

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

Number Fifteen

The Stalking
Horse

*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This ebook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the ebook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the ebook. If either of these conditions applies, please contact a FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. IF THE BOOK IS UNDER COPYRIGHT IN YOUR COUNTRY, DO NOT DOWNLOAD OR REDISTRIBUTE THIS FILE.

Title: The Stalking Horse

Date of first publication: 1929

Author: Richard Austin Freeman (1862-1943)

Date first posted: Aug. 21, 2018

Date last updated: Aug. 21, 2018

Faded Page eBook #20180876

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

As Thorndyke and I descended the stairs of the footbridge at Densford Junction we became aware that something unusual had happened. The platform was nearly deserted save at one point, where a small but dense crowd had collected around the open door of a first-class compartment of the down train; heads were thrust out of the windows of the other coaches, and at intervals doors opened and inquisitive passengers ran along to join the crowd, from which an excited porter detached himself just as we reached the platform.

“You’d better go for Dr. Pooke first,” the station-master called after him.

On this, Thorndyke stepped forward.

“My friend and I,” said he, “are medical men. Can we be of any service until the local doctor arrives?”

“I’m very much afraid not, sir,” was the reply, “but you’ll see.” He cleared a way for us and we approached the open door.

At the first glance there appeared to be nothing to account for the awe-stricken expression with which the bystanders peered into the carriage and gazed at its solitary occupant. For the motionless figure that sat huddled in the corner seat, chin on breast, might have been a sleeping man. But it was not. The waxen pallor of the face and the strange, image-like immobility forbade the hope of any awakening.

“It looks almost as if he had passed away in his sleep,” said the station-master when we had concluded our brief examination and ascertained certainly that the man was dead. “Do you think it was a heart attack, sir?”

Thorndyke shook his head and touched with his finger a depressed spot on the dead man’s waistcoat. When he withdrew his finger it was smeared with blood.

“Good God!” the official gasped, in a horrified whisper. “The man has been murdered!” He stared incredulously at the corpse for a few moments and then turned and sprang out of the compartment, shutting the door behind him, and we heard him giving orders for the coach to be separated and shunted into the siding.

“This is a gruesome affair, Jervis,” my colleague said as he sat down on the seat opposite the dead man and cast a searching glance round the compartment. “I wonder who this poor fellow was and what was the object of the murder? It

looks almost too determined for a common robbery; and, in fact, the body does not appear to have been robbed." Here he stooped suddenly to pick up one or two minute fragments of glass which seemed to have been trodden into the carpet, and which he examined closely in the palm of his hand. I leaned over and looked at the fragments, and we agreed that they were portions of the bulb of an electric torch or flash-lamp.

"The significance of these—if they have any," said Thorndyke, "we can consider later. But if they are recent, it would appear that the metal part of the bulb has been picked up and taken away. That might be an important fact. But, on the other hand, the fragments may have been here some time and have no connection with the tragedy; though you notice that they were lying opposite the body and opposite the seat which the murderer must have occupied when the crime was committed."

As he was speaking, the uncoupled coach began slowly to move towards the siding, and we both stooped to make a further search for the remainder of the lamp-bulb. And then, almost at the same moment, we perceived two objects lying under the opposite seat—the seat occupied by the dead man. One was a small pocket-handkerchief, the other a sheet of notepaper.

"This," said I, as I picked up the former, "accounts for the strong smell of scent in the compartment."

"Possibly," Thorndyke agreed, "though you will notice that the odour does not come principally from the handkerchief, but from the back cushion of the corner seat. But here is something more distinctive—a most incriminating piece of evidence, unless it can be answered by an undeniable alibi." He held out to me a sheet of letter paper, both pages of which were covered with writing in bright blue ink, done with a Hectograph or some similar duplicator. It was evidently a circular letter, for it bore the printed heading, "Women's Emancipation League, 16 Barnabas Square, S.W.," and the contents appeared to refer to a "militant demonstration" planned for the near future.

"It is dated the day before yesterday," commented Thorndyke, "so that it might have been lying here for twenty-four hours, though that is obviously improbable; and as this is neither the first sheet nor the last, there are—or have been—at least two more sheets. The police will have something to start on, at any rate."

He laid the letter on the seat and explored both of the hat-racks, taking down the dead man's hat, gloves, and umbrella, and noting in the hat the initials "F. B." He had just replaced them when voices became audible outside, and the station-master climbed up on the footboard and opened the door to

admit two men, one of whom I assumed to be a doctor, the other being a police inspector.

“The station-master tells me that this is a case of homicide,” said the former, addressing us jointly.

“That is what the appearances suggest,” replied Thorndyke. “There is a bullet wound, inflicted apparently at quite short range—the waistcoat is perceptibly singed—and we have found no weapon in the compartment.”

The doctor stepped past us and proceeded to make a rapid examination of the body.

“Yes,” he said, “I agree with you. The position of the wound and the posture of the body both suggest that death was practically instantaneous. If it had been suicide, the pistol would have been in the hand or on the floor. There is no clue to the identity of the murderer, I suppose?”

