And I had reason to trust him," he added, with a touch of defiance.

"Of course, sir. I recognise that," French answered smoothly. "I am only trying to get the facts clear in my mind. I take it, then, that the deceased gentleman was the only person, other than yourself, who ever handled your key? It was not within reach of any one in your house; your servants, for example?"

"No, I never let it lie about. Even at night I kept it attached to me."

The Inspector rose from his chair.

"Well, sir," he said politely, "I'm sorry to have kept you so long. Just let me take your finger prints to compare with those in the safe, and I have done. Shall I ring up for a taxi for you?"

Mr. Duke looked at his watch.

"Why, it is nearly one," he exclaimed. "Yes, a taxi by all means, please."

Though Inspector French had said that everything possible had been done that night, he did not follow Mr. Duke from the building. Instead, he returned to the inner office and set himself unhurriedly to make a further and more thorough examination of its contents.

He began with the key of the safe. Removing it by the shank with a pair of special pincers, he tested the handle for finger prints, but without success. Looking then at the other end, a slight roughness on one of the wards attracted his attention, and on scrutinising it with his lens, a series of fine parallel scratches was revealed on all the surfaces. "So that's it, is it?" he said to himself complacently. "Manufacturers don't leave keys of valuable safes half finished. This one has been cut with a file, and probably," — he again scrutinised the workmanship— "by an amateur at that. And according to this man Duke, old Gething was the only one that had the handling of the key — that could have taken a wax impression. Well, well; we shall see."

He locked the safe, dropped the key into his pocket, and turned to the fireplace, soliloquising the while.

The fire had still been glowing red when the crime was discovered shortly after ten o'clock. That meant, of course, that it had been deliberately stoked up, because the fire in the outer office was cold and dead. Some one, therefore, had intended to spend a considerable time in the office. Who could it have been?

As far as French could see, no one but Gething. But if Gething were going to commit the robbery — a matter of perhaps ten minutes at the outside — he would not have required a fire. No, this looked as if there really was some business to be done, something that would take time to carry through. But then, if so, why had Gething not consulted Mr. Duke? French noted the point, to be considered further in the light of future discoveries.

But as to the identity of the person who had built up the fire there should be no doubt. Finger prints again! The coal shovel had a smooth, varnished wooden handle, admirably suited for records, and a short test with the white powder revealed thereon an excellent impression of a right thumb.

The poker next received attention, and here French made his second discovery. Picking it up with the pincers in the same careful way in which he had handled the key, he noticed on the handle a dark brown stain. Beside this stain, and sticking to the metal, was a single white hair.

That he held in his hand the instrument with which the crime was committed seemed certain, and he eagerly tested the other end for prints. But this time he was baffled. Nothing showed at the places where finger marks might have been expected. It looked as if the murderer had worn gloves or had rubbed the handle clean, and he noted that either alternative postulated a cold-blooded criminal and a calculated crime.

He continued his laborious search of the room, but without finding anything else which interested him. Finally, while his men were photographing the prints he had discovered, he sat down in the leather-covered arm-chair and considered what he had learned.

Certainly a good deal of the evidence pointed to Gething. Gething knew the stones were there. According to Duke, no one else could have got hold of the key to the safe to make an impression. Moreover, his body was found before the safe with the latter open. All circumstantial evidence, of course, though cumulatively strong.

However, whether or not Gething had contemplated robbery, he had not carried it through. Some one else had the diamonds. And here the obvious possibility recurred to him which had been in his mind since he had heard the Superintendent's first statement. Suppose Orchard was the man. Suppose Orchard, visiting the office in the evening, arrived to find the safe open and the old man stooping over it. Instantly he would be assailed by a terrible temptation. The thing would seem so easy, the way of escape so obvious, the reward so sure. French, sitting back in the arm-chair, tried to picture the scene. The old man bending over the safe, the young one entering, unheard. His halt in surprise; the sudden overwhelming impulse to possess the gems; his stealthy advance; the seizing of the poker; the blow, delivered perhaps with the intention of merely stunning his victim. But he strikes too hard, and, horrified by what he has done, yet sees that for his own safety he must go through with the whole business. He recalls the danger of finger prints, and wipes the handles of the poker and of the drawer in the safe from which he has abstracted the diamonds. With admirable foresight he waits until the body grows cold, lest an examination of it by the policeman he intends to call might disprove his story. Then he rushes out in an agitated manner and gives the alarm.

Though this theory met a number of the facts, French was not overpleased with it. It did not explain what Gething was doing at the safe, nor did it seem to fit in with the

personality of Orchard. All the same, though his instruction to his man to shadow Orchard had been given as an obvious precaution inevitable in the circumstances, he was glad that he had not overlooked it.

Another point occurred to him as he sat thinking over the affair in the leather-lined chair. If Orchard had stolen the stones, he would never have risked having them on his person when he gave the alarm. He would certainly have hidden them, and French could not see how he could have taken them out of the building to do so. A thorough search of the offices seemed therefore called for.

The Inspector was tired, but, late as it was, he spent three solid hours conducting a meticulous examination of the whole premises, only ceasing when he had satisfied himself beyond possibility of doubt that no diamonds were concealed thereon. Then, believing that he had exhausted the possibilities of the scene of the crime, he felt himself free to withdraw. Dawn was appearing in the eastern sky as he drew the door after him and set off in the direction of his home.

End of Sample