

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

Number Thirty Seven

The
Funeral Pyre

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THORNDYKE did not often indulge in an evening paper, and was even disposed to view that modern institution with some disfavour; whence it happened that when I entered our chambers shortly before dinner time with a copy of the *Evening Gazette* in my hand, he fixed upon the folded news-sheet an inquiring and slightly disapproving eye.

“’Orrible discovery near Dartford,” I announced, quoting the juvenile vendor.

The disapproval faded from his face, but the inquiring expression remained.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” I replied; “but it seems to be something in our line.”

“My learned friend does us an injustice,” he rejoined, with his eye riveted on the paper. “Still, if you are going to make my flesh creep, I will try to endure it.”

Thus invited, I opened the paper and read out as follows:

“A shocking tragedy has come to light in a meadow about a mile from Dartford. About two o’clock this morning, a rural constable observed a rick on fire out on the marshes near the creek. By the time he reached it the upper half of the rick was burning fiercely in the strong wind, and as he could do nothing alone, he went to the adjacent farm-house and gave the alarm. The farmer and two of his sons accompanied the constable to the scene of the conflagration, but the rick was now a blazing mass, roaring in the wind and giving out an intense heat. As it was obviously impossible to save any part of it, and as there were no other ricks near, the farmer decided to abandon it to its fate and went home.

“At eight o’clock he returned to the spot and found the rick still burning, though reduced to a heap of glowing cinders and ashes, and approaching it, he was horrified to perceive a human skull grinning out from the cindery mass. Closer examination showed other bones—all calcined white and chalky—and close to the skull a stumpy clay pipe. The explanation of this dreadful occurrence seems quite simple. The rick was not quite finished, and when the farm hands knocked off work they left the ladder in position. It is assumed that

some tramp, in search of a night's lodging, observed the ladder, and climbing up it, made himself comfortable in the loose hay at the top of the rick, where he fell asleep with his lighted pipe in his mouth. This ignited the hay and the man must have been suffocated by the fumes without awakening from his sleep."

"A reasonable explanation," was Thorndyke's comment, "and quite probable; but of course it is pure hypothesis. As a matter of fact, any one of the three conceivable causes of violent death is possible in this case—accident, suicide or homicide."

"I should have supposed," said I, "that we could almost exclude suicide. It is difficult to imagine a man electing to roast himself to death."

"I cannot agree with my learned friend," Thorndyke rejoined. "I can imagine a case—and one of great medico-legal interest—that would exactly fit the present circumstances. Let us suppose a man, hopelessly insolvent, desperate and disgusted with life, who decides to provide for his family by investing the few pounds that he has left in insuring his life heavily and then making away with himself. How would he proceed? If he should commit suicide by any of the orthodox methods he would simply invalidate his policy. But now, suppose he knows of a likely rick; that he provides himself with some rapidly-acting poison, such as potassium cyanide—he could even use prussic acid if he carried it in a rubber or celluloid bottle, which would be consumed in the fire; that he climbs on to the rick; sets fire to it, and as soon as it is fairly alight, takes his dose of poison and falls back dead among the hay. Who is to contest his family's claim? The fire will have destroyed all traces of the poison, even if they should be sought for. But it is practically certain that the question would never be raised. The claim would be paid without demur."

I could not help smiling at this calm exposition of a practicable crime. "It is a mercy, Thorndyke," I remarked, "that you are an honest man. If you were not _____"

"I think," he retorted, "that I should find some better means of livelihood than suicide. But with regard to this case: it will be worth watching. The tramp hypothesis is certainly the most probable; but its very probability makes an alternative hypothesis at least possible. No one is likely to suspect fraudulent suicide; but that immunity from suspicion is a factor that increases the probability of fraudulent suicide. And so, to a less extent, with homicide. We must watch the case and see if there are any further developments."

Further developments were not very long in appearing. The report in the morning paper disposed effectually of the tramp theory without offering any

other. "The tragedy of the burning rick," it said, "is taking a somewhat mysterious turn. It is now clear that the unknown man, who was assumed to have been a tramp, must have been a person of some social position, for careful examination of the ashes by the police have brought to light various articles which would have been carried only by a man of fair means. The clay pipe was evidently one of a pair—of which the second one has been recovered—probably silver-mounted and carried in a case, the steel frame of which has been found. Both pipes are of the 'Burns Cutty' pattern and have neatly scratched on the bowls the initials 'R. R.' The following articles have also been found:—Remains of a watch, probably gold, and a rather singular watch-chain, having alternate links of platinum and gold. The gold links have partly disappeared, but numerous beads of gold have been found, derived apparently from the watch and chain. The platinum links are intact and are fashioned of twisted square wire. A bunch of keys, partly fused; a rock crystal seal, apparently from a ring; a little porcelain mascot figure, with a hole for suspension—possibly from the watch-chain—and a number of artificial teeth. In connection with the latter, a puzzling and slightly sinister aspect has been given to the case by the finding of an upper dental plate by a ditch some two hundred yards from the rick. The plate has two gaps and, on comparison with the skull of the unknown man, these have been found by the police surgeon to correspond with two groups of remaining teeth. Moreover, the artificial teeth found in the ashes all seem to belong to a lower plate. The presence of this plate, so far from the scene of the man's death, is extremely difficult to account for."

As Thorndyke finished reading the extract he looked at me as if inviting some comment.

"It is a most remarkable and mysterious affair," said I, "and naturally recalls to my mind the hypothetical case that you suggested yesterday. If that case was possible then, it is actually probable now. It fits these new facts perfectly, not only in respect of the abundant means of identification, but even to this dental plate—if we assume that he took the poison as he was approaching the rick, and that the poison was of an acrid or irritating character which caused him to cough or retch. And I can think of no other plausible explanation."

