

CHAPTER ONE

1854

The accident could have happened to anyone but it was much more likely to befall Reginald Hibbert. He had, after all, a tradition to maintain. Hibbert was not so much clumsy as unlucky. Whenever there was an opportunity to stub his toe, or tear his clothing on a protruding nail or bruise himself by walking into an unexpected obstruction, he would somehow always manage to take it. His devoted wife, Molly, had lost count of the number of times he had returned from work with a black eye, a decided limp or a jacket unwittingly ripped open. Life with Reginald Hibbert meant that there was a constant demand on her sympathy.

‘Be careful, Reg!’ she cried.

But her warning came too late. He had already tripped over the step by the back door and pitched helplessly forward on to the hard stone floor of the scullery. The tin bath he had been carrying hit the slab with a loud clang then bounced out of his grasp. Hibbert landed heavily on his left hand before rolling over. His wife bent over him.

‘Are you hurt?’ she asked solicitously.

‘No, no,’ he replied bravely. ‘I’m fine, Molly.’

‘You always forget that step.’

‘I just didn’t see it with the bath in my hands.’

‘You should have let me bring it in.’

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‘It’s my job now,’ he said seriously. ‘A woman in your condition must be spared any lifting. You must learn to take it easy.’

‘How can I take it easy on washing day?’ she said, clicking her tongue. ‘Besides, the baby is not due for months and months. Now, come on – get up off that floor.’

When she grabbed his left hand to pull him up, he let out a yelp of pain and snatched it swiftly away. Rubbing his wrist gingerly, he got to his feet and almost fell over the tin bath. His wife quickly retrieved it and put it on the table. She studied him with a love that was tempered by mild irritation.

‘I wish you didn’t keep doing that sort of thing, Reg.’

‘What sort of thing?’

‘Hurting yourself all the time.’

Hibbert grinned amiably. ‘I’m a big boy. Nothing hurts me.’

But he was clearly in pain and winced as his left hand brushed the sink. His wife took charge at once. Leading him into the next room, she made him sit down so that she could examine the injury, doing so with great tenderness. They were in their little red-brick terraced house in Crewe. Cramped, cluttered and featureless, it had two small rooms and a scullery. A bare wooden staircase led up to two bedrooms, one at the front and the other at the back. The privy was at the end of the tiny but well-tended garden.

To a married couple in their late twenties, however, it was a paradise after years of sharing an even smaller house in Stoke-on-Trent with Molly’s intrusive parents. The Hibbert household had only one major defect. It bristled with possibilities of incurring minor accidents and he had explored them all.

His wife scrutinised the injured wrist.

'I think you may have broken it, Reg,' she said with concern.

He gave a boastful laugh. 'I don't break that easy.'

'You ought to see a doctor.'

He shook his head. 'I can't afford to, Molly. With a baby on the way, we need to save every penny that we can.'

'Then stay off work for a day or two.'

'And lose my pay? No chance of that.'

'At least ask Mr Fagge to put you on light duties.'

'Douglas Fagge does *nobody* any favours,' said Hibbert grimly as an image of the head porter came into his mind. 'He's a slave driver. If I showed even the slightest sign of weakness, he'd be down on me like a ton of bricks.'

'Then let me come to the station with you. I'll speak to him.'

'Oh, no! That wouldn't do at all.'

'You need to rest that hand, Reg.'

'I need to do my job properly,' he said, rising to his feet and easing her away. 'Think how it would look. If my wife came and asked for special treatment for me, I'd be a laughing stock.'

As it was, Hibbert was often the butt of his colleagues' jokes and he did not wish to offer them more ammunition. He was a short, thin individual with a shock of red hair and a bushy moustache that acted as the focal point in a freckled face. The fact that his pretty wife was both taller and older than him caused much amusement at the railway station and he wanted to protect her from the routine mockery that he endured. Though she was still in the early stages of pregnancy,

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he was afraid that someone would guess their little secret, exposing him to endless ribald comments. Whatever happened, he resolved, his wife must be kept away from his place of work.

‘That wrist needs seeing to,’ she urged.

‘I sprained it, Molly, that’s all.’

‘At least let me put a bandage around it.’

‘No need,’ he said, bending forward to give her a farewell kiss. ‘It feels better already. In any case, I have to be off straightaway. Now remember what I said – if that washing is too much for you, leave it until I come home.’

‘I can manage,’ she said, touched by his consideration. ‘Forget the washing. I’m more worried about that poor wrist of yours.’

‘There’s nothing wrong with it, I tell you.’

By way of demonstration, he clapped his hands several times together then held up both palms, beaming as he did so. It was only when he had left the house that the agony showed in his face.

