

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

Number Thirty Four

The
Touchstone

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Title: The Touchstone

Date of first publication: 1929

Author: Richard Austin Freeman (1862-1943)

Date first posted: Oct. 17, 2018

Date last updated: Oct. 17, 2018

Faded Page eBook #20181030

This ebook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Mark Akrigg, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

It happened not uncommonly that the exigencies of practice committed my friend Thorndyke to investigations that lay more properly within the province of the police. For problems that had arisen as secondary consequences of a criminal act could usually not be solved until the circumstances of that act were fully elucidated and, incidentally, the identity of the actor established. Such a problem was that of the disappearance of James Harewood's will, a problem that was propounded to us by our old friend, Mr. Marchmont, when he called on us, by appointment, with the client of whom he had spoken in his note.

It was just four o'clock when the solicitor arrived at our chambers, and as I admitted him he ushered in a gentlemanly-looking man of about thirty-five, whom he introduced as Mr. William Crowhurst.

"I will just stay," said he, with an approving glance at the tea-service on the table, "and have a cup of tea with you, and give you an outline of the case. Then I must run away and leave Mr. Crowhurst to fill in the details."

He seated himself in an easy chair within comfortable reach of the table, and as Thorndyke poured out the tea, he glanced over a few notes scribbled on a sheet of paper.

"I may say," he began, stirring his tea thoughtfully, "that this is a forlorn hope. I have brought the case to you, but I have not the slightest expectation that you will be able to help us."

"A very wholesome frame of mind," Thorndyke commented with a smile. "I hope it is that of your client also."

"It is indeed," said Mr. Crowhurst; "in fact, it seems to me a waste of your time to go into the matter. Probably you will think so too, when you have heard the particulars."

"Well, let us hear the particulars," said Thorndyke. "A forlorn hope has, at least, the stimulating quality of difficulty. Let us have your outline sketch, Marchmont."

The solicitor, having emptied his cup and pushed it towards the tray for replenishment, glanced at his notes and began:

“The simplest way in which to present the problem is to give a brief recital of the events that have given rise to it, which are these: The day before yesterday—that is last Monday—at a quarter to two in the afternoon, Mr. James Harewood executed a will at his house at Merbridge, which is about two miles from Welsbury. There were present four persons: two of his servants, who signed as witnesses, and the two principal beneficiaries—Mr. Arthur Baxfield, a nephew of the testator, and our friend here, Mr. William Crowhurst. The will was a holograph written on the two pages of a sheet of letter-paper. When the witnesses signed, the will was covered by another sheet of paper so that only the space for the signatures was exposed. Neither of the witnesses read the will, nor did either of the beneficiaries; and so far as I am aware, no one but the testator knew what were its actual provisions, though, after the servants had left the room, Mr. Harewood explained its general purport to the beneficiaries.”

“And what was its general purport?” Thorndyke asked.

“Broadly speaking,” replied Marchmont, “it divided the estate in two very unequal portions between Mr. Baxfield and Mr. Crowhurst. There were certain small legacies of which neither the amounts nor the names of the legatees are known. Then, to Baxfield was given a thousand pounds to enable him either to buy a partnership or to start a small factory—he is a felt hat manufacturer by trade—and the remainder to Crowhurst, who was made executor and residuary legatee. But, of course, the residue of the estate is an unknown quantity, since we don’t know either the number or the amounts of the legacies.

“Shortly after the signing of the will, the parties separated. Mr. Harewood folded up the will and put it in a leather wallet which he slipped into his pocket, stating his intention of taking the will forthwith to deposit with his lawyer at Welsbury. A few minutes after his guests had departed, he was seen by one of the servants to leave the house, and afterwards was seen by a neighbour walking along a footpath which, after passing through a small wood, joins the main road about a mile and a quarter from Welsbury. From that time, he was never again seen alive. He never visited the lawyer, nor did anyone see him at or near Welsbury or elsewhere.

“As he did not return home that night, his housekeeper (he was a widower and childless) became extremely alarmed, and in the morning she communicated with the police. A search-party was organised, and, following the path on which he was last seen, explored the wood—which is known locally as Gilbert’s Copse—and here, at the bottom of an old chalk-pit, they found him lying dead with a fractured skull and a dislocated neck. How he came by these injuries is not at present known; but as the body had been

robbed of all valuables, including his watch, purse, diamond ring and the wallet containing the will, there is naturally a strong suspicion that he has been murdered. That, however, is not our immediate concern—at least not mine. I am concerned with the will, which, as you see, has disappeared, and as it has presumably been carried away by a thief who is under suspicion of murder, it is not likely to be returned.”

“It is almost certainly destroyed by this time,” said Mr. Crowhurst.

“That certainly seems probable,” Thorndyke agreed. “But what do you want me to do? You haven’t come for counsel’s opinion?”

“No,” replied Marchmont. “I am pretty clear about the legal position. I shall claim, as the will has presumably been destroyed, to have the testator’s wishes carried out in so far as they are known. But I am doubtful as to the view the court may take. It may decide that the testator’s wishes are not known, that the provisions of the will are too uncertain to admit of administration.”

