

# Unsolved Mysteries of the Past Year

## LATEST THEORIES CONCERNING PERCY TOPLIS BY AN EXPERT INVESTIGATOR.



Mrs. Buxton.

NOT since the days of the notorious Charles Peace has a desperado figured so largely in the public eye as Percy Toplis, the monicled, masquerading dandy, whose career terminated after such a sensational hunt for him, extending from the coiled hills of Wales to the remotest glens of the Highlands.

That pauper's grave at Penrith has in its keeping the mystery man of the century. We know that he took the life of Sidney Spicer; that he shot the constable and farmer at Tomintoul; and that he was a convicted thief, who changed his name at will, and was a master of disguise. But that is not all! What other secret—dark crimes and deeds of violence—are hidden in that grave?

Within the past year or so there have been no fewer than nine unsolved mysteries in the country, and in this article shall refer to all these cases in the light of what we know about Percy Toplis.

Since the murder of Spicer, the taxi man—all for trifling gain—I have gone closely into the career of this will-of-the-wisp Toplis. His audacity and daring, told me he was not of the ordinary criminal type. I can't find that he ever planned or perpetrated what we call a clever burglary or brought off any big robbery. Yet he lived by his wits, and was capable of any desperate enterprise.

I knew his record from the official dossier, and it showed the gradual evolution of the criminal. From the occasion at Mansfield in 1908, when he was bitched for a petty crime, and then two years later sent to hard labour for a serious assault upon a young girl, it is a grim page of wrong-doing. He was of the type of criminal which is hardened by prison task and discipline. It was known that Percy Toplis carried a revolver for his defence, and that he was a case in point.

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**TOPLIS THE GUNMAN.**

Charles Peace started carrying a pistol only after he had made up his mind he would never do another "stretch" of prison. And then we know his record, how he shot Constable Cook at close range, sent a bullet into Dyson's heart at Barnhroscross, and fired to kill Constable Robinson at Blackheath. That was Peace, the desperado, and to my mind Toplis had done at that stage a year ago. I'll tell you why I interviewed a warder who had charge of Toplis when he was last in prison, and who gave him the usual good advice to go straight when his time was up. My criminals will swear by all that's holy that price will never see them again. Not so Percy Toplis.

"If I do come back it will be a hanging job," he said, and that was all.

Let me state frankly that Scotland Yard never regarded him as a "big" man in the true sense of the word, that is the criminal of brain power, who plots big coups. Toplis was labelled "dangerous," and for once the designation was right. He was a positive danger to humanity so long as he had a cartridge in his revolver. I said so to a high officer of the C.I.D. while Toplis was at liberty, and before he started Scotland, and that officer agreed.

We know he has a certain amount of ammunition, and we are taking care that he doesn't get a fresh supply," he said. "When it comes to the last cartridge, and he tries to get more he will be trapped."

**AT THE END OF HIS TETHER.**

Percy Toplis knew that quite well, for, cut off as he was from his criminal associates, it was too dangerous a risk to run to buy ammunition. And thus, when he was shot down at Plumpton, he had come to the end of his tether. He knew that the rope was round his neck, and, knowing the man's temperament, I rather think he meant to keep one bullet for himself rather than go back to prison as "a hanging job."

Having his desperate character before us, and his will-of-the-wisp fitting all over the country to mix and blend his trail, it is now regarded as almost certain that he was connected with several other deeds of violence.

I know that certain Scotland Yard men have been trying to piece together the jig-

saw of his life, and that the conviction is strong that he at least was the author of the Hastings train murder, when Nurse Shore was done to death, and that the nude man found in a field near Petersfield, in Hampshire, was actually murdered by Toplis for his clothes and the little cash he had in his pockets.

I am quite well aware, of course, that Charles Peace was saddled with all sorts of crimes, but in the case of Peace, the police knew his movements to a certainty. With Toplis it is different. There are gaps that still have to be explained, and periods when he was "missing" from his usual haunts accounted for. When that is done we shall have unfolded one of the most amazing studies in criminology.