“We found these on the floor under the dead man’s seat,” replied Thorndyke, indicating the letter and the handkerchief; “and there is some glass trodden into the carpet—apparently the remains of an electric flash-lamp.”

The inspector pounced on the handkerchief and the letter, and having scrutinised the former vainly in search of name or initials, turned to the letter.

“Why, this is a suffragist’s letter!” he exclaimed. “But it can’t have anything to do with this affair. They are mischievous beggars, but they don’t do this sort of thing.” Nevertheless, he carefully bestowed both articles in a massive wallet, and approaching the corpse, remarked: “We may as well see who he is while we are waiting for the stretcher.”

With a matter-of-fact air, which seemed somewhat to shock the station-master, he unbuttoned the coat of the passive figure in the corner and thrust his hand into the breast pocket, drawing out a letter-case which he opened, and from which he extracted a visiting card. As he glanced at it, his face suddenly took on an expression of amazement.

“God!” he exclaimed in a startled tone. “Who do you think he is, doctor? He is Mr. Francis Burnham!”

The doctor looked at him with an interrogative frown. “Burnham—Burnham,” he repeated. “Let me see, now——”

“Don’t you know? The anti-suffrage man. Surely——”

“Yes, yes,” interrupted the doctor. “Of course I remember him. The arch-enemy of the suffrage movement and—yes, of course.” The doctor’s brisk

speech changed abruptly into a hesitating mumble. Like the inspector, he had suddenly “seen a great light”; and again, like the officer, his perception had begotten a sudden reticence.

Thorndyke glanced at his watch, “Our train is a minute overdue,” said he. “We ought to get back to the platform.” Taking a card from his case, he handed it to the inspector, who looked at it and slightly raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t think my evidence will be of much value,” said he; “but, of course, I am at your service if you want it.” With this and a bow to the doctor and the station-master, he climbed down to the ground; and when I had given the inspector my card, I followed, and we made our way to the platform.

The case was not long in developing. That very evening, as Thorndyke and I were smoking our after-dinner pipes by the fire, a hurried step was heard on the stair and was followed by a peremptory knock on our door. The visitor was a man of about thirty, with a clean-shaved face, an intense and rather neurotic expression, and a restless, excited manner. He introduced himself by the name of Cadmus Bawley, and thereby, in effect, indicated the purpose of his visit.

“You know me by name, I expect,” he said, speaking rapidly and with a sharp, emphatic manner, “and probably you can guess what I have come about. You have seen the evening paper, of course?”

“I have not,” replied Thorndyke.

“Well,” said Mr. Bawley, “you know about the murder of the man Burnham, because I see that you were present at the discovery; and you know that part of a circular letter from our League was found in the compartment. Perhaps you will not be surprised to learn that Miss Isabel Dalby has been arrested and charged with the murder.”

“Indeed!” said Thorndyke.

“Yes. It’s an infamous affair! A national disgrace!” exclaimed Bawley, banging the table with his fist. “A manifest plot of the enemies of social reform to get rid of a high-minded, noble-hearted lady whose championship of this great Cause they are unable to combat by fair means in the open. And it is a wild absurdity, too. As to the fellow, Burnham, I can’t pretend to feel any regret——”

“May I suggest”—Thorndyke interrupted somewhat stiffly—“that the expression of personal sentiments is neither helpful nor discreet? My methods of defence—if that is what you have come about—are based on demonstration

rather than rhetoric. Could you give us the plain facts?"

Mr. Cadmus Bawley looked unmistakably sulky, but after a short pause, he began his recital in a somewhat lower key.

"The bald facts," he said, "are these: This afternoon, at half-past two, Miss Dalby took the train from King's Cross to Holmwood. This is the train that stops at Densford Junction and is the one in which Burnham travelled. She took a first-class ticket and occupied a compartment for ladies only, of which she was the only occupant. She got out at Holmwood and went straight to the house of our Vice-President, Miss Carleigh—who has been confined to her room for some days—and stayed there about an hour. She came back by the four-fifteen train, and I met her at the station—King's Cross—at a quarter to five. We had tea at a restaurant opposite the station, and over our tea we discussed the plans for the next demonstration, and arranged the rendezvous and the most convenient routes for retreat and dispersal when the police should arrive. This involved the making of sketch plans, and these Miss Dalby drew on a sheet of paper that she took from her pocket, and which happened to be part of the circular letter referring to the raid. After tea we walked together down Gray's Inn Road and parted at Theobald's Road, I going on to the headquarters and she to her rooms in Queen Square. On her arrival home, she found two detectives waiting outside her house, and then—and then, in short, she was arrested, like a common criminal, and taken to the police station, where she was searched and the remainder of the circular letter found in her pocket. Then she was formally charged with the murder of the man Burnham, and she was graciously permitted to send a telegram to head-quarters. It arrived just after I got there, and, of course, I at once went to the police station. The police refused to accept bail, but they allowed me to see her to make arrangements for the defence."

