

DR. THORNDYKE  
HIS FAMOUS CASES  
AS DESCRIBED BY  
R. AUSTIN FREEMAN

Number Twenty Six

A Sower of  
Pestilence

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THE affectionate relations that existed between Thorndyke and his devoted follower, Polton, were probably due, at least in part, to certain similarities in their characters. Polton was an accomplished and versatile craftsman, a man who could do anything, and do it well; and Thorndyke has often said that if he had not been a man of science, he would, by choice, have been a skilled craftsman. Even as things were, he was a masterly manipulator of all instruments of research, and a good enough workman to devise new appliances and processes and to collaborate with his assistant in carrying them out.

Such a collaboration was taking place when the present case opened. It had occurred to Thorndyke that lithography might be usefully applied to medico-legal research, and on this particular morning he and Polton were experimenting in the art of printing from the stone. In the midst of their labours the bell from our chambers below was heard to ring, and Polton, reluctantly laying down the inking roller and wiping his hands on the southern aspect of his trousers, departed to open the door.

“It’s a Mr. Rabbage,” he reported on his return. “Says he has an appointment with you, sir.”

“So he has,” said Thorndyke. “And, as I understand that he is going to offer us a profound mystery for solution, you had better come down with me, Jervis, and hear what he has to say.” Mr. Rabbage turned out to be a benevolent-looking elderly gentleman, who, as we entered, peered at us through a pair of deep, concave spectacles and greeted us “with a smile that was childlike and bland.” Thorndyke looked him over and adroitly brought him to the point.

“Yes,” said Mr. Rabbage, “it is really a most mysterious affair that has brought me here. I have already laid it before a very talented detective officer whom I know slightly—a Mr. Badger; but he frankly admitted that it was beyond him and strongly advised me to consult you.”

“Inspector Badger was kind enough to pay me a very handsome compliment,” said Thorndyke.

“Yes. He said that you would certainly be able to solve this mystery without any difficulty. So here I am. And perhaps I had better explain who I am, in case you don’t happen to know my name. I am the director of the St.

Francis Home of Rest for aged, invalid and destitute cats: an institution where these deserving animals are enabled to convert the autumn of their troubled lives into a sort of Indian summer of comfort and repose. The home is, I may say, my own venture. I support it out of my own means. But I am open to receive contributions; and to that end there is secured to the garden railings a large box with a wide slit and an inscription inviting donations of money, of articles of value, or of food or delicacies for the inmates.”

“And do you get much?” I asked.

“Of money,” he replied, “very little. Of articles of value, none at all. As to gifts of food, they are numerous, but they often display a strange ignorance of the habits of the domestic cat. Such things, for instance, as pickles and banana-skins, though doubtless kindly meant, are quite unsuitable as diet. But the most singular donation that I have ever received was that which I found in the box the day before yesterday. There were a number of articles, but all apparently from the same donor; and their character was so mysterious that I showed them to Mr. Badger, as I have told you, who was as puzzled as I was and referred me to you. The collection comprised three ladies’ purses, a morocco-leather wallet and a small aluminium case. I have brought them with me to show you.”

“What did the purses contain?” Thorndyke asked.

“Nothing,” replied Mr. Rabbage, gazing at us with wide-open eyes. “They were perfectly empty. That is the astonishing circumstance.”

“And the leather wallet?”

“Empty, too, excepting for a few odd papers.”

“And the aluminium case?”

“Ah!” exclaimed Mr. Rabbage, “that was the most amazing of all. It contained a number of glass tubes; and those tubes contained—now, what do you suppose?” He paused impressively, and then, as neither of us offered a suggestion, he answered his own question. “Fleas and lice! Yes, actually! Fleas and lice! Isn’t that an extraordinary donation?”

“It is certainly,” Thorndyke agreed. “Anyone might have known that, with a houseful of cats, you could produce your own fleas.”

“Exactly,” said Mr. Rabbage. “That is what instantly occurred to me, and also, I may say, to Mr. Badger. But let me show you the things.”

He produced from a hand-bag and spread out on the table a collection of articles which were, evidently, the “husks” of the gleanings of some facetious pickpocket, to whom Mr. Rabbage’s donation-box must have appeared as a

perfect God-send. Thorndyke picked up the purses, one after the other, and having glanced at their empty interiors, put them aside. The letter-wallet he looked through more attentively, but without disturbing its contents, and then he took up and opened the aluminium case. This certainly was a rather mysterious affair. It opened like a cigarette case. One side was fitted with six glass specimen-tubes, each provided with a well-fitting parchment cap, perforated with a number of needle-holes; and of the six tubes, four contained fleas—about a dozen in each tube—some of which were dead, but others still alive, and the remaining two lice, all of which were dead. In the opposite side of the case, secured with a catch, was a thin celluloid note-tablet on which some numbers had been written in pencil.

“Well,” said Mr. Rabbage, when the examination was finished, “can you offer any solution of the mystery?”

