

EBONY TORSO

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Synopsis of Previous Chapters

Detective-Inspector HOPTON, of Scotland Yard, has been called to a case which presents some very unusual features.

At Lambeth police station he learns from Divisional-Inspector CARLINGFORD that a man FREDERICK DAVIS SCUTT has been strangled. Great violence was used, and there are several curious scratches and punctures on the throat, suggestive of marks made by some large animal or bird.

The finder of the body was the vicar, Mr. GALESBOURNE, who has been called to the station to make a statement. He tells Hopton that Scutt, an ex-blackmailer, was, at the time of his death, a bogus medium who had come to believe in his own powers. He had been imposing upon a MRS. ABERSHAW, who imagined herself to be in the power of some evil spirit—an incubus, she called it. Scutt had been attempting to free her from this obsession, but in his own imagination the thing, which he described as black and formless, had transferred itself to a black ebony carving of a headless torso which he had come from Africa and which had been given him by Mrs. Abershaw.

In the snow, outside the bedroom window, still locked and barred, was found a single impression of a clawed foot, of a type unknown to science!

**CHAPTER II
THE MISSING SCREW**

The body was that of a man past middle age, and of sallow complexion. The hair was white, and so was the stubble round the chin. The murdered man lay high up in the bed, his ruffled hair actually touching the iron rails and his head thrown back at an unnatural angle displaying the deep lacerations on the throat in all their grimness. The glazed eyes were open and the whole face was contorted into an expression that made it appear like some macabre mask of horror. It was the expression of a damned soul, in which panic and fury were shockingly blended.

Hopton bent over and examined the wounds in the throat. They were unquestionably scratches ending in definite punctures where the sharp talons had sunk into the flesh. The top button of the man's pyjama coat had been torn away, and the blood had run down on to the front of the collar and stained the material and the sheets. The detective next reverently turned down the bedding and examined the body, but could see no further injuries and, replacing the covering, focussed his attention on the room again.

He next inspected the window catch with his magnifying glass and also took a careful look at the sill, from whose surface the pile of snow had now practically disappeared, and noted that its height from the ground was about twelve feet.

"There were no other footmarks in the yard below?" he asked Carlingford, who had been watching his investigation in silence. "No more of these animal footmarks, I mean?"

"No, that's just the thing we can't understand, replied the other. "The yard was carefully looked over and we also made a search of the roof with the idea the thing which left that print might have climbed down from above. But there was nothing... no sign of any other marks, or anything suspicious."

"Um," nodded the detective abstractedly, going over and taking another look at the broken lock. "I see the screw's missing that held the bottom of the socket in place. Did your men find it?"

"Yes, it was picked up on the floor," answered Carlingford. "One of the officers has it here."

"It fell out into the room, I suppose?" Hopton suggested.

"I didn't find it personally, but I understand it did," replied Carlingford, as if he was slightly annoyed at having to worry about such unimportant details.

"Ask the constable to let me have a look at it, will you?"

"Certainly," replied the Divisional Inspector, going out on to the landing and calling up the man.

Hopton continued his investigations until his brother officer returned, followed by the policeman, who held the missing screw in his hand. The Detective took it from his subordinate and examined it with his glass.

"Where did you find this, Officer?" he asked at last.

"Here, sir," replied the man, indicating a point opposite the door. "Right

over here, close to the skirting." "I see," nodded Hopton, comparing the head of the screw with the one still in the door.

"It must have shot out with some force to get over there," commented Carlingford, showing a little more interest as he realized the point might have an important bearing on the case.

"Quite," agreed Hopton with a smile. "The only difficulty being that, in my opinion, it was never in the door at all!"

"What!" Inspector Carlingford's eyebrows shot up in astonishment. "This screw never held the socket in place," repeated the Scotland Yard man, decidedly.

"But it's exactly like this one still in the door, sir," commented the policeman, who had been silently looking on.

"Exactly alike in every respect except one," corrected Hopton. "This screw you picked up has never been driven in with a screw driver. Just look at it in the light a moment."

Carlingford and the officer followed him to the window where he held it between his finger and thumb and handed his glass to the constable.

"Take a good look at the head, officer," he suggested. "You'll notice that it's rounded and covered with black lacquer. Now my contention is, that if a screwdriver had ever been used on it some of that protecting lacquer must have been chipped off, exposing the steel beneath. You'll notice, however, that not a particle of metal is visible."

"Yes, sir, you're right there!" agreed the constable eagerly.

"But isn't this rather pointless?" sneered Carlingford in a sarcastic tone. "What does it prove, in any case?"