"There *are* other possibilities," said Thorndyke, "but fraudulent suicide is certainly the most probable theory on the known facts. But we shall see. As you say, the body can hardly fail to be identified at a pretty early date."

As a matter of fact it was identified in the course of that same day. Both Thorndyke and I were busily engaged until evening in the courts and

elsewhere and had not had time to give this curious case any consideration. But as we walked home together, we encountered Mr. Stalker of the Griffin Life Assurance Company pacing up and down King's Bench Walk near the entry of our chambers.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, striding forward to meet us near the Mitre Court gateway, "you are just the very men I wanted to see. There is a little matter that I want to consult you about. I shan't detain you long."

"It won't matter much if you do," said Thorndyke. "We have finished our routine work for the day and our time is now our own." He led the way up to our chambers, where, having given the fire a stir, he drew up three arm-chairs.

"Now, Stalker," said he. "Warm your toes and tell us your troubles."

Mr. Stalker spread out his hands to the blaze and began reflectively: "It will be enough, I think, if I give you the facts—and most of them you probably know already. You have heard about this man whose remains were found in the ashes of a burnt rick? Well, it turns out that he was a certain Mr. Reginald Reed, an outside broker, as I understand; but what is of more interest to us is that he was a client of ours. We have issued a policy on his life for three thousand pounds. I thought I remembered the name when I saw it in the paper this afternoon, so I looked up our books, and there it was, sure enough."

"When was the policy issued?" Thorndyke asked.

"Ah!" exclaimed Stalker. "That's the exasperating feature of the case. The policy was issued less than a year ago. He has only paid a single premium. So we stand to drop practically the whole three thousand. Of course, we have to take the fat with the lean, but we don't like to take it in such precious large lumps."

"Of course you don't," agreed Thorndyke. "But now: you have come to consult me—about what?"

"Well," replied Stalker, "I put it to you: isn't there something obviously fishy about the case? Are the circumstances normal? For instance, how the devil came a respectable city gentleman to be smoking his pipe in a haystack out in a lonely meadow at two o'clock in the morning, or thereabouts?"

"I agree," said Thorndyke, "that the circumstances are highly abnormal. But there is no doubt that the man is dead. Extremely dead, if I may use the expression. What is the point that you wish to raise?"

"I am not raising any point," replied Stalker. "We should like you to attend the inquest and watch the case for us. Of course, in our policies, as you know,

suicide is expressly ruled out; and if this should turn out to have been a case of suicide——”

“What is there to suggest that it was?” asked Thorndyke.

“What is there to suggest that it wasn’t?” retorted Stalker.

“Nothing,” rejoined Thorndyke. “But a negative plea is of no use to you. You will have to furnish positive proof of suicide, or else pay the claim.”

“Yes, I realise that,” said Stalker, “and I am not suggesting—— But there, it is of no use discussing the matter while we know so little. I leave the case in your hands. Can you attend the inquest?”

“I shall make it my business to do so,” replied Thorndyke.

“Very well,” said Stalker, rising and putting on his gloves, “then we will leave it at that; and we couldn’t leave it in better case.”

When our visitor had gone I remarked to Thorndyke: “Stalker seems to have conceived the same idea as my learned senior—fraudulent suicide.”

“It is not surprising,” he replied. “Stalker is a shrewd man and he perceives that when an abnormal thing has happened we may look for an abnormal explanation. Fraudulent suicide was a speculative possibility yesterday: to-day, in the light of these new facts, it is the most probable theory. But mere probabilities won’t help Stalker. If there is no direct evidence of suicide—and there is not likely to be any—the verdict will be Death by Misadventure, and the Griffin Company will have to pay.”

“I suppose you won’t do anything until you have heard what transpires at the inquest?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I think we should do well to go down and just go over the ground. At present we have the facts at third hand, and we don’t know what may have been overlooked. As to-morrow is fairly free I propose that we make an early start and see the place ourselves.”

“Is there any particular point that you want to clear up?”

“No; I have nothing definite in view. The circumstances are compatible with either accident, suicide or homicide, with an undoubted leaning towards suicide. But, at present, I have a completely open mind. I am, in fact, going down to Dartford in the hope of getting a lead in some definite direction.”

When we alighted at Dartford Station on the following morning,

Thorndyke looked inquiringly up and down the platform until he espied an inspector, when he approached the official and asked for a direction to the site of the burnt rick.

The official glanced at Thorndyke's canvas-covered research-case and at my binocular and camera as he replied with a smile: "You are not the first, by a long way, that has asked that question. There has been a regular procession of Press gentlemen that way this morning. The place is about a mile from here. You take the foot-path to Joyce Green and turn off towards the creek opposite Temple Farm. This is about where the rick stood," he added, as Thorndyke produced his one-inch Ordnance map and a pencil, "a few yards from that dyke."

With this direction and the open map we set forth from the station, and taking our way along the unfrequented path soon left the town behind. As we crossed the second stile, where the path rejoined the road, Thorndyke paused to survey the prospect. "Stalker's question," he remarked, "was not unreasonable. This road leads nowhere but to the river and one does rather wonder what a city man can have been doing out on these marshes in the small hours of the morning. I think that will be our objective, where you see those men at work by the shepherd's hut, or whatever it is."