Thorndyke shook his head gravely. “Not offhand,” he replied. “This is a matter which will require careful consideration. Leave these things with me for further examination and I will let you know, in the course of a few days, what conclusion we arrive at.”

“Thank you,” said Mr. Rabbage, rising and holding out his hand. “You have my address, I think.”

He glanced at his watch, snatched up his hand-bag and darted to the door; and a moment later we heard him bustling down the stairs in the hurried, strenuous manner that is characteristic of persons who spend most of their lives doing nothing.

“I’m surprised at you, Thorndyke,” I said when he had gone, “encouraging that ass, Badger, in his silly practical jokes. Why didn’t you tell this old nincompoop that he had just got a pick-pocket’s leavings and have done with it?”

“For the reason, my learned brother, that I haven’t done with it. I am a little curious as to whose pocket has been picked, and what that person was doing with a collection of fleas and lice.”

“I don’t see that it is any business of yours,” said I. “And as to the vermin, I should suggest that the owner of the case is an entomologist who specialises in epizoa. Probably he is collecting varieties and races.”

“And how,” asked Thorndyke, opening the case and handing it to me, “does my learned friend account for the faint scent of aniseed that exhales from this collection?”

“I don’t account for it at all,” said I. “It is a nasty smell. I noticed it when

you first opened the case. I can only suppose that the flea-merchant likes it, or thinks that the fleas do.”

“The latter seems the more probable,” said Thorndyke, “for you notice that the odour seems to come principally from the parchment caps of the four tubes that contain fleas. The caps of the louse tubes don’t seem to be scented. And now let us have a little closer look at the letter-wallet.”

He opened the wallet and took out its contents, which were unilluminating enough. Apparently it had been gutted by the pickpocket and only the manifestly valueless articles left. One or two bills, recording purchases at shops, a time-table, a brief letter in French, without its envelope and bearing neither address, date, nor signature, and a set of small maps mounted on thin card: this was the whole collection, and not one of the articles appeared to furnish the slightest clue to the identity of the owner.

Thorndyke looked at the letter curiously and read it aloud.

“It is just a little singular,” he remarked, “that this note should be addressed to nobody by name, should bear neither address, date, nor signature, and should have had its envelope removed. There is almost an appearance of avoiding the means of identification. Yet the matter is simple and innocent enough: just an appointment to meet at the Mile End Picture Palace. But these maps are more interesting; in fact, they are quite curious.”

He took them out of the wallet—lifting them carefully by the edges, I noticed—and laid them out on the table. There were seven cards, and each had a map, or rather a section, pasted on both sides. The sections had been cut out of a three-inch map of London, and as each card was three inches by four and a half, each section represented an area of one mile by a mile and a half. They had been very carefully prepared: neatly stuck on the cards and varnished, and every section bore a distinguishing letter. But the most curious feature was a number of small circles drawn in pencil on various parts of the maps, each circle enclosing a number.

“What do you make of those circles, Thorndyke?” I asked.

“One can only make a speculative hypothesis,” he replied. “I am disposed to associate them with the fleas and lice. You notice that the maps all represent the most squalid parts of East London—Spitalfields, Bethnal Green, Whitechapel, and so forth, where the material would be plentiful; and you also notice that the celluloid tablet in the insect case bears a number of pencilled jottings that might refer to these maps. Here, for instance, is a note, ‘B 21  $a + b$  —,’ and you observe that each entry has an  $a$  and  $a b$  with either a plus or a minus sign. Now, if we assume that  $a$  means fleas and  $b$  lice, or vice versa, the

maps and the notes together might form a record of collections or experiments with a geographical basis.”

“They might,” I agreed, “but there isn’t a particle of evidence that they do. It is a most fantastic hypothesis. We don’t know, and we have no reason to suppose, that the insect-case and the wallet were the property of the same person. And we have no means of finding out whether they were or were not.”

“There I think you do us an injustice, Jervis,” said he. “Are we not lithographers?”

“I don’t see where the lithography comes in,” said I.

“Then you ought to. This is a test case. These maps are varnished, and are thus virtually lithographic transfer paper; and the celluloid tablet also has a non-absorbent surface. Now, if you handle transfer paper carelessly when drawing on it, you are apt to find, when you have transferred to the stone, that your finger-prints ink up, as well as the drawing. So it is possible that if we put these maps and the note-tablet on the stone, we may be able to ink up the prints of the fingers that have handled them and so prove whether they were or were not the same fingers.”

“That would be interesting as an experiment,” said I, “though I don’t see that it matters two straws whether they were the same or not.”

“Probably it doesn’t,” he replied, “though it may. But we have a new method and we may as well try it.”