“And what would be the effect of that decision?” asked Thorndyke.

“In that case,” said Marchmont, “the entire estate would go to Baxfield, as he is the next of kin and there was no previous will.”

“And what is it that you want me to do?”

Marchmont chuckled deprecatingly. “You have to pay the penalty of being a prodigy, Thorndyke. We are asking you to do an impossibility—but we don’t really expect you to bring it off. We ask you to help us to recover the will.”

“If the will has been completely destroyed, it can’t be recovered,” said Thorndyke. “But we don’t know that it has been destroyed. The matter is, at least, worth investigating; and if you wish me to look into it, I will.”

The solicitor rose with an air of evident relief. “Thank you, Thorndyke,” said he. “I expect nothing—at least, I tell myself that I do—but I can now feel that everything that is possible will be done. And now I must be off. Crowhurst can give you any details that you want.”

When Marchmont had gone, Thorndyke turned to our client and asked, “What do you suppose Baxfield will do, if the will is irretrievably lost? Will he press his claim as next of kin?”

“I should say yes,” replied Crowhurst. “He is a business man and his natural claims are greater than mine. He is not likely to refuse what the law assigns to him as his right. As a matter of fact, I think he felt that his uncle had treated him unfairly in alienating the property.”

“Was there any reason for this diversion of the estate?”

“Well,” replied Crowhurst, “Harewood and I had been very good friends and he was under some obligations to me; and then Baxfield had not made himself very acceptable to his uncle. But the principal factor, I think, was a strong tendency of Baxfield’s to gamble. He had lost quite a lot of money by backing horses, and a careful, thrifty man like James Harewood doesn’t care to leave his savings to a gambler. The thousand pounds that he did leave to Baxfield was expressly for the purpose of investment in a business.”

“Is Baxfield in business now?”

“Not on his own account. He is a sort of foreman or shop-manager in a factory just outside Welsbury, and I believe he is a good worker and knows his trade thoroughly.”

“And now,” said Thorndyke, “with regard to Mr. Harewood’s death. The injuries might, apparently, have been either accidental or homicidal. What are the probabilities of accident—disregarding the robbery?”

“Very considerable, I should say. It is a most dangerous place. The footpath runs close beside the edge of a disused chalk-pit with perpendicular and overhanging sides, and the edge is masked by bushes and brambles. A careless walker might easily fall over—or be pushed over, for that matter.”

“Do you know when the inquest is to take place?”

“Yes. The day after to-morrow. I had the subpoena this morning for Friday afternoon at 2.30, at the Welsbury Town Hall.”

At this moment footsteps were heard hurriedly ascending the stairs and then came a loud and peremptory rat-tat at our door. I sprang across to see who our visitor was, and as I flung open the door, Mr. Marchmont rushed in, breathing heavily and flourishing a newspaper.

“Here is a new development,” he exclaimed. “It doesn’t seem to help us much, but I thought you had better know about it at once.” He sat down, and putting on his spectacles, read aloud as follows: “A new and curious light has been thrown on the mystery of the death of Mr. James Harewood, whose body was found yesterday in a disused chalk-pit near Merbridge. It appears that on Monday—the day on which Mr. Harewood almost certainly was killed—a passenger alighting from a train at Barwood Junction before it had stopped, slipped and fell between the train and the platform. He was quickly extricated, and as he had evidently sustained internal injuries, he was taken to the local hospital, where he was found to be suffering from a fractured pelvis. He gave his name as Thomas Fletcher, but refused to give any address, saying that he

had no relatives. This morning he died, and on his clothes being searched for an address, a parcel, formed of two handkerchiefs tied up with string, was found in his pocket. When it was opened it was found to contain five watches, three watch-chains, a tie-pin and a number of bank-notes. Other pockets contained a quantity of loose money—gold and silver mixed—and a card of the Welsbury Races, which were held on Monday. Of the five watches, one has been identified as the one taken from Mr. Harewood; and the bank-notes have been identified as a batch handed to him by the cashier of his bank at Welsbury last Thursday and presumably carried in the leather wallet which was stolen from his pocket. This wallet, by the way, has also been found. It was picked up—empty—last night on the railway embankment just outside Welsbury Station. Appearances thus suggest that the man, Fletcher, when on his way to the races, encountered Mr. Harewood in the lonely copse, and murdered and robbed him; or perhaps found him dead in the chalk-pit and robbed the body—a question that is now never likely to be solved.”

As Marchmont finished reading, he looked up at Thorndyke. “It doesn’t help us much, does it?” said he. “As the wallet was found empty, it is pretty certain that the will has been destroyed.”

“Or perhaps merely thrown away,” said Thorndyke. “In which case an advertisement offering a substantial reward may bring it to light.”

The solicitor shrugged his shoulders sceptically, but agreed to publish the advertisement. Then, once more he turned to go; and as Mr. Crowhurst had no further information to give, he departed with his lawyer.

