

THE NORTH SHORE MYSTERY

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CHAPTER I

THE CRIME

ON August 15, 188–, the public of Sydney were aroused to unusual excitement by the following announcement in the Evening Times of that date—

“A NORTH SHORE MYSTERY.

CRIME OR SUICIDE?

SUDDEN AND UNEXPLAINED DEATH OF A
WELL-KNOWN SPORTSMAN.
STABBED TO DEATH IN HIS BED.

HOW WAS IT DONE?

“The usual quiet of North Shore was this morning rudely dispelled by the alarming rumour that a crime of an unusual kind had been committed in the house of Mrs. Delfosse, Lavender Bay.

“An inquiry proved the report only too well founded.

“Mrs. Delfosse, it may be stated, is a widow lady of the highest respectability, who keeps a boarding establishment of the better kind in a stylish mansion near the Lavender Bay steps. Amongst her boarders was, till this morning, the well-known sportsman, Alexander Booth, more widely known under his *nom de guerre* as ‘Newmarket.’

“Mr. Booth was married, and shared with his wife a spacious bedroom on the second floor, the window of which has a fine harbour view. At seven o’clock this morning the other inmates of the house were aroused and startled by a succession of loud shrieks coming from this chamber. In haste they rushed to the landing, but in response to calls and knocking on the door there was no reply. The room was as quiet as the grave.

“The door was locked on the inside. It was decided without hesitation to burst it open. This being done, the spectators were horrified to find the senseless form of Mrs. Booth stretched on the floor, and in the bed itself the lifeless corpse of Mr. Booth. Further examination showed the death of this gentleman to be no natural event. The body was resting on the chest and arms, and between the shoulder-blades was buried what appears to be a thin knife or dagger. The doctor and police were immediately sent for, and Mrs. Booth removed to another room. Here after a time she recovered from what proved to be a swoon, but it was only to return again very quickly to the same state. At the time of writing she is somewhat recovered.

“MRS. BOOTH’S STATEMENT.

“Her statement of the event is very brief, and only adds to the strange surroundings of the case—Her husband and herself retired to rest on the Sunday night at their usual hour, she herself locking and bolting the door, as was her custom. She slept well, and was only awakened by a feeling of coldness close to her; she turned and looked at her husband, he was stiff and rigid, the features a waxen pallor and the eyes wide open,

staring at her with a frightful horror in them. She sprang from the bed, she screamed, she screamed again; she remembers no more.

“THE SCENE OF THE CRIME.

“Sergeant Burrel was quickly on the scene, and made a careful inspection of the premises and the room itself. It did not require the opinions of a medical expert to convince the ordinary layman that death in this case was not self-inflicted. Apart from the absence of any motive for self-destruction, the blow was such as no man could possibly give to himself.

“The room, as has been stated, is on the second floor, and its one window is protected by upright iron bars five inches apart, indicating that some former tenant had used it as a nursery. There is only the one door to the room, and the chimney, which was carefully inspected, would not allow a passage through its registered grate to an animal larger than a cat. The window itself was found to be shut and fastened inside by the ordinary catch.

“The police are very reticent, but so far no arrest has been made. The inquest will be held to-morrow, when the medical evidence and more details may be disclosed. In the meantime the house is surrounded by crowds of the curious, particularly in the right-of-way in the rear of the premises, from which the window of the room can be seen.

“Great sympathy was expressed at Tattersall’s this morning by Mr. Booth’s fellow metallicians on the news of the sad event reaching the club. No member of the fraternity was more

highly respected than the late Alexander Booth, and his death will be a great loss to Sydney sportsmen.”

“ANOTHER CRIME.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

THE CITY OFFICE OF ALEXANDER BOOTH
BROKEN OPEN AND ROBBED.

“Before going to press news reaches us that the mystery surrounding the sudden death of Alexander Booth is heightened by the statement of his clerk, David Israel, that on going to the office at the usual hour this morning he found the door ajar, and on further examination in the office, the safe itself open, and bare of all contents, save the books of the firm. He states that his first impression was that his master had arrived before him, and had opened the premises and safe, and was probably somewhere near at hand; but as minutes passed by and no one appeared, he became alarmed. He then locked the place up, and went at once to his master’s private residence, Lavender Bay, only to learn the sad details of his sudden death.

“An important statement made by this witness is that only Mr. Booth had a key to his office safe, which he securely locked on Saturday afternoon. As the safe does not appear to have been tampered with in any way, its unlocking adds to the strange peculiarities surrounding this case.

“David Israel does not know the exact amount of money missing, but estimates it at two or three hundred pounds only. ‘If,’ said he, ‘this had occurred a month ago, the loss would have been very different, as up to that time Mr. Booth made no

secret of the fact that he had a large amount—thirty or forty thousand pounds—in securities, locked up in what he considered a burglar and fireproof safe. But the late notorious robberies in the city seemed to have weakened his confidence, for only three weeks ago he transferred the whole of his valuables to the safe keeping of the Bank of New South Wales.”

