THE DUBLIN RAILWAY MURDER

THE MURDER OF MR. LITTLE.

THOMAS MORRIS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

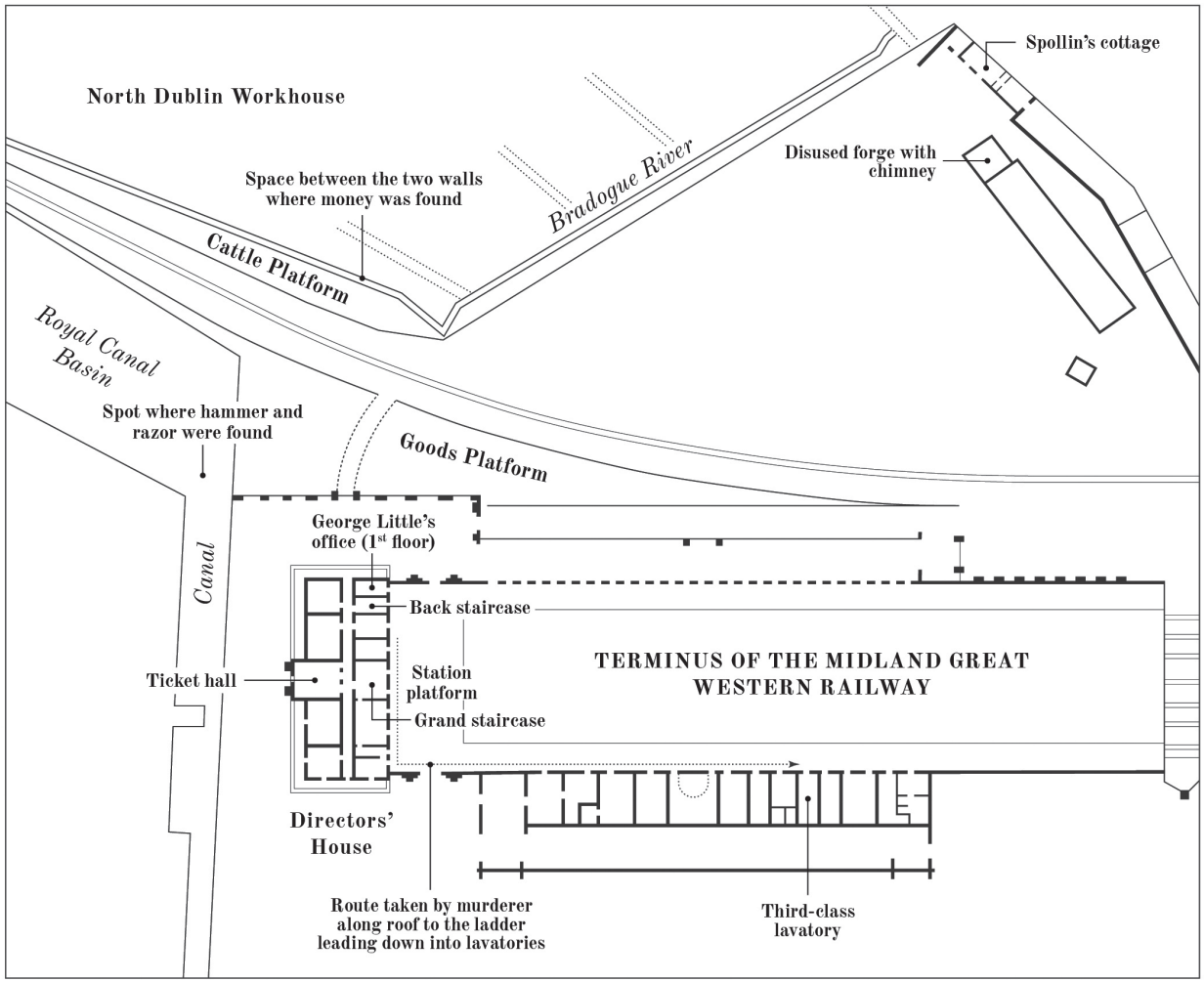
In November 1856 the residents of Dublin were shocked by news of a brutal murder at the city's Broadstone railway terminus – a crime without parallel in the Irish capital's recent history. The ensuing police investigation was the most complex and mystifying that Dublin's detectives had ever undertaken, and its many twists and turns seized the public imagination. It was seven months before the prime suspect was arrested, culminating in a sensational trial that was eagerly followed by newspaper readers on both sides of the Irish Sea.