Until the arrival of the railway in 1837, Crewe had been a sleepy hamlet in the heart of the Cheshire countryside. Three separate railway companies then moved in and Crewe became the connecting point for their respective lines. The Grand Junction Railway, the largest of the companies, soon bought large tracts of land around Crewe and moved its locomotive and carriage works there. It also built two hundred houses for the employees it attracted to the area. When the GJR was absorbed into the London and North West Railway in 1846, the latter markedly increased the

number of dwellings and added churches, chapels, schools, shops, public houses and all the amenities needed by a growing community.

An archetypal railway town had been created.

Reginald Hibbert had been delighted to move there with his wife. He loved the fact that he worked at the hub of the LNWR. Passenger and freight trains came in and out from all directions. The variety was unlimited. No two days were the same. There was always something new, exciting and unscheduled. As a porter, he gave directions to board trains, stowed luggage on the roofs of departing carriages and unloaded it on arrival before carrying it out to waiting cabs and horse-drawn omnibuses. Dealing with the public was what he enjoyed most. His wage might not be high but it was regular and he gained immense satisfaction from his work.

As he approached the station that morning, he gazed at it with pride. Four years earlier, the LNWR had replaced the original building with a larger and much more ornate one. In Hibbert's eyes, it still had an air of newness about it and he always felt a slight thrill as he went through its doors. He was content with his lot, asking nothing more of life than to be doing a valuable job at an important junction on the railway network. Hibbert entered the station with a spring in his step. In spraining his wrist at home, he had already had his daily accident. That, he hoped, absolved him from any further mishaps.

There was, of course, still the wrath of his boss to be faced.

'Hibbert!'

'Good morning, Mr Fagge.'

'You're two minutes late.'

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'I'm sorry, sir. I was held up by—'

'Spare me your excuses,' snapped Douglas Fagge, interrupting him with a dismissive wave of his hand. 'I've heard them all before. You're working on Platform Two.'

'Yes, Mr Fagge.'

'Well, don't stand there, man. Get across there quickly. The next train is due in five minutes.'

'Three, actually,' corrected Hibbert, who knew the timetable by heart. 'It's the through train to Carlisle.'

'That's immaterial,' said Fagge testily. 'I'm talking about the Birmingham train that terminates here in...' He consulted his watch. '...in less than five minutes. All available porters must be on duty.'

'Of course, Mr Fagge.'

'One small plea.'

'Yes, sir?'

'Try to have a day without any little accidents.'

There was a withering scorn in the head porter's voice. Fagge was a tall, wiry man with all the attributes of a martinet. He subjected Hibbert to verbal persecution but the latter had learnt to live with the discomfort. He saw it as a small price to pay for the privilege of working at Crewe Station. As he made his way to Platform Two, he was relieved that Fagge had not noticed the handkerchief that he had tied around his left wrist. Had he been forced to admit suffering yet another domestic mishap, Hibbert would have provoked more ridicule from the head porter.

It was a busy morning. Passenger trains came and went. Goods trains thundered past in both directions on the through lines in the middle. Traffic was relentless and Reginald

Hibbert was kept on his toes along with the other porters. Working with his usual enthusiasm, he tried to ignore the twinges in his left wrist. By the afternoon, he had forgotten all about his injury. Hibbert was emboldened to handle even the heaviest luggage without trepidation. His overconfidence was to prove fatal.

Another train steamed into the station in a riot of noise, vibration and pungent smoke. As soon as the passengers had alighted, Hibbert climbed on to the roof of one of the carriages and began to pass down the luggage to another porter. Stacked on the platform, it was singled out by its owners before being carried away for them. Hibbert had no problems until he tried to handle a large leather trunk. Having manoeuvred it to the edge of the roof, he attempted to lift it in one fluent move but his left wrist suddenly gave way and he let go of the trunk with a cry of anguish.

It plummeted through the air and the porter waiting to take it from him had the presence of mind to step back smartly out of the way. The trunk hit a lady's hatbox with such force that it broke the strap attached to its lid. A small crowd of passengers stood beside the piles of luggage and a collective gasp of horror went up. As the lid of the hatbox flipped open, its contents were tipped roughly out. Reginald Hibbert could not believe his eyes.

Rolling around below him on the platform was a human head.

CHAPTER TWO

Seated at the desk in his office, Detective Inspector Robert Colbeck was writing a report on his latest case. Details of a brutal murder in Seven Dials were somehow robbed of their full horror by his elegant hand but they remained fresh and disturbing in his mind. He was nearing the end of his work when the door suddenly opened and Superintendent Edward Tallis burst in without bothering to knock.

'Stop whatever you're doing, Inspector,' he ordered.

Colbeck looked up. 'Is there a problem, sir?'

'There's *always* a problem at Scotland Yard. Problems arrive on my desk by the dozen every day. Policing a city like London is one long, continuous problem that defies solution.'

