

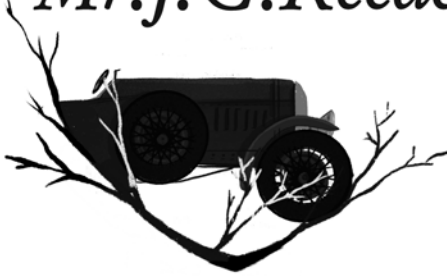


Edgar Wallace

*The Scotland Yard Book
of Edgar Wallace*

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*The Mind
of Mr. J. G. Reeder*



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I THE POETICAL POLICEMAN

The day Mr. Reeder arrived at the Public Prosecutor's office was indeed a day of fate for Mr. Lambton Green, Branch Manager of the London Scottish and Midland Bank.

That branch of the bank, which Mr. Green controlled was situated at the corner of Pell Street and Firling Avenue on the "country side" of Ealing. It is a fairly large building and, unlike most suburban branch offices, the whole of the premises were devoted to banking business, for the bank carried very heavy deposits, the Lunar Traction Company, with three thousand people on its payroll, the Associated Novelties Corporation, with its enormous turnover, and the Laraphone Company being only three of the L.S.M.'s customers.

On Wednesday afternoons, in preparation for the pay days of these corporations, large sums of currency were brought from the head office and deposited in the steel and concrete strong room, which was immediately beneath Mr. Green's private office, but admission, to which was gained through a steel door in the general office. This door was observable from the street, and to assist observation there was a shaded lamp fixed to the wall immediately above, which threw a powerful beam of light upon the door. Further security was ensured by the employment of a night watchman, Arthur Malling, an army pensioner.

The bank lay on a restricted police beat, which had been so arranged that the constable on patrol passed the bank every forty minutes. It was his practice to look through the window and exchange signals with the night watchman, his orders being to wait until Malling appeared.

On the night of October 17th, Police Constable Burnett stopped as usual before the wide peephole and glanced into the bank. The first thing he noticed was that the lamp above the strong room door had been extinguished. The night watchman was not visible, and, his suspicions aroused, the officer did not wait for the man to put in an appearance as he would ordinarily have done, but passed the window to the door, which, to his alarm, he found ajar. Pushing it open, he entered the bank, calling Malling by name.

There was no answer.

Permeating the air was a faint, sweet scent, which he could not locate. The general offices were empty and, entering the manager's room, in which a light burnt, he saw a figure stretched upon the ground. It was the night watchman. His wrists were handcuffed, two straps had been tightly buckled about his knees and ankles.

The explanation for the strange and sickly aroma was now clear. Above the head of the prostrate man was suspended, by a wire hooked to the picture rail, an old tin can, the bottom of which was perforated so that there fell an incessant trickle of some volatile liquid upon the thick cotton pad, which covered Malling's face.

Burnett, who had been wounded in the war, had instantly recognised the smell of chloroform and, dragging the unconscious man into the outer office, snatched the pad from his face and, leaving him only long enough to telephone to the police station, sought vainly to bring him to consciousness.

The police reserves arrived within a few minutes and with them the divisional surgeon who, fortunately, had been at the station when the alarm came through. Every effort to restore the unfortunate man to life proved unavailing.

“He was probably dead when he was found,” was the police doctor’s verdict. “What those scratches are on his right palm is a mystery.”

He pulled open the clenched fist and showed half a dozen little scratches. They were recent, for there was a smear of blood on the palm.

Burnett was sent at once to arouse Mr. Green, the manager, who lived in Firling Avenue, at the corner of which the bank stood; a street of semi-detached villas of a pattern familiar enough to the Londoner. As the officer walked through the little front garden to the door he saw a light through the panels, and he had hardly knocked before the door was opened and Mr. Lambton Green appeared, fully dressed and, to the officer’s discerning eye, in a state of considerable agitation. Constable Burnett saw on a hall chair a big bag, a travelling rug and an umbrella.

The little manager listened, pale as death, whilst Burnett told him of his discovery.

“The bank robbed? Impossible!” he almost shrieked. “My God! This is awful!”

He was so near the point of collapse that Burnett had to assist him into the street.

“I—I was going away on a holiday,” he said incoherently, as he walked up the dark thoroughfare towards the bank premises. “The fact is—I was leaving the bank. I left a note explaining to the directors.”

Into a circle of suspicious men the manager tottered. He unlocked the drawer of his desk, looked and crumbled up.

“They’re not here!” he said wildly. “I left them here—my keys—with the note!”

And then he swooned. When the dazed man recovered he found himself in a police cell and, later in the day, he drooped before a police magistrate, supported by two constables and listened, like a man in a dream, to a charge of causing the death of Arthur Malling, and further, of converting to his own use the sum of £100,000.

It was on the morning of the first remand that Mr. John G. Reeder, with some reluctance for he was suspicious of all Government departments, transferred himself from his own office on Lower Regent Street to a somewhat gloomy bureau on the top floor of the building, which housed the Public Prosecutor. In making this change, he advanced only one stipulation: that he should be connected by private telephone wire with his old bureau.

He did not demand this—he never demanded anything. He asked, nervously and apologetically. There was a certain wistful helplessness about John G. Reeder that made people feel sorry for him that caused even the Public Prosecutor a few uneasy moments of doubt as to whether he had been quite wise in substituting this weak appearing man of middle age for Inspector Holford—bluff, capable and heavily mysterious.