We took the things up to the laboratory and explained the problem to Polton, who entered into the inquiry with enthusiasm. Producing from a cupboard a fresh stone, he picked the maps out of the wallet one by one (with a pair of watchmaker’s tweezers) and fell to work forthwith on the task of transferring the invisible—and possibly non-existent—finger-prints from the maps and the note-tablet to the stone. I watched him go through the various processes in his neat, careful, dexterous fashion and hoped that all his trouble would not be in vain. Nor was it; for when he began cautiously to ink up the stone, it was evident that something was there, though it was not so evident what that something was. Presently, however, the vague markings took more definite shape, and now could be recognised as eight rather confused masses of finger-prints, some badly smeared, some incomplete, and all mixed up and superimposed so as to make the identification of any one print almost an impossibility.

Thorndyke looked them over dubiously. “It is a dreadful muddle,” said he, “but I think we can pick out the prints well enough for identification if that

should be necessary. Which of these is the note-tablet, Polton?"

"The one in the right-hand top corner, sir," was the reply.

"Ah!" said Thorndyke, "then that answers our question. Confused as the impressions are, you can see quite plainly that the left thumb is the same thumb as that on the maps."

"Yes," I agreed after making the comparison, "there is not much doubt that they are the same. And now the question is, what about it?"

"Yes," said Thorndyke; "that is the question." And with this we retired from the laboratory, leaving Polton joyfully pulling off proofs.

During the next few days I had a vague impression that my colleague was working at this case, though with what object I could not imagine. Mr. Rabbage's problem was too absurd to take seriously, and Thorndyke was beyond working out cases, as he used to at one time, for the sake of mere experience. However, a day or two later, a genuine case turned up and occupied our attention to some purpose.

It was about six in the evening when Mr. Nicholas Balcombe called on us by appointment, and proceeded, in a business-like fashion, to state his case.

"I was advised by my friend Stalker, of the Griffin Life Assurance Office, to consult you," said he. "Stalker tells me that you have got him out of endless difficulties, and I am hoping that you will be able to help me out of mine, though they are not so clearly within your province as Stalker's. But you will know about that better than I do.

"I am the manager of Rutherford's Bank—the Cornhill Branch—and I have just had a very alarming experience. The day before yesterday, about three in the afternoon, a deed-box was handed in with a note from one of our customers—Mr. Pilcher, the solicitor, of Pilcher, Markham and Sudburys—asking us to deposit it in our strong-room and give the bearer a receipt for it. Of course this was done, in the ordinary way of business; but there was one exceptional circumstance that turns out to have been, as it would appear, providential. Owing to the increase of business our strong-room had become insufficient for our needs, and we have lately had a second one built on the most modern lines and perfectly fire-proof. This had not been taken into use when Pilcher's deed-box arrived, but as the old room was very full, I opened the new room and saw the deed-box deposited in it.

"Well, nothing happened up to the time that I left the bank, but about two o'clock in the morning the night watchman noticed a smell of burning, and on investigating, located the smell as apparently proceeding from the door of the

new strong-room. He at once reported to the senior clerk, whose turn it was to sleep on the premises, and the latter at once telephoned to the police station. In a few minutes a police officer arrived with a couple of firemen and a hand-extinguisher. The clerk took them down to the strong-room and unlocked the door. As soon as it was opened, a volume of smoke and fumes burst out, and then they saw the deed-box—or rather the distorted remains of it—lying on the floor. The police took possession of what was left, but a very cursory examination on the spot showed that the box was, in effect, an incendiary bomb, with a slow time fuse or some similar arrangement.”

“Was any damage done?” Thorndyke asked.

“Mercifully, no,” replied Mr. Balcombe. “But just think of what might have happened! If I had put the box in the old strong-room it is certain that thousands of pounds’ worth of valuable property would have been destroyed. Or again, if instead of an incendiary bomb the box had contained a high explosive, the whole building would probably have been blown to pieces.”

“What explanation does Pilcher give?”

“A very simple one. He knows nothing about it. The note was a forgery; and on the firm’s headed paper, or a perfect imitation of it. And mind you,” Mr. Balcombe continued, “my experience is not a solitary one. I have made private inquiries of other bank managers, and I find that several of them have been subjected to similar outrages, some with serious results. And probably there are more. They don’t talk about these things, you know. Then there are those fires: the great timber fire at Stepney, and those big warehouse fires near the London Docks; there is something queer about them. It looks as if some gang was at work for purposes of pure mischief and destruction.”

“You have consulted the police, of course?”

“Yes. And they know something, I feel sure. But they are extremely reticent; so I suppose they don’t know enough. At any rate, I should like you to investigate the case independently, and so would my directors. The position is most alarming.”

“Could you let me see Pilcher’s letter?” Thorndyke asked.

“I have brought it with me,” said Balcombe. “Thought you would probably want to examine it. I will leave it with you; and if we can give you any other information or assistance, we shall be only too glad.”

“Was the box brought by hand?” inquired Thorndyke.

“Yes,” replied Balcombe, “but I didn’t see the bearer. I can get you a

description from the man who received the package, if that would be any use.”

“We may as well have it,” said Thorndyke, “and the name and address of the person giving it, in case he is wanted as a witness.”

“You shall have it,” said Balcombe, rising and picking up his hat. “I will see to it myself. And you will let me know, in due course, if any information comes to hand?”