We struck off across the level meadows, out of which arose the red sails of a couple of barges, creeping down the invisible creek; and as we approached our objective the shepherd's hut resolved itself into a contractor's office van, and the men were seen to be working with shovels and sieves on the ashes of the rick. A police inspector was superintending the operations, and when we drew near he accosted us with a civil inquiry as to our business.

Thorndyke presented his card and explained that he was watching the case in the interests of the Griffin Insurance Company. "I suppose," he added, "I shall be given the necessary facilities?"

"Certainly," replied the officer, glancing at my colleague with an odd mixture of respect and suspicion; "and if you can spot anything that we've overlooked, you are very welcome. It's all for the public good. Is there anything in particular that you want to see?"

"I should like to see everything that has been recovered so far. The remains of the body have been removed, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. To the mortuary. But I have got all the effects here."

He led the way to the office—a wooden hut on low wheels—and unlocking the door, invited us to enter. "Here are the things that we have salvaged," he said,

indicating a table covered with white paper on which the various articles were neatly set out, “and I think it’s about the lot. We haven’t come on anything fresh for the last hour or so.”

Thorndyke looked over the collection thoughtfully; picked up and examined successively the two clay pipes—each with the initials “R. R.” neatly incised on the bowl—the absurd little mascot figure, so incongruous with its grim surroundings and the tragic circumstances, the distorted keys, the platinum chain-links to several of which shapeless blobs of gold adhered, and the crystal seal; and then, collecting the artificial teeth, arranged them in what appeared to be their correct order and compared them with the dental plate.

“I think,” said he, holding the latter in his fingers, “that as the body is not here, I should like to secure the means of comparison of these teeth with the skull. There will be no objection to that, I presume?”

“What did you wish to do?” the inspector asked.

“I should like to take a cast of the plate and a wax impression of the loose teeth. No damage will be done to the originals, of course.”

The inspector hesitated, his natural, official tendency to refuse permission apparently contending with a desire to see with his own eyes how the famous expert carried out his mysterious methods of research. In the end the latter prevailed and the official sanction was given, subject to a proviso. “You won’t mind my looking on while you do it?”

“Of course not,” replied Thorndyke. “Why should I?”

“I thought that perhaps your methods were a sort of trade secret.”

Thorndyke laughed softly as he opened the research-case. “My dear inspector,” said he, “the people who have trade secrets are those who make a profound mystery of simple processes that any schoolboy could carry out with once showing. That is the necessity for the secrecy.”

As he was speaking he half-filled a tiny aluminium saucepan with water, and having dropped into it a couple of cakes of dentist’s moulding composition, put it to heat over a spirit-lamp. While it was heating he greased the dental plate and the loose teeth, and prepared the little rubber basin and the other appliances for mixing the plaster.

The inspector was deeply interested. With almost ravenous attention he followed these proceedings, and eagerly watched Thorndyke roll the softened composition into the semblance of a small sausage and press it firmly on the teeth of the plate; peered into the plaster tin, and when the liquid plaster was

mixed and applied, first to the top and then to the lower surface of the plate, not only observed the process closely but put a number of very pertinent questions.

While the plaster and composition were setting Thorndyke renewed his inspection of the salvage from the rick, picking out a number of iron boot protectors which he placed apart in a little heap.

Then he proceeded to roll out two flat strips of softened composition, into one of which he pressed the loose teeth in what appeared to be their proper order, and into the other the boot protectors—eight in number—after first dusting the surface with powdered French chalk. By this time the plaster had set hard enough to allow of the mould being opened and the dental plate taken out. Then Thorndyke, having painted the surfaces of the plaster pieces with knotting, put the mould together again and tied it firmly with string, mixed a fresh bowl of plaster and poured it into the mould.

While this was setting Thorndyke made a careful inventory, with my assistance, of the articles found in the ashes and put a few discreet questions to the inspector. But the latter knew very little about the case. His duty was merely to examine and report on the rick for the information of the coroner. The investigation of the case was evidently being conducted from headquarters. There being no information to be gleaned from the officer, we went out and inspected the site of the rick. But here, also, there was nothing to be learned; the surface of the ground was now laid bare and the men who were working with the sieves reported no further discoveries. We accordingly returned to the hut, and as the plaster had now set hard Thorndyke proceeded with infinite care to open the mould. The operation was a complete success, and as my colleague extracted the cast—a perfect replica, in plaster, of the dental plate—the inspector’s admiration was unbounded. “Why,” he exclaimed, “excepting for the colour you couldn’t tell one from the other; but all the same, I don’t quite see what you want it for.”

“I want it to compare with the skull,” replied Thorndyke, “if I have time to call at the mortuary. As I can’t take the original plate with me, I shall need this copy to make the comparison. Obviously, it is most important to make sure that this is Reed’s plate and not that of some other person. By the way, can you show us the spot where the plate was picked up?”

“Yes,” replied the inspector. “You can see the place from here. It was just by that gate at the crossing of the ditch.”

“Thank you, inspector,” said Thorndyke. “I think we will walk down and have a look at the place.” He wrapped the new cast in a soft cloth, and having

repacked his research-case, shook hands with the officer and prepared to depart.

“You will notice, Jervis,” he remarked as we walked towards the gate, “that this denture was picked up at a spot beyond the rick—farther from the town, I mean. Consequently, if the plate is Reed’s, he must have dropped it while he was approaching the rick from the direction of the river. It will be worth while to see if we can find out whence he came.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “But the dropping of the plate is a rather mysterious affair. It must have happened when he took the poison—assuming that he really did poison himself; but one would have expected that he would wait until he got to the rick to take his dose.”