"Does Miss Dalby offer any suggestion," asked Thorndyke, "as to how a sheet of her letter came to be in the compartment with the murdered man?"

"Oh, yes!" replied Mr. Bawley. "I had forgotten that. It wasn't her letter at all. She destroyed her copy of the letter as soon as she had read it."

"Then," inquired Thorndyke, "how came the letter to be in her pocket?"

"Ah," replied Bawley, "that is the mystery. She thinks someone must have slipped it into her pocket to throw suspicion on her."

"Did she seem surprised to find it in her pocket when you were having tea together?"

"No. She had forgotten having destroyed her copy. She only remembered it

when I told her that the sheet had been found in Burnham's carriage."

"Can she produce the fragments of the destroyed letter?"

"No, she can't. Unfortunately she burned it."

"Do these circular letters bear any distinguishing mark? Are they addressed to members by name?"

"Only on the envelopes. The letters are all alike. They are run off a duplicator. Of course, if you don't believe the story——"

"I am not judging the case," interrupted Thorndyke; "I am simply collecting the facts. What do you want me to do?"

"If you feel that you could undertake the defence I should like you to do so. We shall employ the solicitors to the League, Bird & Marshall, but I know they will be willing and glad to act with you."

"Very well," said Thorndyke. "I will investigate the case and consult with your solicitors. By the way, do the police know about the sheet of the letter on which the plans were drawn?"

"No. I thought it best to say nothing about that, and I have told Miss Dalby not to mention it."

"That is just as well," said Thorndyke. "Have you the sheet with the plan on it?"

"I haven't it about me," was the reply. "It is in my desk at my chambers."

"You had better let me have it to look at," said Thorndyke.

"You can have it if you want it, of course," said Bawley, "but it won't help you. The letters are all alike, as I have told you."

"I should like to see it, nevertheless," said Thorndyke; "and perhaps you could give me some account of Mr. Burnham. What do you know about him?"

Mr. Bawley shut his lips tightly, and his face took on an expression of vindictiveness verging on malignity.

"All I know about Burnham," he said, "is that he was a fool and a ruffian. He was not only an enemy of the great reform that our League stands for; he was a treacherous enemy—violent, crafty, and indefatigably active. I can only regard his death as a blessing to mankind."

"May I ask," said Thorndyke, "if any members of your League have ever publicly threatened to take personal measures against him?"

“Yes,” snapped Bawley. “Several of us—including myself—have threatened to give him the hiding that he deserved. But a hiding is a different thing from murder, you know.”

“Yes,” Thorndyke agreed somewhat dryly; then he asked: “Do you know anything about Mr. Burnham’s occupation and habits?”

“He was a sort of manager of the London and Suburban Bank. His job was to supervise the suburban branches, and his habit was to visit them in rotation. He was probably going to the branch at Holmwood when he was killed. That is all I can tell you about him.”

“Thank you,” said Thorndyke; and as our visitor rose to depart he continued: “Then I will look into the case and arrange with your solicitors to have Miss Dalby properly represented at the inquest; and I shall be glad to have that sheet of the letter as soon as you can send or leave it.”

“Very well,” said Bawley, “though, as I have told you, it won’t be of any use to you. It is only a duplicated circular.”

“Possibly,” Thorndyke assented. “But the other sheets will be produced in Court, so I may as well have an opportunity of examining it beforehand.”

For some minutes after our client had gone Thorndyke remained silent and reflective, copying his rough notes into his pocket-book and apparently amplifying and arranging them. Presently he looked up at me with an unspoken question in his eyes.

“It is a queer case,” said I. “The circumstantial evidence seems to be strongly against Miss Dalby, but it is manifestly improbable that she murdered the man.”

“It seems so,” he agreed. “But the case will be decided on the evidence; and the evidence will be considered by a judge, not by a Home Secretary. You notice the importance of Burnham’s destination?”

“Yes. He was evidently dead when the train arrived at Holmwood. But it isn’t clear how long he had been dead.”

“The evidence,” said Thorndyke, “points strongly to the tunnel between Cawden and Holmwood as the place where the murder was committed. You will remember that the up-express passed our train in the tunnel. If the adjoining compartments were empty, the sound of a pistol shot would be completely drowned by the noise of the express thundering past. Then you will remember the fragments of the electric bulb that we picked up, and that there was no light on in the carriage. That is rather significant. It not only suggests

that the crime was committed in the dark, but there is a distinct suggestion of preparation—arrangement and premeditation. It suggests that the murderer knew what the circumstances would be and provided for them.”

“Yes; and that is rather a point against our client. But I don’t quite see what you expect to get out of that sheet of the letter. It is the presence of the letter, rather than its matter, that constitutes the evidence against Miss Dalby.”

“I don’t expect to learn anything from it,” replied Thorndyke; “but the letter will be the prosecution’s trump card, and it is always well to know in advance exactly what cards your opponent holds. It is a mere matter of routine to examine everything, relevant or irrelevant.”