Thorndyke gave the required promise and our client took his leave.

“Well,” I said with a laugh, as the brisk footsteps died away on the stairs, “you have had a very handsome compliment paid you. Our friend seems to think that you are one of those master craftsmen who can make bricks, not only without straw, but without clay. There’s absolutely nothing to go on.”

“It is certainly rather in the air,” Thorndyke agreed. “There is this letter and the description of the man who left the packet, when we get it, and neither of them is likely to help us much.”

He looked over the letter and its envelope, held the former up to the light and then handed them to me.

“We ought to find out whether this is Pilcher’s own paper or an imitation,” said I, when I had examined the letter and envelope without finding anything in the least degree distinctive or characteristic; “because, if it is their paper, the unknown man must have had some sort of connection with their establishment or staff.”

“There must have been some sort of connection in any case,” said Thorndyke. “Even an imitation implies possession of an original. But you are quite right. It is a line of inquiry, and practically the only one that offers.”

The inquiry was made on the following day, and the fact clearly established that the paper was Pilcher’s paper, but the ink was not their ink. The handwriting appeared to be disguised, and no one connected with the firm was able to recognise it. The staff, even to the caretaker, were all eminently respectable and beyond suspicion of being implicated in an affair of the kind.

“But after all,” said Mr. Pilcher, “there are a hundred ways in which a sheet of paper may go astray if anyone wants it: at the printer’s, the stationer’s, or even in this office—for the paper is always in the letter-rack on the table.”

Thus our only clue—if so it could be called—came to an end, and I waited with some curiosity to see what Thorndyke would do next. But so far as I could see, he did nothing, nor did he make any reference to this obscure case during the next few days. We had a good deal of other work on hand, and I

assumed that this fully occupied his attention.

One evening, about a week later, he made the first reference to the case and a very mysterious communication it seemed to me.

“I have projected a little expedition for to-morrow,” said he. “I am proposing to spend the day, or part of it, in the pastoral region of Bethnal Green.”

“In connection with any of our cases?” I asked.

“Yes,” he replied. “Balcombe’s. I have been making some cautious inquiries with Polton’s assistance, principally among hawkers and coffee-shop keepers, and I think I have struck a promising track.”

“What kind of inquiries have you been making?” said I.

“I have been looking for a man, or men, engaged in giving street entertainments. That is what our data seemed to suggest, among other possibilities.”

“Our data!” I exclaimed. “I didn’t know we had any.”

“We had Balcombe’s account of the attempt to burn the bank. That gave us some hint as to the kind of man to look for. And there were certain other data, which my learned friend may recall.”

“I don’t recall anything suggesting a street entertainer,” said I.

“Not directly,” he replied. “It was one of several hypotheses, but it is probably the correct one, as I have heard of such a person as I had assumed, and have ascertained where he is likely to be found on certain days. To-morrow I propose to go over his beat in the hope of getting a glimpse of him. If you think of coming with me, I may remind you that it is not a dressy neighbourhood.”

On the following morning we set forth about ten o’clock, and as raiment which is inconspicuous at Bethnal Green may be rather noticeable in the Temple, we slipped out by the Tudor Street gate and made our way to Blackfriars Station. In place of the usual “research-case,” I noticed that Thorndyke was carrying a somewhat shabby wood-fibre attaché case, and that he had no walking-stick. We got out at Aldgate and presently struck up Vallance Street in the direction of Bethnal Green; and by the brisk pace and the direct route adopted, I judged that Thorndyke had a definite objective. However, when we entered the maze of small streets adjoining the Bethnal Green Road, our pace was reduced to a saunter, and at corners and crossroads Thorndyke halted from time to time to look along the streets; and occasionally

he referred to a card which he produced from his pocket, on which were written the names of streets and days of the week.

A couple of hours passed in this apparently aimless perambulation of the back streets.

“It doesn’t look as if you were going to have much luck,” I remarked, suppressing a yawn. “And I am not sure that we are not, in our turn, being ‘spotted.’ I have noted a man—a small, shabby-looking fellow—apparently keeping us in view from a distance, though I don’t see him at the moment.”

“It is quite likely,” said Thorndyke. “This is a shady neighbourhood, and any native could see that we don’t belong to it. Good morning! Taking a little fresh air?”

The latter question was addressed to a man who was standing at the door of a small coffee-shop, having apparently come to the surface for a “breather.”

“Dunno about fresh,” was the reply, “but it’s the best there is. By the by, I saw one of them blokes what I was a-tellin’ you about go by just now. Foreigner with the rats. If you want to see him give a show, I expect you’ll find him in that bit of waste ground off Bolter’s Rents.”

“Bolter’s Rents?” Thorndyke repeated. “Is that a turning out of Salcombe Street?”

“Quite right,” was the reply. “Half-way up on the right-hand side.”

