

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

Number Thirty Six

The
Stolen
Ingots

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“IN medico-legal practice,” Thorndyke remarked, “one must be constantly on one’s guard against the effects of suggestion, whether intentional or unconscious. When the facts of a case are set forth by an informant, they are nearly always presented, consciously or unconsciously, in terms of inference. Certain facts, which appear to the narrator to be the leading facts, are given with emphasis and in detail, while other facts, which appear to be subordinate or trivial, are partially suppressed. But this assessment of evidential value must never be accepted. The whole case must be considered and each fact weighed separately, and then it will commonly happen that the leading fact turns out to be the one that had been passed over as negligible.”

The remark was made apropos of a case, the facts of which had just been stated to us by Mr. Halethorpe, of the Sphinx Assurance Company. I did not quite perceive its bearing at the time, but looking back when the case was concluded, I realised that I had fallen into the very error against which Thorndyke’s warning should have guarded me.

“I trust,” said Mr. Halethorpe, “that I have not come at an inconvenient time. You are so tolerant of unusual hours——”

“My practice,” interrupted Thorndyke, “is my recreation, and I welcome you as one who comes to furnish entertainment. Draw your chair up to the fire, light a cigar and tell us your story.”

Mr. Halethorpe laughed, but adopted the procedure suggested, and having settled his toes upon the kerb and selected a cigar from the box, he opened the subject of his call.

“I don’t quite know what you can do for us,” he began, “as it is hardly your business to trace lost property, but I thought I would come and let you know about our difficulty. The fact is that our company looks like dropping some four thousand pounds, which the directors won’t like. What has happened is this:

“About two months ago the London House of the Akropong Gold Fields Company applied to us to insure a parcel of gold bars that were to be consigned to Minton and Borwell, the big manufacturing jewellers. The bars were to be shipped at Accra and landed at Bellhaven, which is the nearest port to Minton and Borwell’s works. Well, we agreed to underwrite the risk—we

have done business with the Akropong people before—and the matter was settled. The bars were put on board the *Labadi* at Accra, and in due course were landed at Bellhaven, where they were delivered to Minton's agents. So far, so good. Then came the catastrophe. The case of bars was put on the train at Bellhaven, consigned to Anchester, where Minton's have their factory. But the line doesn't go to Anchester direct. The junction is at Garbridge, a small country station close to the river Crouch, and here the case was put out and locked up in the station-master's office to wait for the Anchester train. It seems that the station-master was called away and detained longer than he had expected, and when the train was signalled he hurried back in a mighty twitter. However, the case was there all right, and he personally superintended its removal to the guard's van and put it in the guard's charge. All went well for the rest of the journey. A member of the firm was waiting at Anchester station with a closed van. The case was put into it and taken direct to the factory, where it was opened in the private office—and found to be full of lead pipe."

"I presume," said Thorndyke, "that it was not the original case."

"No," replied Halethorpe, "but it was a very fair imitation. The label and the marks were correct, but the seals were just plain wax. Evidently the exchange had been made in the station-master's office, and it transpires that although the door was securely locked there was an unfastened window which opened on to the garden, and there were plain marks of feet on the flowerbed outside."

"What time did this happen?" asked Thorndyke.

"The Anchester train came in at a quarter past seven, by which time, of course, it was quite dark."

"And when did it happen?"

"The day before yesterday. We heard of it yesterday morning."

"Are you contesting the claim?"

"We don't want to. Of course, we could plead negligence, but in that case I think we should make a claim on the railway company. But, naturally, we should much rather recover the property. After all, it can't be so very far away."

"I wouldn't say that," said Thorndyke. "This was no impromptu theft. The dummy case was prepared in advance, and evidently by somebody who knew what the real case was like, and how and when it was to be despatched from Bellhaven. We must assume that the disposal of the stolen case has been provided for with similar completeness. How far is Garbridge from the river?"

“Less than half a mile across the marshes. The detective-inspector—Badger, I think you know him—asked the same question.”

“Naturally,” said Thorndyke. “A heavy object like this case is much more easily and inconspicuously conveyed by water than on land. And then, see what facilities for concealment a navigable river offers. The case could be easily stowed away on a small craft, or even in a boat; or the bars could be taken out and stowed amongst the ballast, or even, at a pinch, dropped overboard at a marked spot and left until the hue and cry was over.”

“You are not very encouraging,” Halethorpe remarked gloomily. “I take it that you don’t much expect that we shall recover those bars.”

“We needn’t despair,” was the reply, “but I want you to understand the difficulties. The thieves have got away with the booty, and that booty is an imperishable material which retains its value even if broken up into unrecognisable fragments. Melted down into small ingots, it would be impossible to identify.”

“Well,” said Halethorpe, “the police have the matter in hand—Inspector Badger, of the C.I.D., is in charge of the case—but our directors would be more satisfied if you would look into it. Of course we would give you any help we could. What do you say?”