For some time after they had gone, Thorndyke sat with his brief notes before him, silent and deeply reflective. I, too, maintained a discreet silence, for I knew from long experience that the motionless pose and quiet, impassive face were the outward signs of a mind in swift and strenuous action. Instinctively, I gathered that this apparently chaotic case was being quietly sorted out and arranged in a logical order; that Thorndyke, like a skilful chess-player, was “trying over the moves” before he should lay his hand upon the pieces.

Presently he looked up. “Well?” he asked. “What do you think, Jervis? Is it worth while?”

“That,” I replied, “depends on whether the will is or is not in existence. If it has been destroyed, an investigation would be a waste of our time and our client’s money.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But there is quite a good chance that it has not been destroyed. It was probably dropped loose into the wallet, and then might have

been picked out and thrown away before the wallet was examined. But we mustn't concentrate too much on the will. If we take up the case—which I am inclined to do—we must ascertain the actual sequence of events. We have one clear day before the inquest. If we run down to Merbridge to-morrow and go thoroughly over the ground, and then go on to Barwood and find out all we can about the man Fletcher, we may get some new light from the evidence at the inquest.”

I agreed readily to Thorndyke's proposal, not that I could see any way into the case, but I felt a conviction that my colleague had isolated some leading fact and had a definite line of research in his mind. And this conviction deepened when, later in the evening, he laid his research-case on the table, and rearranged its contents with evident purpose. I watched curiously the apparatus that he was packing in it and tried—not very successfully—to infer the nature of the proposed investigation. The box of powdered paraffin wax and the spirit blowpipe were obvious enough; but the “dust-aspirator”—a sort of miniature vacuum cleaner—the portable microscope, the coil of Manila line, with an eye spliced into one end, and especially the abundance of blank-labelled microscope slides, all of which I saw him pack in the case with deliberate care, defeated me utterly.

About ten o'clock on the following morning we stepped from the train in Welsbury Station, and having recovered our bicycles from the luggage van, wheeled them through the barrier and mounted. During the train journey we had both studied the one-inch Ordnance map to such purpose that we were virtually in familiar surroundings and immune from the necessity of seeking directions from the natives. As we cleared the town we glanced up the broad by-road to the left which led to the race-course; then we rode on briskly for a mile, which brought us to the spot where the footpath to Merbridge joined the road. Here we dismounted and, lifting our bicycles over the stile, followed the path towards a small wood which we could see ahead, crowning a low hill.

“For such a good path,” Thorndyke remarked as we approached the wood, “it is singularly unfrequented. I haven't seen a soul since we left the road.” He glanced at the map as the path entered the wood, and when we had walked on a couple of hundred yards, he halted and stood his bicycle against a tree. “The chalk-pit should be about here,” said he, “though it is impossible to see.” He grasped a stem of one of the small bushes that crowded on to the path and pulled it aside. Then he uttered an exclamation.

“Just look at that, Jervis. It is a positive scandal that a public path should be

left in this condition.”

Certainly Mr. Crowhurst had not exaggerated. It was a most dangerous place. The parted branches revealed a chasm some thirty feet deep, the brink of which, masked by the bushes, was but a matter of inches from the edge of the path.

“We had better go back,” said Thorndyke, “and find the entrance to the pit, which seems to be to the right. The first thing is to ascertain exactly where Harewood fell. Then we can come back and examine the place from above.”

We turned back, and presently found a faint track, which we followed until, descending steeply, it brought us out into the middle of the pit. It was evidently an ancient pit, for the sides were blackened by age, and the floor was occupied by a number of trees, some of considerable size. Against one of these we leaned our bicycles and then walked slowly round at the foot of the frowning cliff.

“This seems to be below the path,” said Thorndyke, glancing up at the grey wall which jutted out above in stages like an inverted flight of steps. “Somewhere hereabouts we should find some traces of the tragedy.”

Even as he spoke my eye caught a spot of white on a block of chalk, and on the freshly fractured surface a significant brownish-red stain. The block lay opposite the mouth of an artificial cave—an old wagon-shelter, but now empty—and immediately under a markedly overhanging part of the cliff.

“This is undoubtedly the place where he fell,” said Thorndyke. “You can see where the stretcher was placed—an old-pattern stretcher with wheel-runners—and there is a little spot of broken soil at the top where he came over. Well, apart from the robbery, a clear fall of over thirty feet is enough to account for a fractured skull. Will you stay here, Jervis, while I run up and look at the path?”

He went off towards the entrance, and presently I heard him above, pulling aside the bushes, and after one or two trials, he appeared directly overhead.

“There are plenty of footprints on the path,” said he, “but nothing abnormal. No trampling or signs of a struggle. I am going on a little farther.”

He withdrew behind the bushes, and I proceeded to inspect the interior of the cave, noting the smoke-blackened roof and the remains of a recent fire, which, with a number of rabbit bones and a discarded tea-boiler of the kind used by the professional tramp, seemed not without a possible bearing on our investigation. I was thus engaged when I heard Thorndyke hail me from above and coming out of the cave, I saw his head thrust between the branches. He

seemed to be lying down, for his face was nearly on a level with the top of the cliff.