“We had better not make too many assumptions while we have so few facts,” said Thorndyke. He put down his case beside the gate, which guarded a bridge across a broad ditch, or drainage dyke, and opened his map.

“The question is,” said he, “did he come through this gate or was he only passing it? This dyke, you see, opens into the creek about three-quarters of a mile farther down. The probability is, therefore, that if he came up from the river across the marshes he would be on this side of the ditch and would pass the gate. But we had better try both sides. Let us leave our things by the gate and explore the ground for a few hundred yards, one on either side of the ditch. Which side will you take?”

I elected to take the side nearer the creek, and, having put my camera down by the research-case, climbed over the padlocked gate and began to walk slowly along by the side of the ditch, scanning the ground for foot-prints showing the impression of boot-protectors. At first the surface was far from favourable for imprints of any kind, being, like that immediately around the gate, covered with thick turf. About a hundred and fifty yards down, however, I came upon a heap of worm-casts on which was plainly visible the print of a heel with a clear impression of a kidney-shaped protector such as I had seen in the hut. Thereupon I hailed Thorndyke and, having stuck my stick in the ground beside the heel-print, went back to meet him at the gate.

“This is rather interesting, Jervis,” he remarked, when I had described my find. “The inference seems to be that he came from the creek—unless there is another gate farther down. We had better have our compo impressions handy for comparison.” He opened his case and taking from it the strip of composition—now as hard as bone—on which were the impressions of the boot-protectors, slipped it into his outer pocket. We then took up the case and the camera and proceeded to the spot marked by my stick.

“Well,” said Thorndyke, “it is not very conclusive, seeing that so many people use boot-protectors, but it is probably Reed’s foot-print. Let us hope that we shall find something more distinctive farther on.”

We resumed our march, keeping a few yards apart and examining the ground closely as we went. For a full quarter of a mile we went on without detecting any trace of a foot-print on the thick turf. Suddenly we perceived ahead of us a stretch of yellow mud occupying a slight hollow, across which the creek had apparently overflowed at the last spring tide. When we reached it we found that the mud was nearly dry, but still soft enough to take an impression; and the surface was covered with a maze of foot-prints.

We halted at the edge of the patch and surveyed the complicated pattern; and then it became evident that the whole group of prints had been produced by two pairs of feet, with the addition of a row of sheep-tracks.

“This seems to raise an entirely new issue,” I remarked.

“It does,” Thorndyke agreed. “I think we now begin to see a definite light on the case. But we must go cautiously. Here are two sets of foot-prints, of which one is apparently Reed’s—to judge by the boot-protectors—while the other prints have been made by a man, whom we will call X, who wore boots or shoes with rubber soles and heels. We had better begin by verifying Reed’s.” He produced the composition strip from his pocket, and, stooping over one pair of foot-prints, continued: “I think we may assume that these are Reed’s feet. We have on the compo strip impressions of eight protectors from the rick, and on each foot-print there are four protectors. Moreover, the individual protectors are the same on the compo and on the foot-prints. Thus the compo shows two pairs of half-protectors, two single edge-pieces, and two kidney-shaped protectors; while each foot-print shows a pair of half-protectors on the outside of the sole, a single one on the inside and a kidney-shaped piece on the heel. Furthermore, in both cases the protectors are nearly new and show no appreciable signs of wear. The agreement is complete.”

“Don’t you think,” said I, “that we ought to take plaster records of them?”

“I do,” he replied, “seeing that a heavy shower or a high tide would obliterate them. If you will make the casts I will, meanwhile, make a careful drawing of the whole group to show the order of imposition.”

We fell to work forthwith upon our respective tasks, and by the time I had filled four of the clearest of the foot-prints with plaster, Thorndyke had completed his drawing with the aid of a set of coloured pencils from the research-case. While the plaster was setting he exhibited and explained the drawing.

“You see, Jervis, that there are four lines of prints and a set of sheep-tracks. The first in order of time are these prints of X, drawn in blue. Then come the sheep, which trod on X’s foot-prints. Next comes Reed, alone and after some interval, for he has trodden both on the sheep-tracks and on the tracks of X. Both men were going towards the river. Then we have the tracks of the two men coming back. This time they were together, for their tracks are parallel and neither treads into the prints of the other. Both tracks are rather sinuous as if the men were walking unsteadily, and both have trodden on the sheep-tracks and on the preceding tracks. Next, we have the tracks of X going alone towards the river and treading on all the others excepting number four, which is the tracks of X coming from the river and turning off towards that gate, which opens on to the road. The sequence of events is therefore pretty clear.

“First, X came along here alone to some destination which we have yet to discover. Later—how much later we cannot judge—came Reed, alone. The two men seem to have met, and later returned together, apparently the worse for drink. That is the last we see of Reed. Next comes X, walking back—quite steadily, you notice—towards the river. Later, he returns; but this time, for some reason—perhaps to avoid the neighbourhood of the rick—he crosses the ditch at that gate, apparently to get on the road, though you see by the map that the road is much the longer route to the town. And now we had better get on and see if we can discover the rendezvous to and from which these two men went and came.”

As the plaster had now set quite hard I picked up the casts, and when I had carefully packed them in the case we resumed our progress riverwards. I had already noticed, some distance ahead, the mast of what looked like a small cutter yacht standing up above the marshes, and I now drew Thorndyke’s attention to it. But he had already observed it and, like me, had marked it as the probable rendezvous of the two men. In a few minutes the probability became a certainty, for a bend in the creek showed us the little vessel—with the name *Moonbeam* newly painted on the bow—made fast alongside a small wooden staging; and when we reached this the bare earth opposite the gangway was seen to be covered with the foot-prints of both men.