I have before me the details of the recent great mysteries which have thrilled the country, and in many ways and methods they bear the ruthless Toplis mark. It must be kept in mind that Toplis was an adept at disguise. His changing into other garb at the roadside at Plumpton and shaving himself proves that he relied upon these little artifices to baffle his pursuers. Then it is well-known that while in London he frequently appeared as a young man about town, a private soldier, and also as an officer. He was also quick in his movements, the rapidity of his flight showing that he was a quick thinker who did not take the obvious course. I am betraying no secret when I state that it was a regular bomb-shell in Scotland Yard when the news was flashed from Scotland that the Tomintoul desperado resembled Toplis.

One officer who was hot on the scent in Wales flatly refused to believe it, arguing that Toplis would never trust himself to a country which he did not know. But Toplis knew what he was doing, and, but for that chance encounter in the deserted dwelling, he might have played possum for a very long time—until that revolver spoke again. Thus in all the recent cases I have investigated we have the Toplis touch and the Toplis cunning.

### THE FATE OF NELLIE RAULT.

Take the case of Nellie Rault, the pretty young W.A.A.C., who was found done to death near Bedford in May of last year, her body emplaced in a clump of blue bells. I made personal inquiry in that case and at the time I disagreed with the official theory that the murderer was a man who knew Miss Rault and had been slighted. My contention was that it was a stranger who had committed the crime, a man who had been seen riding a bicycle near the scene of the murder. Such a man had been observed and had vanished leaving no direct clue, but it is now stated that Percy Toplis was in the immediate district about that time, masquerading as an officer and that he had hired a bicycle on one occasion. It cannot, however, be established whether he actually had the machine on that particular day in May.

Let me recall the crime and the mysterious details. Miss Rault was a popular girl at Haynes Park camp, about seven miles from Bedford, and apparently had no enemy. On more than one occasion, however, she had expressed herself as being afraid of a certain man—a soldier—whose identity she did not disclose.

Before setting out on that fatal walk she told a friend that she had dreamed about a certain man, and had woken up in fright, believing him to be in the room.

Half an hour later she was seen sitting on a log of wood not far from the fatal spot. She was alone, and was reading a book. Two "Waacs" saw her there, and she called "Chicago" to them. It was at no great distance from the camp, yet no scream

I remember an ingenious theory was put forward that Nellie Rault had seen the man in the wood acting suspiciously, and having the fear of that omen in her heart had endeavoured to raise the alarm. The man, having reason to fear being caught and questioned, had sprung upon her and dealt the blow that silenced her for ever. If it were Percy Toplis he had reason to dread exposure, for the police were after him at that time. He was then passing under the name of Francis Edmondson.

**THE HASTINGS TRAIN TRAGEDY.**

But undoubtedly the case which has gripped the police now that they have a glimmering of the real Toplis is that known as the Hastings train tragedy, when Nurse Florence Nightingale Shore was found dying in a railway compartment.

Nurse Shore had been staying with a friend at HammerSmith, and left on the 3.20 p.m. train for Hastings on 12th Janu-



Gerald Griggs.

ary last, her friend seeing her off at the station. Just before the train started a respectably-dressed man, apparently about thirty years of age, with large staring eyes (the outstanding Toplis characteristic), entered the carriage. He was wearing a brown suit, and had passed along the platform before fixing on that carriage.

What actually happened on route is, of course, a mystery, but it seems clear that Nurse Shore's travelling companion had robbed and murdered in his heart. At Polegate Station three playaters entered the compartment and noticed a lady propped up in a corner, apparently dozing. Soon, however, as the train rattled on, a faint moan told them something was wrong. A closer look and they saw blood on her head and clothing. At Bexhill the matter was reported, and Nurse Shore was taken on to Hastings in a dying condition.

Although terribly battered about the head she lingered for three days, and then died without being able to guide the police. She had been robbed of some jewellery and money, and her wounds had been inflicted by a blunt instrument, probably the butt end of a revolver. The man who had travelled with Nurse Shore from Victoria had vanished, and the published description, as supplied to the police by the nurse's friend, has a remarkable similarity to that of Toplis.