The inquest was to be held at Densford on the third day after the discovery of the body. But in the interval certain new facts had come to light. One was that the deceased was conveying to the Holmwood branch of the bank a sum of three thousand pounds, of which one thousand was in gold and the remainder in Bank of England notes, the whole being contained in a leather handbag. This bag had been found, empty, in a ditch by the side of the road which led from the station to the house of Miss Carleigh, the Vice-President of the Women’s Emancipation League. It was further stated that the ticket-collector at Holmwood had noticed that Miss Dalby—whom he knew by sight—was carrying a bag of the kind described when she passed the barrier, and that when she returned, about an hour later, she had no bag with her. On the other hand, Miss Carleigh had stated that the bag which Miss Dalby brought to her house was her (Miss Carleigh’s) property, and she had produced it for the inspection of the police. So that already there was some conflict of evidence, with a balance distinctly against Miss Dalby.

“There is no denying,” said Thorndyke, as we discussed the case at the breakfast table on the morning of the inquest, “that the circumstantial evidence is formidably complete and consistent, while the rebutting evidence is of the feeblest. Miss Dalby’s statement that the letter had been put into her pocket by some unknown person will hardly be taken seriously, and even Miss Carleigh’s statement with reference to the bag will not carry much weight unless she can furnish corroboration.”

“Nevertheless,” said I, “the general probabilities are entirely in favour of the accused. It is grossly improbable that a lady like Miss Dalby would commit a robbery with murder of this cold-blooded, deliberate type.”

“That may be,” Thorndyke retorted, “but a jury has to find in accordance with the evidence.”

“By the way,” said I, “did Bawley ever send you that sheet of the letter that you asked for?”

“No, confound him! But I have sent Polton round to get it from him, so that I can look it over carefully in the train. Which reminds me that I can’t get down in time for the opening of the inquest. You had better travel with the solicitors and see the shorthand writers started. I shall have to come down by a later train.”

Half an hour later, just as I was about to start, a familiar step was heard on the stair, and then our laboratory assistant, Polton, let himself in with his key.

“Just caught him, sir, as he was starting for the station,” he said, with a satisfied, crinkly smile, laying an envelope on the table, and added, “Lord! how he did swear!”

Thorndyke chuckled, and having thanked his assistant, opened the envelope and handed it to me. It contained a single sheet of letter-paper, exactly similar to the one that we had found in the railway carriage, excepting that the writing filled one side and a quarter only, and, since it concluded with the signature “Letitia Humboe, President,” it was evidently the last sheet. There was no water-mark nor anything, so far as I could see, to distinguish it from the dozens of other impressions that had been run off on the duplicator with it, excepting the roughly-pencilled plan on the blank side of the sheet.

“Well,” I said as I put on my hat and walked towards the door, “I suspect that Bawley was right. You won’t get much help from this to support Miss Dalby’s rather improbable statement.” And Thorndyke agreed that appearances were not very promising.

The scene in the coffee-room of “The Plough” Inn at Densford was one with which I was familiar enough. The quiet, business-like coroner, the half-embarrassed jurors, the local police and witnesses and the spectators, penned up at one end of the room, were all well-known characters. The unusual feature was the handsome, distinguished-looking young lady who sat on a plain Windsor chair between two inscrutable policemen, watched intently by Mr. Cadmus Bawley. Miss Dalby was pale and obviously agitated, but quiet, resolute, and somewhat defiant in manner. She greeted me with a pleasant smile when I introduced myself, and hoped that I and my colleague would have no difficulty in disposing of “this grotesque and horrible accusation.”

I need not describe the proceedings in detail. Evidence of the identity of the deceased having been taken, Dr. Pooke deposed that death was due to a wound

of the heart produced by a spherical bullet, apparently fired from a small, smooth-bore pistol at very short range. The wound was in his opinion not self-inflicted. The coroner then produced the sheet of the circular letter found in the carriage, and I was called to testify to the finding of it. The next witness was Superintendent Miller of the Criminal Investigation Department, who produced the two sheets of the letter which were taken from Miss Dalby's pocket when she was arrested. These he handed to the coroner for comparison with the one found in the carriage with the body of deceased.

"There appear," said the coroner, after placing the three sheets together, "to be one or more sheets missing. The two you have handed me are sheets one and three, and the one found in the railway carriage is sheet two."

"Yes," the witness agreed, "sheet four is missing, but I have a photograph of it. Here is a set of the complete letter," and he laid four unmounted prints on the table.

The coroner examined them with a puzzled frown. "May I ask," he said, "how you obtained these photographs?"

"They are not photographs of the copy that you have," the witness explained, "but of another copy of the same letter which we intercepted in the post. That letter was addressed to a stationer's shop to be called for. We have considered it necessary to keep ourselves informed of the contents of these circulars, so that we can take the necessary precautions; and as the envelopes are marked with the badge and are invariably addressed in blue ink, it is not difficult to identify them."

