

True Detective Stories

THE RED HAND

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"All aboard! All aboard!" The guards who had charge of the London local which was due to stop at Hackney shortly after six o'clock in the evening, were even more insistent than usual in their demands one night in the summer, for the train was already late, and trying to make up time. But a cry of consternation from one of the men who was boarding the train brought the attendants flocking around him.

"Look!" he cried, pointing through the glass of the compartment toward the cushions of the seat on the far side. My God, man! Don't you see? They are soaked with blood! And there's a man's walking stick and a black leather bag! Where's the occupant of this compartment?"

That was the question which puzzled every member of the London police force, and especially Col. James Fraser, head of the department.

Where was the man who had very evidently been murdered in the coach? Who was he?

The black bag contained no information whatever, and the walking stick was merely an ordinary one, lacking even initials. The guard who had charge of that car said that he "seemed to recall two men getting into that compartment at Fenhurst street, in London," but he wasn't sure.

When Colonel Fraser examined the car carefully, however, he found the print of a bloody hand—a hand with short, squat fingers—on the wall of the coach, evidently where the murderer had stendled himself after committing the crime. But where was the body?

This angle of the case was soon cleared up by the discovery of the body of a man near the railroad tracks in Victoria park. The head and face had been so disfigured that identification would have been almost impossible, had it not been for the card which was found in his vest pocket. By means of this it was found that the dead man was a certain Thomas Briggs, chief clerk of a London banking house, who had been on his way to visit his daughter in Peckham. According to his associates, he was in the habit of carrying a considerable sum of money with him, and also wore a very handsome watch and chain. When the body was discovered, however, the watch, chain and the money were missing.

Immediately after the body was discovered Colonel Fraser measured the fingers of the left hand, but found that they were entirely too long and well shaped to fit the bloody imprint on the wall of the coach.

Pinning his faith to the fact that the murderer would probably try to sell Briggs' watch and chain, the police settled down to watch all the pawn brokers in and around London, but days passed without any developments from this end of the case.

Finally, just as Fraser was nearing the end of his patience a second-hand dealer in Cheapside reported that a chain, similar to the one worn by the dead man, had been brought into his establishment on the day after the murder. The chain, he said, had been placed in with some others, and had slipped his mind, until he commenced to go over his stock. The only description he could give of the man who sold it was that he was "foreign-looking," in fact he felt certain he was a German.

More in order to quiet the press than because he attached any real importance to the discovery, Colonel Fraser made public the details of the dealer's story, and the following morning a man called at police headquarters, bringing with him a card which he said his daughter had found on the floor of the room recently occupied by Franz Muller. The card bore the name of the second-hand dealer who had purchased the chain!

Muller, stated Fraser's informant, was a German who had boarded in his house for some time past, but who had suddenly disappeared, leaving most of his effects behind him.

"Didn't happen to leave a photograph, did he?"

"Yes, sir, he did. Here it is," and the man produced a picture which the second-hand dealer immediately identified as the man who had sold him the chain.

It was a matter of only a few hours to trace the German to a steamship office and to find that he had sailed, 48 hours before, for America. Wishing his own men to have credit for the capture, Fraser dispatched two of them to New York on a fast boat, and when Muller stepped off the gangplank he was arrested for the murder of Thomas Briggs, although he vigorously protested his innocence, and stated that he had bought the chain from a man on the street. As further proof of his assertion, he produced Briggs' watch, which he said he had bought at the same time as the chain.

Inasmuch as the guard who had seen the men enter the coach at Fenhurst street could not positively identify Muller, the case against him appeared to be very flimsy—until Colonel Fraser compared the man's hand with the bloody outline on the wall of the coach. The two were identical to the thousandth part of an inch!

Some months later Franz Muller paid the penalty for his crime on the gallows.

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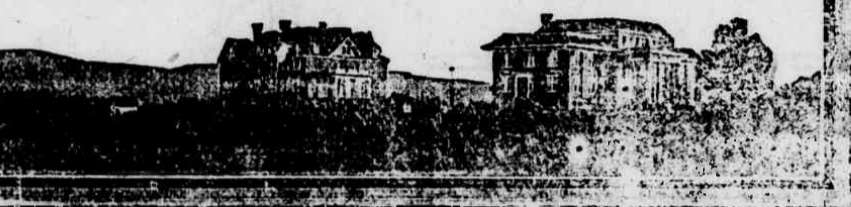
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