I think, however, that the circumstances in this case are highly significant, and the authorities appear latterly to have begun to agree with my original opinion. I have no doubt that the man met his doom at the hands of a desperado, and that the motive for the crime was robbery.

But why was the murdered man stripped of his clothing? I inclined to the theory that the perpetrator of this crime was a man already wanted by the police, and who desired the wearing apparel of his victim as a new disguise.

Toplis was certainly wanted; he was bold enough and ruthless enough to obtain the disguise he needed in just this way; and the latest facts which have come to light in connection with the mystery establish the circumstance that about this time a man very similar to Toplis had been seen in the neighbourhood.

### THE MYSTERY OF THE CROSS KEYS INN.

I now come to one of the most extraordinary of these cases, indeed, one which presents many features of as baffling mystery as I have ever encountered in the course of my experience. I refer to the case of Mrs. Buxton, the hostess of the Cross Keys Inn at Chelsea.

Mrs. Buxton lived alone, but was not afraid, for she was a strong-minded, courageous woman, and had a revolver to defend herself if attacked. Yet she was brutally done to death under her own roof on Saturday, January 17, of this year. The date is significant. Living alone as she did Mrs. Buxton was careful in locking up, and after everything was secure she had a bit of supper in a little room off the bar. Then she had a last look around, going to the cellar, as was her custom. On the Sunday morning a police constable going his rounds found the saloon bar door open and smoke issuing from the cellar. He gave the alarm of "Fire."

The firemen speedily quenched the fire, but there was no sign of the landlady. What looked like a heap of rags was seen in the cellar on top of a pile of sawdust, but on closer inspection it was seen to be the body of the landlady. Mrs. Buxton had been terribly battered about the head by a blunt weapon, and the murderer had also shattered a heavy bottle against his victim's head. He had then set fire to the contents of the cellar, seeking to destroy all traces of this night's work.

In this case, I have secured information showing that Percy Toplis was acquainted with the Cross Keys Inn, and more than likely with its genial landlady. Was it only coincidence that, like an evil spirit, he was in that quarter of London about that time? What does the mysterious entry in his diary mean—"Jan. 17—Last of B—"

Can it be possible that the "B." stands for Buxton, and that in some way the desperado had come into her life?

Two days later, according to his diary, he kept an appointment at Falmouth. There is suspicion that Toplis was associated with the gang of motor thieves so long rampant in the Metropolis, and led by a mysterious individual known as "Red." The gang operated on two occasions in Chelsea. The theory has been advanced that Mrs. Buxton had become aware of the connection of certain visitors at the Cross Keys with the gang, and, scenting danger, the outlaws had resolved to silence her.

If we accept the diary entry by entry as genuine, then it is hardly possible that Toplis, as some people allege, could have been the murderer of the old blacksmith, Reuben Mort, at Little Lever, near Bolton.



Nurse Shore.

tragedy at Truro on January 23. If, indeed, we consider his diary as absolutely complete, Toplis was not at Truro at this time; but there may conceivably have been certain gaps in his record. There is at least nothing in the document to show that he might not have been there. Certainly, he was familiar with the district, having often been in Falmouth, and his diary, if not mentioning Truro, at least establishes that he was in the West Country about the time of the Cornish tragedy.

Two people were the victims in this affair—Joseph Hoare, a cattle-dealer, and Laura Sans, his housekeeper. They lived in a lonely farmhouse seven miles from Truro. The motive of the assailant appears to have been robbery, as Hoare was in the habit of keeping a considerable amount of money in the house.

We must now follow Toplis back to London, where he would rejoin the motor bandits. I think that I can again connect him with a tragedy which baffled the police, and has the real Toplis touch.

### THE ACTON SHOOTING AFFAIR.

In the early hours of the morning of the 11th February a grim encounter took place in a lonely and picturesque lane near Acton.