The Broadstone murder, as it became known, was a particularly notorious crime in an age that relished them. Both the victim and his suspected killer became household names, while the outcome of the trial was a national cause célèbre. This level of public interest meant that newspapers competed to uncover any minor development in the investigation, and sent reporters to transcribe every court hearing. These accounts make it possible to reconstruct much of what happened, but more importantly a huge cache of confidential government papers relating to the case has also survived. A 160-year-old file held by the National Archives of Ireland contains more than three hundred pages of police interviews, minutes and memos; correspondence between detectives, government ministers and lawyers; and even letters written by the prime suspect from his prison cell. What emerges is an unusually complete picture of a Victorian murder inquiry, including many details that were deliberately withheld from the public at the time.

This book draws on all these sources, and also includes material from a pamphlet published privately in 1858 by the phrenologist

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Frederick Bridges, who interviewed the main suspect at length over the course of several weeks. Every incident in the pages that follow is based closely on witness statements and other first-hand accounts. All characters identified by name are real people, and biographical details, however minor, are genuine. Even the dialogue is authentic, with two important exceptions. In transcripts of police interviews and court proceedings the questions asked by detectives or barristers were usually omitted, and I have reconstructed these based on the answers given. In one or two places I have taken the liberty of constructing conversations from statements that were originally committed to paper – but in every case using the actual words of the people concerned.



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Thursday 13 November 1856

The mail train was supposed to leave Galway on the stroke of midnight, but once again the GPO delivery was late. The squat Midland Great Western locomotive sat quietly by the 'up' platform, exhaling plumes of steam into the chilly November air, while its driver and fireman chatted in the open cab. Mr Wainwright, the stationmaster, paced the platform impatiently. Dispatching the night train was the last and most important duty of his working day, and he resented being kept from his bed. Sadly this delay was nothing new. The Galway post office was notorious for its inefficiency, and the city authorities had publicly reprimanded the postmaster for his laziness – but without any discernible effect.

Several minutes after the hour the post-cart finally clattered its way into the station. While the sacks were being heaved into a windowless goods wagon, Mr Wainwright double-checked the locks of a sturdy metal cashbox entrusted to him earlier that evening by the station cashier. Satisfied that they were secure, he handed it over to the guard. There were only two keys to this box: one was attached to the chain jangling in his pocket, the other was at the company headquarters in Dublin. It contained the day's takings at the ticket office, well over £100 in gold and silver – five or six times what the average farm labourer would earn in a year. The guard scribbled a receipt and stowed the cashbox in a corner of the break-van at the rear of the train.

Loading was complete; it was time to get going. The guard stepped back on to the platform, made a cursory inspection of

the goods wagon and blew his whistle. He gave Mr Wainwright a friendly nod and hopped back on to his van as it passed him. The guard's accommodation for the five-and-a-half-hour journey to Dublin was a small wooden carriage with apertures cut into its walls so that he could keep an eye on the rest of the train. It also contained a charcoal stove, but this was no match for the icy North Atlantic blast that whipped mercilessly through the unglazed windows. Nor did the scenery offer much by way of compensation for his discomfort. At this time of night the distant mountains of County Clare were shrouded in darkness, and all that could be seen of Galway Bay was the steady glow of the Mutton Island lighthouse a mile or so out to sea.

The Galway to Dublin line crossed Ireland due east from coast to coast, from the North Atlantic to the Irish Sea. But for most of its one hundred and twenty-five miles the railway passed through some of the dreariest countryside that this famously beautiful island had to offer. Much of the track had been laid through the vast expanse of bog covering the midlands, a flat and featureless wasteland of peat and standing water. Occasionally the train would emerge from the wilderness into green farmland – but this was no rural idyll. What had once been lush pasture was now a tangle of thistles; last summer's oats and barley had rotted in the fields, choked by bindweed and ragwort. But worst of all, this fertile agricultural land was deserted. It was possible to travel for miles without seeing a single person working in the fields: everywhere cottages lay derelict, their roofs and windows gone, the doors long ago ripped off their hinges and used as fuel.

As the locomotive rolled through the night at a sedate twenty miles an hour, the guard had reason to be glad that the sterile landscape remained out of sight. A decade ago, in the mid-1840s, these fields had been the epicentre of the Great Famine, when a virulent new blight had devastated the potato harvest and left countless numbers in abject poverty. Every empty cottage was an unwelcome reminder of a family displaced or dead. Many, unable

to pay the rent, had been evicted by the local landowner and were now living in squalid mud huts in the bog, their children running barefoot through the muck and slime. Others had left to take their chances in the slums of Dublin, or joined the mass exodus to America. A million had emigrated in the space of a few years, and another million had perished from malnutrition or disease. A quarter of Ireland's population, killed or driven from her shores, in the greatest catastrophe the island had ever known.

Few places bore the scars of this calamity as obviously as Athenry, second of the fifteen stops on the line. One tourist guidebook even described the town, reputed to be the oldest in County Galway, as 'the very acme of human misery'. Wretched shacks had sprung up around the ruins of grand aristocratic houses and ancient monasteries, the terrible deprivation of modern Ireland cohabiting with the excesses of its past.