Thanking our informant, Thorndyke strode off up the street, and as we turned the next corner I glanced back. At the moment, the small man whom I had noticed before stepped out of a doorway and came after us at a pace suggesting anxiety not to lose sight of us.

Bolter’s Rents turned out to be a wide paved alley, one side of which opened into a patch of waste ground where a number of old houses had been demolished. This space had an unspeakably squalid appearance; for not only had the debris of the demolished houses been left in unsavoury heaps, but the place had evidently been adopted by the neighbourhood as a general dumping-ground for household refuse. The earth was strewn with vegetable, and even animal, leavings; flies and bluebottles hummed around and settled in hundreds on the garbage, and the air was pervaded by an odour like that of an old-fashioned brick dust-bin.

But in spite of these trifling disadvantages, a considerable crowd had collected, mainly composed of women and children; and at the centre of the crowd a man was giving an entertainment with a troupe of performing rats. We

had sauntered slowly up the “Rents” and now halted to look on. At the moment, a white rat was climbing a pole at the top of which a little flag was stuck in a socket. We watched him rapidly climb the pole, seize the flagstaff in his teeth, lift it out of the socket, climb down the pole and deliver the flag to his master. Then a little carriage was produced and the rat harnessed into it, another white rat being dressed in a cloak and placed in the seat, and the latter—introduced to the audience as Lady Murphy—was taken for a drive round the stage.

While the entertainment was proceeding I inspected the establishment and its owner. The stage was composed of light hinged boards opened out on a small four-wheeled hand-cart, apparently home-made. At one end was a largish cage, divided by a wire partition into two parts, one of which contained a number of white and piebald rats, while the inmates of the other compartment were all wild rats; but not, I noted, the common brown or Norway rat, but the old-fashioned British black rat. I remarked upon the circumstance to Thorndyke.

“Yes,” he said, “they were probably caught locally. The sewers here will be inhabited by brown rats, but the houses, in an old neighbourhood like this, will be infested principally by the black rat. What do you make of the exhibitor?”

I had already noticed him, and now unobtrusively examined him again. He was a medium-sized man with a sallow complexion, dark, restless eyes—which frequently wandered in our direction—a crop of stiff, bushy, upstanding hair—he wore no hat—and a ragged beard.

“A Slav of some kind, I should think,” was my reply; “a Russian, or perhaps a Lett. But that beard is not perfectly convincing.”

“No,” Thorndyke agreed, “but it is a good make-up. Perhaps we had better move on now; we have a deputy, you observe.”

As he spoke, the small man whom I had observed following us strolled up the Rents; and as he drew nearer, revealed to my astonished gaze no less a person than our ingenious laboratory assistant, Polton. Strangely altered, indeed, was our usually neat and spruce artificer, with his seedy clothing and grubby hands; but as he sauntered up, profoundly unaware of our existence, a faint reminiscence of the familiar crinkly smile stole across his face.

We were just moving off when a chorus of shrieks mingled with laughter arose from the spectators, who hastily scattered right and left, and I had a momentary glimpse of a big black rat bounding across the space, to disappear into one of the many heaps of debris. It seemed that the exhibitor had just

opened the cage to take out a black rat when one of the waiting performers—presumably a new recruit—had seized the opportunity to spring out and escape.

“Well,” a grinning woman remarked to me, genially, “there’s plenty more where that one came from. You should see this place on a moonlight night! Fair alive with ’em it is.”

We sauntered up the Rents and along the cross street at the top; and as we went, I reflected on the very singular inquiry in which Thorndyke seemed to be engaged. The rat-tamer’s appearance was suspicious. He didn’t quite look the part, and his beard was almost certainly a make-up—and a skilful one, too, for it was no mere “property” beard; and the restless, furtive eyes, and a certain suppressed excitement in his bearing, hinted at something more than met the eye. But if this was Mr. Balcombe’s incendiary, how had Thorndyke arrived at his identity, and, above all, by what process of reasoning had he contrived to associate the bank outrage with performing rats? That he had done so, his systematic procedure made quite clear. But how? It had seemed to me that we had not a single fact on which to start an investigation.

We had walked the length of the cross street, and had halted before turning, when a troop of children emerged from the Rents. Then came the exhibitor, towing his cart, with the cage shrouded in a cloth, then more children, and finally, at a little distance, Polton, slouching along idly but keeping the cart in view.

“I think,” said Thorndyke, “it would be instructive, as a study in urban sanitation, to have a look round the scene of the late exhibition.”

We retraced our steps down Bolter’s Rents, now practically deserted, and wandered around the patch of waste land and in among the piles of bricks and rotting timber where the houses had been pulled down.

“Your lady friend was right,” said Thorndyke. “This is a perfect Paradise for rats. Convenient residences among the ruins and unlimited provisions to be had for the mere picking up.”

“Apparently you were right, too,” said I, “as to the species inhabiting these eligible premises. That seems to be a black rat,” and I pointed to a deceased specimen that lay near the entrance to a burrow.

Thorndyke stooped over the little corpse, and after a brief inspection, drew a glove on his right hand.

