

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

Number Twenty Four

The Seal of
Nebuchadnezzar

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“I SUPPOSE, Thorndyke,” said I, “footprints yield quite a lot of information if you think about them enough?”

The question was called forth by the circumstance of my friend halting and stooping to examine the little pit made in the loamy soil of the path by the walking-stick of some unknown wayfarer. Ever since we had entered this path—to which we had been directed by the station-master of Pinwell Junction as a short cut to our destination—I had noticed my friend scanning its surface, marked with numerous footprints, as if he were mentally reconstructing the personalities of the various travellers who had trodden it before us. This I knew to be a habit of his, almost unconsciously pursued; and the present conditions certainly favoured it, for here, as the path traversed a small wood, the slightly moist, plastic surface took impressions with the sharpness of moulding wax.

“Yes,” he answered, “but you must do more than think. You need to train your eyes to observe inconspicuous characteristics.”

“Such as these, for instance,” said I, with a grin, pointing to a blatant print of a Cox’s “Invicta” rubber sole with its prancing-horse trade-mark.

Thorndyke smiled. “A man,” said he, “who wears a sole like that is a mere advertising agent. He who runs may read those characteristics, but as there are thousands of persons wearing ‘Invicta’ soles, the observation merely identifies the wearer as a member of a large genus. It has to be carried a good deal farther to identify him as an individual; otherwise, a standardised sole is apt to be rather misleading than helpful. Its gross distinctiveness tends to divert the novice’s attention from the more specific characteristics which he would seek in a plain footprint like that of this man’s companion.”

“Why companion?” I asked. “The two men were walking the same way, but what evidence is there that they were companions?”

“A good deal, if you follow the series of tracks, as I have been doing. In the first place, there is the stride. Both men were rather tall, as shown by the size of their feet, but both have a distinctly short stride. Now the leather-soled man’s short stride is accounted for by the way in which he put down his stick. He held it stiffly, leaning upon it to some extent and helping himself with it. There is one impression of the stick to every two paces; every impression of

his left foot has a stick impression opposite to it. The suggestion is that he was old, weak or infirm. But the rubber-soled man walked with his stick in the ordinary way—one stick impression to every four paces. His abnormally short stride is not to be accounted for excepting by the assumption that he stepped short to keep pace with the other man.

“Then the two sets of footprints are usually separate. Neither man has trodden nor set his stick on the other man’s tracks, excepting in those places where the path is too narrow for them to walk abreast, and there, in the one case I noticed the rubber soles treading on the prints of the leather soles, whereas at this spot the prints of the leather soles are imposed on those of the rubber soles. That, of course, is conclusive evidence that the two men were here at the same time.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “that settles the question without troubling about the stride. But after all, Thorndyke, this is a matter of reasoning, as I said; of thinking about the footprints and their meaning. No special acuteness of observation or training of vision comes into it. The mere facts are obvious enough; it is their interpretation that yields the knowledge.”

“That is true so far,” said he, “but we haven’t exhausted our material. Look carefully at the impressions of the two sticks and tell me if you see anything remarkable in either of them.”

I stooped and examined the little pits that the two sticks had made in the path, and, to tell the truth, found them extremely unilluminating.

“They seem very much alike,” I said. “The rubber-soled man’s stick is rather larger than the other and the leather-soled man’s stick has made deeper holes—probably because it was smaller and he was leaning on it more heavily.”

Thorndyke shook his head. “You’ve missed the point, Anstey, and you’ve missed it because you have failed to observe the visible facts. It is quite a neat point, too, and might in certain circumstances be a very important one.”

“Indeed,” said I. “What is the point?”

“That,” said he, “I shall leave you to infer from the visible facts, which are these: first, the impressions of the smaller stick are on the right-hand side of the man who made them, and second, that each impression is shallowest towards the front and the right-hand side.”

I examined the impressions carefully and verified Thorndyke’s statement.

“Well,” I said, “what about it? What does it prove?”

Thorndyke smiled in his exasperating fashion. “The proof,” said he, “is arrived at by reasoning from the facts. My learned friend has the facts. If he will consider them, the conclusion will emerge.”

“But,” said I, “I don’t see your drift. The impression is shallower on one side, I suppose, because the ferrule of the stick was worn away on that side. But I repeat, what about it? Do you expect me to infer why the fool that it belonged to wore his stick away all at one side?”

“Now, don’t get irritable, Anstey,” said he. “Preserve a philosophic calm. I assure you that this is quite an interesting problem.”

“So it may be,” I replied. “But I’m hanged if I can imagine why he wore his stick down in that way. However, it doesn’t really matter. It isn’t my stick—and by Jingo, here is old Brodribb—caught us in the act of wasting our time on academic chin-wags and delaying his business. The debate is adjourned.”