Mr. Reeder was something over fifty, a long-faced gentleman with sandy grey hair and a slither of side whiskers that mercifully distracted attention from his large outstanding ears. He wore halfway down his nose a pair of steel rimmed pince-nez, through which nobody had ever seen him look—they were invariably removed when he was reading. A high and flat-crowned bowler hat matched and yet did not match a frockcoat tightly buttoned across his sparse chest. His boots were square-toed, his cravat—of the broad, chest protector pattern—was ready-made and buckled into place behind

a Gladstonian collar. The neatest appendage to Mr. Reeder was an umbrella rolled so tightly that it might be mistaken for a frivolous walking cane. Rain or shine, he carried this article hooked to his arm, and within living memory, it had never been unfurled.

Inspector Holford (promoted now to the responsibilities of Superintendent) met him in the office to hand over his duties, and a more tangible quantity in the shape of old furniture and fixings.

"Glad to know you, Mr. Reeder. I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you before, but I've heard a lot about you. You've been doing Bank of England work, haven't you?"

Mr. Reeder whispered that he had had that honour, and sighed as though he regretted the drastic sweep of fate that had torn him from the obscurity of his labours. Mr. Holford's scrutiny was full of misgivings.

"Well," he said awkwardly, "this job is different, though I'm told that you are one of the best informed men in London, and if that is the case this will be easy work. Still, we've never had an outsider—I mean, so to speak, a private detective—in this office before, and naturally the Yard is a bit—"

"I quite understand," murmured Mr. Reeder, hanging up his immaculate umbrella. "It is very natural. Mr. Bolond expected the appointment. His wife is annoyed—very properly. But she has no reason to be. She is an ambitious woman. She has a third interest in a West End dancing club that might be raided one of these days."

Holford was staggered. Here was news that was little more than a whispered rumour at Scotland Yard.

"How the devil do you know that?" he blurted.

Mr. Reeder's smile was one of self-depreciation.

"One picks up odd scraps of information," he said apologetically. "I—I see wrong in everything. That is my curious perversion—I have a criminal mind!"

Holford drew a long breath.

“Well—there is nothing much doing. That Ealing case is pretty clear. Green is an ex-convict, who got a job at the bank during the war and worked up to manager. He has done seven years for conversion.”

“Embezzlement and conversion,” murmured Mr. Reeder. “I—er—I’m afraid I was the principal witness against him: bank crimes were rather—er—a hobby of mine. Yes, he got into difficulties with moneylenders. Very foolish—extremely foolish. And he doesn’t admit his error.” Mr. Reeder sighed heavily. “Poor fellow! With his life at stake one may forgive and indeed condone his pitiful prevarications.”

The inspector stared at the new man in amazement.

“I don’t know that there is much ‘poor fellow’ about him. He has cached £100,000 and told the weakest yarn that I’ve ever read—you’ll find copies of the police reports here, if you’d like to read them. The scratches on Malling’s hand are curious—they’ve found several on the other hand. They are not deep enough to suggest a struggle. As to the yarn that Green tells—”

Mr. J.G. Reeder nodded sadly.

“It was not an ingenious story,” he said, almost with regret. “If I remember rightly, his story was something like this: he had been recognised by a man who served in Dartmoor with him, and this fellow wrote a blackmailing letter telling him to pay or clear out. Sooner than return to a life of crime, Green wrote out all the facts to his directors, put the letter in the drawer of his desk with his keys, and left a note for his head cashier on the desk itself, intending to leave London and try to make a fresh start where he was unknown.”

“There were no letters in or on the desk, and no keys,” said the inspector decisively. “The only true part of the yarn was that he had done time.”

“Imprisonment,” suggested Mr. Reeder plaintively. He had a horror of slang. “Yes, that was true.”

Left alone in his office, he spent a very considerable time at his private telephone, communing with the young person who was still a young person, although the passage of time had dealt unkindly with her. For the rest of the morning he was reading the depositions, which his predecessor had put on the desk.

It was late in the afternoon when the Public Prosecutor strolled into his room and glanced at the big pile of manuscript, through which his subordinate was wading.

“What are you reading—the Green business?” he asked, with a note of satisfaction in his voice. “I’m glad that is interesting you, though it seems a fairly straightforward case. I have had a letter from the president of the man’s bank, who for some reason seems to think Green was telling the truth.”

Mr. Reeder looked up with that pained expression of his, which he invariably wore when he was puzzled.

“Here is the evidence of Policeman Burnett,” he said. “Perhaps you can enlighten me, sir. Policeman Burnett stated in his evidence—let me read it:

“Some time before I reached the bank premises I saw a man standing at the corner of the street, immediately outside the bank. I saw him distinctly in the light of a passing mail van. I did not attach any importance to his presence, and I did not see him again. It was possible for this man to have gone round the block and come to 120, Firling Avenue without being seen by me. Immediately after I saw him, my foot struck against a piece of iron on the sidewalk. I put my lamp on the object and found it was an old horseshoe. I had seen children playing with this particular shoe earlier in the evening. When I looked again towards the corner, the man had disappeared. He would have seen the light of my lamp.

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