Ballinasloe, Athlone, Moate: large or small, in the early hours these places were almost indistinguishable – a solidly built station-house and a small patch of platform illuminated by oil lamps. As the mail train continued its stately progress eastwards, the baggage wagon became heavier and the pile of cashboxes in the guard's van grew ever larger. At Mullingar, three hours into the journey, there was quite a heap of boxes waiting for him, and he had to make several trips from platform to carriage to stow them all safely.

As the railway left the town behind it joined the course of the Royal Canal, the ninety-mile waterway constructed half a century earlier, at vast expense, between Dublin and Limerick. At the incorporation of the Midland Great Western Railway Company in 1845 its directors had bought the canal, intending to fill it in and lay track over its corpse. But this sentence of execution had been commuted: instead the railway was placed next to it, in the hope that the waterway would provide some welcome extra revenue. This had proved foolishly optimistic. Four-fifths of passenger traffic on the canal had disappeared more or less overnight,

and the barges carrying cows and peat were becoming ever more scarce. For the fifty-odd miles between Mullingar and Dublin, canal and railway ran companionably together, the flashy young upstart side by side with its superannuated cousin.

Killucan, Enfield, Kilcock, Maynooth: every twenty minutes another town or village interrupted the train's passage through the 'dreary tracts' – as one visiting writer described it – of the Bog of Allen, a quarter of a million acres of drab peat. As if to ensure that its exhausted occupants were in no danger of falling asleep, the train now began to rattle violently. The Galway to Dublin line remained blandly rectilinear for most of its length, but on its approach to the capital it indulged in a number of extravagant curves. The guard was jolted around uncomfortably in his van, and the contents of the railway company cashboxes – now amounting to several hundred pounds – jangled like a sack of tambourines. At the village of Lucan he had taken custody of the twenty-eighth of these receptacles; and the last, for they were already in the outskirts of Dublin. Emerging from the long Clonsilla cutting, the train slowed as it passed the Phoenix Park and the Zoological Gardens a mile to the south. The zoo had recently acquired a pair of lions, and on a clear night one could sometimes hear a distant roar from one or other of these lucrative star attractions.

It was almost 5.30 in the morning when the mail train finally pulled under the impressive glass roof of Broadstone terminus. The guard's long night was nearly over. All that remained was to supervise the porters unloading the mailbags, sign over the cashboxes to the stationmaster Mr Hanbury, and then he could begin his weary walk home. Outside the gaslight of the station building, most of Dublin still slumbered. A few bleary-eyed apprentices were taking down the shutters from the fronts of their shops, and here and there a policeman walked his beat, looking out for the petty criminals who had plagued the capital since the famine years.

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THE MURDER

It was just after 8 a.m. when George Little, cashier of the Midland Great Western Railway Company, emerged from number 58 Waterloo Road and set off for his office at the Broadstone terminus. George lived in an elegant villa on a broad street of recently built town houses in south Dublin. With two storeys and a basement it was not much bigger than some of the workers' cottages to be found in the less salubrious parts of town, but the high-ceilinged rooms and intricate fanlight over the front door were indications that this was a residence intended for a superior class of person. Each house was set back from the road by a sizeable front garden, with an even larger one to the rear. Although some distance from the city centre, it was a desirable place to live. Mr Little's neighbours included judges and bankers, surgeons and government officials – some of the most successful professionals in the city.

Despite these affluent surroundings, George Little was far from wealthy. He shared his home with his sister Kate, their elderly mother, and an aunt who was in poor health. George's father, a prosperous solicitor, had died suddenly when George was fifteen. His mother Frances then found herself widowed at the age of thirty-two, with four children to look after and no source of income. Selflessly she decided that their modest savings should go towards her eldest son's education. George attended Trinity College for a couple of years, but when their funds ran out he had to leave without taking a degree. With no hope of entering one of the professions he became a clerk, supporting the family on his meagre salary until his younger brother James was old enough to make a contribution of his own.

That, at least, had been the plan. Kate married a doctor and moved forty miles away to the country, but within a few weeks the newly-wed returned to Dublin a widow, her husband having died suddenly from a fever. The younger sister, Fanny, met an Englishman and settled down with him in Cheshire. And then George's brother James, an engineer, announced that he was

emigrating to Canada. The decision was understandable, since his employment prospects were poor in an Ireland still reeling from the effects of the Great Famine. But it was a major blow for the rest of the family, who had counted on him to help ease their precarious financial situation. George Little was now forty-two and unmarried, the sole breadwinner for a household of four: himself, and three impecunious widows.

