

Death goes by bus

by Leslie Cargill

YOU CAN START THE STORY HERE
Only one instalment of this thrilling serial has been printed. Here is a synopsis of the chapters already given:

Synopsis
Travelling from Colborough to Netherton, a country bus develops engine trouble and back-fires several times. Under cover of one of these explosions, a male passenger is shot dead. CARTER, the driver, and WITHERS the conductor, take the situation in hand, assisted by a rather dreary little man named MORRISON SHARPE, whose chief interest in life is solving puzzles—chess problems, cross-words and the like.

Sharpe suggests that the first thing is to account for all who were in the bus when the shot was fired.

Withers makes the number eleven, including the dead man, the driver and the conductor.

Now start the story here:—

FIRED UNDER COAT
"Decidedly," he agreed. So it might be for this man, who had been given an exceptional chance to fire the fatal shot when standing up, ostensibly to attend to the window. From that position of vantage taking hurried aim would be comparatively simple. Of course there would be an element of chance in it. But there were expert gunmen who could control a lethal weapon under cover of a coat.

Mr. Sharpe had no first-hand knowledge of such methods, though he had seen plenty of cinematograph films where it was very neatly done.

Motive was an important factor. Half a dozen possible alternatives suggested themselves, all of them too far-fetched to be probable. More neatly-fitting was the idea that this man was a confirmed criminal. His hands favoured it—so restlessly sensitive and quivering.

Juggling his thoughts a little more expertly, he formulated a clever scheme of revenge involving the removal of somebody who either knew too much or who had double-crossed the injured party. But that seemed too melodramatic. So many tiny things had to be put together with meticulous exactness to make the puzzle complete. Reluctantly he scrapped it, and was formulating an entirely fresh theory, when the bus pulled up with a jerk that set the already quivering nerves of the majority of the passengers tingling.

Conductor Withers was leaning out from his platform frantically signalling to a small car that was coming rapidly towards them. When it stopped they could see that the occupants were police officers. One wore the three stripes,

and the other was a uniformed constable. From the fact that they wore peaked caps in place of the customary spiked helmet, they were evidently attached to the mobile unit detailed to carry out the provisions of the Road Traffic Act.

A gasp from behind was distinctly audible to Morrison Sharpe. So the gentleman with the striking fingers was nervous! The unexpected intrusion of the policemen had knocked him off his guard.

At that moment Mr. Sharpe started an intriguing line of conjecture.

II.
Sergeant Matthews possessed outstanding intelligence—not at all an unusual quality in these days when police work attracts recruits of good education. Although his intellectual attainments were of no particular concern to anybody but his immediate superiors, he boasted a first-class secondary-school training with a matriculation pass that would have seen him to the University had financial circumstances been different.

Having to earn his own living he had deliberately chosen a life that promised adventure rather than accept a hum-drum appointment with an office stool as its starting point. Promotion came early, especially as the formation of motoring patrols permitted an outlet for certain specialized talents he possessed.

One disappointment was that his work on the roads had usually involved cases that were either trivial or merely calling for the exercise of natural courage.

Murder was the type of case Sergeant Matthews hardly expected to come his way. At first he was incredulous. When informed that a man had been shot in a bus, he imagined that bus conductor Withers was playing a joke in rather bad taste.

"It's true enough, Sergeant," said Withers. "See for yourself. I wouldn't pull your leg about a serious matter like this."

Telling Constable Higgins to park the car at the rear, Matthews went to investigate. As he stalked down the gangway he carefully took in the position and demeanour of everybody present. Arriving in the smokers' compartment, he stooped down and made a hurried examination. "Hm," he grunted, "It certainly is a bullet wound. Fired at close range I should judge. What happened?"

Withers explained in detail. When he related how the man had been taken outside the Sergeant's eyebrows went up.

"That was foolish," he said reprovingly.

"Well, we didn't know he was dead and it seemed best to give him fresh air."

"I suppose not. But it makes it harder for purposes of investigation. Just show me where he was sitting."

