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Crime in our century.

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2/William Podmore

Another British murder which surprisingly excited a lot of attention from the press, for it was not associated with famous names nor was it the work of a 'monster', 'mad dog' or 'vicious psychopath', cost the life of a petty thief named William Podmore.

The reason may be that Vivian Messiter, the victim, was an American who, though he lived most of his adult life abroad, had recently visited his homeland. He arrived in Southampton in September 1928, to work as an agent of the Wolf's Head Oil Company, and took lodgings at 3 Carlton Road, which belonged to a Mr and Mrs Parrott.

Messiter was in his late fifties, and though in his youth he had held a responsible engineering post during the construction of the tunnel under the Hudson River, he wasn't much good as a salesman and the business he was doing was virtually nil. However on 30 October he ordered his breakfast half an hour earlier than usual at 7.30 a.m., explaining that he had an important appointment to keep. Whom this appointment was with will never be known. The evidence showed that it wasn't with Podmore. However, Messiter was not seen at his lodgings again, and two days later Mr Parrott reported his disappearance. Oddly enough, the police were not particularly interested; they assumed that Messiter had returned to America—without bothering to take his luggage with him. As a matter of fact, the police may have had some reason for this suspicion, for the Parrotts found a diary in their lodger's drawer that contained a lover's telegraphic code. Thus 'Bees' stood for 'When do you think you can come?' and 'Cluny' for 'I am awfully lonesome for you'.

The Wolf's Head Oil Company was likewise content to believe that Messiter had simply gone home in a hurry, and more than two months later, on 10 January 1929, a Mr Passmore arrived in Southampton to take his place. When Mr Passmore unlocked the door of the garage at 42 Grove Street, which was to be his headquarters, he found the dead, rotting body of Vivian Messiter. A post mortem examination established that death had been caused by a blow on the head.

William Podmore, who was 28, had arrived in Southampton with his mistress Lily Hambleton on 20 October. He put up in lodgings at 5 Cranbury Avenue until 2 November. He called himself William F. Thomas,

MURDER

which was prudent of him since he was wanted in his own name by the Manchester police. He had been a petty crook since the age of 11, though he had never been guilty of an act of violence (or at least had never been charged with one). He answered an advertisement which Messiter had placed in the *Southampton Echo* asking for an assistant, and there is no doubt he was hired. There is no doubt either that he cheated Messiter by pretending to have made oil sales to companies which didn't exist, and no doubt finally that he met Messiter at his garage on 30 October, though this was not the important appointment to which Messiter was referring when he asked for an early breakfast.

But Podmore was not accused of murder until nearly a year after he had made a statement (which he stuck to at his trial) and after he had served two prison sentences for fraud. Moreover, it was only by a majority that the magistrates agreed to commit him; and at the trial itself, while the Lord Chief Justice was clearly against him, the prosecution felt it necessary to boost their case by calling two prisoners, both of them with bad criminal records, who related damaging admissions that Podmore had allegedly made to them.

The prosecution did not suggest that the crime was premeditated. Their theory—and it was in reality no more than a theory, however convincing—was that Messiter had discovered Podmore was cheating him, had threatened to go immediately to the police, and that Podmore in a sudden uncontrollable fit of rage had killed him. This may possibly have been true, though no evidence at all was produced to show that Podmore was given to rages. It was, however, unfortunate for him that in the story he told before he knew exactly what was the case against him he referred to a mysterious third party—an agent, he said—who might have done the murder. This, so the prosecution alleged, was why he deliberately left a receipt dated 30 October in the dead man's coat pocket, hoping it would be found there. But the receipt was for a two shillings and sixpence commission on the sale of oil and had, in fact, been collected by Messiter the day before from H. F. Galton, a foreman on the Southern Railway. It was improperly dated.