“I want to take an impression,” he called out. “Will you bring up the paraffin and the blower? And you might bring the coil of line, too.”

I hurried away to the place where our bicycles were standing, and opening the research-case, took out the coil of line, the tin of paraffin wax and the spirit blowpipe, and having ascertained that the container of the latter was full, I ran up the incline and made my way along the path. Some distance along, I found my colleague nearly hidden in the bushes, lying prone, with his head over the edge of the cliff.

“You see, Jervis,” he said, as I crawled alongside and looked over, “this is a possible way down, and someone has used it quite recently. He climbed down with his face to the cliff—you can see the clear impression of the toe of a boot in the loam of that projection, and you can even make out the shape of an iron toe-tip. Now the problem is how to get down to take the impression without dislodging the earth above it. I think I will secure myself with the line.”

“It is hardly worth the risk of a broken neck,” said I. “Probably the print is that of some schoolboy.”

“It is a man’s foot,” he replied. “Most likely it has no connection with our case. But it may have, and as a shower of rain would obliterate it we ought to secure it.” As he spoke, he passed the end of the cord through the eye and slipped the loop over his shoulders, drawing it tight under his arms. Then, having made the line fast to the butt of a small tree, he cautiously lowered himself over the edge and climbed down to the projection. As soon as he had a secure footing, I passed the spare cord through the ring on the lid of the wax tin and lowered it to him, and when he had unfastened it, I drew up the cord and in the same way let down the blowpipe. Then I watched his neat, methodical procedure. First he took out a spoonful of the powdered, or grated, wax and very delicately sprinkled it on the toe-print until the latter was evenly but very thinly covered. Next he lit the blowlamp, and as soon as the blue flame began to roar from the pipe, he directed it on to the toe-print. Almost instantly the powder melted, glazing the impression like a coat of varnish. Then the flame was removed and the film of wax at once solidified and became dull and opaque. A second, heavier, sprinkling with the powder, followed by another application of the flame, thickened the film of wax, and this process, repeated four or five times, eventually produced a solid cake. Then Thorndyke extinguished the blowlamp, and securing it and the tin to the cord, directed me to pull them up. “And you might send me down the field-

glasses,” he added. “There is something farther down that I can’t quite make out.”

I slipped the glasses from my shoulder, and opening the case, tied the cord to the leather sling and lowered it down the cliff; and then I watched with some curiosity as Thorndyke stood on his insecure perch steadily gazing through the glasses (they were Zeiss 8-prismatics) at a clump of wallflowers that grew from a boss of chalk about half-way down. Presently he lowered the glasses and, slinging them round his neck by their lanyard, turned his attention to the cake of wax. It was by this time quite solid, and when he had tested it, he lifted it carefully, and placed it in the empty binocular case, when I drew it up.

“I want you, Jervis,” Thorndyke called up, “to steady the line. I am going down to that wallflower clump.”

It looked extremely unsafe, but I knew it was useless to protest, so I hitched the line around a massive stump and took a firm grip of the “fall.”

“Ready,” I sang out; and forthwith Thorndyke began to creep across the face of the cliff with feet and hands clinging to almost invisible projections. Fortunately, there was at this part no overhang, and though my heart was in my mouth as I watched, I saw him cross the perilous space in safety. Arrived at the clump, he drew an envelope from his pocket, stooped and picked up some small object, which he placed in the envelope, returning the latter to his pocket. Then he gave me another bad five minutes while he recrossed the nearly vertical surface to his starting-point; but at length this, too, was safely accomplished, and when he finally climbed up over the edge and stood beside me on solid earth, I drew a deep breath and turned to revile him.

“Well?” I demanded sarcastically, “what have you gathered at the risk of your neck? Is it samphire or edelweiss?”

He drew the envelope from his pocket, and dipping into it, produced a cigarette-holder—a cheap bone affair, black and clammy with long service and still holding the butt of a hand-made cigarette—and handed it to me. I turned it over, smelled it and hastily handed it back. “For my part,” said I, “I wouldn’t have risked the cervical vertebræ of a yellow cat for it. What do you expect to learn from it?”

“Of course, I expect nothing. We are just collecting facts on the chance that they may turn out to be relevant. Here, for instance, we find that a man has descended, within a few yards of where Harewood fell, by this very inconvenient route, instead of going round to the entrance to the pit. He must have had some reason for adopting this undesirable mode of descent. Possibly he was in a hurry, and probably he belonged to the district, since a stranger

would not know of the existence of this short cut. Then it seems likely that this was his cigarette tube. If you look over, you will see by those vertical scrapes on the chalk that he slipped and must have nearly fallen. At that moment he probably dropped the tube, for you notice that the wallflower clump is directly under the marks of his toes.”

“Why do you suppose he did not recover the tube?”

“Because the descent slopes away from the position of the clump, and he had no trusty Jervis with a stout cord to help him to cross the space. And if he went down this way because he was hurried, he would not have time to search for the tube. But if the tube was not his, still it belonged to somebody who has been here recently.”

“Is there anything that leads you to connect this man with the crime?”