"I see," said the coroner, glaring stonily at Mr. Bawley, who had accompanied the superintendent's statement with audible and unfavourable comments. "Is that the whole of your evidence? Thank you. Then, if there is no cross-examination, I will call the next witness. Mr. Bernard Parsons."

Mr. Parsons was the general manager of the London and Suburban Bank, and he deposed that deceased was, on the day when he met his death, travelling to Holmwood to visit and inspect the new local branch of the bank, and that he was taking thither the sum of three thousand pounds, of which one thousand was in gold and the remainder in Bank of England notes—mostly five-pound notes. He carried the notes and specie in a strong leather handbag.

"Can you say if either of these is the bag that he carried?" the coroner asked, indicating two largish, black leather bags that his officer had placed on the table.

Mr. Parsons promptly pointed to the larger of the two, which was smeared

externally with mud. The coroner noted the answer and then asked:

“Did anyone besides yourself know that deceased was making this visit?”

“Many persons must have known,” was the reply. “Deceased visited the various branches in a fixed order. He came to Holmwood on the second Tuesday in the month.”

“And would it be known that he had this great sum of money with him?”

“The actual amount would not be generally known, but he usually took with him supplies of specie and notes—sometimes very large sums—and this would be known to many of the bank staff, and probably to a good many persons outside. The Holmwood Branch consumes a good deal of specie, as most of the customers pay in cheques and draw out cash for local use.”

This was the substance of Mr. Parsons’ evidence, and when he sat down the ticket-collector was called. That official identified Miss Dalby as one of the passengers by the train in which the body of deceased was found. She was carrying a bag when she passed the barrier. He could not identify either of the bags, but both were similar to the one that she was carrying. She returned about an hour later and caught an up-train, and he noticed that she was then not carrying a bag. He could not say whether any of the other passengers was carrying a bag. There were very few first-class passengers by that train, but a large number of third-class—mostly fruit-pickers—and they made a dense crowd at the barrier so that he did not notice individual passengers particularly. He noticed Miss Dalby because he knew her by sight, as she often came to Holmwood with other suffragist ladies. He did not see which carriage Miss Dalby came from, and he did not see any first-class compartment with an open door.

The coroner noted down this evidence with thoughtful deliberation, and I was considering whether there were any questions that it would be advisable to ask the witness when I felt a light touch on my shoulder, and looking up perceived a constable holding out a telegram. Observing that it was addressed to “Dr. Jervis, Plough Inn, Densford,” I nodded to the constable, and taking the envelope from him, opened it and unfolded the paper. The telegram was from Thorndyke, in the simple code that he had devised for our private use. I was able to decode it without referring to the key—which each of us always carried in his pocket—and it then read:

“I am starting for Folkestone *in re* Burnham deceased. Follow immediately and bring Miller if you can for possible arrest. Meet me on pier near Ostend boat. Thorndyke.”

Accustomed as I was to my colleague's inveterate habit of acting in the least expected manner, I must confess that I gazed at the decoded message in absolute stupefaction. I had been totally unaware of the faintest clue beyond the obvious evidence to which I had been listening, and behold! here was Thorndyke with an entirely fresh case, apparently cut-and-dried, and the unsuspected criminal in the hollow of his hand. It was astounding.

Unconsciously I raised my eyes—and met those of Superintendent Miller, fixed on me with devouring curiosity. I held up the telegram and beckoned, and immediately he tip-toed across and took a seat by my side. I laid the decoded telegram before him, and when he had glanced through it, I asked in a whisper: “Well, what do you say?”

By way of reply, he whisked out a time-table, conned it eagerly for a few minutes, and then held it towards me with his thumb-nail on the words “Densford Junction.”

“There's a fast train up in seven minutes,” he whispered hoarsely. “Get the coroner to excuse us and let your solicitors carry on for you.”

A brief, and rather vague, explanation secured the assent of the coroner—since we had both given our evidence—and the less willing agreement of my clients. In another minute the superintendent and I were heading for the station, which we reached just as the train swept up alongside the platform.

“This is a queer start,” said Miller, as the train moved out of the station; “but, Lord! there is never any calculating Dr. Thorndyke's moves. Did you know that he had anything up his sleeve?”

“No; but then one never does know. He is as close as an oyster. He never shows his hand until he can play a trump card. But it is possible that he has struck a fresh clue since I left.”

“Well,” rejoined Miller, “we shall know when we get to the other end. And I don't mind telling you that it will be a great relief to me if we can drop this charge against Miss Dalby.”

From time to time during the journey to London, and from thence to Folkestone, the superintendent reverted to Thorndyke's mysterious proceedings. But it was useless to speculate. We had not a single fact to guide us; and when, at last, the train ran into Folkestone Central Station we were as much in the dark as when we started.