“Yes,” he said, “this is a typical specimen of *Mus rattus*, though it is unusually light in colour. I think it will be worth taking away to examine at our

leisure.”

Glancing round to see that we were unobserved, he opened his attaché case and took from it a largish tin canister and removed the lid—which, I noted, was anointed at the joint with vaseline. Stooping, he picked up the dead rat by the tail with his gloved fingers, dropped it into the canister, clapped on the lid, and replaced it in the attaché case. Then he pulled off the glove and threw it on a rubbish heap.

“You are mighty particular,” said I.

“A dead rat is a dirty thing,” said he, “and it was only an old glove.”

On our way home I made various cautious attempts to extract from Thorndyke some hint as to the purpose of his investigation and his mode of procedure. But I could extract nothing from him beyond certain generalities.

“When a man,” said he, “introduces an incendiary bomb into the strong-room of a bank, we may reasonably inquire as to his motives. And when we have reached the fairly obvious conclusion as to what those motives must be, we may ask ourselves what kind of conduct such motives will probably generate; that is, what sort of activities will be likely to be associated with such motives and with the appropriate state of mind. And when we have decided on that, too, we may look for a person engaged in those activities; and if we find such a person we may consider that we have a *prima facie* case. The rest is a matter of verification.”

“That is all very well, Thorndyke,” I objected, “but if I find a man trying to set fire to a bank, I don’t immediately infer that his customary occupation is exhibiting performing rats in a back street of Bethnal Green.”

Thorndyke laughed quietly. “My learned friend’s observation is perfectly just. It is not a universal rule. But we are dealing with a specific case in which certain other facts are known to us. Still, the connection, if there is one, has yet to be established. This exhibitor may turn out not to be Balcombe’s man after all.”

“And if he is not?”

“I think we shall want him all the same; but I shall know better in a couple of hours’ time.”

What transpired during those two hours I did not discover at the time, for I had an engagement to dine with some legal friends and must needs hurry away as soon as I had purified myself from the effects of our travel in the unclean East. When I returned to our chambers, about half-past ten, I found Thorndyke

seated in his easy chair immersed in a treatise on old musical instruments. Apparently he had finished with the case.

“How did Polton get on?” I asked.

“Admirably,” replied Thorndyke. “He shadowed our entertaining friend from Bethnal Green to a bystreet in Ratcliff, where he apparently resides. But he did more than that. We had made up a little book of a dozen leaves of transfer paper in which I wrote in French some infallible rules for taming rats. Just as the man was going into his house, Polton accosted him and asked him for an expert opinion on these directions. The foreign gentleman was at first impatient and huffy, but when he had glanced at the book, he became interested, and a good deal amused, and finally read the whole set of rules through attentively. Then he handed the book back to Polton and recommended him to follow the rules carefully, offering to supply him with a few rats to experiment on, an offer which Polton asked him to hold over for a day or two.

“As soon as he got home, Polton dismembered the book and put the leaves down on the stone, with this result.”

He took from his pocket-book a number of small pieces of paper, each of which was marked more or less distinctly with lithographed reproductions of finger-prints, and laid them on the table. I looked through them attentively, and with a faint sense of familiarity.

“Isn't that left thumb,” said I, “rather similar to the print on the maps from Mr. Rabbage's letter-wallet?”

“It is identical,” he replied. “Here are the proofs of the map-prints and the note-tablet. If you compare them you can see that not only the left thumb but the other prints are the same in all.”

Careful comparison showed that this was so.

“But,” I exclaimed, “I don't understand this at all. These are the finger-prints of Mr. Rabbage's mysterious entomologist. I thought you were looking for Balcombe's man.”

“My impression,” he replied, “is that they are the same person, though the evidence is far from conclusive. But we shall soon know. I have sworn an information against the foreign gent, and Miller has arranged to raid the house at Ratcliff early to-morrow morning; and as it promises to be a highly interesting event, I propose to be present. Shall I have the pleasure of my learned friend's company?”

“Most undoubtedly,” I replied, “though I am absolutely in the dark as to the meaning of the whole affair.”

“Then,” said Thorndyke, “I recommend you to go over the history of both cases systematically in the interval.”

Six o'clock on the following morning found us in an empty house in Old Gravel Lane, Ratcliff, in company with Superintendent Miller and three stalwart plain-clothes men, awaiting the report of a patrol. We were all dressed in engineers' overalls, reeking with naphthalin. Our trousers were tucked into our socks, and socks and boots were thickly smeared with vaseline, as were our wrists, around which our sleeves were bound closely with tape. These preparations, together with an automatic pistol served out to each of us, gave me some faint inkling of the nature of the case, though it was still very confused in my mind.

About a quarter-past six a messenger arrived and reported that the house which was to be raided was open. Thereupon Miller and one of his men set forth, and the rest of us followed at short intervals. On arriving at the house, which was but a short distance from our rendezvous, we found a stolid plain-clothes man guarding the open door and a frowsy-looking woman, who carried a jug of milk, angrily demanding in very imperfect English to be allowed to pass into her house. Pushing past the protesting housekeeper, we entered the grimy passage, where Miller was just emerging from a ground-floor room.