His responsibilities weighed heavily on him, and he found solace in religion. Brought up a Church of Ireland Protestant, in his thirties he joined an evangelical sect known as the Exclusive Brethren, a Nonconformist group recently founded in the city. The Brethren's rather severe approach to personal morality had left its mark: he was devout, abstemious, and had a powerful sense of personal duty. One colleague described him as being 'of a gloomy cast of mind', but this was putting it too strongly; he was not a pessimist, but approached life with an intense seriousness that left little room for levity. Though George had few close friends he was well liked, a quiet and amiable soul who avoided conflict and treated everybody with courtesy.

In the 1850s the Littles' house in Waterloo Road was at the very edge of the city, where the modern housing of southern Dublin petered out and gave way to woods and fields. George's office was in the north, three miles away, a walk of about forty-five minutes through the city centre. His route took him over the Grand Canal and through the Georgian splendour of St Stephen's Green – sixty years earlier the scene of public executions, but now Europe's largest and most elegant garden square. From there he turned northwards and passed Dublin Castle, then and for the last seven centuries the seat and symbol of British power in Ireland. While he walked he thought about the day ahead. His work often detained him late in the office, but the week's accounts had been submitted the previous day, so he saw no reason why he should not be home for supper. In his bag was a paper package containing a few pieces of bread and butter for his lunch; his

sister had offered to make him a chicken sandwich, but he had told her he needed nothing so substantial.

'I'll be back early,' he had said as he left the house.

As he crossed the Liffey, George grimaced and clamped a handkerchief to his nose. The stench of raw sewage was overwhelming: beneath him, standing knee deep in the river, a group of labourers was shovelling a foul mixture of mud and human ordure on to a barge. The unlucky residents of Temple Bar had to put up with this appalling smell for eight hours in every twenty-four, but after months of debate the members of the city corporation still could not agree what to do about it.

George hurried away from this foul miasma and into the commercial hubbub of Capel Street, with its glorious muddle of umbrella makers and pawnbrokers and haberdashers and seed merchants. These businesses and the nearby food markets attracted the most prolific of Dublin's 'strokers', the professional thieves whose ability to make a watch or a wallet disappear would not have disgraced a stage conjuror.

But as George Little continued northwards and away from the city centre, the character of the streets began to change. The shops gave way to large institutional buildings full of lawyers, doctors and prisoners. This was a densely populated part of the metropolis, but few of the residents would call it home; indeed, barely any lived here by choice. People might come here because they were sick, and needed treatment at one of the three hospitals on Brunswick Street; or because they were destitute, and had been placed in the workhouse on Constitution Hill; or even because they had been declared insane, and committed to the Richmond Lunatic Asylum. Many of those George walked past every morning were only passing through, travellers en route to Galway or Belfast or London, perhaps staying at one of the hotels that had sprung up to cater for the large transient population.

This area, Broadstone, was Dublin's gateway to western Ireland. The Royal Canal ended here in a wide harbour where barges

had been disgorging their loads of goods, livestock and people for almost half a century. There was still the odd boat on the canal, but for most people the name Broadstone now signified the railway. After all, it made little sense to spend four shillings for an uncomfortable eight-hour journey in the laughably named fly boat to Mullingar, when the train covered the fifty-two miles in a quarter of the time, and for only sixpence more.

The directors of the Midland Great Western Railway Company had wanted their new headquarters to make a bold statement, and the architect had certainly met his brief. Broadstone station was built on the highest spot in the vicinity, so that as one climbed Constitution Hill the station's weighty granite facade loomed impressively, dominating its surroundings completely. It was a two-storey building whose proportions and chimneystacks were reminiscent of a grand Regency town house, but the first thing most visitors noticed was the colossal doorway in the centre of the building, and above it a blank face of stone. It was an entrance worthy of some ancient monument, and after dark it was easy to imagine the hefty double doors slowly swinging open to admit a torchlit procession of robe-clad priests. To the traveller nervous about the novel dangers of rail travel, the high speeds and fatal accidents that appeared in the newspapers with worrying frequency, the solidity and permanence of the Broadstone terminus offered some reassurance.

It was a bitterly cold day, but George had stopped noticing by the time he crossed the pontoon bridge over the canal on to the station forecourt. The last passengers from the morning 'up' train were just leaving the building as he walked through the entrance. Inside was the ticket hall, an echoing stone atrium which with its Doric columns and massive lintels looked like a cross between a Greek temple and an Egyptian burial chamber. Above his head a wrought-iron gallery encircled the room at first-floor height, and above that the wintry daylight filtered through a glass cupola set in the roof. George crossed the hall and walked through a second

doorway which led to the platforms – but instead of turning right into the train shed he climbed an elaborate iron staircase to the first floor. This part of the building was known as Directors' House, and it contained the offices and administrative staff of the Midland Great Western Railway Company.