“I am willing to look into the case,” said Thorndyke, “though I don’t hold out much hope. Could you give me a note to the shipping company and another to the consignees, Minton and Borwell?”

“Of course I will. I’ll write them now. I have some of our stationery in my attaché case. But, if you will pardon my saying so, you seem to be starting your inquiry just where there is nothing to be learned. The case was stolen after it left the ship and before it reached the consignees—although their agent had received it from the ship.”

“The point is,” said Thorndyke, “that this was a preconcerted robbery, and that the thieves possessed special information. That information must have come either from the ship or from the factory. So, while we must try to pick up the track of the case itself, we must seek the beginning of the clue at the two ends—the ship and the factory—from one of which it must have started.”

“Yes, that’s true,” said Halethorpe. “Well, I’ll write those two notes and then I must run away; and we’ll hope for the best.”

He wrote the two letters, asking for facilities from the respective parties, and then took his departure in a somewhat chastened frame of mind.

“Quite an interesting little problem,” Thorndyke remarked, as Halethorpe’s footsteps died away on the stairs, “but not much in our line. It is really a police case—a case for patient and intelligent inquiry. And that is what we shall have to do—make some careful inquiries on the spot.”

“Where do you propose to begin?” I asked.

“At the beginning,” he replied. “Bellhaven. I propose that we go down there to-morrow morning and pick up the thread at that end.”

“What thread?” I demanded. “We know that the package started from there. What else do you expect to learn?”

“There are several curious possibilities in this case, as you must have noticed,” he replied. “The question is, whether any of them are probabilities. That is what I want to settle before we begin a detailed investigation.”

“For my part,” said I, “I should have supposed that the investigation would start from the scene of the robbery. But I presume that you have seen some possibilities that I have overlooked.”

Which eventually turned out to be the case.

“I think,” said Thorndyke as we alighted at Bellhaven on the following morning, “we had better go first to the Customs and make quite certain, if we can, that the bars were really in the case when it was delivered to the consignees’ agents. It won’t do to take it for granted that the substitution took place at Garbridge, although that is by far the most probable theory.” Accordingly we made our way to the harbour, where an obliging mariner directed us to our destination.

At the Custom House we were received by a genial officer, who, when Thorndyke had explained his connection with the robbery, entered into the matter with complete sympathy and a quick grasp of the situation.

“I see,” said he. “You want clear evidence that the bars were in the case when it left here. Well, I think we can satisfy you on that point. Bullion is not a customable commodity, but it has to be examined and reported. If it is consigned to the Bank of England or the Mint, the case is passed through with the seals unbroken, but as this was a private consignment, the seals will have been broken and the contents of the case examined. Jefferson, show these gentlemen the report on the case of gold bars from the *Labadi*.”

“Would it be possible,” Thorndyke asked, “for us to have a few words with the officer who opened the case? You know the legal partiality for personal

testimony.”

“Of course it would. Jeffson, when these gentlemen have seen the report, find the officer who signed it and let them have a talk with him.”

We followed Mr. Jeffson into an adjoining office, where he produced the report and handed it to Thorndyke. The particulars that it gave were in effect those that would be furnished by the ship’s manifest and the bill of lading. The case was thirteen inches long by twelve wide and nine inches deep, outside measurement; and its gross weight was one hundred and seventeen pounds three ounces, and it contained four bars of the aggregate weight of one hundred and thirteen pounds two ounces.

“Thank you,” said Thorndyke, handing back the report. “And now can we see the officer—Mr. Byrne, I think—just to fill in the details?”

“If you will come with me,” replied Mr. Jeffson, “I’ll find him for you. I expect he is on the wharf.”

We followed our conductor out on to the quay among a litter of cases, crates and barrels, and eventually, amidst a battalion of Madeira wine casks, found the officer deep in problems of “content and ullage,” and other customs mysteries. As Jeffson introduced us, and then discreetly retired, Mr. Byrne confronted us with a mahogany face and a truculent blue eye.

“With reference to this bullion,” said Thorndyke, “I understand that you weighed the bars separately from the case?”

“Oi did,” replied Mr. Byrne.

“Did you weigh each bar separately?”

“Oi did not,” was the concise reply.

“What was the appearance of the bars—I mean as to shape and size? Were they of the usual type?”

“Oi’ve not had a great deal to do with bullion,” said Mr. Byrne, “but Oi should say that they were just ordinary gold bars, about nine inches long by four wide and about two inches deep.”

“Was there much packing material in the case?”

“Very little. The bars were wrapped in thick canvas and jammed into the case. There wouldn’t be more than about half an inch clearance all round to allow for the canvas. The case was inch and half stuff strengthened with iron bands.”

“Did you seal the case after you had closed it up?”

“Oi did. ’Twas all shipshape when it was passed back to the mate. And Oi saw him hand it over to the consignees’ agent; so ’twas all in order when it left the wharf.”