“I wonder,” said I, “which of them was the owner of the yacht.”

“It is pretty obvious, I think,” said Thorndyke, “that X was the owner if either of them was. He came to the yacht alone, and he wore rubber-soled shoes such as yachtsmen favour; whereas Reed came when the other man was there, and he wore iron boot-protectors, which no yacht owner would do if he had any respect for his deck-planks. But they may have had a joint interest; appearances suggest that they were painting the woodwork when they were

here together, as some of the paint is fresh and some of it old and shabby.” He gazed at the yacht reflectively for some time and then remarked: “It would be interesting—and perhaps instructive—to have a look at the inside.”

“It would be a flagrant trespass, to put it mildly,” said I.

“It would be more than trespass if that padlock is locked,” he rejoined. “But we need not take a pedantic view of the legal position. My learned friend has a serviceable pair of glasses and commands an unobstructed view of a mile or so; and if he maintains an observant attitude while I make an inspection of the premises any trifling irregularity will be of no consequence.” As he spoke he felt in his pocket and produced the instrument which our laboratory assistant, Polton, had made from a few pieces of stiff steel wire, and which was euphemistically known as a smoker’s companion. With this appliance in his hand he dropped down on to the yacht’s deck, and after a quick look round, tried the padlock. Finding it locked he proceeded to operate on it with the smoker’s companion, and in a few moments it fell open, when he pushed back the sliding hatch and stepped down into the little cabin.

His exploration did not take long. In a few minutes he reappeared and climbed the short ladder to the staging. “There isn’t much to see,” he reported, “but what there is is highly suggestive. If you slip down and have a look round, I think you will have no difficulty in forming a plausible reconstruction of the recent events. You had better take the camera. There is light enough for a time exposure.”

I handed him the glasses, and dropping on to the deck, stepped down through the open hatch into the cabin. It was an absurd little cave, barely four feet high from the floor to the coach-roof, open to the fore-peak and lighted by a little skylight and two portholes. Of the two sleeping berths, one had evidently been used as a seat, while the other appeared to have been slept in, to judge by the indented pillow and the tumbled blankets, left just as the occupant had crawled out of them. But the whole interior was in a state of squalid disorder. Paint-pots and unwashed brushes lay about the floor, in company with a couple of whisky-bottles—one empty and one half-full—two tumblers, a pair of empty siphons and a litter of playing cards scattered broadcast and evidently derived from two packs. It was, as Thorndyke had said, easy to reconstruct the scene of sordid debauchery that the light of the two candles—each in its congealed pool of grease—must have displayed on that night of horror whose dreadful secret had been disclosed by the ashes of the rick. But I could see nothing that would enable me to give a name to the dead man’s mysterious companion.

When I had completed my inspection and taken a photograph of the

interior, I rejoined Thorndyke, who then descended and replaced the padlock on the closed hatch, relocking it with the invaluable smoker's companion.

"Well, Jervis," said he, as we turned our faces towards the town, "it seems as if we had accomplished our task, so far as Stalker is concerned. It is still possible that this was a case of suicide, but it is no longer probable. All the appearances point to homicide. I think my learned friend will agree with me in that."

"Undoubtedly," I replied. "And to me there is a strong suggestion of premeditation. I take it that X, the owner of the yacht, enticed Reed out here, possibly to prepare for a cruise; that the two men worked at the repainting while the daylight lasted and then spent the evening drinking and gambling. The fact that they used several packs of cards suggests that they played for pretty heavy stakes. Then, I think, Reed became drunk and X offered to see him safely off the marshes. It is evident that X was not drunk, because, although both tracks appear unsteady when the men were walking together, the tracks of X returning to the yacht are quite steady and straight. I should say that the actual murder took place just after they had got over the gate; that Reed's false teeth fell out while his body was being dragged to the rick, and that this was unnoticed by X owing to the darkness. Then X dragged the body up the ladder and laid it in the middle of the rick at the top, set fire to the rick—probably on the lee side—and at once made off back to the yacht. There he passed the night, and in the morning he returned to the town along the road, giving the neighbourhood of the rick a wide berth. That is my reading of the evidence."

"Yes," said Thorndyke, "that seems to be the interpretation of the facts. And now all that remains is to give a name to the mysterious X, and I should think that will present no difficulties."

"Are you proposing to inspect the remains at the mortuary?" I asked.

"No," he replied. "It would be interesting, but it is not necessary. We have all the available data for identification, and our concern is now not with Reed but with X. We had better get back to London."

On our arrival at the station, we found the bookstall keeper in the act of sticking up a placard of the evening paper on which was the legend:

"Rick tragedy; Sensational development."

We immediately provided ourselves each with a copy of the paper, and sitting down on a seat, proceeded to read the heavily-leaded report.

"A new and startling aspect has been given to the rick tragedy by some

further inquiries that the police have made. It seems that the dead man, Reed, was a member of the firm of Reed and Jarman, outside brokers, and it now transpires that his partner, Walter Jarman, is also missing. There has been no one at the office this week, but the caretaker states that on Monday evening at about eight o'clock, he saw Mr. Jarman let himself into the office with his key (the rick was first seen to be on fire at two o'clock on Monday morning). It appears that three cheques, payable to the firm and endorsed by Jarman, were paid into the bank—Patmore's—by the first post on Tuesday morning, and that, also on Tuesday morning, Jarman purchased a parcel of diamonds of just over a thousand pounds in value from a diamond merchant in Hatton Garden, who accepted a cheque in payment after telephoning to the bank. It further appears that on the previous Saturday morning, Reed and Jarman visited the bank together and drew out in cash practically their whole balance, leaving only thirty-two pounds. The diamond merchant's cheque was met by the cheques that had just been paid in. It is premature to make any comments, but we may expect some strange disclosures at the inquest, which will be held at Dartford the day after to-morrow."