George Little had joined the railway as a clerk in the Transfer Office in 1853, three years after the station opened. The company was rigidly hierarchical, and an employee's progress through its ranks was typically slow and difficult. But his superiors soon recognised his quiet diligence and valued his fastidious, even pedantic, approach to his work. Six months earlier, in May 1856, he had been promoted to cashier, beating sixty other candidates to the job. It was not a position of any great status, but one carrying grave responsibility. Thousands of pounds in cash passed through his office every week, the majority of the company's revenues. George's appointment was a sign that his bosses trusted him implicitly.

At the top of the staircase George turned right, walked to the end of the corridor and opened the last door on the right. The cashier's office occupied a corner of the building, and although small it was light and well ventilated, with windows on two sides. A few feet inside the door was a stout wooden counter topped by railings, like that of a high-street bank, dividing the room into two. In the middle of the counter was a small aperture at shoulder height, through which money or documents might be passed. Underneath this opening was a door which opened like a wicket gate, giving access to the cashier's private sanctum within. This arrangement was a recent innovation: when George had assumed his new role six months earlier security had been so lax that a stranger might easily have walked in and helped themselves to the piles of cash that were routinely on his desk. It had taken some effort to persuade the company directors that this situation was not acceptable, but eventually they had relented, and arranged for a carpenter from the workshops downstairs to build the

barrier that now prevented unwelcome incursions from members of the public.

George went to the end of the room and sat down at his desk, a large plain table facing the door. It was empty, since it was his unvarying habit to clear it of every atom of clutter when he left the office in the evening. Behind him was a safe set into the wall, and a window which opened on to a sloping expanse of glass and iron, the massive pitched roof that covered the station platforms. Its proximity to the train shed meant that the room was seldom quiet, even when there was no locomotive at either platform. Voices swirled and echoed underneath the glass canopy, as did the never-ending cacophony of bells. A bell was rung ten minutes before a train was due to depart, and again when it actually left. Another bell indicated when an incoming train was ten minutes away, and when it had reached the platform. The incessant noise had been disconcerting at first, but George soon learned to shut it out.

To his right was a wooden dresser containing his ledgers and stationery, and a large sash window which offered the best view in the building, a tableau worthy of a Bruegel. In the foreground the goods yard teemed with men and cattle, their forms dwarfed by the dark edifice of the North Dublin Workhouse. Beyond that could be seen the open green space of the Phoenix Park, the wilder tracts of the plains of Kildare, and a shapely line of undulating hills. A fire had been laid in a small grate opposite this window, and next to it were the high stool and lectern used by his clerk William Chamberlain. There was no other furniture, apart from rough matting covering the floor; the walls were bare, giving the office an air of monastic austerity.

William arrived at 10.00, an hour after his boss. He was a lad of eighteen who had joined the company the previous July. Although the clerk's duties consisted mainly of mundane administrative tasks, such as copying figures into the official ledgers, a great deal of trust was placed in him, given that he was often

asked to handle large amounts of cash. George had kept a watchful eye on his new subordinate at first, looking for any sign that he might succumb to temptation, but soon concluded that he was reliable and honest.

As cashier, George Little was responsible for counting and recording every penny taken at all the ticket offices on the line between Dublin and Galway – as well as every fare taken on the boats of the Royal Canal. Each week he was required to present his accounts to the company directors for scrutiny, and on Thursdays he also had to prepare the weekly wage packets for distribution to the hundred or more employees who worked at the Broadstone terminus. Twice a week he visited the bank to deposit the takings, check the balance of the company accounts and report what he had learned to the accountants. His workload varied considerably, since the amount of cash coming into the office was entirely dependent on the volume of traffic being carried by the railway. Not all the passengers were human: the greater part of the company's revenues throughout the year came from transporting livestock, and the sound of lowing cattle often drifted in through the window as the beasts were being unloaded on to the platform beneath the office.

The cashier's hopes for a quiet Thursday were confounded by the arrival of William McCauley, one of the station porters. Every day McCauley was in and out of the office at regular intervals, bringing the heavy cashboxes from the platform in batches, and collecting them once they had been emptied. Today as he set down the wicker basket containing the first load of boxes he grunted apologetically that there were rather a lot of them. It was Mullingar Fair, he explained: the entire line had been unusually busy for the last two days. The annual livestock fair at Mullingar, fifty-odd miles west of Dublin, was the biggest in Ireland, attracting sheep and cattle farmers from all over the country. In recent years it had also become an important marketplace for the sale of horses, and the leading dealers from England now travelled

hundreds of miles to be there, paying as much as £200 for the finest specimens.

When George Little had helped McCauley stack the cash-boxes against the wall he acknowledged with a sigh that he was likely to be stuck in the office until unusually late. George was not obliged to work any later than 5 p.m., but he also loathed the idea of leaving a task unfinished. His predecessor as cashier, a man called Nugent, had not been quite so particular about his duties, and his bookkeeping had often been chaotic. Mr Little was determined never to let his accounts get into such a state, even though it meant that he often had to stay at work long after everybody else had gone home.