Our discussion had brought us to the opening of the wood, which now framed the figure of the solicitor. As he caught sight of us, he hurried forward, holding out his hand.

“Good men and true!” he exclaimed. “I thought you would probably come this way, and it is very good of you to have come at all, especially as it is a mere formality.”

“What is?” asked Thorndyke. “Your telegram spoke of an ‘alleged suicide.’ I take it that there is some ground for inquiry?”

“I don’t know that there is,” replied Brodribb. “But the deceased was insured for three thousand pounds, which will be lost to the estate if the suicide is confirmed. So I put it to my fellow-executor that it was worth an expert’s fee to make sure whether or not things are what they seem. A verdict of death by misadventure will save us three thousand pounds. *Verbum sap.*” As he concluded, the old lawyer winked with exaggerated cunning and stuck his elbow into my ribs.

Thorndyke ignored the facetious suggestion of bribery and corruption and inquired dryly:

“What are the circumstances of the case?”

“I’d better give you a sketch of them before we get to the house,” replied Brodribb. “The dead man is Martin Rowlands, the brother of my neighbour in New Square, Tom Rowlands. Poor old Tom found the telegram waiting when he got to his office this morning and immediately rushed into my office with it and begged me to come down here with him. So I came. Couldn’t refuse a

brother solicitor. He's waiting at the house now.

"The circumstances are these. Last evening, when he had finished dinner, Rowlands went out for a walk. That is his usual habit in the summer months—it is light until nearly half-past nine nowadays. Well, that is the last time he was seen alive by the servants. No one saw him come in. But there was nothing unusual in that, for he had a private entrance to the annexe in which his library, museum and workrooms were situated, and when he returned from his walk, he usually entered the house that way and went straight to his study or workroom and spent the evening there. So the servants very seldom saw him after dinner.

"Last night he evidently followed his usual custom. But, this morning, when the housemaid went to his bedroom with his morning tea, she was astonished to find the room empty and the bed undisturbed. She at once reported to the housekeeper, and the pair made their way to the annexe. There they found the study door locked, and as there was no answer after repeated knockings, they went out into the grounds to reconnoitre. The study window was closed and fastened, but the workroom window was unbolted, so that they were able to open it from outside. Then the housemaid climbed in and went to the side door, which she opened and admitted the housekeeper. The two went to the workroom, and as the door which communicated with the study was open, they were able to enter the latter, and there they found Martin Rowlands, sitting in an arm-chair by the table, stone-dead, cold and stiff. On the table were a whisky decanter, a siphon of soda-water, a box of cigars, an ash-bowl with the stump of a cigar in it, and a bottle of photographic tabloids of cyanide of potassium.

"The housekeeper immediately sent off for a doctor and dispatched a telegram to Tom Rowlands at his office. The doctor arrived about nine and decided that the deceased had been dead about twelve hours. The cause of death was apparently cyanide poisoning, but, of course, that will be ascertained or disproved by the post-mortem. Those are all the known facts at present. The doctor helped the servants to place the body on a sofa, but as it is as stiff as a frozen sheep, they might as well have left it where it was."

"Have the police been communicated with?" I asked.

"No," replied Brodribb. "There were no suspicious circumstances, so far as any of us could see, and I don't know that I should have felt justified in sending for you—though I always like to have Thorndyke's opinion in a case of sudden death—if it had not been for the insurance."

Thorndyke nodded. "It looks like a straightforward case of suicide," said

he. "As to the state of deceased's affairs, his brother will be able to give us any necessary information, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Brodribb. "As a matter of fact, I think Martin has been a bit worried just lately; but Tom will tell you about that. This is the place."

We turned in at a gateway that opened into the grounds of a substantial though unpretentious house, and as we approached the front door, it was opened by a fresh-coloured, white-haired man whom we both knew pretty well in our professional capacities. He greeted us cordially, and though he was evidently deeply shocked by the tragedy, struggled to maintain a calm, business-like manner.

"It is good of you to come down," said he; "but I am afraid we have troubled you rather unnecessarily. Still, Brodribb thought it best—*ex abundantia cautela*, you know—to have the circumstances reviewed by a competent authority. There is nothing abnormal in the affair excepting its having happened. My poor brother was the sanest of men, I should say, and we are not a suicidal family. I suppose you had better see the body first?"