"I assume," said I, "that the identity of X is no longer a mystery. It looks as if these two men had agreed to realise their assets and abscond, and had then spent the night gambling for the swag, and, oddly enough, Reed appears to have been the winner, for otherwise there would have been no need to murder him."

"That is so," Thorndyke agreed, "assuming that X is Jarman, which is probable, though not certain. But we mustn't go beyond our facts, and we mustn't construct theories from newspaper reports. I think we had better call at Scotland Yard on our way home and verify those particulars."

The report and our own observations occupied us during the journey to London, though our discussion produced no further conclusions. As soon as we arrived at Charing Cross, Thorndyke sprang out of the train, and emerging from the station, walked swiftly towards Whitehall.

Our visit was fortunately timed, for as we approached the entrance to the head-quarters, our old friend, Superintendent Miller, came out. He smiled as he saw us and halted to utter the laconic query: "Rick Case?"

"Yes," replied Thorndyke. "We have come to verify the particulars given in the evening paper. Have you seen the report?"

"Yes; and you may take it as correct. Anything else?"

"I should have liked to look over a series of the cheques drawn by the firm. The last two, I suppose, are inaccessible?"

“Yes. They will be at the bank, and we couldn’t inspect them without an order of the court. But, as to the others, if they are at the office, I think you could see them. I’ll come along with you now if you like, and have a look round myself. Our people are in possession.”

We at once closed with the superintendent’s offer and proceeded with him by the Underground Railway to the Mansion House, from whence we made our way to Queen Victoria Street, where Reed and Jarman had their offices. A sergeant was in charge at the moment, and to him the superintendent addressed himself.

“Have you found any returned cheques?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the sergeant; “lots of ’em. We’ve been through them all.”

As he spoke he produced several bundles of cheques and laid them on a desk, the drawers of which all stood open.

“Well,” said Miller, “there they are, doctor. I don’t know what you want to find out, but I expect you do.” He placed a chair by the desk, and as Thorndyke sat down and proceeded to turn the cheques over, he watched him with politely-suppressed curiosity.

“It appears,” said Thorndyke, “as if these two men had mixed up their private affairs with the business account. Here, for instance, is a cheque drawn by Reed for the Picardy Wine Company. But that company could hardly have been a client. And this one of Jarman’s for the Secretary of the St. John’s Nursing Home must be a private cheque, and so I should say are these two for F. Waller, Esq., F.R.C.S., and for Andrew Darton, Esq., L.D.S. They are drawn for professional men and both are—like the Nursing Home cheque—stated in even amounts of guineas, whereas the business cheques are in uneven amounts of pounds, shillings and pence.”

“I think you are right, sir,” said Miller. “The business seems to have been conducted in a very casual manner. And just look at those signatures! Never twice alike. The banks hate that sort of thing, naturally. When a customer signs in the signature book he has given a specimen for reference and he ought to keep to it strictly. A man who varies his signature is asking for trouble.”

“He is,” Thorndyke agreed, as he rapidly entered a few particulars of the cheques in his notebook; “particularly in the case of a firm with a staff of clerks.”

He stood up, and having pocketed his notebook, held out his hand.

“I am very much obliged to you, superintendent,” he said.

“Seen all that you wanted to see?” Miller asked.

“Thank you, yes,” Thorndyke replied.

“I should very much like to know what you *have* seen,” Miller rejoined; to which my colleague replied by waving his hand towards the cheques, as he turned to go.

“I don’t quite see the bearing of those cheques on our inquiry,” I said, as we took our way homeward along Cheapside.

“It is not very direct,” Thorndyke replied; “but the cheques help us to understand the characters of these two men and their relations with one another; which may be very necessary when we come to the inquest.”

During the following day I saw very little of Thorndyke, for our excursion to Dartford had put our work somewhat in arrear and we had to secure a free day for the inquest on the morrow. We met at dinner after the day’s work, but, beyond settling the programme for the next day nothing of importance passed with reference to the “Rick Case.”

The opening phases of the inquest, though of thrilling interest to the numerous spectators and Press men, did not particularly concern us. The evidence of the rural constable, the farmer and the police inspector—with whom Thorndyke had a little confidential talk and apparently surprised the officer considerably—merely amplified what we knew already. Of more interest was that of a local dentist who testified to having examined the dental plate and to having compared it with the skull of the dead man. “The plate and the jaw of deceased,” he said, “agree completely. The jaw contains five natural teeth in two groups, and the plate has two spaces which exactly correspond to those two groups of teeth. I have tried the plate on the jaw and have no doubt whatever that it belonged to deceased.”

“That is a very important fact,” Thorndyke remarked to me as the witness retired. “It is the indispensable link in the chain.”

“But surely it was obvious?” said I.

“No doubt,” he replied. “But now it is proved and in evidence.”

I was somewhat puzzled by Thorndyke’s remark, but the appearance of a new witness forbade discussion. Mr. Arthur Gerrard was an alert-looking, rather tall man, with bushy, Mephistophelian eyebrows and a small, dark moustache, who wore a pair of large bifocal spectacles, and to whom a small mole at the corner of the mouth imparted the effect of a permanent one-sided

smile.

“It was on your information,” said the coroner, “that the identity of the deceased was established.”