George placed the first of the day's boxes on his desk, and opened it with a key from his chain. It was an object about the size of a doctor's bag, made from sheet iron. Inside was a mass of notes and coins, and an official docket detailing how much money the box contained, what tickets had been purchased and at which station it originated. His task now was to check that the cash amounts all tallied with the dockets, make a note of the receipts in his ledger, and then transfer the dockets to the accountant's office downstairs to ensure that there was a duplicate record of the day's takings.

That was the theory, but the reality was nowhere near as simple. Although most of the cash that came out of each box belonged to the railway company, a significant proportion did not. Passengers using the stations on the Midland Great Western line often continued their journeys beyond Dublin: they might buy a through ticket to Belfast or Wicklow or even to London. In that case, part of the fare was passed on to another railway, or to the firm that operated the regular ferries across the Irish Sea. This portion of the ticket-office revenues, known as 'surplus money', had to be placed in a different pile and accounted separately, before being bundled up and labelled with the name of the company that was to receive it – a laborious and complicated

task. The packets of surplus money were sent periodically to a bank in London, but they sometimes accumulated in the office – amounting to considerable sums – for weeks at a time.

After an hour of industrious activity, George Little's desk was covered in piles of money, cheques and papers. To the casual observer the scene might have appeared chaotic; but, if asked, the cashier could have explained precisely what was in each pile, where it had come from and its final destination. He processed each cashbox with methodical care. When he had sorted the money and dockets, and made a record of each in his ledger, the notes were arranged into bundles and the coins wrapped in paper cartridges, each according to their denomination. The empty box and cash were then placed on a mahogany shelf underneath the large window to his right. Occasionally he asked William to take some document downstairs to the accounting office, but such interruptions were rare, and for several hours the pair continued their labours in silence.

It was mid-afternoon that Thursday when the peace was abruptly shattered by the noisy arrival of an uninvited guest, a scruffily dressed man of indeterminate age carrying a leather satchel. Mr Little stood up and went to the other side of the counter to investigate. The man produced a box of spectacles from his satchel and launched into an enthusiastic but rambling sales patter which he managed to keep up, almost without interruption, for the next quarter of an hour. George asked the pedlar to leave, but this did nothing to stem the verbiage. In desperation he agreed to try on a couple of pairs of glasses. Squinting theatrically through them, he declared that they were not as good as his own, and said firmly that he would not be making a purchase. At length the disappointed salesman was reluctantly evicted into the corridor. George and William, who were equally glad to see the back of him, laughed about their limpet-like visitor, and William asked if the fellow was perhaps Jewish.

'Yes, I think you are right, William,' said Mr Little.

Another hour passed before McCauley returned to the office to pick up the final load of empty cashboxes, which needed to be returned to their various stations by the five o'clock train. William had left them out for him, piled neatly on the counter. Seeing the cashier hunched over his work, McCauley decided not to disturb him, closing the door quietly on his way out. Twenty minutes later another visitor entered the room. It was a while before George Little, glancing up from his ledgers, noticed him at the counter and hurried over to see what he wanted. It turned out to be William Tough, a local builder who sometimes dropped into the office in the hope of cashing a cheque. George was happy to oblige: with several hundred pounds sitting on his desk in notes and coins it was no great inconvenience. He handed over £104 5s 3d in cash, countersigned the builder's cheque and wrote him a receipt.

Mr Tough had just left, his transaction complete, when William Chamberlain looked up at the clock and saw that it was already after 5.00. He put away his work, gathered up his coat and retrieved his hat from the shelf beneath the window. He wished his boss a good evening, ducked through the opening in the counter and departed. All over the building, clerks and managers were doing the same – but the cashier still had work to do. He followed his clerk to the door of the office and locked it behind him. It was the last time that anyone who knew George Little would see him alive.

George was often the last to leave, and disliked being left alone surrounded by so much money. Ten days earlier he had been startled by the sudden intrusion of a rough-looking stranger wearing a dirty jacket and carrying a length of rope. It transpired that the man was only looking for Mr Cabry, the chief engineer, and had taken a wrong turn in the labyrinthine corridors. It was an honest mistake, but the incident had shaken the cashier considerably. He decided that in future he would lock himself in when working on his own, but was alarmed to discover that his door would not

lock from the inside. Since the office was readily accessible from the ticket hall, this made him an easy target for a would-be robber. At George's insistence, the door had been modified so that he could shut himself in with relative security.