As Thorndyke assented, he conducted us to the end of the hall and into the annexe, where we entered the study, the door of which was now open, though the key was still in the lock. The table still bore the things that Brodribb had described, but the chair was empty, and its late occupant lay on a sofa, covered with a large table-cloth. Thorndyke advanced to the sofa and gently drew away the cloth, revealing the body of a man, fully dressed, lying stiffly and awkwardly on its back with the feet raised and the stiffened limbs extended. There was something strangely and horribly artificial in the aspect of the corpse, for, though it was lying down, it had the posture of a seated figure, and thus bore the semblance of a hideously realistic effigy which had been picked up from a chair and laid down. I stood looking at it from a little distance with a layman's distaste for the presence of a dead body, but still regarding it with attention and some curiosity. Presently my glance fell on the soles of the shoes—which were, indeed, exhibited plainly enough—and I noted, as an odd coincidence, that they were "Invicta" rubber soles, like those which we had just been discussing in the wood; that it was even possible that those very footprints had been made by the feet of this grisly lay figure.

"I expect, Thorndyke," Brodribb said tactfully, "you would rather make your inspection alone. If you should want us, you will find us in the dining-room," and with this he retired, taking Mr. Rowlands with him.

As soon as they were gone I drew Thorndyke's attention to the rubber soles.

“It is a queer thing,” said I, “but we may have actually been discussing this poor fellow’s own footprints.”

“As a matter of fact, we were,” he replied, pointing to a drawing-pin that had been trodden on and had stuck into one of the rubber heels. “I noticed this at the time, and apparently you did not, which illustrates what I was saying about the tendency of these very distinctive types of sole to distract attention from those individual peculiarities which are the ones that really matter.”

“Then,” said I, “if they were his footprints, the man with the remarkable stick was with him. I wonder who he was. Some neighbour who was walking home from the station with him, I expect.”

“Probably,” said Thorndyke, “and as the prints were quite recent—they might even have been made last night—that person may be wanted as a witness at the inquest as the last person who saw deceased alive. That depends on the time the prints were made.”

He walked back to the sofa and inspected the corpse very methodically, giving close attention to the mouth and hands. Then he made a general inspection of the room, examined the objects on the table and the floor under it, strayed into the adjoining workshop, where he peered into the deep laboratory sink, took an empty tumbler from a shelf, held it up to the light and inspected the shelf—where a damp ring showed that the tumbler had been put there to drain—and from the workshop wandered into a little lobby and from thence out at the side door, down the flagged path to the side gate and back again.

“It is all very negative,” he remarked discontentedly, as we returned to the study, “except that bottle of tabloids, which is pretty positive evidence of premeditation. That looks like a fresh box of cigars. Two missing. One stump in the ash-tray and more ash than one cigar would account for. However, let us go into the dining-room and hear what Rowlands has to tell us,” and with this he walked out and crossed the hall and I followed him.

As we entered the dining-room, the two men looked at us and Brodrigg asked:

“Well, what is the verdict?”

“At present,” Thorndyke replied, “it is an open verdict. Nothing has come to light that disagrees with the obvious appearances. But I should like to hear more of the antecedents of the tragedy. You were saying that deceased had been somewhat worried lately. What does that amount to?”

“It amounts to nothing,” said Rowlands; “at least, I should have thought so,

in the case of a level-headed man like my brother. Still as it is all there is, so far as I know, to account for what has happened, I had better give you the story. It seems trivial enough.

“Some short time ago, a Major Cohen, who had just come home from Mesopotamia, sold to a dealer named Lyon a small gold cylinder seal that he had picked up in the neighbourhood of Baghdad. The Lord knows how he came by it, but he had it and he showed it to Lyon, who bought it of him for a matter of twenty pounds. Cohen, of course, knew nothing about the thing, and Lyon didn’t know much more, for although he is a dealer, he is no expert. But he is a very clever faker—or rather, I should say, restorer, for he does quite a legitimate trade. He was a jeweller and watch-jobber originally, a most ingenious workman, and his line is to buy up damaged antiques and restore them. Then he sells them to minor collectors, though quite honestly as restorations, so I oughtn’t to call him a faker. But, as I said, he has no real knowledge of antiques, and all he saw in Cohen’s seal was a gold cylinder seal, apparently ancient and genuine, and on that he bought it for about twice the value of the gold and thought no more about it.

“About a fortnight later, my brother Martin went to his shop in Petty France, Westminster, to get some repairs done, and Lyon, knowing that my brother was a collector of Babylonian antiquities, showed him the seal; and Martin, seeing at once that it was genuine and a thing of some interest and value, bought it straightway for forty pounds without examining it at all minutely, as it was obviously worth that much in any case. But when he got home and took a rolled impression of it on moulding wax, he made a most astonishing discovery. The impression showed a mass of minute cuneiform characters, and on deciphering these he learned with amazement and delight that this was none other than the seal of Nebuchadnezzar.