“Yes,” replied the witness, who spoke with a slight, but perceptible, Irish accent. “I saw the description in the papers of the things that had been found in the rick and at once recognised them as Reed’s. I knew deceased intimately and had often noticed his peculiar watch-chain and the little china mascot and seen him smoking the clay pipe with his initials scratched on it; and I knew that he wore false teeth.”

“Did you meet him frequently?”

“Oh, yes. For more than a year he was my partner in business, and we remained friends after I had dissolved the partnership.”

“Why did you dissolve the partnership?”

“I had to. Reed was impossible in a business sense. He gambled incessantly in stocks and I had to pay his losses. I lent him, for this purpose, at one time and another, over two thousand pounds. He gave me bills for the loans, but he was never able to meet them, and in the end, when we dissolved, I got him to insure his life for three thousand pounds and to draw up a document making his debt to me the first charge on his estate in the event of his death.”

“Had you ever any reason to suppose that he contemplated suicide?”

“None whatever. After he left me, he entered into partnership with a Mr. Walter Jarman, and whenever I met him, he seemed to be quite happy and contented, though I gathered that he was still gambling a good deal. I saw him a week ago to-day and he then told me that he proposed to take a short yachting holiday with his partner, who owned a small cutter. That was the last time that I saw him alive.”

As the witness was about to retire, Thorndyke rose, and having obtained the coroner’s permission to cross-examine, asked:

“You have spoken of a yacht. Do you know what her name is and where she has been kept lately?”

“Her name is the *Moonbeam*, and I believe Jarman kept her somewhere in the Thames, but I don’t know where.”

“And as to Jarman himself: what do you know about him, as to his character, for instance?”

“I knew him very slightly. He appeared to be rather a dissipated man. Drank a good deal, I should say, and I think he was a bit of a gambler.”

“Do you know if he was a heavy smoker?”

“He didn’t smoke at all, but he was an inveterate snuff-taker.”

At this point the foreman of the jury interposed with the audible remark that “he didn’t see what this had to do with the inquiry,” and the coroner looked dubiously at Thorndyke; but as my colleague sat down, the objection was not pursued.

The next witness was the caretaker of the building in which Reed and Jarman’s office was situated. His evidence was to the effect that on the previous Monday evening at about eight o’clock, he saw Mr. Jarman let himself into the office with his key. “I don’t know how long he stayed there,” he continued, in reply to the coroner’s question. “I had finished my work and was going up to my rooms at the top of the building. I didn’t see him again.”

“Did you notice anything unusual in his appearance?” asked Thorndyke, rising to cross-examine. “Was his face at all flushed, for instance?”

“I couldn’t say. I was going up the stairs and I just looked back over my shoulder when I heard him. His face was turned away from me.”

“But you had no difficulty in recognising him?”

“No: I should have known him a mile off. He had his overcoat on, and it is a very peculiar overcoat—light brown with a sort of greenish check. You couldn’t possibly mistake it.”

“What should you say was Mr. Jarman’s height?”

“About five feet nine or ten, I should say.”

Here the foreman of the jury again interposed. “Aren’t we wasting time, sir?” he inquired impatiently. “These details about Jarman may be very important to the police, but they don’t concern us. We are inquiring into the death of Mr. Reginald Reed.”

The coroner looked deprecatingly at Thorndyke and remarked: “There is some truth in what the foreman says.”

“I submit, sir,” replied Thorndyke, “that there is no truth in it at all. We are not inquiring into the death of Reginald Reed, but into that of a man whose remains were found in a burned rick.”

“But the body has been identified as that of Reginald Reed.”

“Then,” said Thorndyke, “I submit that it has been wrongly identified. I suggest that the body is that of Walter Jarman and I am prepared to produce witnesses who will prove that it is.”

“But,” exclaimed the coroner, “we have just heard the evidence of a witness who states that he saw Jarman alive eighteen hours after the rick was fired.”

“I beg your pardon, sir,” said Thorndyke. “We have heard the witness say that he saw Jarman’s overcoat. He expressly stated that he did not see the man’s face.”

The coroner hastily conferred with the jury—who openly scoffed at Thorndyke’s suggestion—and then said: “I find what you say perfectly incredible and so do the jury. It is utterly irreconcilable with the facts. You had better call your witnesses and let us dispose of this extraordinary suggestion.”

Thorndyke bowed to the coroner and called Mr. Andrew Darton; whereupon a middle-aged man of markedly professional aspect came forward and, having been sworn, gave evidence as follows:

“I am a dental surgeon. A little over two years ago, Mr. Walter Jarman was under my care. I extracted some loose teeth from both jaws and made him two plates—an upper and a lower.”

“Could you identify those plates?”

“Yes. I have with me the plaster model on which those plates were made.” He opened a bag and produced a plaster cast of a pair of jaws fitted with a brass hinge so that the jaws could be opened and shut. On the upper jaw were two groups of teeth separated by a space of bare gums, while the lower jaw bore a single group of four front teeth.

“This model,” the witness explained, “is an exact replica of the patient’s jaws, and the two plates were actually moulded on it.” He picked up the dental plate from the table and, amidst a hush of breathless expectancy, opened the mouth of the model and applied the plate to the upper jaw. At a glance, it was obvious that it fitted perfectly. The two groups of the plaster teeth slipped exactly into the spaces on the plate, making a complete row of teeth. Then the witness covered the lower gums with strips of plastic wax, and taking the loose teeth from the table, attached them to the wax; and again the correspondence was evident. The teeth thus applied exactly filled the vacant spaces.

“Can you now identify that plate?” Thorndyke asked.