The extra special edition of the *Evening Times* of the same date had the following additional item—

“On learning the details of the office robbery we at once dispatched a reporter to the scene of the crime in Lavender Bay. It will be noted that, according to the statement of David Israel, there was only one key to the city safe, and that was in the possession of his master. If this key was missing, then a motive for what may now be safely called a crime is forthcoming.

“The police authorities had already made a careful inventory of the dead man’s personal effects, and amongst these, taken from the trousers pocket, was a small flat key, said by Mrs. Booth to be, without doubt, that of her husband’s safe.

“So far as the public is concerned, this safety of the key, the abstraction of which was so naturally anticipated by our reporter, makes the mystery still deeper, and banishes what would at first appear to be the motive for at least part of the crime, and the connecting link between the murder on North Shore and the robbery in town.

“Despite the reticence of the police, it is plain to all that they are as puzzled as the public in general to form an acceptable theory as to how the crime was committed.”

CHAPTER II

THE MISFORTUNES OF A B.A. OF LONDON UNIVERSITY

It was Sunday night, or rather in the early darkness of the small hours of Monday morning, that Police-Constable Hobbs wended his slow and deliberate way down the vista of Walker Street. Why the force are trained to step with a measured tread, which proclaims their personality minutes before their arrival, is one of those questions only to be answered by the benevolent supposition that Authority is anxious to warn Criminality that it is coming!

The constable had a dejected air, he put no energy into the trying of doors and windows, and even the sight of a drunk going by short tacks up Junction Street did not restore his animation.

“Never get a chance!” he muttered to himself; “never get a chance. In the force three years and only a common constable and a B.A. of London University, too! What’s the use of education, anyway? Now, if I was only ignorant enough I might be a Member of Parliament, or perhaps a Minister of the Crown. But to spend years of time and bags of money to end as a policeman is enough to make a man sick. If I was only a sergeant now it would not be so bad. But on the Shore ability has no show, never a burglary worth speaking of, and as for a good murder such a thing is unheard of. I really don’t know what possesses the people. If it was not for a few old reliable drunks that I can always run in in case of need, I should have

got the sack for incompetency long ago. Over in Sydney, how different! Hardly a night but some chap has a turn, and not a paltry drunk with nothing in his pockets either.”

By this time the speaker had arrived at the top of that long flight of steps that runs down the steep hill at the foot of Walker Street to the wharf at Lavender Bay. Here he paused a while, and his talk to himself took a new turn.

“Shall I or shan’t I have a smoke? It is an hour before I have to meet the Sergeant. Shall I waste it in a profitless round of deserted streets and lanes, or have a quiet whiff in the bushes there? I will put the motion to the meeting, as our chairman used to say. Decidedly I think the ‘ayes’ have it. Then here’s for a smoke.”

Saying this he drew a short black pipe from some hidden pocket, charged it with tobacco, and descending the steps a short distance, turned into the bushes on his left. He was just about to strike a light when the figure of a man started up before him and rushed forward.

Without hesitation the policeman took up the chase thus offered. It was too dark to see very clearly, but the fugitive appeared to be a young active man carrying a bag. Now such a character does not go tearing around a quiet suburb like North Shore at four o’clock in the morning with an honest motive. So at least thought P.-C. Hobbs, and he shouted “Stop!” and went at his best handicap speed to overtake the fugitive. But this person, far from stopping or losing in the race, had now turned some corner of stone or bush, and when the constable came

out in the open ground beyond the bushes he found his prey had fled.

Not a sound, not a sign. The earth might have closed on him.

More disconsolate than ever, Hobbs retraced his steps.

“Just my luck—the same old luck! The only kind of a chance I have had for a month, and it slips through my fingers.”

Going not far from the steps he sat concealed in the bushes, and puffed his pipe. And it seemed to him as he gazed through the fumes of Black Jack, that his previous view of things had been pessimistic—his turn would come some day. North Shore could not for ever remain so ferociously virtuous. A time might come when theft, even, perhaps, a good murder might occur on his beat. And then people would learn that it was not for nothing that he had qualified as B.A. at London University.

The dusky light and cold air of dawn now made our philosopher consider the time come to proceed on his round. Already fish-buyers and news-vendors were descending the steps to proceed by the first boat. The steamer was at the wharf puffing out steam as Hobbs looked down on her from the steps.

But stay! Who is that who rushes out from the bushes next the baths and dives at full speed down the slope?

It is THE MAN WITH THE BAG!

Like a flash our policeman again starts in pursuit. This time he says to himself, “The man is mine!”

Vain hope! Even as he rushes into the waiting-room the ferry-boat has cast off and left the wharf. He sees the man with the bag make a desperate leap over a yawning chasm of green sea and white foam, and land safely on the deck. And when he arrives it is only to be greeted by the derisive jeers of the little crowd of passengers.