“Hardly able to believe in his good fortune, he hurried off to the British Museum and showed his treasure to the Keeper of the Babylonian Antiquities, who fully confirmed the identity of the seal and was naturally eager to acquire it for the Museum. Of course, Martin wouldn’t sell it, but he allowed the keeper to take a record of its weight and measurements and to make an impression on clay to exhibit in the case of seal-rollings.

“Meanwhile, it seems that Cohen, before disposing of the seal, had amused himself by making a number of rolled impressions on clay. Some of these he took to Lyon, who bought them for a few shillings and put one of them in his shop window as a curio. There it was seen and recognised by an American Assyriologist, who went in and bought it and then began to question Lyon closely as to whence he had obtained it. The dealer made no secret of the

matter, but gave Cohen's name and address, saying nothing, however, about the seal. In fact, he was unaware of the connection between the seal and the rollings, as Cohen had sold him the latter as genuine clay tablets which he said he had found in Mesopotamia. But, of course, the expert saw that it was a recent rolling and that someone must have the seal.

"Accordingly, off he went to Cohen and questioned him closely, whereupon Cohen began to smell a rat. He admitted that he had had the seal, but refused to say what had become of it until the expert told him what it was and how much it was worth. This the expert did, very reluctantly and in strict confidence, and when Cohen learned that it was the seal of Nebuchadnezzar and that it was worth anything up to ten thousand pounds, he nearly fainted; and then he and the expert together bustled off to Lyon's shop.

"But now Lyon smelt a rat, too. He refused absolutely to disclose the whereabouts of the seal; and having, by now, guessed that the seal-rollings were those of the seal, he took one of them to the British Museum, and then, of course, the murder was out. And further to complicate the matter, the Assyriologist, Professor Bateman, seems to have talked freely to his American friends at his hotel, with the result that Lyon's shop was besieged by wealthy American collectors, all roaring for the seal and all perfectly regardless of cost. Finally, as they could get no change out of Lyon, they went to the British Museum, where they learned that my brother had the seal and got his address—or rather mine, for he had, fortunately for himself, given my office as his address. Then they proceeded to bombard him with letters, as also did Cohen and Lyon.

"It was an uncomfortable situation. Cohen was like a madman. He swore that Lyon had swindled him and he demanded to have the seal returned or the proper price paid. Lyon, for his part, went about like a roaring lion of Judah, making a similar demand; and the millionaire collectors offered wild sums for the seal. Poor Martin was very much worried about it. He was particularly unhappy about Cohen, who had actually found the seal and who was a disabled soldier—he had been wounded in both legs and was permanently lame. As to Lyon, he had no grievance, for he was a dealer and it was his business to know the value of his own stock; but still it was hard luck even on him. And then there were the collectors, pestering him daily with entreaties and extravagant offers. It was very worrying for him. They would probably have come down here to see him, but he kept his private address a close secret.

"I don't know what he meant to do about it. What he did was to arrange with me for the loan of my private office and have a field day, interviewing the whole lot of them—Cohen, Lyon, the Professor and the assorted millionaires.

That was three days ago, and the whole boiling of them turned up; and by the same token, one of them was the kind of pestilent fool that walks off with the wrong hat or umbrella.”

“Did he walk off with your hat?” asked Brodribb.

“No, but he took my stick; a nice old stick that belonged to my father.”

“What sort of stick did he leave in its place?” Thorndyke asked.

“Well,” replied Rowlands, “I must admit that there was some excuse, for the stick that he left was almost a facsimile of my own. I don’t think I should have noticed it but for the feel. When I began to walk with it, I was aware of something unusual in the feel of it.”

“Perhaps it was not quite the same length as yours,” Thorndyke suggested.

“No, it wasn’t that,” said Rowlands. “The length was all right, but there was some more subtle difference. Possibly, as I am left-handed and carry my stick on the left side, it may in the course of years have acquired a left-handed bias, if such a thing is possible. I’ll go and get the stick for you to see.”

He went out of the room and returned in a few moments with an old-fashioned Malacca cane the ivory handle of which was secured by a broad silver band. Thorndyke took it from him and looked it over with a degree of interest and attention that rather surprised me. For the loss of Rowlands’ stick was a trivial incident and no concern of ours. Nevertheless, my colleague inspected it most methodically, handle, silver band and ferrule; especially the ferrule, which he examined as if it were quite a rare and curious object.

“You needn’t worry about your stick, Tom,” said Brodribb with a mischievous smile. “Thorndyke will get it back if you ask him nicely.”

“It oughtn’t to be very difficult,” said Thorndyke, handing back the stick, “if you have a list of the visitors who called that day.”

