



**Murder on the Tracks - Stories
of Mayhem and Murder on the
Railways**

Various



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The Murder on the Okehampton Line

VICTOR L. WHITECHURCH

The solution of the murder on the Okehampton line was, at best, only partial, and yet there can be no doubt whatever that Godfrey Page penetrated the mystery as deeply as it could be penetrated and that his theory was correct; in fact, though some links in the chain of evidence were missing, there was quite sufficient to prove that my brother-in-law had fathomed the leading points.

He was not pressed into the investigation, but took it up out of sheer curiosity.

I had been dining at his house one night and he had sent out for the last edition of the evening paper. I think there was a railway strike or something of the kind going on that interested him. But however that might be, his attention was caught directly he opened the paper with the following paragraph, which he handed me to read:

MURDER ON THE OKEHAMPTON LINE!

(A Railway Mystery)

On the arrival of the last train from Exeter to Okehampton at the latter station last night, a gruesome discovery was made. A porter on the platform noticed a gentleman seated in the corner of a third-class compartment and, as he made no attempt to get out of the carriage, opened the door to wake him, thinking he might be asleep. To his horror he discovered that the man was dead and a subsequent examination revealed the fact that he had been stabbed in the heart with some sharp instrument. There were signs of a struggle in the carriage.

The murdered man was dressed in a dark blue suit with a soft felt hat, but there was absolutely nothing on him to lead to his identification – not a scrap of paper of any sort.

That robbery was not the object is proved by the fact that some five or six pounds in gold and silver and his watch and chain were still on him.

Although the police were communicated with at once nothing further has been ascertained up to going to press. The body has been removed to the White Hart Hotel and there awaits identification.

'Here's a mystery if you like,' said Godfrey Page. 'Let me see, the last down train arrives at Okehampton at ten-fifty. It's the one that leaves Waterloo at five-fifty and Exeter, St David's, at ten-thirty. Of course, the great question is – where did he get into the train and whereabouts on the journey was he murdered?'

'And who he was?' I added.

'Exactly. Do you know, I've half a mind to run down tomorrow and have a look at things. Would you care to come?'

'Well,' I said, 'I think I could spare the day.'

'It means two days. We'll go down tomorrow morning by the ten-thirty express from Paddington. I've been wanting to have a run on that train for a long time.'

'But Okehampton is on the L & SW Railway,' I ventured to suggest.

'I fancy I'm aware of that,' he replied snappishly, 'but I tell you I want a run on the Great Western. I've got a friend at Paddington, too, who'll give me a leg up. I'll write to him tonight. Meet me at Paddington at ten-fifteen under the clock.'

I found him waiting for me when I arrived, holding in his hand a newspaper and a letter.

'It's all right,' he said; 'I've got a line of introduction to the officials at St David's in case I want information. And there's a whole column about the case in this morning's paper. We'll read it as we go down.'

He spent the rest of the time before starting in noting the name of the engine, the number of the coaches, and other details of the express, and then we found ourselves in a comfortable carriage, speeding westward.

'Now,' he said, when we had read the paper, 'you see, there are several new points in the case. Let's try and sum them up.'

'First of all, the identity of the murdered man is still unknown. Secondly, you see, the crime must have been committed between Exeter and Okehampton, because the guard of the train remembers speaking to the man at Exeter. It appears that the guard put his head in the window just before the train started and said: "Where are you for, sir?" To which the man made a singular reply. He answered: "Where does this train go to?" Upon the guard saying "Okehampton," he simply replied, "All right." Now this seems to show that he was in a train *the destination of which he didn't know.*'

'And the next point evidently touches the murderer,' I said.

'Yes; I think so, too. Two men got off the train at Yeoford junction, telling the ticket-collector that there had been no time for them to get a ticket at St David's and paying him the fare. These two men seem to have disappeared. They could not have got away by train, for that was the last one at the junction that night. But it's only a seven or eight miles' walk back to Exeter, and that's probably how they've eluded search.