“Nothing but time and place,” he replied. “The man has been down into the pit close to where Harewood was robbed and possibly murdered, and as the traces are quite recent, he must have been there near about the time of the robbery. That is all. I am considering the traces of this man in particular because there are no traces of any other. But we may as well have a look at the path, which, as you see, yields good impressions.”

We walked slowly along the path towards Merbridge, keeping at the edges and scrutinising the surface closely. In the shady hollows, the soft loam bore prints of many feet, and among them we could distinguish one with an iron toe-tip, but it was nearly obliterated by another studded with hob-nails.

“We shan’t get much information here,” said Thorndyke as he turned about. “The search-party have trodden out the important prints. Let us see if we can find out where the man with the toe-tips went to.”

We searched the path on the Welsbury side of the chalkpit, but found no trace of him. Then we went into the pit, and having located the place where he descended, sought for some other exit than the track leading to the path. Presently, half-way up the slope, we found a second track, bearing away in the direction of Merbridge. Following this for some distance, we came to a small hollow at the bottom of which was a muddy space. And here we both halted abruptly, for in the damp ground were the clear imprints of a pair of boots which we could see had, in addition to the toe-tips, half-tips to the heels.

“We had better have wax casts of these,” said Thorndyke, “to compare with the boots of the man Fletcher. I will do them while you go back for the bicycles.”

By the time that I returned with the machines two of the footprints were

covered with a cake each of wax, and Thorndyke had left the track, and was peering among the bushes. I inquired what he was looking for.

“It is a forlorn hope, as Marchmont would say,” he replied, “but I am looking to see if the will has been thrown away here. It was quite probably jettisoned at once, and this is the most probable route for the robber to have taken, if he knew of it. You see by the map that it must lead nearly directly to the race-course, and it avoids both the path and the main road. While the wax is setting we might as well look round.”

It seemed a hopeless enough proceeding and I agreed to it without enthusiasm. Leaving the track on the opposite side to that which Thorndyke was searching, I wandered among the bushes and the little open spaces, peering about me and reminding myself of that “aged, aged man” who

“Sometimes searched the grassy knolls,
For wheels of hansom cabs.”

I had worked my way nearly back to where I could see Thorndyke, also returning, when my glance fell on a small, brown object caught among the branches of a bush. It was a man’s pigskin purse; and as I picked it out of the bush I saw that it was open and empty.

With my prize in my hand, I hastened to the spot where Thorndyke was lifting the wax casts. He looked up and asked, “No luck, I suppose?”

I held out the purse, on which he pounced eagerly. “But this is most important, Jervis,” he exclaimed. “It is almost certainly Harewood’s purse. You see the initials, ‘J. H.,’ stamped on the flap. Then we were right as to the direction that the robber took. And it would pay to search this place exhaustively for the will, though we can’t do that now, as we have to go to Barwood. I wrote to say we were coming. We had better get back to the path now and make for the road. Barwood is only half-an-hour’s run.”

We packed the casts in the research-case (which was strapped to Thorndyke’s bicycle), and turning back, made our way to the path. As it was still deserted, we ventured to mount, and soon reached the road, along which we started at a good pace towards Barwood.

Half-an-hour’s ride brought us into the main street of the little town, and when we dismounted at the police station we found the Chief Constable himself waiting to receive us, courteously eager to assist us, but possessed by a devouring curiosity which was somewhat inconvenient.

“I have done as you asked me in your letter, sir,” he said. “Fletcher’s body

is, of course, in the mortuary, but I have had all his clothes and effects brought here; and I have had them put in my private office, so that you can look them over in comfort.”

“It is exceedingly good of you,” said Thorndyke, “and most helpful.” He unstrapped the research-case, and following the officer into his sanctum, looked round with deep approval. A large table had been cleared for the examination, and the dead pickpocket’s clothes and effects neatly arranged at one end.

Thorndyke’s first proceeding was to pick up the dead man’s boots—a smart but flimsy pair of light brown leather, rather down at heel and in need of re-soling. Neither toes nor heels bore any tips or even nails excepting the small fastening brads. Having exhibited them to me without remark, Thorndyke placed them on a sheet of white paper and made a careful tracing of the soles, a proceeding that seemed to surprise the Chief Constable, for he remarked, “I should hardly have thought that the question of footprints would arise in this case. You can’t charge a dead man.”

Thorndyke agreed that this seemed to be true; and then he proceeded to an operation that fairly made the officer’s eyes bulge. Opening the research-case—into which the officer cast an inquisitive glance—he took out the dust-aspirator, the nozzle of which he inserted into one after another of the dead thief’s pockets while I worked the pump. When he had gone through them all, he opened the receiver and extracted quite a considerable ball of dusty fluff. Placing this on a glass slide, he tore it in halves with a pair of mounted needles and passing one half to me, when we both fell to work “teasing” it out into an open mesh, portions of which we separated and laid—each in a tiny pool of glycerine—on blank-labelled glass slides, applying to each slide its cover-glass and writing on the label, “Dust from Fletcher’s pockets.”