“Their names will be in the appointments book,” said Rowlands. “I must look them up. Some of them I remember—Cohen, Lyon, Bateman and two or three of the collectors. But to return to our history. I don’t know what passed at the interviews or what Martin intended to do, but I have no doubt he made some notes on the subject. I must search for them, for, of course, we shall have to dispose of the seal.”

“By the way,” said Thorndyke, “where is the seal?”

“Why, it is here in the safe,” replied Rowlands; “and it oughtn’t to be. It should have been taken to the bank.”

“I suppose there is no doubt that it is in the safe?” said Thorndyke.

“No,” replied Rowlands; “at least——” He stood up suddenly. “I haven’t seen it,” he said. “Perhaps we had better make sure.”

He led the way quickly to the study, where he halted and stood looking at the shrouded corpse.

“The key will be in his pocket,” he said, almost in a whisper. Then, slowly and reluctantly, he approached the sofa, and gently drawing away the cover from the body, began to search the dead man’s pockets.

“Here it is,” he said at length, producing a bunch of keys and separating one, which he apparently knew. He crossed to the safe, and inserting the key, threw open the door.

“Ha!” he exclaimed with evident relief, “it is all right. Your question gave me quite a start. Is it necessary to open the packet?”

He held out a little sealed parcel on which was written “The Seal of Nebuchadnezzar,” and looked inquiringly at Thorndyke.

“You spoke of making sure,” the latter replied with a faint smile.

“Yes, I suppose it would be best,” said Rowlands; and with that, he cut the thread with which it was fastened, broke the seal and opened the package, disclosing a small cardboard box in which lay a cylindrical object rolled up in a slip of paper.

Rowlands picked it out, and removing the paper, displayed a little cylinder of gold pitted all over with minute cuneiform characters. It was about an inch and a quarter long by half an inch thick and had a hole bored through its axis from end to end.

“This paper, I see,” said Rowlands, “contains a copy of the keeper’s description of the seal—its weight, dimensions and so on. We may as well take care of that.”

He handed the little cylinder to Thorndyke, who held it delicately in his fingers and looked at it with a gravely reflective air. Indeed, small as it was, there was something very impressive in its appearance and in the thought that it had been handled by and probably worn on the person of the great king in those remote, almost mythical times, so familiar and yet so immeasurably far away. So I reflected as I watched Thorndyke inspecting the venerable little object in his queer, exact, scientific way, examining the minute characters through his lens, scrutinising the ends and even peering through the central hole.

“I notice,” he said, glancing at the paper which Rowlands held, “that the keeper has given only one transverse diameter, apparently assuming that it is a true cylinder. But it isn’t. The diameter varies. It is not quite circular in section and the sides are not perfectly parallel.”

He produced his pocket calliper-gauge, and, closing the jaws on the cylinder, took the reading of the vernier. Then he turned the cylinder, on which the gauge became visibly out of contact.

“There is a difference of nearly two millimetres,” he said when he had again closed the gauge and taken the reading.

“Ah, Thorndyke,” said Brodribb, “that keeper hadn’t got your mathematically exact eye; and, in fact, the precise measurements don’t seem to matter much.”

“On the other hand,” retorted Thorndyke, “inexact measurements are of no use at all.”

When we had all handled and inspected the seal, Rowlands repacked it and returned it to the safe, and we went back to the dining-room.

“Well, Thorndyke,” said Brodribb, “how does the insurance question stand? What is our position?”

“I think,” Thorndyke replied, “that we will leave the question open until the inquest has been held. You must insist on an expert analysis, and perhaps that may throw fresh light on the matter. And now we must be off to the station. I expect you have plenty to do.”

“We have,” said Brodribb, “so I won’t offer to walk with you. You know the way.”

Politely but firmly declining Rowlands’ offer of material hospitality, Thorndyke took up his research-case, and having shaken hands with our hosts, we followed them to the door and took our departure.

“Not a very satisfactory case,” I remarked as we set forth along the road, “but you can’t make a bull’s-eye every time.”

“No,” he agreed; “you can only observe and note the facts. Which reminds me that we have some data to collect in the wood. I shall take casts of those footprints in case they should turn out to be of importance. It is always a useful precaution, seeing that footprints are fugitive.”

It seemed to me an excessive precaution, but I made no comment; and when we arrived at the footpath through the wood and he had selected the

sharpest footprints, I watched him take out from his case the plaster-tin, water-bottle, spoon and little rubber bowl, and wondered what was in his mind. The "Invicta" footprints were obviously those of the dead man. But what if they were? And of what use were the casts of the other man's feet? The man was unknown, and as far as I could see, there was nothing suspicious in his presence here. But when Thorndyke had poured the liquid plaster into the two pairs of footprints, he went on to a still more incomprehensible proceeding. Mixing some fresh plaster, he filled up with it two adjoining impressions of the strange man's stick. Then, taking a reel of thread from the case, he cut off about two yards, and stretching it taut, held it exactly across the middle of the two holes, until the plaster set and fixed it in position. After waiting for the plaster to set hard, and having, meanwhile, taken up and packed the casts of the footprints, he gently raised, first the one and then the other cast; each of which was a snowy-white facsimile of the tip of the stick which had made the impression, the two casts being joined by a length of thread which gave the exact distance apart of the two impressions.