Assuming that Thorndyke would have made any necessary arrangements for assistance from the local police, we chartered a cab and proceeded direct to the end of Rendez-vous Street—a curiously appropriate destination, by the

way. Here we alighted in order that we might make our appearance at the meeting-place as inconspicuously as possible, and, walking towards the harbour, perceived Thorndyke waiting on the quay, ostensibly watching the loading of a barge, and putting in their case a pair of prismatic binoculars with which he had apparently observed our arrival.

“I am glad you have come, Miller,” he said, shaking the superintendent’s hand. “I can’t make any promises, but I have no doubt that it is a case for you even if it doesn’t turn out all that I hope and expect. The *Cornflower* is our ship, and we had better go on board separately in case our friends are keeping a look-out. I have arranged matters with the captain, and the local superintendent has got some plain-clothes men on the pier.”

With this we separated. Thorndyke went on in advance, and Miller and I followed at a discreet interval.

As I descended the gangway a minute or so after Miller, a steward approached me, and having asked my name requested me to follow him, when he conducted me to the purser’s office, in which I found Thorndyke and Miller in conversation with the purser.

“The gentlemen you are inquiring for,” said the latter, “are in the smoking-room playing cards with another passenger. I have put a tarpaulin over one of the ports, in case you want to have a look at them without being seen.”

“Perhaps you had better make a preliminary inspection, Miller,” said Thorndyke. “You may know some of them.”

To this suggestion the superintendent agreed, and forthwith went off with the purser, leaving me and Thorndyke alone. I at once took the opportunity to demand an explanation.

“I take it that you struck some new evidence after I left you?”

“Yes,” Thorndyke replied. “And none too soon, as you see. I don’t quite know what it will amount to, but I think we have secured the defence, at any rate; and that is really all that we are concerned with. The positive aspects of the case are the business of the police. But here comes Miller, looking very pleased with himself, and with the purser.”

The superintendent, however, was not only pleased; he was also not a little puzzled.

“Well!” he exclaimed, “this is a quaint affair. We have got two of the leading lights of the suffrage movement in there. One is Jameson, the secretary of the Women’s Emancipation League, the other is Pinder, their chief bobbery-

monger. Then there are two men named Dorman and Spiller, both of them swell crooks, I am certain, though we have never been able to fix anything on them. The fifth man I don't know."

"Neither do I," said Thorndyke. "My repertoire includes only four. And now we will proceed to sort them out. Could we have a few words with Mr. Thorpe—in here, if you don't mind."

"Certainly," replied the purser. "I'll go and fetch him." He bustled away in the direction of the smoking-room, whence he presently reappeared, accompanied by a tall, lean man who wore large bi-focal spectacles of the old-fashioned, split-lens type, and was smoking a cigar. As the new-comer approached down the alley-way, it was evident that he was nervous and uneasy, though he maintained a certain jaunty swagger that accorded ill with a pronounced, habitual stoop. As he entered the cabin, however, and became aware of the portentous group of strangers, the swagger broke down completely; suddenly his face became ashen and haggard, and he peered through his great spectacles from one to the others with an expression of undisguisable terror.

"Mr. Thorpe?" queried Thorndyke; and the superintendent murmured: "Alias Pinder."

"Yes," was the reply, in a husky undertone. "What can I do for you?"

Thorndyke turned to the superintendent.

"I charge this man," said he, "with having murdered Francis Burnham in the train between London and Holmwood."

The superintendent was visibly astonished, but not more so than the accused, on whom Thorndyke's statement produced the most singular effect. In a moment, his terror seemed to drop from him; the colour returned to his face, the haggard expression of which gave place to one of obvious relief.

Miller stood up, and addressing the accused, began:

"It is my duty to caution you——" but the other interrupted:

"Caution your grandmother! You are talking a parcel of dam' nonsense. I was in Birmingham when the murder was committed. I can prove it, easily."

The superintendent was somewhat taken aback, for the accused spoke with a confidence that carried conviction.

"In that case," said Thorndyke, "you can probably explain how a letter belonging to you came to be found in the carriage with the murdered man."

“Belonging to me!” exclaimed Thorpe. “What the deuce do you mean? That letter belonged to Miss Dalby. The rest of it was found in her pocket.”

“Precisely,” said Thorndyke. “One sheet had been placed in the railway carriage and the remainder in Miss Dalby’s pocket to fix suspicion on her. But it was your letter, and the inference is that you disposed of it in that manner for the purpose that I have stated.”

“But,” persisted Thorpe, with visibly-growing uneasiness, “this was a duplicated circular. You couldn’t tell one copy from another.”

“Mr. Pinder,” said Thorndyke, in an impressively quiet tone, “if I tell you that I ascertained from that letter that you had taken a passage on this ship in the name of Thorpe, you will probably understand what I mean.”

Apparently he did understand, for, once more, the colour faded from his face and he sat down heavily on a locker, fixing on Thorndyke a look of undisguised dismay. Thus he sat for some moments, motionless and silent, apparently thinking hard.

Suddenly he started up. “My God!” he exclaimed, “I see now what has happened. The infernal scoundrel! First he put it on to Miss Dalby, and now he has put it on to me. Now I understand why he looked so startled when I ran against him.”