Still, this apart, the evidence against Podmore—and all of it was circumstantial—was just as consistent with an attempt to cover up fraud as with one to cover up murder. Moreover, there was circumstantial evidence that told in his favour. The murder weapon, a hammer, which was found in the garage, was claimed by a Mr

The garage at
Southampton
where the body of
Vivian Messiter lay
for two months
before being
discovered

Marsh, an engineer. He said he had lent it to a stranger, but failed to pick out Podmore at an identification parade, nor did his description of the borrower at the trial fit the defendant in the dock. Mr Card, a grocer, swore he had seen the same young man with Messiter both on 30 October and a fortnight before, that is before Podmore and Lil arrived in Southampton. The police, who examined Podmore's clothes, failed to find the least sign of bloodstains; nor were they able to trace any of Messiter's personal belongings which Podmore was alleged to have stolen. And, for an unpremeditated murder, it must have been astonishingly cold-blooded. Not only did Podmore take his time afterwards to destroy evidence that would implicate him, but having done this calmly drove in Messiter's car to Downton (near Salisbury), where he was interviewed by another potential employer, and that same evening went to the theatre with Lil to see *Paddy The Next Best Thing*.

In the circumstances, there was understandably a good



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deal of public pressure brought to bear on the Labour Home Secretary, Mr Clynes, to commute Podmore's sentence from death to life imprisonment. Mr Clynes refused on the grounds that his personal dislike of capital punishment was grounds in itself for not interfering with the decision of the jury and the belief of the judge. He was much praised for his courage, though one may think that in a case of such dubiety he would have shown considerably greater courage had he taken the opposite course.

Podmore went to the gallows still protesting his innocence. That may have meant everything—or nothing. He was a poorly educated man of above average intelligence, rather arrogant, and with a remarkable memory, as he revealed several times during his cross-examination by Sir Thomas Inskip. But someone murdered Vivian Messiter. And if it wasn't Podmore, who was it? There was no other candidate in view, which in the last analysis is why he died.

Below left: *Daily Mirror*, 4 February 1930 and (right) *Daily Mirror*, 10 March 1930

'SCORNED LOVE' IN MURDER CHARGE

C.I.D. Inspector's Evidence at Garage Hearing

PODMORE FOR TRIAL

Committed by Majority After a Fifteen-Day Hearing

After a hearing that had lasted fifteen days the Southampton magistrates yesterday decided by a majority to send William Henry Podmore for trial on the charge of murdering Vivian Messiter in a garage.

Inside the court it was a day of drama. Under cross-examination, Inspector Prothero, of Scotland Yard, admitted that several people besides Podmore had been suspected of committing the crime. A man had said a woman came home covered with blood. "Jealousy and love scorned were at the bottom of that," declared the inspector emphatically.

For the defence Mr. O'Connor submitted that no jury would convict Podmore and that the prosecution facts were a "mass of rubbish."

STRUGGLE WITH POLICE

Women's Screams and Cries Heard in Court Room—Dramatic Scene

PODMORE'S LIFE OF CRIME

Housebreaking When He Was Only Nine Years Old

DEATH SENTENCE

Dramatic Court Scene—'I Know Nothing of Garage Murder'

"I still repeat I know nothing whatever about it."

So said William Henry Podmore, "the man with the scar," in the dock at Winchester Assizes on Saturday, before he was sentenced to death for the Southampton garage murder.

Over sixteen months have passed since the murder was committed.

It was two months later before the body of Vivian Messiter, the oil agent, was found in his garage, and from that day the police have worked unremittingly to build up the case against Podmore.

There were dramatic scenes when the end of the trial came. Amid a tense silence the jury, after an absence of eighty-three minutes, filed back into the court.

The word "guilty" came clearly from the lips of the foreman. Some women raised their handkerchiefs to their eyes.

Podmore stood like a statue in the dock. The short figure in a blue suit with a coloured handkerchief peeping out of his breast pocket seemed dazed and dumb.

After Podmore's words the Lord Chief Justice, in a low voice, pronounced the death sentence.