To get there it was necessary to push through several of the passengers, who were craning their necks as they stood in the entrance way. The Sergeant instructed them to return to the seats they occupied at the time of the tragedy. Where the dead man had been he placed his cap.

Before proceeding further he called the constable, instructing him to keep watch outside. "See that nobody leaves or enters."

The latter order was really superfluous, because the road was practically deserted. It was an advantage not to be worried by curious spectators.

Satisfied, he turned back. From the doorway he could see the whole of the interior of the vehicle—even the still form right at the far end. But that post of vantage left the driver out of sight. Morrison Sharpe could see him clearly—except when he stooped down as had happened at the time the back-firing occurred. Why on earth should the man want to keep fiddling about down there by the floorboards?

"Name, please, and address!" It was the routine examination of potential witnesses that interrupted him. Mr. Sharpe gave the necessary particulars and told what little he knew of the shooting, even to the detail of the window incident.

Sergeant Matthews made no comment. Eventually he turned away—looked back again, and appeared to consider taking the next statement from the man with the slim fingers. Instead he contented himself with fixing that individual with a long and searching gaze.

Morrison Sharpe sensed the uneasiness which the Sergeant's scrutiny was giving the man. But the indignation was delayed. Again came that deep drawing of breath and the thin sound of breathing out.

No, there was not the slightest doubt that one of them, at least, was on tenterhooks.

CHAPTER III
A PHANTOM PASSENGER

Matthews conducted his examination in a way that was not strictly in accordance with the rules supposed to be memorized and observed. Some of the methods were faintly reminiscent of those attributed to American detectives. At all events they were unorthodox.

Jerry Tuckley, schoolboy, of 184 Parbury Terrace, Netherton, had little to say. It was a merit holiday and he had stayed overnight with an aunt in Colborough, taking an early bus home so that he could play in a cricket match during the afternoon. No, he had never had a firearm in his possession.

From his expression it seemed that this was a bitter regret of childhood.

"Did you notice anything suspicious happening?" the Sergeant asked.

"Lots of things."

Jerry, it transpired, had imagination. He had been inventing stories to fit the passengers. Morrison Sharpe heard this statement with interest, tinged with an amusement that gave place to rueful chagrin when it turned out that he had been the particular object of juvenile consideration. "That funny little man, who keeps peering about" was a description that stung.

"What else?"

The lad looked slightly bewildered. "There was something," he admitted, "but I've forgotten what it was."

"Come, come, that won't do! You mustn't hide anything."

"Please, sir, I'm not. But I can't remember. It was something to do with one of the men."

"If you haven't forgotten that part you must know the rest of it."

"Please, sir, I don't. Not . . . only I thought somebody looked queer like."

"What do you mean by 'queer'?"

"Just queer, sir. Sort of jumpy. You know, sir, as if waiting for something to happen."

"Not very clear, but I think I've got the idea. Which of them is it?"

"That's funny, too, sir, because I don't know that either."

"Look round and see if you can recollect."

Jerry stood up rather self-consciously, examining every passenger with a wide-eyed stare that would have been amusing under other circumstances. At last he shook his head. "Can't place him, sir," he announced.

Matthews clicked his tongue impatiently. Plainly he regarded the witness as dull-witted.

But Morrison Sharpe was thinking otherwise. The boy's statement tallied with his own impressions. Somebody had managed to leave a memory on the sub-conscious . . . and there was no presence to encourage a distinct reminder of what it was.

"No presence?" That was the clue. Of all those who were there not one provided the right influence to encourage remembrance. Had there been a miscount of the passengers after all? Managing to catch the official's eye, Mr. Sharpe beckoned Sergeant Matthews across.

"I think I can elaborate the theme," he remarked.

"In what way?" inquired the Sergeant.

"Well it is rather difficult, but I imagine you will follow my method of reasoning."

"Your reasoning, sir?" echoed the Sergeant, slightly shocked.

Mr. Sharpe was mildly apologetic. "Of course I don't pretend to teach you your business. I'm not a trained observer like yourself, although I am in the habit of working difficult matters out very carefully."

"What are you trying to tell me? This is no time to discuss these things."