“What do you mean?” asked Thorndyke.

“I’ll tell you,” replied Pinder. “As I move about a good deal—and for other reasons—I used to have my suffrage letters sent to a stationer’s shop in Barlow Street——”

“I know,” interrupted the superintendent; “Bedall’s. I used to look them over and take photographs of them.” He grinned craftily as he made this statement, and, rather to my surprise, the accused grinned too. A little later I understood that grin.

“Well,” continued Pinder, “I used to collect these letters pretty regularly. But this last letter was delivered while I was away at Birmingham. Before I came back I met a man who gave me certain—er—instructions—you know what they were,” he added, addressing Thorndyke—“so I did not need the letter. But, of course, I couldn’t leave it there uncollected, so when I got back to London, I called for it. That was two days ago. To my astonishment Miss Bedall declared that I had collected it three days previously. I assured her that I was not in London on that day, but she was positive that I had called. ‘I remember clearly,’ she said, ‘giving you the letter myself.’ Well, there was no arguing. Evidently she had given the letter to the wrong person—she is very

near-sighted, I should say, judging by the way she holds things against her nose—but how it happened I couldn't understand. But I think I understand now. There is one person only in the world who knew that I had my letters addressed there: a sort of pal of mine named Payne. He happened to be with me one evening when I called to collect my letters. Now, Payne chanced to be a good deal like me—at least he is tall and thin and stoops a bit; but he does not wear spectacles. He tried on my spectacles once for a joke, and then he really looked extremely like me. He looked in a mirror and remarked on the resemblance himself. Now, Payne did not belong to the Women's League, and I suggest that he took advantage of this resemblance to get possession of this letter. He got a pair of spectacles like mine and personated me at the shop."

"Why should he want to get possession of that letter?" Miller demanded.

"To plant it as he has planted it," replied Pinder, "and set the police on a false trail."

"This sounds pretty thin," said Miller. "You are accusing this man of having murdered Mr. Burnham. What grounds have you for this accusation?"

"My grounds," replied Pinder, "are, first, that he stole this letter which has been found, obviously planted; and, second, that he had a grudge against Burnham and knew all about his movements."

"Indeed!" said Miller, with suddenly increased interest. "Then who and what is this man Payne?"

"Why," replied Pinder, "until a month ago, he was assistant cashier at the Streatham branch of the bank. Then Burnham came down and hoofed him out without an hour's notice. I don't know what for, but I can guess."

"Do you happen to know where Payne is at this moment?"

"Yes, I do. He is on this ship, in the smoking-room—only he is Mr. Shenstone now. And mighty sick he was when he found me on board."

The superintendent looked at Thorndyke.

"What do you think about it, doctor?" he asked.

"I think," said Thorndyke, "that we had better have Mr. Shenstone in here and ask him a few questions. Would you see if you can get him to come here?" he added, addressing the purser, who had been listening with ecstatic enjoyment.

"I'll get him to come along all right," replied the purser, evidently scenting a new act in this enthralling drama; and away he bustled, all agog. In less than

a minute we saw him returning down the alley-way, with a tall, thin man, who, at a distance, was certainly a good deal like Pinder, though the resemblance diminished as he approached. He, too, was obviously agitated, and seemed to be plying the purser with questions. But when he came opposite the door of the cabin he stopped dead and seemed disposed to shrink back.

“Is that the man?” Thorndyke demanded sharply and rather loudly, springing to his feet as he spoke.

The effect of the question was electrical. As Thorndyke rose, the newcomer turned, and, violently thrusting the purser aside, raced madly down the alley-way and out on to the deck.

“Stop that man!” roared Miller, darting out in pursuit; and at the shout a couple of loitering deckhands headed the fugitive off from the gangway. Following, I saw the terrified man swerving this way and that across the littered deck to avoid the seamen, who joined in the pursuit; I saw him make a sudden frantic burst for a baggage-slide springing from a bollard up to the bulwark-rail. Then his foot must have tripped on a lashing, for he staggered for a moment, flung out his arms with a wild shriek, and plunged headlong into the space between the ship’s side and the quay wall.

In an instant the whole ship was in an uproar. An officer and two hands sprang to the rail with ropes and a boathook, while others manned the cargo derrick and lowered a rope with a running bowline between the ship and the quay.

“He’s gone under,” a hoarse voice proclaimed from below; “but I can see him jammed against the side.”

There were a couple of minutes of sickening suspense. Then the voice from below was heard again.

“Heave up!”

The derrick-engine rattled, the taut rope came up slowly, and at length out of that horrid gulf arose a limp and dripping shape that, as it cleared the bulwark, was swung inboard and let down gently on the deck. Thorndyke and I stooped over him. But it was a dead man’s face that we looked into; and a tinge of blood on the lips told the rest of the tale.

“Cover him up,” said the superintendent. “He’s out of our jurisdiction now. But what’s going on there?”