'Now, you see, this gives us two more points. First, if these two men committed the crime, they did it between Exeter and Yeoford; and secondly, the fact of their having no tickets proves our theory correct that the murdered man was in a train that was strange to him.'

'How so?'

'Because *they* didn't know where they were going either. They must have been following him. They saw him get into the Okehampton train and they got in after him.'

'But the guard said he was alone when he saw him at St David's and spoke to him.'

'Very likely. But the train had not quite started. There was time for them to get in – if not in his compartment in another one. And there *is* such a thing as walking along the footboard of a train in motion, and getting into another compartment. I've done it lots of times.

'Now,' he went on, 'acting on these theories, the next question is – what made the murdered man get into the Okehampton train, and where was he before he got in? Perhaps our good friend Bradshaw will help us.' He opened the book and consulted its pages carefully. 'I won't say what I think yet,' he remarked presently, 'but I've a sort of an idea. There's an island platform at St David's.'

'What on earth's that?'

He looked at me scornfully.

'An island platform is one between two lines, so that trains run on either side of it. But now I'm going to enjoy the run.'

I scarcely saw where the enjoyment came in. He was not still for five minutes together. At every station his head went out of the window, once or twice when we slowed down he grew impatient, but brightened up when he timed a mile in fifty-seven and three-fifths seconds. He made notes of all sorts of things and generally fidgeted during the whole

journey.

'It's been a glorious run,' he exclaimed as we drew up at St David's. 'One hundred and ninety-four miles without a stop, and a minute ahead of scheduled time in spite of that signal against us at Taunton and the slowing down for the PW operations.'

'What's "PW"?' I asked.

'Permanent way, you ignoramus. Stop a minute. I want to speak to the driver.'

He was back in a few minutes.

'Our train leaves for Okehampton at three twenty-five,' he said. 'Now, we'll just have a chat with one of the officials here to begin with.'

We found our way to one of the officials, and Godfrey Page presented the letter of introduction.

'Ah, I've heard of you, Mr Page,' he said. 'You unearthed that strange affair at Warchester, didn't you? Well, I see you've come down to have a look at this Okehampton mystery. Can I do anything for you?'

'Not at present,' said my brother-in-law, 'except to tell me if the train in which the murder took place wasn't a bit late in starting from St David's.'

'Aha,' laughed the other, 'we Great Western men always like to get a rise out of the South-Western, you know. Yes, she *was* three or four minutes late.'

'That's all I want to know. It confirms me in a little theory, though. If I find out anything further at Okehampton I shall trouble you again.'

'Certainly. Anything we can do for you, please ask me. But it seems to me that it is a South-Western job, Mr Page.'

'Ah! I'm not so sure that your line isn't mixed up in it!'

Arrived at Okehampton we quickly found our way to the hotel. Godfrey Page made himself known to the detective-inspector on the premises and we were ushered by him into the room where the body of the murdered man had been taken. He lay in the bed, quiet and serene, with quite a smile upon his face.

He was a man of some five and thirty years of age, with very dark moustache and beard and a bronzed countenance which even death had not been able to stamp with pallor.

'Are there no marks about him?' asked Godfrey Page of the inspector.

'Only this,' and he turned down the sheet and showed the man's right arm, on which a small dragon was tattooed in black and red.

'Hm!' said my brother-in-law, 'looks as if he'd been in the Far East. Only a Chinese or Japanese artist could have done that.'

'Yes,' said the inspector, 'there was a silver dollar along with his money, too, which corroborates that.'

'Were there no marks on his clothes?'

'No.'

'May I look at them?'

'Here they are.'

The inspector narrowly watched Godfrey Page as he turned over garment after garment till he arrived at the shirt. It was an ordinary white one, but with a nasty red stain upon it that told its own tale.

'It's no use,' said the inspector, 'there's no name upon it.'

'By George, though, there's something else. Look, have you noticed this?'

And he pointed to a faint pencilling inside the starched linen cuff.

'What is it?' asked the inspector. 'Looks like a pencilled note. Strange we never noticed it.'

'You gentlemen don't always look everywhere. But I'll just jot that down, please. It's interesting.'