“That is the woman's quarters,” said he, “and the kitchen seems to be a sort of rat-menagerie. We'd better try the first-floor.”

He led the way up the stairs, and when he reached the landing he tried the handle of the front room. Finding the door locked or bolted, he passed on to the back room and tried the door of that, with the same result. Then, holding up a warning finger, he proceeded to whistle a popular air in a fine, penetrating tone, and to perform a double shuffle on the bare floor. Almost immediately an angry voice was heard in the front room, and slippers padded quickly across the floor. Then a bolt was drawn noisily, the door flew open, and for an instant I had a view of the rat-showman, clothed in a suit of very soiled pyjamas. But it was only for an instant. Even as our eyes met, he tried to slam the door to, and failing—in consequence of an intruding constabulary foot—he sprang back, leaped over a bed and darted through a communicating doorway into the back room and shut and bolted the door.

“That's unfortunate,” said Miller. “Now we're going to have trouble.”

The superintendent was right. On the first attempt to force the door, a pistol-shot from within blew a hole in the top panel and made a notch in the

ear of the would-be invader. The latter replied through the hole, and there followed a sort of snarl and the sound of a shattered bottle. Then, as the constable stood aside and shot after shot came from within, the door became studded with ragged holes. Meanwhile Miller, Thorndyke and I tiptoed out on the landing, and taking as long a run as was possible, flung ourselves, simultaneously, on the back-room door. The weight of three large men was too much for the crazy woodwork. As we fell on it together, there was a bursting crash, the hinges tore away, the door flew inwards, and we staggered into the room.

It was a narrow shave for some of us. Before we could recover our footing, the showman had turned with his pistol pointing straight at Miller's head. But a bare instant before it exploded, Thorndyke, whose momentum had carried him half-way across the room, caught it with an upward snatch, and its report was followed by a harmless shower of plaster from the ceiling. Immediately our quarry changed his tactics. Leaving the pistol in Thorndyke's grasp, he darted across the room towards a work-bench on which stood a row of upright, cylindrical tins. He was in the act of reaching out for one of these when Thorndyke grasped his pyjamas between the shoulders and dragged him back, while Miller rushed forward and seized him. For a few moments there was a frantic and furious struggle, for the fellow fought with hands and feet and teeth with the ferocity of a wild cat, and, overpowered as he was, still strove to drag his captors towards the bench. Suddenly, once more, a pistol-shot rang out, and then all was still. By accident or design the struggling man had got hold of the pistol that Thorndyke still grasped and pressed the trigger, and the bullet had entered his own head just above the ear.

"Pooh!" exclaimed Miller, rising and wiping his forehead, "that was a near one. If you hadn't stopped him, doctor, we'd all have gone up like rockets."

"You think those things are bombs, then?" said I.

"Think!" he repeated. "I removed two exactly like them from the General Post Office, and they turned out to be charged with T.N.T. And those square ones on the shelf are twin brothers of the one that went off in Rutherford's Bank."

As we were speaking, I happened to glance round at the doorway, and there, to my surprise, was the woman whom we had seen below, still holding the jug of milk and staring in with an expression of horror at the dead revolutionary. Thorndyke also observed her, and stepping across to where she stood, asked:

"Can you tell me if there has been, or is now, anyone sick in this house?"

“Yes,” the woman replied, without removing her eyes from the dead man. “Dere is a chentleman sick upstairs. I haf not seen him. *He* used to look after him,” and she nodded to the dead body of the showman.

“I think we will go up and have a look at this sick gentleman,” said Thorndyke. “You had better not come, Miller.”

We started together up the stairs, and as we went I asked:

“Do you suppose this is a case of plague?”

“No,” he replied. “I fancy the plague department is in the kitchen; but we shall see.”

He looked round the landing which we had now reached and then opened the door of the front room. Immediately I was aware of a strange, intensely fetid odour, and glancing into the room, I perceived a man lying, apparently in a state of stupor, in a bed covered with indescribably filthy bed-clothes. Thorndyke entered and approached the bed, and I followed. The light was rather dim, and it was not until we were quite close that I suddenly recognised the disease.

“Good God!” I exclaimed, “it is typhus!”

“Yes,” said Thorndyke; “and look at the bed-clothes, and look at the poor devil’s neck. We can see now how that villain collected his specimens.”

I stooped over the poor, muttering, unconscious wretch and was filled with horror. Bed-clothes, pillow and patient were all alike crawling with vermin.

“Of course,” I said as we walked homewards, “I see the general drift of this case, but what I can’t understand is how you connected up the facts.”