When the series was complete, Thorndyke brought out the microscope, and fitting on a one-inch objective, quickly examined the slides, one after another, and then pushed the microscope to me. So far as I could see, the dust was just ordinary dust—principally made up of broken cotton fibres with a few fibres of wool, linen, wood, jute, and others that I could not name and some undistinguishable mineral particles. But I made no comment, and resigning the microscope to the Chief Constable—who glared through it, breathing hard, and remarked that the dust was “rummy-looking stuff”—watched Thorndyke’s further proceedings. And very odd proceedings they were.

First he laid the five stolen watches in a row, and with a Coddington lens minutely examined the dial of each. Then he opened the back of each in turn and copied into his notebook the watch-repairers’ scratched inscriptions. Next

he produced from the case a number of little vulcanite rods, and laying out five labelled slides, dropped a tiny drop of glycerine on each, covering it at once with a watch-glass to protect it from falling dust. Then he stuck a little label on each watch, wrote a number on it and similarly numbered the five slides. His next proceeding was to take out the glass of watch No. 1 and pick up one of the vulcanite rods, which he rubbed briskly on a silk handkerchief and passed across and around the dial of the watch, after which he held the rod close to the glycerine on slide No. 1 and tapped it sharply with the blade of his pocket-knife. Then he dropped a cover-glass on to the glycerine and made a rapid inspection of the specimen through the microscope.

This operation he repeated on the other four watches, using a fresh rod for each, and when he had finished he turned to the open-mouthed officer. "I take it," said he, "that the watch which has the chain attached to it is Mr. Harewood's watch?"

"Yes, sir. That helped us to identify it."

Thorndyke looked at the watch reflectively. Attached to the bow by a short length of green tape was a small, rather elaborate key. This my friend picked up, and taking a fresh mounted needle, inserted it into the barrel of the key, from which he then withdrew it with a tiny ball of fluff on its point. I hastily prepared a slide and handed it to him, when, with a pair of dissecting scissors, he cut off a piece of the fluff and let it fall into the glycerine. He repeated this manœuvre with two more slides and then labelled the three "Key, outside," "middle" and "inside," and in that order examined them under the microscope.

My own examination of the specimens yielded very little. They all seemed to be common dust, though that from the face of watch No. 3 contained a few broken fragments of what looked like animal hairs—possibly cat's—as also did the key-fluff marked "outside." But if this had any significance, I could not guess what it was. As to the Chief Constable, he clearly looked on the whole proceeding as a sort of legerdemain with no obvious purpose, for he remarked, as we were packing up to go, "I am glad I've seen how you do it, sir. But all the same, I think you are flogging a dead horse. We know who committed the crime and we know he's beyond the reach of the law."

"Well," said Thorndyke, "one must earn one's fee, you know. I shall put Fletcher's boots and the five watches in evidence at the inquest to-morrow, and I will ask you to leave the labels on the watches."

With renewed thanks and a hearty handshake he bade the courteous officer adieu, and we rode off to catch the train to London.

That evening, after dinner, we brought out the specimens and went over

them at our leisure; and Thorndyke added a further specimen by drawing a knotted piece of twine through the cigarette-holder that he had salvaged from the chalk-pit, and teasing out the unsavoury, black substance that came out on the string in glycerine on a slide. When he had examined it, he passed it to me. The dark, tarry liquid somewhat obscured the detail, but I could make out fragments of the same animal hairs that I had noted in the other specimens, only here they were much more numerous. I mentioned my observation to Thorndyke. "They are certainly parts of mammalian hairs," I said, "and they look like the hairs of a cat. Are they from a cat?"

"Rabbit," Thorndyke replied curtly; and even then, I am ashamed to admit, I did not perceive the drift of the investigation.

The room in the Welsbury Town Hall had filled up some minutes before the time fixed for the opening of the inquest, and in the interval, when the jury had retired to view the body in the adjacent mortuary, I looked round the assembly. Mr. Marchmont and Mr. Crowhurst were present, and a youngish, horsey-looking man in cord breeches and leggings, whom I correctly guessed to be Arthur Baxfield. Our friend the Chief Constable of Barwood was also there, and with him Thorndyke exchanged a few words in a retired corner. The rest of the company were strangers.

As soon as the coroner and the jury had taken their places the medical witness was called. The cause of death, he stated, was dislocation of the neck, accompanied by a depressed fracture of the skull. The fracture might have been produced by a blow with a heavy, blunt weapon, or by the deceased falling on his head. The witness adopted the latter view, as the dislocation showed that deceased had fallen in that manner.

The next witness was Mr. Crowhurst, who repeated to the court what he had told us, and further stated that on leaving deceased's house he went straight home, as he had an appointment with a friend. He was followed by Baxfield, who gave evidence to the same effect, and stated that on leaving the house of deceased he went to his place of business at Welsbury. He was about to retire when Thorndyke rose to cross-examine.

"At what time did you reach your place of business?" he asked.

The witness hesitated for a few moments and then replied, "Half-past four."

"And what time did you leave deceased's house?"

"Two o'clock," was the reply.

“What is the distance?”