And he entered the following in his notebook, a copy of what had been scrawled on the dead man's shirt cuff: 242, E3 Great Marlow.

'I'll wire to Great Marlow at once,' said the inspector, 'it looks like a clue. It may be he's known there. It might even be the number of a street he knows, or something of that kind.'

'It might be,' returned Godfrey Page dryly. 'I'll only detain you one moment. Was anything else found on him besides money?'

'Only this knife.'

It was an ordinary, rather large, clasp knife. My brother-in-law opened it.

'The big blade's broken,' he said, 'and freshly done, too. Ah, and see how loose it is.'

'Now, sir,' said the inspector impatiently, 'if you've quite finished we'll go. I hope you won't mention what you've seen.'

'Not I. And you're really going to investigate at Great Marlow?'

'Certainly!'

'Ah! Perhaps the bit of blade broken off that knife lies somewhere by Great Marlow.'

The inspector stared at him with astonishment.

'I've heard of you as a sort of private detective where railways are concerned,' he said, 'but, if you'll excuse my saying so, you don't seem to know much about this kind of thing.'

'And perhaps you are as strangely ignorant of railways,' retorted Godfrey Page, 'but I don't bear you any malice. If I'm ever in a position to help you, I will.'

'Now,' he said to me, as we regained the street, 'there's just time for us to make a little purchase, and then we'll catch the five-twelve train back to Exeter.'

And, taking me into an ironmonger's shop, he bought a small screwdriver and put it into his pocket.

Arrived at Exeter we sought out the friendly GW official, and my brother-in-law at once began:

'I'm going to ask you for some rather curious information. We shall stay the night at Exeter, and if you can get it by tomorrow I shall be much obliged.'

'What is it, Mr Page?'

'Find out on what train the third-class coach numbered 242 was running the night before last, and where it is to be found tomorrow.'

The official promised to do so.

Godfrey Page refused to say another word on the subject that night. The next morning we went to St David's and sought out our friend.

'Well?' asked the 'railwayac'.

'I've got you the information, but I don't see how it will help you. Number 242 third coach is one that at present is kept at Plymouth as a spare carriage in case there is an abnormal number of passengers for the Paddington express. The night to which you refer it ran—'

'On the eight-twenty p.m. from North Road, Plymouth, arriving here

at 10.03.'

'How on earth did you know that, for it's quite true?'

'It was only my little theory,' said Page, with a smile, 'but go on.'

'It was put on to the up-corridor express at Plymouth because some passengers, arriving by a P&O steamer, increased the demand for room on that train. You know, perhaps, that if we have over twenty-four P&O passengers we run a "boat special", but not if we take them by ordinary express. On this occasion only sixteen travelled to London.'

'And where is number 242 now?' asked Page impatiently.

'Here.'

'Here?'

'Yes. It was running back to Plymouth last night and I took the liberty of detaining it here because you seemed interested in it.'

Godfrey Page was jubilant.

'Let's go and see it at once,' he said, drawing the screwdriver out of his pocket.

'What do you want that for?' asked the official.

'You'll see,' was the only reply he would make.

We very soon reached the siding where the third-class carriage was standing. Page counted down the fifth compartment and climbed in. We followed.

'Now,' said he to me, 'what do you see? Notice that!' And he pointed above the door. There I read as follows: 242, E. 'All the compartments are lettered, you see,' went on Page, 'and E, of course, is the fifth compartment from the end, commencing with A. Now look at those photographs!'

As is customary in Great Western carriages there were photographs of places of interest along the line over the seats.

'Great Scott!' I exclaimed.

'Great Marlow! you mean,' said my brother-in-law triumphantly, for there, before me, was a photograph of that picturesque Thames town.

'Now,' said Godfrey Page, 'I'll give you my theory, and then we'll see if it's correct.'

'A man, travelling in a train the destination of which he is seemingly ignorant of, is found murdered. Not a single scrap of paper of any kind

remains upon him to prove his identity. His money being left proves that robbery of *that* was not an object. The two men whom we assume committed the crime were following him, and he was flying from them. He was evidently acquainted with China or Japan, and his bronzed face suggested a recent return from abroad.