“Well,” replied Thorndyke, “let us set out the argument and trace the connections. The starting-point was the aluminium case that Mr. Rabbage brought us. Those tubes of fleas and lice were clearly an abnormal phenomenon. They might, as you suggested, have belonged to a scientific collector; but that was not probable. The fleas were alive, and were meant to remain alive, as the perforated caps of the tubes proved. And the lice had merely died, as lice quickly do if they are not fed. They did not appear to have been killed. But against your view there were two very striking facts, one of which I fancy you did not observe. The fleas were not the common human flea; they were Asiatic rat-fleas.”

“You are quite right,” I admitted. “I did not notice that.”

“Then,” he continued, “there was the aniseed with which the parchment

caps of the tubes were scented. Now aniseed is irresistible to rats. It is an infallible bait. But it is not specially attractive to fleas. What then was the purpose of the scent? The answer, fantastic as it was, had to be provisionally accepted because it was the only one that suggested itself. If one of these tubes had been exposed to rats—dropped down a rat-hole, for instance—it is certain that the rats would have gnawed off the parchment cap. Then the fleas would have been liberated, and as they were rat-fleas, they would have immediately fastened upon the rats. The tubes, therefore, appeared to be an apparatus for disseminating rat-fleas.

“But why should anyone want to disseminate rat-fleas? That question at once brought into view another striking fact. Here, in these tubes, were rat-fleas and body-lice: both carriers of deadly disease. The rat-flea is a carrier of plague; the body-louse is a carrier of typhus. It was an impressive coincidence. It suggested that the dissemination of rat-fleas might be really the dissemination of plague; and if the lice were distributed, too, that might mean the distribution of typhus.

“And now consider the maps. The circles on them all marked old slum-areas tenanted by low-class aliens. But old slums abound in rats; and low-class aliens abound in body-lice. Here was another coincidence. Then there was the note-tablet bearing numbers associated with the letters *a* and *b* and plus and minus signs. The letters *a* and *b* might mean rat and louse or plague and typhus, and the plus and minus might mean a success or a failure to produce an outbreak of disease. That was merely speculative, but it was quite consistent.

“So far we were dealing with a hypothesis based on simple observation. But that hypothesis could be proved or disproved. The question was: Were these insects infected insects, or were they not? To settle this I took one flea from each of the four tubes and ‘sowed’ it on agar, with the result that from each flea I got a typical culture of plague bacillus, which I verified with Haffkine’s ‘Stalactite test.’ I also examined one louse from each of the two tubes, and in each case got a definite typhus reaction. So the insects were infected and the hypothesis was confirmed.

“The next thing was to find the owner of the tubes. Now the circles on the maps indicated some sort of activity, presumably connected with rats and carried on in these areas.

“I visited those areas and got into conversation with the inhabitants on the subject of rats, rat-catchers, rat-pits, sewer-men, and everything bearing on rats; and at length I heard of an exhibitor of performing rats. You know the rest. We found the man, we observed that all his rats, excepting the tame white ones, were black rats—the special plague-carrying species—and we found on this

spot a dead rat, which I ascertained, on examining the body, had died of plague. Finally there was Polton's little book giving us the finger-prints of the owner of the aluminium case. That completed the identification; and inquiries at the Local Government Board showed that cases of plague and typhus had occurred in the marked areas."

"Had not the authorities taken any steps in the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," he replied. "They had carried out an energetic rat campaign in the London Docks, the likeliest source of infection. Naturally, they would not think of a criminal lunatic industriously sowing plague broadcast."

"Then how did you connect this man with the bank outrage?"

"I never did, very conclusively," he replied. "It was mostly a matter of inference. You see, the two crimes were essentially similar. They were varieties of the same type. Both were cases of idiotic destructiveness, and the agent in each was evidently a moral imbecile who was a professed enemy of society. Such persons are rare in this country, and when they occur are usually foreigners, most commonly Russians, or East Europeans of some kind. The only actual clue was the date on Pilcher's letter, the rather peculiar figures of which were extraordinarily like those on the maps and the note-tablet. Still, it was little more than a guess, though it happens to have turned out correct."

"And how do you suppose this fellow avoided getting plague and typhus himself?"

"It was quite likely that he had had both. But he could easily avoid the typhus by keeping himself clean and his clothing disinfected; and as to the plague, he could have used Haffkine's plague-prophylactic and given it to the woman. Clearly it would not have suited him to have a case of plague in the house and have the health officer inspecting the premises."

That was the end of the case, unless I should include in the history a very handsome fee sent to my colleague by the President of the Local Government Board.

"I think we have earned it," said Thorndyke; "and yet I am not sure that Mr. Rabbage is not entitled to a share."

And in fact, when that benevolent person called a few days later to receive a slightly ambiguous report and tender his fee, he departed beaming, bearing a donation wherewith to endow an additional bed, cot, or basket, in the St. Francis Home of Rest.

THE END

## TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story is Number Twenty Six from the book  
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Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Book name and author have been added to the original book cover, together with the name and number of this story. The resulting cover is placed in the public domain.

[The end of *A Sower of Pestilence* by Richard Austin Freeman]