Night was falling, and there was still a significant amount of work to be done. George reckoned that it would take three or four hours to get through it all. He returned to his desk and sat down amid the piles of coins and sheaves of notes – a fortune to most Dubliners, more than £1500 in cash. From elsewhere in the building he could hear movement and voices; evidently he was not the only employee working late. The trains would be running for a little while longer, and underneath the great glass roof behind him the cavernous space still echoed with the shouts of porters and the vaporous sighs of locomotives. George adjusted the sputtering mantle of the gas lamp on the table in front of him and picked up his pen. He had told his sister Kate that he would not be late tonight, but she appreciated that his work was often unpredictable. She would not be worried.

The railway offices were looked after by a housekeeper, Anne Gunning, who lived in a basement flat with her husband and children. Every evening she walked through the building, turning down the gaslights and checking that Catherine Campbell, the housemaid, had cleaned the floors and raked out the fires to her satisfaction. At a quarter past seven she began her tour of inspection on the ground floor. In the downstairs passage she met a clerk from the solicitor's department, Mr Thornton, who was unexpectedly – and rather unwillingly – returning to work. He had been at home eating supper with his wife when he was summoned back to the office to copy an important document which needed to be sent to Parliament the following morning.

Mrs Gunning climbed a back staircase to the first floor. The building was in darkness, but as she turned into the long corridor she noticed a patch of light on the wall opposite the cashier's office. Approaching closer, she realised that it was caused by the

gaslight shining through the keyhole. Mrs Gunning was on friendly terms with Mr Little, and was used to seeing him at work long after everybody else had departed. She turned the handle of his door, but found that it was locked. The noise would usually prompt a shout of 'Not gone yet!' from the cashier, but this time there was no reaction from within. Supposing that Mr Little did not wish to be disturbed, she left him to it. She lit a candle and continued with her evening rounds.

A distant clanging, followed shortly by the thunderous music of steam pistons, told her that the 7.30 p.m. train to Galway – the last departure of the day – was under way. The ticket office was now closed, and the porters and other staff were hurrying home to their families. The train shed fell gradually into darkness as the lamps were extinguished one by one. Just three were left burning, illuminating a small portion of the arrivals platform next to Directors' House. Inside, the housekeeper walked past the open door of an office where Catherine, who also lived in the building, was laying a fire for the following morning. Remembering that the coal scuttle in her own bedroom was empty, Mrs Gunning went to refill it. Her chores completed, she returned to the basement to spend the evening with her children.

At 9.00 there was a knock on the door of the Gunnings' parlour. It was another of the legal clerks, Mr Linskey, who asked apologetically if he might have a light, as he needed to fetch something from the solicitor's office on the top floor. Such interruptions were to be expected when one lived in a busy railway station, and Mrs Gunning did not mind them. As it happened, the worst disturbance of the day was yet to come.

The railway company was obliged by law to provide one train per day to cater for those who could not ordinarily afford rail travel, with tickets priced at a penny a mile. The fare from Galway to Dublin worked out at a mere 10s 6d, but the journey was likely to be as uncomfortable as it was inexpensive. The parliamentary train, as it was known, consisted entirely of third-class

carriages with hard wooden seats, and was often unpleasantly overcrowded. Its arrival at Broadstone at 9.30 p.m. could be a raucous affair, as bad-tempered passengers, cooped up in the airless and unheated compartments for hours, spilled out noisily on to the platform. There followed an undignified scramble to secure one of the few cabs still waiting at the side of the station, while suitcases and trunks were unloaded and – in the absence of anything so convenient as a porter – dragged unceremoniously along the dark platform.

This Thursday evening the parliamentary train was half an hour late. The delay was particularly unwelcome to Patrick Hanbury, the stationmaster, who had personally supervised every arrival and departure on these platforms – be it people, goods or livestock – since 5.30 in the morning. If he was lucky he might get six hours' sleep before tomorrow morning's mail train, but he could not even think about going to bed until the last passenger had left the station. At length the great terminus fell silent, and the exhausted stationmaster could perform his final task of the day. Brandishing a large bunch of keys, he walked the length of both platforms, locking up the waiting rooms, the separate lavatories set aside for first-, second- and third-class passengers, and the porters' room. As he headed for the alluring warmth of Directors' House, Mr Hanbury passed the nightwatchman, John King. A few gaslights still glimmered in the offices upstairs; but soon they too would go dark, leaving the custodian to his solitary vigil in Broadstone station.

Henry Beausire, company secretary to the Midland Great Western Railway, sat in his spacious office on the ground floor of Directors' House. It was midday on Friday, and he was just beginning to contemplate the possibility of lunch when Bennett, his clerk, put his head around the door to tell him that something was amiss. Every Friday morning Mr Beausire signed a number of cheques which were then sent up to the cashier's office and added

to the pile of moneys to be taken to the bank later that afternoon. On this occasion Bennett had taken the cheques upstairs but found to his surprise that the office was locked and Mr Little nowhere to be found. The secretary agreed that this was strange, and sent one of the office juniors, a youth called Magee, to enquire for the cashier at his home in south Dublin, three miles away.

