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searches were nearing their conclusion when he caught sight of the knob of a drawer that had rolled into a dark corner under the bunk. He fitted this to a drawer of the desk. The finding of it evidently made him reconstruct his theories, for he went over the carpet once more, pausing a long time under the unshuttered window. Then he turned to the body and lastly fixed his attention on the bed. Behind the pillow lay a book called "Periwinkle," face downward.

"Read himself to sleep," said Joe. "Not much despair about that."

The conductor pushed open the door and stepped in hurriedly.

"Say, Joe, the evidence is getting to be the sure thing against Knowles," he exclaimed. He was seen creeping through the sleeping car after midnight.

"Who saw him?"  
"Thompson . . . the chap with the red head, next berth to this door. He saw Knowles slip by, but didn't think anything of it then."

"Let's talk to Knowles," said Joe.

WE were soon face to face with the suspected man. Mrs. Buckman's description, "sour-looking and shabby," fitted him very well. He appeared to be about fifty, with stooped but powerful shoulders, and he showed gray about the temples, and in his stubble of beard. In the daylight he looked more than shabby, his whole person was unkempt and neglected. At first sight I mistrusted him, and every moment I spent in his company I liked him and his shifty, vindictive face less. At first it seemed he would not speak to any purpose, but at length Joe's friendliness and tobacco thawed his reserve.

There were four of us in the uncomfortable privacy of the cook's galley.

"Yes," said Knowles, "it's true I was manager of the Telville depot of the Giant Oil three months ago, and that Buckman got me fired on some liar's evidence. I saw him last evening and I told him what I thought of him."

"To be exact, you said, 'Look out for yourself!'" interposed Steve, the conductor.

"You were eavesdropping, were you?" Knowles snarled. "Suppose I did say something of that sort."

"Very good! Now, what about the second time you saw Buckman?" went on Steve.

"I did not see him a second time." Here Joe spoke. "The truth is your best card," said he quietly.

Knowles glared round like a trapped animal. "Why are you asking me all these questions?" he cried.

"Because Buckman was murdered, choked to death in the small hours of this morning."

Knowles gasped at the words. "God! Is that true?"

"I guess it's no news to you!" snapped out Steve.

"What do you mean by that?"

"We know you passed along through the sleeper just before he was killed. You were seen. We can prove it."

Knowles had gone dead white. "I swear I never saw Buckman but once last night."

"Then, what were you doing in the sleeper?"

Joe had stood silent during Steve's questioning, and at this Knowles turned to him.

"I'll tell you just the cold truth," he said. "I did go along. I was mad at Buckman and I meant to see him and to make another appeal."

"Then, why did n't you see him?"

"Because I could n't. I tried, but the door of his car was locked."

"Locked?" cried Joe.

"That yarn won't carry you, for I can prove it's a lie," sneered Steve. "The door was n't locked when I went along and found him dead. You won't tell me he got down to turn the key and then hung himself up again?"

"I'm speaking the truth," reiterated Knowles, "though you are all against me."

Then, Joe astonished us. "I'm not ag'in you," said he. "I know as well as you do yourself that you did not murder Buckman."

"Bah! Then who did it?" cried the conductor.

"The man who locked the door and who was inside when Knowles went along."

Steve thrust out his lip. "Is that so? Well, until he's in handcuffs I'll make sure that Knowles here don't escape."

"All right," said Joe. "Say, Mr. Knowles, let me have a match."

Knowles pulled a box from his pocket. "Now lay your hand flat on the table," went on Joe.

The large hand with its grimed and jagged nails was placed palm downward for our inspection.

"Look at the thumbs," said Joe.

There was no more said until we were again alone with Steve.

"I'll undertake to smash any case you get up against Knowles, Steve, so as a jury of cotton-tail rabbits wouldn't convict him," said November gently.

"I'd like to see you do it!"

"Listen then. There was two kinds of matches on the floor in the car, here they are." Joe spread them on his palm. "And here's one out of Knowles' box. These first two of wax were used by Buckman himself; this by the murderer. They're neither of them Knowles' brand; that's plain enough."

"That fact won't carry a jury."

"Not alone," said Joe. "But the next one will. You saw the sharp broken nails on Knowles' hand. The thumbs had 'em nigh a quarter of an inch long. It's impossible to choke a man to death with nails that length and not tear and scratch the skin of the throat, and you saw for yourself that there isn't a mark on Buckman's throat except bruises. That's a proof would go with any jury."

The conductor looked a little sheepish. "I give you best, Joe. But if it was n't Knowles, who in creation was it?"

IT WAS a man twenty years younger than Knowles, very active and strong. A superior chap, trims his nails with scissors, and is at any rate fairly educated. He is well acquainted with this line of railway. He boarded the car by the rear door when Buckman and his wife were asleep, at some spot where the speed slows down. He was after the report on the Tiger Lily Oilfield. He was searching for it when Buckman woke and jumped at him.

"Why on earth did n't Buckman give the alarm?"

"Because he tried to get to the bureau without the other seeing."

"What for . . . to the bureau?"

"For his revolver. He'd left it in the drawer. And he near got it, too. In the struggle the knob was tore off the drawer."

"But there was n't a revolver in that drawer. I had a look in it myself!"

"That's so, but it was there till the murderer took it."

"Why did he take it if he'd got Buckman dead already?"

"A man don't likely hang himself if he's got a revolver handy that'll do the business more comfortably. The finding o' that revolver would may be have spoiled the notion of suicide. That fellow did n't mean to kill Buckman, but he had to choke him to prevent his shouting. And when he found he'd done it too hard, like as not he had a bad five minutes. But he was full of cunning, and he hung him up as a blind. Then, he locked the door and sat there in Buckman's chair and smoked one of Buckman's cigars."

"What?" exclaimed Steve, "with Buckman hanging there?"

"Sure! There was three cigar stumps. Two of them Buckman had smoked through a holder, but the end of the third was all chewed. . . . I tell you the murderer sat there and smoked and thought out what he'd do, for Buckman's death was awkward in two or three ways. He sat there for nigh on twenty minutes, and now and again he'd go to the window that he'd slipped the shutter from and look out."

"Tracked him on the carpet?" inquired Steve, who was still a bit sore on the matter of Knowles.

Joe grinned significantly. "Yes, and found he had wet mud on his moccasins. That's how I first made sure it was n't you, Steve. Your soles were dry when I

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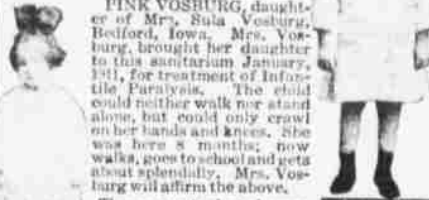
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