Following his look, I perceived a small scattered crowd of men all running furiously along the quay towards the town. Some of them I judged to be the

late inmates of the smoking-room and some plain-clothes men. The only figure that I recognised was that of Mr. Pinder, and he was already growing small in the distance.

“The local police will have to deal with them,” said Miller. Then turning to the purser, he asked: “What baggage had this man?”

“Only two cabin trunks,” was the reply. “They are both in his state-room.”

To the state-room we followed the purser, when Miller had possessed himself of the dead man’s keys, and the two trunks were hoisted on to the bunk and opened. Each trunk contained a large cash-box, and each cash-box contained five hundred pounds in gold and a big bundle of notes. The latter Miller examined closely, checking their numbers by a column of entries in his pocket-book.

“Yes,” he reported at length; “it’s a true bill. These are the notes that were stolen from Mr. Burnham. And now I will have a look at the baggage of those other four sportsmen.”

This being no affair of ours, Thorndyke and I went ashore and slowly made our way towards the town. But presently the superintendent overtook us in high glee, with the news that he had discovered what appeared to be the accumulated “swag” of a gang of swell burglars for whom he had been for some months vainly on the look-out.

“How was it done?” repeated Thorndyke in reply to Miller’s question, as we sat at a retired table in the “Lord Warden” Hotel. “Well, it was really very simple. I am afraid I shall disappoint you if you expect anything ingenious and recondite. Of course, it was obvious that Miss Dalby had not committed this atrocious murder and robbery; and it was profoundly improbable that this extremely incriminating letter had been dropped accidentally. That being so, it was almost certain that the letter had been ‘planted,’ as Pinder expressed it. But that was a mere opinion that helped us not at all. The actual solution turned upon a simple chemical fact with which I happened to be acquainted; which is this: that all the basic coal-tar dyes, and especially methylene blue, dye oxycellulose without requiring a mordant, but do not react in this way on cellulose. Now, good paper is practically pure cellulose; and if you dip a sheet of such paper into certain oxidising liquids, such as a solution of potassium chlorate with a slight excess of hydrochloric acid, the paper is converted into oxycellulose. But if instead of immersing the paper, you write on it with a quill or glass pen dipped in the solution, only the part which has been touched by the pen is changed into oxycellulose. No change is visible to the eye: but if a sheet of paper written on with this colourless fluid is dipped in a solution of,

say, methylene blue, the invisible writing immediately becomes visible. The oxycellulose takes up the blue dye.

“Now, when I picked up that sheet of the letter in the railway carriage and noted that the ink used appeared to be methylene blue, this fact was recalled to my mind. Then, on looking at it closely, I seemed to detect a certain slight spottiness in the writing. There were points on some of the letters that were a little deeper in colour than the rest; and it occurred to me that it was possible that these circulars might be used to transmit secret messages of a less innocent kind than those that met the unaided eye, just as these political societies might form an excellent cover for the operations of criminal associations. But if the circulars had been so used, it is evident that the secret writing would not be on all the circulars. The prepared sheets would be used only for the circulars that were to be sent to particular persons, and in those cases the secret writing would probably be in the nature of a personal communication, either to a particular individual or to a small group. The possible presence of a secret message thus became of vital evidential importance; for if it could be shown that this letter was addressed to some person other than Miss Dalby, that would dispose of the only evidence connecting her with the crime.

“It happened, most fortunately, that I was able to get possession of the final sheet of this letter——”

“Of course it did,” growled Miller, with a sour smile.

“It reached me,” continued Thorndyke, “only after Dr. Jervis had started for Densford. The greater part of one side was blank, excepting for a rough plan drawn in pencil, and this blank side I laid down on a sheet of glass and wetted the written side with a small wad of cotton-wool dipped in distilled water. Of course, the blue writing began to run and dissolve out; and then, very faintly, some other writing began to show through in reverse. I turned the paper over, and now the new writing, though faint, was quite legible, and became more so when I wiped the blue-stained cotton-wool over it a few times. A solution of methylene blue would have made it still plainer, but I used water only, as I judged that the blue writing was intended to furnish the dye for development. Here is the final result.”

He drew from his pocket a letter-case, from which he extracted a folded paper which he opened and laid on the table. It was stained a faint blue, through which the original writing could be seen, dim and blurred, while the secret message, though very pale, was quite sharp and clear. And this was the message:

“. . . so although we are not actually blown on, the position is

getting risky and it's time for us to hop. I have booked passages for the four of us to Ostend by the *Cornflower*, which sails on Friday evening next (20th). The names of the four illustrious passengers are, Walsh (that's me), Grubb (Dorman), Jenkins (Spiller) and Thorpe (that's you). Get those names well into your canister—better make a note of them—and turn up in good time on Friday.”

“Well,” said Miller, as he handed back the letter, “we can't know everything—unless we are Dr. Thorndyke. But there's one thing I do know.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“I know why that fellow Pinder grinned when I told him that I had photographed his confounded letters.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story is Number Fifteen 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 Stalking Horse* by Richard Austin Freeman]