“In a direct line, about two miles. But I didn’t go direct. I took a round in the country by Lenfield.”

“That would take you near the race-course on the way back. Did you go to the races?”

“No. The races were just over when I returned.”

There was a slight pause and then Thorndyke asked, “Do you smoke much, Mr. Baxfield?”

The witness looked surprised, and so did the jury, but the former replied, “A fair amount. About fifteen cigarettes a day.”

“What brand of cigarettes do you smoke, and what kind of tobacco is it?”

“I make my own cigarettes. I make them of shag.”

Here protesting murmurs arose from the jury, and the coroner remarked stiffly, “These questions do not appear to have much connection with the subject of this inquiry.”

“You may take it, sir,” replied Thorndyke, “that they have a very direct bearing on it.” Then, turning to the witness he asked, “Do you use a cigarette-tube?”

“Sometimes I do,” was the reply.

“Have you lost a cigarette-tube lately?”

The witness directed a startled glance at Thorndyke and replied after some hesitation, “I believe I mislaid one a little time ago.”

“When and where did you lose that tube?” Thorndyke asked.

“I—I really couldn’t say,” replied Baxfield, turning perceptibly pale.

Thorndyke opened his dispatch-box, and taking out the tube that he had salvaged at so much risk, handed it to the witness. “Is that the tube that you lost?” he asked.

At this question Baxfield turned pale as death, and the hand in which he received the tube shook as if with a palsy. “It may be,” he faltered. “I wouldn’t swear to it. It is like the one I lost.”

Thorndyke took it from him and passed it to the coroner. “I am putting this tube in evidence, sir,” said he. Then, addressing the witness, he said, “You stated that you did not go to the races. Did you go on the course or inside the

grounds at all?”

Baxfield moistened his lips and replied, “I just went in for a minute or two, but I didn’t stay. The races were over, and there was a very rough crowd.”

“While you were in that crowd, Mr. Baxfield, did you have your pocket picked?”

There was an expectant silence in the court as Baxfield replied in a low voice:

“Yes. I lost my watch.”

Again Thorndyke opened the dispatch-box, and taking out a watch (it was the one that had been labelled 3), handed it to the witness. “Is that the watch that you lost?” he asked.

Baxfield held the watch in his trembling hand and replied hesitatingly, “I believe it is, but I won’t swear to it.”

There was a pause. Then, in grave, impressive tones, Thorndyke said, “Now, Mr. Baxfield, I am going to ask you a question which you need not answer if you consider that by doing so you would prejudice your position in any way. That question is, When your pocket was picked, were any articles besides this watch taken from your person? Don’t hurry. Consider your answer carefully.”

For some moments Baxfield remained silent, regarding Thorndyke with a wild, affrighted stare. At length he began falteringly, “I don’t remember missing anything——” and then stopped.

“Could the witness be allowed to sit down, sir?” Thorndyke asked. And when the permission had been given and a chair placed, Baxfield sat down heavily and cast a bewildered glance round the court. “I think,” he said, addressing Thorndyke, “I had better tell you exactly what happened and take my chance of the consequences. When I left my uncle’s house on Monday, I took a circuit through the fields and then entered Gilbert’s Copse to wait for my uncle and tell him what I thought of his conduct in leaving the bulk of his property to a stranger. I struck the path that I knew my uncle would take and walked along it slowly to meet him. I did meet him—on the path, just above where he was found—and I began to say what was in my mind. But he wouldn’t listen. He flew into a rage, and as I was standing in the middle of the path, he tried to push past me. In doing so he caught his foot in a bramble and staggered back, then he disappeared through the bushes and a few seconds after I heard a thud down below. I pulled the bushes aside and looked down into the chalkpit, and there I saw him lying with his head all on one side. Now,

I happened to know of a short cut down into the pit. It was rather a dangerous climb, but I took it to get down as quickly as possible. It was there that I dropped the cigarette-tube. When I got to my uncle I could see that he was dead. His skull was battered and his neck was broken. Then the devil put into my head the idea of making away with the will. But I knew that if I took the will only, suspicion would fall on me. So I took most of his valuables—the wallet, his watch and chain, his purse and his ring. The purse I emptied and threw away, and flung the ring after it. I took the will out of the wallet—it had just been dropped in loose—and put it in an inner pocket. Then I dropped the wallet and the watch and chain into my outside coat pocket.

“I struck across country, intending to make for the race-course and drop the things among the crowd, so that they might be picked up and safely carried away. But when I got there a gang of pickpockets saved me the trouble; they mobbed and hustled me and cleared my pockets of everything but my keys and the will.”

“And what has become of the will?” asked Thorndyke.

“I have it here.” He dipped into his breast pocket and produced a folded paper, which he handed to Thorndyke, who opened it, and having glanced at it, passed it to the coroner.

That was practically the end of the inquest. The jury decided to accept Baxfield’s statement and recorded a verdict of “Death by Misadventure,” leaving Baxfield to be dealt with by the proper authorities.

“An interesting and eminently satisfactory case,” remarked Thorndyke, as we sat over a rather late dinner. “Essentially simple, too. The elucidation turned, as you probably noticed, on a single illuminating fact.”