"I suppose," said I, as he made a pencil mark on one of the casts, "the thread is to show the length of the stride?"

"No," he answered. "It is to show the exact direction in which the man was walking and to mark the front and back of the stick."

I could make nothing of this. It was highly ingenious, but what on earth was the use of it? What could it possibly prove?

I put a few tentative questions, but could get no explanation beyond the obvious truth that it was of no use to postpone the collection of evidence until after the event. What event he was referring to, I did not gather; nor was I any further enlightened when, on arriving at Victoria, he hailed a taxicab and directed the driver to set him down at Scotland Yard.

"You had better not wait," he said, as he got out. "I have some business to talk over with Miller or the Assistant Commissioner and may be detained some time. But I shall be at home all the evening."

Taking this as an invitation to drop in at his chambers, I did so after dinner and made another ineffectual attempt to pump him.

"I am sorry to be so evasive," said he, "but this case is so extremely speculative that I cannot come to any definite conclusion until I have more data. I may have been theorising in the air. But I am going forth tomorrow morning at half-past eight in the hope of putting some of my inferences to the test. If my learned friend would care to lend his distinguished support to the expedition, his society would be appreciated. But it will be a case of passive

observation and quite possibly nothing will happen.”

“Well, I will come and look on,” said I. “Passive observation is my speciality”; and with this I took my departure, rather more mystified than ever.

Punctually, next morning at half-past eight, I arrived at the entry of Thorndyke’s chambers. A taxicab was already waiting at the kerb, and, as I stepped on the threshold, my colleague appeared on the stairs. Together we entered the cab which at once moved off, and proceeding down Middle Temple Lane to the Embankment, headed westward. Our first stopping-place was New Scotland Yard, but there Thorndyke remained only a minute or two. Our further progress was in the direction of Westminster, and in a few minutes we drew up at the corner of Petty France, where we alighted and paid off the taxi. Sauntering slowly westward and passing a large, covered car that was drawn up by the pavement, we presently encountered no less a person than Mr. Superintendent Miller, dressed in the height of fashion and smoking a cigar. The meeting was not, apparently, unexpected, for Miller began, without preamble:

“It’s all right, so far, doctor, unless we are too late. It will be an awful suck-in if we are. Two plain-clothes men have been here ever since you called yesterday evening, and nothing has happened yet.”

“You mustn’t treat it as a certainty, Miller,” said Thorndyke. “We are only acting on reasonable probabilities. But it may be a false shot, after all.”

Miller smiled indulgently. “I know, sir. I’ve heard you say that sort of thing before. At any rate, he’s there at present; I saw him just now through the shop window—and, by gum! here he is!”

I followed the superintendent’s glance and saw a tallish, elderly man advancing on the opposite side of the street. He walked stiffly with the aid of a stick and with a pronounced stoop as if suffering from some weakness of the back, and he carried in his free hand a small wooden case suspended by a rug-strap. But what instantly attracted my attention was his walking-stick, which appeared, so far as I could remember, to be an exact replica of the one that Tom Rowlands had shown us.

We continued to walk westward, allowing Mr. Lyon—as I assumed him to be—to pass us. Then we turned back and followed at a little distance; and I noticed that two tall, military-looking men whom we had met kept close behind us. At the corner of Petty France Mr. Lyon hailed a taxicab; and Miller quickened his pace and bore down on the big covered car.

“Jump in,” he said, opening the door as Lyon entered the cab. “We mustn’t

lose sight of him,” and with this he fairly shoved Thorndyke and me into the car, and having spoken a word to the driver, stepped in himself and was followed by the two plain-clothes men. The car started forward, and having made a spurt which brought it within a few yards of the taxi, slowed down to the pace of the latter and followed it through the increasing traffic until we turned into Whitehall, where our driver allowed the taxi to draw ahead somewhat. At Charing Cross, however, we closed up and kept immediately behind our quarry in the dense traffic of the Strand; and when it turned to cross opposite the Acropolis Hotel, we still followed and swept past it in the hotel courtyard so that we reached the main entrance first. By the time that Mr. Lyon had paid his fare we had already entered and were waiting in the hall of the hotel.