But it was not long before the mystery deepened. Half an hour later his clerk knocked on the door to say that a lady wished to see him. The woman he then admitted, Mrs Morton, was in her mid-thirties, smartly dressed and spoke with an educated formality that suggested a privileged upbringing. She seemed unsettled, and fidgeted nervously as she explained that she was the sister of George Little, the cashier. Beausire knew him well: George had entered the company as his personal clerk three years earlier, and the secretary had quickly warmed to his quiet dedication and his guileless, unassuming manner. Kate Morton told him that her brother had not returned home the previous night. She was very worried, and feared that he had been taken seriously ill, or perhaps attacked while walking home in the dark.

Mr Beausire's response was not at all what she had expected. He became agitated and spoke of calling the police, as if he assumed that George had absconded with the week's takings. Kate was offended by the implied slur on her brother's character, and begged Mr Beausire not to take this course of action. She left shortly afterwards, telling him that she intended to check that George had not spent the night with a relative who lived nearby. Kate asked him not to do anything until her return, but the secretary decided that he had better begin making enquiries straight away. It was not unheard of for a railway employee to turn up late for work after a night of drinking or gambling, but he knew George Little well enough to be quite sure that such nocturnal vices were not his style. And it seemed inconceivable that a man so conscientious would deliberately stay away from home overnight without letting his family know.

Mr Beausire strode up the grand staircase to the first floor and found William Chamberlain loitering in the passage outside the cashier's office. When asked why he was not working, the clerk replied that the office was locked; he had asked the housekeeper to let him in, but she had told him that Mr Little had the only key. Beausire gave the door a quick rattle to confirm the truth of this statement, and then bent down to look through the keyhole. But there was nothing to see: the metal keyhole cover on the other side of the door entirely obscured his view.

Awful thoughts coursed through Mr Beausire's mind. Perhaps George had suffered a stroke or heart attack, and was now sitting slumped at his desk just a few yards away, dead or dying. But if he was still alive they must do everything in their power to help him; there was not a minute to lose. Mr Beausire had just decided that they would have to break down the door when a messenger boy, Thomas Moore, emerged from the office opposite. The secretary instructed him to run downstairs to the carriage workshop and ask for Mr Brophy, the foreman. Brophy must send a carpenter to the first floor, urgently, and help them gain access to the cashier's office. The boy listened attentively and then told Mr Beausire that he knew how to get into Mr Little's room. There was a window on the back staircase that gave access to the station roof. From there it would be easy to get into the office through one of the side windows. The secretary agreed to this plan, on condition that he summon the carpenter first.

A few minutes later Mr Beausire and William heard noises from the other side of the locked door. Thomas had succeeded in getting on to the roof, but was struggling to open the window from outside. He shouted to them that he was not strong enough to lift the heavy sash. Assistance soon arrived in the muscular form of James Brophy, carrying a basket of tools. A builder and joiner by trade, Brophy was quite at home clambering about on the roof, and in a moment he was outside the window of Mr Little's office. The blinds were down, and the only news he could

pass on to the small crowd now waiting anxiously in the corridor was that the gas was still lit.

Just then a clerk from the engineering department, Patrick Moan, returned from lunch. He was surprised to find so many people standing around in the corridor outside the cashier's office. Before he could ask what was going on, Mr Beausire barked an instruction at him.

'Moan, run for a doctor. There is something wrong.'

As Moan scurried off on his errand, the company secretary shouted to Brophy that he should get inside the room as quickly as he could, by whatever means were necessary. Brophy tried the window and found that it would not open. Looking more closely, he noticed that it had been roughly secured by a single nail driven through the bottom sash. One firm yank proved enough to dislodge it, and on the other side of the door Mr Beausire soon heard the protesting squeal of a warped window frame being forced open. Brophy swung his legs round and jumped lightly to the floor, then gave an involuntary cry of horror.

'He is here, lying dead,' he yelled, 'and there is no key in the door.'

'Quick!' said Mr Beausire. 'Prise that door open!'

With a rising sense of panic, those in the corridor – who now numbered five or six – tried to force the door, while inside the room Brophy attacked the lock with a chisel. When it finally gave way, Beausire led the charge into the cashier's office. Brophy looked at him blankly and, without saying a word, turned his head towards the window through which he had entered. Beausire followed his gaze, taking in the gas lamp still burning in broad daylight, the desk with its neat piles of papers and coins, and, on the floor behind it, a motionless human form. George Little was lying on his front, his right cheek resting on the floorboards and his eyes fixed open in a glassy stare. His neck was disfigured by a gaping wound; and all around him was blood, endless blood, more blood than Henry Beausire had ever seen.