“I judged that it was so,” said I, “though the illumination of that fact has not yet reached me.”

“Well,” said Thorndyke, “let us first take the general aspect of the case as it was presented by Marchmont. The first thing, of course, that struck one was that the loss of the will might easily have converted Baxfield from a minor beneficiary to the sole heir. But even if the court agreed to recognise the will, it would have to be guided by the statements of the only two men to whom its provisions were even approximately known, and Baxfield could have made any statement he pleased. It was impossible to ignore the fact that the loss of the will was very greatly to Baxfield’s advantage.

“When the stolen property was discovered in Fletcher’s possession it

looked, at the first glance, as if the mystery of the crime were solved. But there were several serious inconsistencies. First, how came Fletcher to be in this solitary wood, remote from any railway or even road? He appeared to be a London pickpocket. When he was killed he was travelling to London by train. It seemed probable that he had come from London by train to ply his trade at the races. Then, as you know, criminological experience shows that the habitual criminal is a rigid specialist. The burglar, the coiner, the pickpocket, each keeps strictly to his own special line. Now, Fletcher was a pickpocket, and had evidently been picking pockets on the race-course. The probabilities were against his being the original robber and in favour of his having picked the pocket of the person who robbed Harewood. But if this were so, who was that person? Once more the probabilities suggested Baxfield. There was the motive, as I have said, and further, the pocket-picking had apparently taken place on the race-course, and Baxfield was known to be a frequenter of race-courses. But again, if Baxfield were the person robbed by Fletcher, then one of the five watches was probably Baxfield's watch. Whether it was so or not might have been very difficult to prove, but here came in the single illuminating fact that I have spoken of.

“You remember that when Marchmont opened the case he mentioned that Baxfield was a manufacturer of felt hats, and Crowhurst told us that he was a sort of foreman or manager of the factory.”

“Yes, I remember, now you speak of it. But what is the bearing of the fact?”

“My dear Jervis!” exclaimed Thorndyke. “Don't you see that it gave us a touchstone? Consider, now. What is a felt hat? It is just a mass of agglutinated rabbits' hair. The process of manufacture consists in blowing a jet of the more or less disintegrated hair on to a revolving steel cone which is moistened by a spray of an alcoholic solution of shellac. But, of course, a quantity of the finer and more minute particles of the broken hairs miss the cone and float about in the air. The air of the factory is thus charged with the dust of broken rabbit hairs; and this dust settles on and penetrates the clothing of the workers. But when clothing becomes charged with dust, that dust tends to accumulate in the pockets and find its way into the hollows and interstices of any object carried in those pockets. Thus, if one of the five watches was Baxfield's it would almost certainly show traces where this characteristic dust had crept under the bezel and settled on the dial. And so it turned out to be. When I inspected those five watches through the Coddington lens, on the dial of No. 3 I saw a quantity of dust of this character. The electrified vulcanite rod picked it all up neatly and transferred it to the slide, and under the microscope its nature was obvious.

The owner of this watch was therefore, almost certainly, employed in a felt hat factory. But, of course, it was necessary to show not only the presence of rabbit hair in this watch, but its absence in the others and in Fletcher's pockets, which I did.

"Then with regard to Harewood's watch. There was no rabbit hair on the dial, but there was a small quantity on the fluff from the key barrel. Now, if that rabbit hair had come from Harewood's pocket it would have been uniformly distributed through the fluff. But it was not. It was confined exclusively to the part of the fluff that was exposed. Thus it had come from some pocket other than Harewood's and the owner of that pocket was almost certainly employed in a felt hat factory, and was most probably the owner of watch No. 3.

"Then there was the cigarette-tube. Its bore was loaded with rabbit hair. But its owner had unquestionably been at the scene of the crime. There was a clear suggestion that his was the pocket in which the stolen watch had been carried and that he was the owner of watch No. 3. The problem was to piece this evidence together and prove definitely who this person was. And that I was able to do by means of a fresh item of evidence, which I acquired when I saw Baxfield at the inquest. I suppose you noticed his boots?"

"I am afraid I didn't," I had to admit.

"Well, I did. I watched his feet constantly, and when he crossed his legs I could see that he had iron toe-tips on his boots. That was what gave me confidence to push the cross-examination."

"It was certainly a rather daring cross-examination—and rather irregular, too," said I.

"It was extremely irregular," Thorndyke agreed. "The coroner ought not to have permitted it. But it was all for the best. If the coroner had disallowed my questions we should have had to take criminal proceedings against Baxfield, whereas now that we have recovered the will, it is possible that no one will trouble to prosecute him."

Which, I subsequently ascertained, is what actually happened.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story is Number Thirty Four from the book
“The Famous Cases of Dr. Thorndyke
Thirty-seven of his criminal
investigations as set down by
R. Austin Freeman.”

also known as

“Dr. Thorndyke His Famous Cases as
Described by R. Austin Freeman”.

First published July 1929
Hodder & Stoughton, London

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 *The Touchstone* by Richard Austin Freeman]