Police-Constable Kelly, while patrolling the lane, suddenly caught sight of a stranger whose furtive movements aroused his suspicions. Alive to his duty, the constable approached the man with the intention of questioning him, but before he had uttered a word he was surprised to see the wayfarer take to his heels. Immediately concluding from the fugitive's conduct that he had good reason to avoid the policeman, Kelly gave chase.

The stranger, after running for some distance, suddenly turned and confronted his pursuer. Acting on the spur of the moment, Kelly dashed his helmet at the man, who dodged behind a tree.

An instant after three revolver shots rang out in quick succession, and the constable, who meantime had sounded his whistle for help, collapsed, bleeding profusely. He died eleven days afterwards.

The gunman escaped, and it was afterwards found that the booking office at Acton Railway Station had been burgled. Toplis was undoubtedly in London at that time, and answers to the description.

### THE CASE OF GERALD GRIGGS.

Another unsolved mystery was that of the murder of Gerald Griggs, a cadet at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst. He was strangled with his cadet's lanyard, and his body left in a field, and here again certain circumstances point to Toplis as the possible perpetrator.

The death of Griggs was followed by an assault upon another cadet, who had been the chief witness at the inquest. It is, I think, a highly significant fact that the description of the man who shot the man who shot him is one which tallies in certain points with that of Toplis.

There is the further mystery known as the green bicycle mystery, which I have followed very closely, and about which I have written in this paper. It is a remarkable coincidence, and one that I regard as almost certainly connected with the man who shot the man who shot him, and that whoever did the deed it was certainly not Percy Toplis.

It is interesting to note that Constable Fulton, who was the officer responsible for the hunting down of Toplis, was the nephew of Constable Byrnes, of the Cumberland Road, Police, who was murdered in 1885 by Rudolph Martin, and Baker, the Newbury Hall burglars, at almost the same spot, near Plumpton, where Toplis was cornered and shot. It is a remarkable coincidence, and one that I regard as almost certainly connected with the man who shot the man who shot him, and that whoever did the deed it was certainly not Percy Toplis.

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"You are passing the sentence that I want—that I absolutely want. I prefer it, not to the living death of penal servitude."

And perhaps that bullet from the police revolver gave Toplis the end that he deserved. The secrets of his life are buried with him, but Percy Toplis will go down in criminal history as a man capable of any black deed—a man who defied the law, and was broken in the end.



P.C. Kelly.



Nellie Rault.



Reuben Mort.

was heard, no despairing cry for help. She was missed that night, but not till several days had passed was her body discovered. A stabbing instrument was used. Against taking place, and the unfortunate girl had been stabbed by a sharp instrument in the back and the breast. Not far away a blood-stained table-knife was discovered, and it was quite apparent that the body had been dragged into the spinney and concealed beneath leaves and bracken.

Personally, I believe that knife was left as a blind, but I have a certain doubt in this case of the Toplis connection for a stabbing instrument was used. Against that, however, there is the fact that an outlaw of the Toplis type would not risk firing a revolver so close to a busy camp. There was apparently no motive, but at the time

At that time the latter had been seen wearing a brown suit, and had left London for Bristol that very day. Was this only coincidence? I cannot say, but if he were the travelling companion of the nurse, and had left the train at Lewes, then by doubling back he could have covered his tracks, and proceeded to Bristol.

In this case, and also that of the "nude man," the police are impressed by the resemblance of the wanted man to Percy Toplis.

On 21st February the body of a nude man was discovered lying in a ploughed field at East Moon, Hampshire. There was no reason beyond the curious fact of nudity to suspect foul play, and the theory held for some little time was that the man had died from exposure.

on the morning of January 20. This aged man, according to his dying deposition, was attacked at his own door by a disguised man, who demanded the keys of a safe in which he had locked up a considerable sum of money.

The old man retreated to the house. "Well, I will kill you, I hissed the robber, and old Reuben was felled by a blow on the head—another, and yet another—and then in a dying condition was tied up with a rope, and his house plundered. In this case robbery was assuredly the motive, and it was carried out by one who knew the habits of his victim. Toplis had been at Falmouth on the 19th, so that it is unlikely that he had anything to do with this mystery murder.

The same hardly applies to the double