"I am only endeavour to justify my intervention. Suppose there had been another man present at the time in question?"

"YOUR NAME, PLEASE?"

When Mr. Sharpe suggested that there might have been a twelfth passenger in the bus at the time of the tragedy, Sergeant Matthews looked at him incredulously.

"My suggestion is made in perfect seriousness. Ask the others, and they will, no doubt, bear me out," protested Sharpe.

"You mean they can say that the murderer has escaped?"

"Not so fast, please. Do you realize how rare it is to visualize the obvious? Ever read Chesterton?"

"H'm . . . the best place to hide a leaf is the forest . . . nobody saw the postman because he was too familiar to be noticed . . . Yes, that has been pointed out plenty of times. What bearing has it on this case?"

"The proper place for a bus passenger is on a bus."

"Agreed," said the Sergeant, a little snappily.

"People are getting on and off at irregular intervals."

"Don't waste time, sir."

"I'm not. How many buttons have you on your tunic? Tell me offhand the number of pockets you have, or stairs leading to your bedroom?"

Matthews allowed a flicker of a smile to disturb his stolid grimace. "I live in a bungalow," he murmured.

"No matter, you know what I'm driving at by now."

"Yes, I'd answer at random that I had seven buttons and find the accurate number was either six or eight."

"Nine, to be exact," Morrison Sharpe pointed out.

"Eh!"

"Nine. I've been counting them to make sure. But, mark you, I did not take a census of the passengers because there wasn't any necessity, although I could tell every one in the near vicinity."

"Why?"

"Taking mental notes is a habit of mine."

"And good manners would prevent you turning round to see who was behind you in the bus?"

"Exactly! You are a man of acute discernment."

"Thank you, sir. Spare the compliments until later. Now I'm going to be busy discovering who sat in the rear seats. Much obliged for the tip."

The man with the slim fingers was not nearly so grateful, for he drew attention immediately upon himself. Forgetting that regard for good manners which had been mentioned by Mr. Sharpe placed himself in a position where he could both see and hear what was going on.

"Your name, please?"

"Smith—John Smith."

Sergeant Matthews smiled grimly. "Sounds rather familiar."

"It happens to be true. Nobody ever believes it."

"Then I shall have to accept it."

The other shrugged. "Please yourself about that. There's worse to come."

"I will be the worse for you if you come the smart Alec with me, my man."

"Don't bully. Now ask my address, and I'll tell you."

"Well, what is it?"

"No fixed abode."

"H'm. Are you trying to make yourself out to be a suspicious character?"

"There isn't any need. I am one. Might as well admit it. I've been in quad half a dozen times. That do you any good?"

"Not unless you're going to come clean about the killing?"

"You can't pin that on to me." For the first time he betrayed acute fear.

"I didn't do it, I tell you."

"What brings you here?"

"None of your business."

"Let me suggest the reason. This man who is now dead was a confederate of yours. Either he betrayed you or tried the double-cross. So you followed him and took the first opportunity to croak him."

Morrison Sharpe smiled to himself. This was exactly the theme he had first toyed with.

John Smith wriggled uncomfortably. "You're too smart, he sneered. "But I thought you'd invent that yarn when you found out who I was."

"Keep a civil tongue in your head."

"I'll try! Now get on with the third degree."

The sergeant frowned. He did not like these taunts. "The gentleman in front says you were standing up when the shot was fired."

"That's true. We'd had the window open, but it got a bit draughty and the row from the back-fires was getting on our nerves."

"Eh! what's that?"

"The back-fires—bang-bangs from the engine. I thought the shot was another of 'em at first."

"Strange! So there was a series of explosions going on at the time. Very convenient for the murderer. I'll come back to that point later. Will you describe exactly how you were when the man was killed?"

Quite obligingly John Smith got up and opened the window, closing it as he had been doing when the tragic inter-

ruption intervened. While so engaged, his memory was stimulated. "There was a rowdy little sports car passing," he observed.

"Didn't notice the number, I supposed?"

"No, why should I?"

"What happened then?"

"The chap down the gangway gave a sort of a gurgle and flopped out."