'I think you're being unduly pessimistic, Superintendent.'

'Be that as it may, I've a new assignment for you.'

'Here in London?'

'No,' said Tallis. 'In Crewe.'

'That means a railway crime,' said Colbeck with interest, getting to his feet. 'Have the LNWR been in touch with you?'

'They requested you by name.'

'I'm flattered.'

'This is no time to preen yourself,' warned Tallis. 'The London and North West Railway want immediate action. A severed head was found in a hatbox that was unloaded at Crewe station this afternoon.'

'Male or female?'

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‘What does it matter? A head is a head.’

‘Do you have any more details, sir?’

‘None beyond the few that were sent by electric telegraph.’

Colbeck opened a drawer in his desk. ‘I’ll set off at once,’ he said, taking out a copy of *Bradshaw’s Guide*. ‘Let’s find a train that will get me there fast.’

‘You’ll take Sergeant Leeming with you.’

‘Victor will not be happy about that.’

‘His job is to obey orders.’

‘And he always does so,’ said Colbeck, running his finger down a list of departure times. ‘Since we won’t get to Crewe until well into the evening, it means that we’ll have to stay the night. Victor hates to be away from his wife and children.’

Tallis raised a contemptuous eyebrow. ‘You know my view of families,’ he said. ‘They cease to exist when a major crime has been committed. Detection takes precedence over *everything*. It’s the main reason that I never married.’

Colbeck could think of other reasons why the superintendent had not succumbed to holy matrimony, chief among them being the brusque, authoritarian manner that would have little appeal to a member of the opposite sex. Tallis was a solid man in his fifties with grey hair and a neat moustache. Though he had left the army many years ago, he still looked as if he were on the parade ground. He respected Colbeck for his skill as a detective but he could never bring himself to like the undisputed dandy of Scotland Yard. There was a permanent unresolved tension between the two men.

Having selected a train, Colbeck closed his *Bradshaw* and put it back in the desk drawer. He gave his superior a token smile.

‘Your devotion to duty is an inspiration to us all,’ he said without a trace of irony, ‘but some of us need more than the relentless pursuit of the criminal fraternity to get true fulfilment from life. Victor Leeming is a case in point.’

‘A wife and children are unnecessary handicaps.’

‘That’s a matter of opinion, Superintendent.’

‘Mine is based on experience.’

‘Mine is tempered by a recognition of basic human needs,’ said Colbeck suavely. ‘A police force is not a monastic order, sir. I refuse to believe that celibacy in our ranks is to be encouraged.’

‘I’m well aware of your eccentric views, Inspector,’ said Tallis with exasperation, ‘and I’d be grateful if you kept them to yourself. What time is your train?’

‘In just under an hour.’

‘Then find Sergeant Leeming and get over to Euston Station.’

‘At once, sir.’

‘And don’t presume to rest on your laurels.’

‘I’d never dare to do that.’

‘This is an entirely new case.’

Colbeck knew what he meant. It was not the first time that the inspector had answered the call of the London and North West Railway. When a mail train was robbed on its way to Birmingham, a succession of other serious crimes had been committed in its wake. Because of the way he had brought the investigation to a satisfactory conclusion, Robert Colbeck had earned the gratitude of the LNWR as well as that of the Post Office and the Royal Mint. Newspapers had unanimously christened him the Railway Detective. It was an honour that

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he cherished but it also placed a heavy and often uncomfortable burden of expectation on his shoulders.

‘Are you sure you’ve picked the fastest train?’ asked Tallis.

‘I couldn’t have chosen a better one, sir.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘The engine driver is a good friend of mine.’

Caleb Andrews was a short, thin, sinewy man of middle years with the energy of someone half his age. Though he had spent his entire working life on the railway, he had lost none of his boyish enthusiasm for his job. Having begun as a cleaner, he had eventually become a fireman before reaching the pinnacle of his profession as an engine driver. Andrews considered himself to be one of the aristocrats of the railway world and expected deference from those in lowlier positions. He was on the footplate of his locomotive, checking that everything was in order for departure, when two familiar figures came along the platform to see him.

‘Hello, Mr Andrews,’ said Robert Colbeck.

‘Ah!’ exclaimed the driver, turning to look at them. ‘I had a feeling that I might be seeing you on my train, Inspector.’

‘You remember Sergeant Leeming, don’t you?’

‘Of course.’

Andrews and Leeming exchanged a friendly nod.

‘We need to get to Crewe as fast as possible,’ said Colbeck.

‘Then you’ve come to the right man.’

‘You sound as if you expected us,’ said Victor Leeming.

‘I did, Sergeant. When a man’s head is found inside a hatbox at a railway station, the people they’ll always send for are you and Inspector Colbeck.’