As he followed us in, he paused and looked about him until his glance fell on a stoutish, clean-shaved man who was sitting in a wicker chair, who, on catching his eye, rose and advanced towards him. At this moment Superintendent Miller touched him on the shoulder, causing him to spin round with an expression of very distinct alarm.

“Mr. Maurice Lyon, I think,” said Miller. “I am a detective officer.” He paused and looked hard at the dealer, who had turned deathly pale. Then he continued: “You are carrying a walking-stick which I believe is not your property.”

Lyon gave a gasp of relief. “You are quite right,” said he. “But I don’t know whose property it is. If you do, I shall be pleased to return it in exchange for my own, which I left by mistake.”

He held it out in an irresolute fashion, and Miller took it from him and handed it to Thorndyke.

“Is that the stick?” he asked.

Thorndyke looked the stick over quickly, and then, inverting it, made a minute examination of the ferrule, finishing up by taking its dimensions in two diameters and comparing the results with some written notes.

Mr. Lyon fidgeted impatiently. “There’s no need for all this fuss,” said he. “I have told you that the stick is not mine.”

“Quite so,” said Miller, “but we must have a few words privately about that stick.”

Here he turned to an hotel official, who had just arrived under the guidance of one of the plain-clothes men, and who suggested rather anxiously that our business would be better transacted in a private room at the back of the

building than in the public hall. He was just moving off to show us the way when the clean-shaved stranger edged up to Lyon and extended his hand towards the wooden case.

“Shall I take this?” he asked suavely.

“Not just now, sir,” said Miller, firmly fending him off. “Mr. Lyon will talk to you presently.”

“But that case is my property,” the other objected truculently; “and who are you, anyway?”

“I am a police officer,” replied Miller. “But if that is your property, you had better come with us and keep an eye on it.”

I have never seen a man look more uncomfortable than did the owner of that case—with the exception of Mr. Lyon; whose complexion had once more taken on a tallowy whiteness. But as the manager led the way to the back of the hall the two men followed silently, shepherded by the superintendent and the rest of our party, until we reached a small, marble-floored lobby or ante-room, when our conductor shut us in and retired.

“Now,” said Miller, “I want to know what is in that case.”

“I can tell you,” said the stranger. “It is a piece of sculpture, and it belongs to me.”

Miller nodded. “Let us have a look at it,” said he.

There being no table, Lyon sat down on a chair, and resting the case on his knees, unfastened the straps with trembling fingers, on which a drop of sweat fell now and again from his forehead. When the case was free, he opened the lid and displayed the head of a small plaster bust, a miniature copy of Donatello’s “St. Cecilia,” the shoulders of which were wedged in with balls of paper. These Lyon picked out clumsily, and when he had removed the last of them, he lifted out the bust with infinite care and held it out for Miller’s inspection. The officer took it from him tenderly—after an eager glance into the empty case—and holding it with both hands, looked at it rather blankly.

“Feels rather damp,” he remarked with a somewhat nonplussed air; and then he cast an obviously inquiring glance at Thorndyke, who took the bust from him, and holding it poised in the palm of his hand, appeared to be estimating its weight. Glancing past him at Lyon, I noticed with astonishment that the dealer was watching him with a ghastly stare of manifest terror, while the stranger was hardly less disturbed.

“For God’s sake, man, be careful!” the latter exclaimed, starting forward.

“You’ll drop it!”

The prediction was hardly uttered before it was verified. Drop it he did; and in a perfectly deliberate, purposeful manner, so that the bust fell on its back on the marble floor and was instantly shattered into a hundred fragments. It was an amazing affair. But what followed was still more amazing. For, as the snowy fragments scattered to right and left, from one of them a little yellow metal cylinder detached itself and rolled slowly along the floor. The stranger darted forward and stooped to seize it; but Miller stooped, too, and I judged that the superintendent’s cranium was the harder, for he rose, rubbing his head with one hand and with the other holding out the cylinder to Thorndyke.

“Can you tell us what this is, doctor?” he asked.

“Yes,” was the reply. “It is the seal of Nebuchadnezzar, and it is the property of the executors of the late Martin Rowlands, who was murdered the night before last.”

As he finished speaking, Lyon slithered from his chair and lay upon the floor insensible, while the stranger made a sudden burst for the door, where he was instantly folded in the embrace of a massive plain-clothes man, who held him immovable while his colleague clicked on the handcuffs.

“So,” I remarked, as we walked home, “your casts of the stick and the footprints were not wanted after all.”