'Let us assume that he landed at Plymouth from the P&O boat and took the eight-twenty express to Paddington, travelling alone in this compartment. Let us further assume that he discovered that his enemies were on board the same train, having watched for his arrival at Plymouth, and further that he had in his possession some very important paper or letter that it was their object to obtain.

'He knows he is watched and is in danger. First, then, he hides the paper and scribbles the key to finding it again on his wristband. Then, as the train draws up at 10.03 on the left-hand side of the island platform, here he sees another train, the Okehampton one, which ought to have been starting at that very moment, standing on the other side of the platform. Thinking to escape, he rushes across and takes a seat in it. But he is observed by his followers, and they do the same. Then the murder takes place, and they search in vain for the hidden paper.'

'But where did he hide it?'

'Behind this picture of Great Marlow,' said Godfrey Page, commencing to unscrew the panel of it. 'He broke the blade of his knife in doing what I'm doing now.'

Breathlessly we waited while the four screws were withdrawn. Then the panel was removed, and out dropped a large sheet of thin tracing paper, many times folded. We undid it carefully.

'A map,' exclaimed the railway official.

'Yes, but what a map! Look, Tom!'

'A plan of a fortress apparently,' I said.

'A plan of Port Arthur!' cried Godfrey Page.

There, sure enough, was the map of a fortress, with guns and other points marked out with care, and brief explanations in French.

'I'll tell you what,' said Godfrey Page, as he commenced screwing up the panel, 'it's my opinion that we three had better keep this little discovery to ourselves. For, depend upon it, even if we handed this over to the police, the murderers would never be discovered.'

'Why not?'

'Because in all probability they are police themselves.'

'Russians?'

'Exactly so. He met with a spy's fate.'

'But who was this map intended for?'

'My dear fellow, our government would have paid well for it, eh?'

On further consultation we agreed to say nothing to the police. Just before we took the train back to Paddington, Godfrey Page said to our friend the official: 'By the way, they take tickets at Reading from the passengers in the eight-twenty p.m. from Plymouth? You might try and find out if three fewer tickets than were issued at Plymouth were collected that night?'

'All right, Mr Page, I'll drop you a line.'

On our way home my brother-in-law was much puzzled how to act. He had retained the map in his possession, and he was talking of destroying it when suddenly an idea occurred to him.

'Tom,' he said, 'do you ever come across Colonel Sylvester now?'

'Occasionally I meet him at the club.'

'Ah! Isn't he something to do with the Secret Service?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Let's sound him. Ask me to meet him at your place to dinner and leave the rest to me.'

A few days later the dinner came off. We three men were lazily smoking our cigars afterwards when Godfrey Page exclaimed: 'Mysterious affair that at Okehampton the other night.'

'Very,' said the Colonel, with a quick look at him.

'I was down there a day or two afterwards.'

'Indeed!'

'I made an interesting discovery.'

'What?'

'I found a curious thing in a railway carriage.'

'May I ask what?'

'This map,' replied Godfrey Page, taking it out of his pocket.

The Colonel seized it eagerly.

'Good heavens!' he said. 'Have you told anyone of this?'

'Only two beside ourselves know it.'

'For goodness' sake say nothing, Mr Page. If the Russian police knew you had that map, they'd – they'd—'

'Murder me as they did the man who brought it to England, eh?'

The Colonel was pale and trembling as he laid a hand on Godfrey Page's arm.

'Tell me,' he said, 'the police know nothing of this?'

'Nothing.'

'What do you propose to do with it?'

'I thought *you* might find it more useful than I should,' he said significantly.

The Colonel put it in his breast-pocket with a sigh of satisfaction.

'You are a wise man, Mr Page,' he said. 'I am extremely obliged to you.'

'I wonder,' remarked my brother-in-law a day or two later, 'how the inspector got on at Great Marlow? By the way, I've had a letter from Exeter. There *were* three tickets from Plymouth to London missing at the collection at Reading!'