Slowly he returns up the steps. Shall he report the matter to the Sergeant? It might gain him credit, and the information might prove of use. On the other hand, the Sergeant might want to know what he wanted at that part of his beat at that particular time. And the question would be awkward.

This is how it came about that the police records are bare of any mention of the vain chase by P.-C. Hobbs of a suspicious character carrying a bag.

CHAPTER III

MRS. HOBBS

It was the custom of Mr. Hobbs when he had been on night duty to sleep till twelve noon on the following day, when he would awaken with a punctuality at the dinner hour which would shame the fidelity of an alarm clock. What was his surprise then to have his slumbers rudely disturbed at ten o'clock by the high-pitched voice of Mrs. Hobbs.

"What's the matter, Bell?"

"Wake up, you! Here's news! Who'd have thought it! Why half the Shore might be murdered for all you care!"

"What's that about murdering?"

"Why, the baker boy just told me that at Mrs. Delfosse's, down on the Point, three of the boarders, if not more, were murdered in their beds last night. The whole neighbourhood is there, and there is such a crowd you can hardly get by. And that is your beat, too—I should just like to know where you were last night? I'll be bound packed away in some corner, smoking. You need not shake your head. I know you. Neither use nor ornament. Whatever the Government sees in you to pay you wages I can't think."

"Now, do keep quiet, Bell, and let a fellow have a show. You have got hold of some cock-and-bull story that will melt down in the end to a broken window or a drunken man beating his wife, or some such foolery."

“No such thing! You just dress and pack off to the station. You may be wanted, and how can you get a chance to show your ability if you are out of the way? A clever man like you only a common constable! I say it’s a disgrace. You should speak up, and put yourself forward.”

* * * * *

Two hours later Mr. Hobbs returned.

“You were partly right for a wonder, Bell. One man has been murdered, and a very strange case it is, too.”

And then he told in detail to his wife those events that have been related.

“Well, I never!” exclaimed Mrs. Hobbs. “What shall we have next? And you call that a mystery? Why it is as plain as the nose on your face. The woman killed him, of course! Who else could have done it? That fainting or swooning is all moonshine. Why I could faint twenty times a day if I wanted to. I know that Mrs. Booth—knew her before she was married. A barmaid in a sixpenny bar. That will tell you what she is. Why I would not trust the life of a cat to one of those creatures. Faint, indeed! It wants a fool of a man to be taken in by that sort of humbug.”

“That’s just what Detective Dobell says; he’s got the case in hand. Sent for him to Sydney. As though we were all fools here. Just my luck again! He seems to think there is no doubt about it, and that all the trouble will be to hunt up the corroborative evidence against her.”

“Is that Dobell, the Sydney detective, that took your last chance from you?”

“Yes, that’s the man.”

“Then, in my opinion, he’s a fool! If he said it was the woman did it, then you can make up your mind he is wrong. Is it likely, now, that a woman that wanted to kill her husband, would get a dagger and stab him in his sleep? Suppose I wanted to kill you now, should I go about it like that? No indeed! I should buy some ‘Rough on Rats,’ or something of that kind, and put it in your tea. That is our way. It is only women on the stage that use knives or daggers. You take my advice, and pay no attention at all to what that Dobell says. That woman no more committed that deed than I did myself.”

“But you were positive only five minutes ago that she had!”

“I said no such thing, and if you were not the most aggravating man in the world you would not dare to say so. That is always your way. Trying to make out I contradict myself, when you are too daft to know what to say. If you would only take my advice for once you would—”

“What?”

“Just do a bit of detective work on the quiet. This affair will make a great noise, and the man who finds out the riddle will not be that thick-head Dobell, take my word for it. While all these wiseacres are busy over the woman, you just take another track. Hunt up their history, hers and his. You say that there was no robbery. If so, what was it done for? Who would his death benefit? Trust a woman’s judgment. I’d back her to

find more out about a case in five minutes than one of you tall muddle-heads in a week.”

“It’s all very well to talk, Bell. If it comes to that I give you best. But how should a woman who has never been out of Sydney in her life understand these things? Now, I have had the advantage of a University education in the metropolis of the world—a B.A. of London.”

“Well, Mr. B.A., if you are so clever just go into the back yard and chop some wood for the stove if you expect to have your tea.”

The B.A. went, and as he chopped he inwardly resolved that the advice of his wife was good; that much might be gained and nothing lost by following it. Of a truth, that Dobell did hold his nose a trifle too high—a man who could not construe a page of Latin to save his life.

“Are you going to do what I say about that case?” screamed out Mrs. Hobbs from the kitchen.

Mr. Hobbs’ only reply as he took in an armful of billets was to mutter—

“Bell, you’re a fool?”

* * * * *

On resuming duty some hours later, Mr. Hobbs found himself detailed for the special service of watching Mrs. Booth.

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