“On the contrary,” he replied, “they are wanted very much. If the seal should fail to hang Mr. Lyon, the casts will assuredly fit the rope round his neck.” (This, by the way, actually happened. The defence that Lyon received the seal from some unknown person was countered by the unexpected production in court of the casts of Lyon’s feet and the stick, which proved that the prisoner had been at Pinwell, and in the company of the deceased at or about the date of the murder, and secured his conviction.)

“By the way,” said I, “how did you fix this crime on Lyon? It began, I think, with those stick impressions in the wood. What was there peculiar about those impressions?”

“Their peculiarity was that they were the impressions of a stick which apparently did not belong to the person who was carrying it.”

“Good Lord, Thorndyke!” I exclaimed, “is that possible? How could an impression on the ground suggest ownership?”

“It is a curious point,” he replied, “though essentially simple, which turns on the way in which the ferrule of a stick becomes worn. In a plain, symmetrical stick without a handle, the ferrule wears evenly all round; but in a stick with a crook or other definite handle, which is grasped in a particular way and always put down in the same position, the ferrule becomes worn on one side—the side opposite the handle, or the front of the stick. But the important point is that the bevel of wear is not *exactly* opposite the handle. It is slightly to one side, for this reason. A man puts his stick down with the handle fore and aft; but as he steps forward, his hand swings away from his body, rotating the stick slightly outward. Consequently, the wear on the ferrule is slightly inward. That is to say, that in a right-handed man’s stick the wear is slightly to the left and in a left-handed man’s stick the wear is slightly to the right. But if a right-handed man walks with a left-handed stick, the impression on the ground will show the bevel of wear on the right side—which is the wrong side; and the right-handed rotation will throw it still farther to the right. Now in this case, the impressions showed a shallow part, corresponding to the bevel of wear, on the right side. Therefore it was a left-handed stick. But it was being carried in the right hand. Therefore it—apparently—did not belong to the person who was carrying it.

“Of course, as the person was unknown, the point was merely curious and did not concern us. But see how quickly circumstantial evidence mounts up. When we saw the feet of deceased, we knew that the footprints in the wood were his. Consequently the man with the stick was in his company; and that man at once came into the picture. Then Tom Rowlands told us that he had lost his stick and that he was left-handed; and he showed us the stick that he had got in exchange, and behold! that is a right-handed stick, as I ascertained by examining the ferrule. Here, then, is a left-handed man who has lost a stick and got a right-handed one in exchange; and there, in the wood, was a right-handed man who was carrying a left-handed stick and who was in company with the deceased. It was a striking coincidence. But further, the suggestion was that this unknown man was one of those who had called at Tom’s office, and therefore one who wanted to get possession of the seal. This instantly suggested the question, Did he succeed in getting possession of the seal? We went to the safe; and at once it became obvious that he did.”

“The seal in the safe was a forgery, of course?”

“Yes; and a bad forgery, though skilfully done. It was an electrotype; it was unsymmetrical; it did not agree with the keeper’s measurements; and the perforation, though soiled at the ends, was bright in the middle from the boring tool.”

“But how did you know that Lyon had made it?”

“I didn’t. But he was by far the most probable person. He had a seal-rolling, from which an electro could be made, and he had the great skill that was necessary to turn a flat electro into a cylinder. He was an experienced faker of antiques, and he was a dealer who would have facilities for getting rid of the stolen seal. But it was only a probability, though, as time pressed, we had to act on it. Of course, when we saw him with the stick in his hand, it became virtually a certainty.”

“And how did you guess that the seal was in the bust?”

“I had expected to find it enclosed in some plaster object, that being the safest way to hide it and smuggle it out of this country and into the United States. When I saw the bust, it was obvious. It was a hastily-made copy of one of Brucciani’s busts. The plaster was damp—Brucciani’s bake theirs dry—and had evidently been made only a few hours. So I broke it. If I had been mistaken I could have replaced it for five shillings, but the whole circumstances made it practically a certainty.”

“Have you any idea as to how Lyon administered the poison?”

“We can only surmise,” he replied. “Probably he took with him some solution of cyanide—if that was what was used—and poured it into Rowlands’ whisky when his attention was otherwise occupied. It would be quite easy; and a single gulp of a quick-acting poison like that would finish the business in a minute or two. But we are not likely ever to know the details.”

The evidence at the inquest showed that Thorndyke was probably right, and his evidence at the trial clenched the case against Lyon. As to the other man—who proved to be an American dealer well known to the New York Customs officials—the case against him broke down from lack of evidence that he was privy either to the murder or the theft. And so ended the case of Nebuchadnezzar’s seal: a case that left Mr. Brodribb more than ever convinced that Thorndyke was either gifted with a sixth sense which enabled him to smell out evidence or was in league with some familiar demon who did it for him.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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

[The end of *The Seal of Nebuchadnezzar* by Richard Austin Freeman]