QUESTIONING A CROOK

Matthews thought the story was straightforward enough, told so simply as to take suspicion off the teller. What if the man was an acknowledged crook? That hardly warranted him being held responsible for the major crime. "I'll have another word with you soon," he added brusquely.

"Can't you cops leave a chap alone to earn an honest living?" Smith said, with a leer.

"We can," the sergeant retorted meaningly. "So long as that's the sort of living a man is getting. But there's one more question I want to put. Who was behind you?"

"Couldn't say."

"There was somebody?"

"Oh, yes. A man in an overcoat, for one."

Smith paused. Oddly he looked at the people sitting around. Then he turned and examined the rear, a frown wrinkling his forehead. "That's all I can remember . . . but . . ."

"Go on! What else?"

"I—I didn't notice." His roving eyes flickered. "There's ten now, and yourself. I suppose that's the lot. No, there was another . . ."

Morrison Sharpe craned round. The sergeant showed signs of rising excitement. "Who was it? Where was he sitting?"

"There," came the disappointing report. "Just down the gangway. It was the man who was shot, of course."

"Damn!" snapped Matthews. "Isn't there anybody without an addle pate on this bus?"

"I can't see one," grinned Smith. He was looking intently above his interrogator's eyes as he spoke.

Mr. Sharpe quietly interrupted. "Never mind about the front, what about the back?"

That brought back the frown. "Well," Smith replied, "it's possible there was another, but I can't place him. You see I don't look properly, except to notice the man with his coat collar turned up. On a warm day that struck me as a bit queer."

"Never mind about him," broke in the sergeant.

"Really, officer, I think you ought to concentrate on this point," objected Mr. Sharpe. "Doesn't anything occur to you?"

"Only that there is a lot too much talk about a man who didn't think the same about the weather as some of you. Numbers of people wear overcoats when travelling, even in the middle of summer."

"Take a good look round."

"I'm doing so. Up to now I don't see what you're driving at."

"And I don't want to explain. If you hit on it yourself you will appreciate more thoroughly the point I want to make."

"Oh, I'm level with you in that already. It's a sort of psycho-analysis, isn't it? So long as certain circumstances persist the memory will function efficiently enough. Remove them, and it isn't so easy. That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Good! Do you play chess?"


"Yes. But, damn it all, I haven't time for all these riddles."

"Sorry, sergeant, I'm only trying to be helpful. Occasionally an odd man gets in a chess set—very worrying, because you mix him up. An overwise pawn, say, tempts you to make a bishop move that isn't on."

Admiration showed in Matthew's eyes. He snapped his fingers in an in-

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One of these deals with Canada. "The Birth of Western Canada," by George F. G. Stanley tells a different story than that Canadians have read in history text books of the rebellions Louis Riel led in the West. In Eastern Canada there has always been an absence of explanation of why the revolts occurred. The reasons are here, dug up from the archives of the Hudson's Bay Company, Great Britain, Canada and United States.

"History of the Russian Revolution," by Leon Trotsky, is not a new work, for it has been available since 1932. Here the only man who has made history and written it tells not only his own part in that war but the parts played by most of the other prominent revolutionaries. The book was first published in three volumes which have now been combined into one.

Two Germans

"The Kaiser and His English Relations," by E. F. Benson. The author has written several books on British royalty and now turns his attention to Queen Victoria's most troublesome descendant. He has a theory that William's injury at birth left him with a distinct inferiority complex. Between the Germany of William's rule and the Germany of Hitler's rule there appears to be little difference.

"Germany's War Machine," by Albert Muller, is not history—yet. This is not a sensationally written volume but the information it contains (apparently drawn from well-informed sources) is certainly sensational. The book is called a "dossier of militarization of the Third Reich." It tells of the complete mechanization of the forces, the super highways designed to lead into enemy territories and is illustrated with photos of Germany's latest war machines, maps. There are figures by the page telling the strength of various units.

"Voltaire," by Alfred Noyes, brings more facts to light about the man many consider France's greatest writer. Mr. Noyes has read every one of Voltaire's hundred-odd books and so has absorbed an understanding of the man

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