“Yes,” was the reply. “I am quite certain that this is the plate I made for

Mr. Jarman and that those loose teeth are from his lower plate.”

Thorndyke looked at the coroner, who nodded emphatically. “This evidence seems perfectly conclusive,” he admitted. “What do you say, gentlemen?” he added, turning to the jury.

There was no doubt as to their sentiments. With one voice they declared their complete conviction. Had they not seen the demonstration with their own eyes?

“And now, sir,” said the coroner, “as you appear to know more than anyone else about this case, and as it is perfectly incomprehensible to me, and probably also to the jury, I suggest that you give us an explanation. And you had better make it a sworn statement, so that it can go into the depositions.”

“Yes,” Thorndyke agreed, “especially as I have some evidence to give.” He was accordingly sworn and then proceeded to make the following statement:

“The first thing that struck me on reading the report of this case was the very remarkable character of the objects found in the ashes of the rick. They included objects composed of platinum, of pipe-clay, of iron and of porcelain—all substances practically indestructible by fire. And these imperishable objects were all highly distinctive and easily identifiable, and two of them actually bore the initials of their owner. There was almost a suggestion of the body having been prepared for identification after burning. This mere suggestion, however, gave place to definite suspicion when I saw the dental plate. That plate presented a most striking discrepancy. Here it is, sir, and you see that it is a clean polished plate of red vulcanite, with not a trace of stain or discoloration. But associated with that plate were two clay pipes. Now the man who smokes a clay pipe is not only—as a rule—a heavy smoker, but he smokes strong and dark-coloured tobacco. And if he wears a dental plate, that plate becomes encrusted with a black deposit which is very difficult to remove. There is, as you see, no trace of any such deposit, or of any tobacco stain in the interstices of the teeth. It appeared to be almost certainly the plate of a non-smoker. But if that were so, it could not be Reed’s. But it had been ascertained by the police surgeon that it fitted the jaw of the skull and undoubtedly belonged to the burned body. Consequently if the plate was not Reed’s plate, the skull was not Reed’s skull, and the body was not Reed’s body. But the watch-chain was Reed’s, the pipes were his and the mascot was his. That is to say that the very identifiable and fire-proof property of Reed was associated with the burned body of some other person; that, in other words, the body of some unknown person had been deliberately prepared to counterfeit the body of Reed. This offered a further suggestion and raised a question. The suggestion was that the unknown person had been murdered—presumably

somewhere near the spot where the dental plate was found. The question was—What was the object of causing the body to counterfeit that of Reed?

“Now, I knew, from the insurance company, that Reed had insured his life for three thousand pounds. Therefore, somebody stood to gain three thousand pounds by his death. The question was—Who was that somebody? I proceeded to make certain investigations on the spot”; and here Thorndyke gave a summary of our discoveries on the marsh and on the yacht. “It thus appeared,” he continued, “that there were two men on the marshes that night, going towards the rick. One of them was the person whose body was found in the ashes; the other, who went back alone to the yacht, was presumably the person who stood to gain three thousand pounds by Reed’s death.”

“Have you formed any opinion as to who that person was?” the coroner asked.

“Yes,” replied Thorndyke. “I have very little doubt that he was Reginald Reed.”

“But,” exclaimed the coroner, “we have heard in evidence that it was Mr. Arthur Gerrard who stood to gain the three thousand pounds!”

“Precisely,” said Thorndyke; and for a while he and the coroner looked at one another without speaking.

Suddenly the latter cast a searching look around the court. “Where is Mr. Gerrard?” he demanded.

“He left the court about ten minutes ago,” said Thorndyke; “and the police inspector left immediately afterwards. I had advised him not to lose sight of Mr. Gerrard.”

“Then I take it that you suspect Gerrard of being in collusion with Reed?”

“I suspect that Arthur Gerrard and Reginald Reed are one and the same person.”

As Thorndyke made this statement, a murmur of astonishment arose from the jurymen and the spectators. The coroner, after a few moments’ puzzled reflection, remarked: “You are not forgetting that Reed’s caretaker was present while Gerrard was giving his evidence?” Then, turning to the caretaker, he asked: “What do you say? Was that Mr. Reed who gave evidence under the name of Gerrard?”

The caretaker, who had evidently been thinking furiously, was by no means confident. “I should say not,” he replied, “unless he was made up a good deal. He was certainly about the same height and build and colour; but he

had a moustache, whereas Mr. Reed was clean-shaved; he had a mole on his face, which Mr. Reed hadn't; he had bushy eyebrows, whereas Mr. Reed had hardly any eyebrows to speak of; and he wore spectacles, which Mr. Reed didn't, and he spoke like an Irishman, whereas Mr. Reed was English. Still it is possible——”

Before he could finish, the door rattled to a heavy concussion. Then it flew open, and Mr. Gerrard staggered into the room, thrust forward by the police inspector. His appearance was marvellously changed, for he had lost his spectacles, and one of his eyebrows had disappeared, as had also the mole and a portion of the built-up moustache. The caretaker started up with an exclamation, but at this moment Gerrard, with a violent effort, wrenched himself free. The inspector sprang forward to recapture him. But he was too late. The prisoner's hand flew upwards; there was a ringing report; and Arthur Gerrard—or Reginald Reed—fell back across a bench with a trickle of blood on his temple and a pistol still clutched in his hand.

“And so,” said Stalker, when he called on us the next day for details, “it was a suicide after all. Very lucky, too, seeing that there was no provision in the policy for death by judicial hanging.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

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[The end of *The Funeral Pyre* by Richard Austin Freeman]