"Nothing in itself," agreed Hopton readily. "But it's a loose end from which to begin the unravelling process. No, I want you both to take this glass and examine the screw that has remained in position in the door. You'll see at once that the lacquer on its head is chipped pretty extensively round the ridge into which the blade of the screwdriver fits."

The two officers did as they were asked: Carlingford with a rather bad grace.

"Well," asked the detective, "is that correct, or isn't it?"

"I must admit you're right," replied the inspector. "But—"

"One moment, before you start making any objections," Hopton interrupted. "Do you notice anything else?"

Carlingford subjected the screw-head to another long stare, for he was anxious not to appear less observant than his brother-officer, but was at last forced to admit he could see nothing.

"Well, the uncovered portion of the metal is very rusty," Hopton pointed out, "proving pretty conclusively that the screw has been in place for some time."

"And your contention is that the one which the officer picked up had never been in the door?" Carlingford inquired after taking another look at the object in question, and finding what the other said to be undeniable.

"Exactly," agreed the detective. "And I'll go even further. I wouldn't mind taking a sporting bet that if you cut the entire piece of wood out of the door, and carefully saw it in two, so that the screw-hole can be examined in section, you'll find one or two other things to interest you."

"Such as?" Carlingford's question was put in an acid tone.

"Well, when you drive a screw into a door, its thread leaves a corresponding spiral impression in the wood, doesn't it?"

"Quite so."

"But, if it's torn out, as this one was alleged to have been, it tears away the corresponding spiral in the wood, does it not?"

"I suppose so."

"Very well. Now, I may as well tell you right away that I suspect the footprint on the sill was a mere blind, and that Scutt was murdered by an ordinary flesh and blood person with an extremely acute brain. This job has been planned with the most devilish cunning..."

"One moment, Hopton," broke in Carlingford sharply. "This Sherlock Holmes business is all very well, old man; but deduction won't satisfy a judge or jury, you know. You were talking about this screw."

"Give me a chance," cried the detective, holding up a silencing hand. "What I'm telling you isn't deduction, it's fact. You'll find the screw which held the bottom of this socket in place was cut off; so that very little effort would be needed for anyone to force it out, and enable the intruder to get at his victim easily and, above all, without much noise."

"You mean, someone removed the proper screw and substituted a cut off one?" questioned Carlingford.

"I do," nodded Hopton decidedly. "And if you want proof, you'll find that a sectional view of the hole it was imbedded in will show that the corresponding spirals in the wood will only be torn away quite near the opening."

"By George! That's a brainy theory!" agreed Carlingford grudgingly. "I'll have a carpenter in at once and see if it works out. But what about this screw the constable picked up, in the meantime?"

"That's very simple," Hopton assured him. "This criminal we're after is a pretty cute fish. It must have been quite clear to him that we should

examine the broken lock and that the missing screw would possibly set us on the right scent; so he brought a new screw altogether, and dropped it so that it would be found as soon as the room was searched; but, like most clever criminals, Carlingford, he made a little slip and dropped a brand new one, which could obviously have never been used, and, furthermore, he made a second blunder."

"Well, look where the thing was picked up. Right over on the far side of the room, against the skirting. If it had been forced out legitimately, by someone violently breaking open the door, it would have fallen... well, certainly not more than two feet from the entrance; and yet, it's picked up right over on the other side of the room. That fact alone's distinctly suspicious."

"It might easily have got kicked over there by anyone coming in," suggested Carlingford.

"Possible, but most unlikely," objected Hopton.

"And this cut-off screw was, of course, picked up and taken away by the murderer?"

"So I suspect," replied the Detective confidently.

"Um, that looks rather black against Galesbourne, doesn't it?" remarked Carlingford. "He was the person who burst open the door, and he stated he didn't leave the room again until the police arrived."

"Well, he's definitely under suspicion," agreed Hopton.

"And what about a motive?" inquired the Divisional Inspector sarcastically. "It certainly wasn't robbery, this fellow Scutt was as poor as a church mouse; then, there's the foot mark on the sill, and the talon wounds on the dead man's throat to explain away. How did they get there?"

"Everything will fall into its proper place as soon as we begin to thin the facts down," Hopton assured him confidently. "I don't think there's much

to be found here. You'd better have the body removed while I take a look at the backyard and have a chat to Mrs. Scutt."

"Very good," agreed Carlingford, and began to instruct the officer as Hopton left the room and went downstairs.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

Element of Chance Expected in Mining

Hard Work Another Big Factor in Success of Mining.

(From Globe and Mail)

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