“That was what I wanted to make sure of,” said Thorndyke; and, having pocketed his notebook and thanked the officer, he turned away among the wilderness of merchandise.

“So much for the Customs,” said he. “I am glad we went there first. As you have no doubt observed, we have picked up some useful information.”

“We have ascertained,” I replied, “that the case was intact when it was handed over to the consignees’ agents, so that our investigations at Garbridge will start from a solid basis. And that, I take it, is all you wanted to know.”

“Not quite all,” he rejoined. “There are one or two little details that I should like to fill in. I think we will look in on the shipping agents and present Halethorpe’s note. We may as well learn all we can before we make our start from the scene of the robbery.”

“Well,” I said, “I don’t see what more there is to learn here. But apparently you do. That seems to be the office, past those sheds.”

The manager of the shipping agent’s office looked us up and down as he sat at his littered desk with Halethorpe’s letter in his hand.

“You’ve come about that bullion that was stolen,” he said brusquely. “Well, it wasn’t stolen here. Hadn’t you better inquire at Garbridge, where it was?”

“Undoubtedly,” replied Thorndyke. “But I am making certain preliminary inquiries. Now, first, as to the bill of lading, who has that—the original, I mean?”

“The captain has it at present, but I have a copy.”

“Could I see it?” Thorndyke asked.

The manager raised his eyebrows protestingly, but produced the document from a file and handed it to Thorndyke, watching him inquisitively as he copied the particulars of the package into his notebook.

“I suppose,” said Thorndyke as he returned the document, “you have a copy of the ship’s manifest?”

“Yes,” replied the manager, “but the entry in the manifest is merely a copy of the particulars given in the bill of lading.”

“I should like to see the manifest, if it is not troubling you too much.”

“But,” the other protested impatiently, “the manifest contains no information respecting this parcel of bullion excepting the one entry, which, as I have told you, has been copied from the bill of lading.”

“I realise that,” said Thorndyke; “but I should like to look over it, all the same.”

Our friend bounced into an inner office and presently returned with a voluminous document, which he slapped down on a side-table.

“There, sir,” he said. “That is the manifest. This is the entry relating to the bullion that you are inquiring about. The rest of the document is concerned with the cargo, in which I presume you are not interested.”

In this, however, he was mistaken; for Thorndyke, having verified the bullion entry, turned the leaves over and began systematically, though rapidly, to run his eye over the long list from the beginning, a proceeding that the manager viewed with frenzied impatience.

“If you are going to read it right through, sir,” the latter observed, “I shall ask you to excuse me. Art is long but life is short,” he added with a sour smile.

Nevertheless he hovered about uneasily, and when Thorndyke proceeded to copy some of the entries into his notebook, he craned over and read them without the least disguise, though not without comment.

“Good God, sir!” he exclaimed. “What possible bearing on this robbery can that parcel of scivelloes have? And do you realise that they are still in the ship’s hold?”

“I inferred that they were, as they are consigned to London,” Thorndyke replied, drawing his finger down the “description” column and rapidly scanning the entries in it. The manager watched that finger, and as it stopped successively at a bag of gum copal, a case of quartz specimens, a case of six-inch brass screw-bolts, a bag of beni-seed and a package of kola nuts, he breathed hard and muttered like an angry parrot. But Thorndyke was quite unmoved. With calm deliberation he copied out each entry, conscientiously noting the marks, descriptions of packages and contents, gross and net weights, dimensions, names of consignors and consignees, ports of shipment and discharge, and, in fact, the entire particulars. It was certainly an amazing proceeding, and I could make no more of it than could our impatient friend.

At last Thorndyke closed and pocketed his notebook, and the manager heaved a slightly obtrusive sigh. “Is there nothing more, sir?” he asked. “You

don't want to examine the ship, for instance?"

The next moment, I think, he regretted his sarcasm, for Thorndyke inquired, with evident interest: "Is the ship still here?"

"Yes," was the unwilling admission. "She finishes unloading here at midday to-day and will probably haul into the London Docks to-morrow morning."

"I don't think I need go on board," said Thorndyke, "but you might give me a card in case I find that I want to."

The card was somewhat grudgingly produced, and when Thorndyke had thanked our entertainer for his help, we took our leave and made our way towards the station.

"Well," I said, "you have collected a vast amount of curious information, but I am hanged if I can see that any of it has the slightest bearing on our inquiry."

Thorndyke cast on me a look of deep reproach. "Jervis!" he exclaimed, "you astonish me; you do, indeed. Why, my dear fellow, it stares you in the face!"

"When you say 'it,' " I said a little irritably, "you mean——?"

"I mean the leading fact from which we may deduce the *modus operandi* of this robbery. You shall look over my notes in the train and sort out the data that we have collected. I think you will find them extremely illuminating."

"I doubt it," said I. "But, meanwhile, aren't we wasting a good deal of time? Halethorpe wants to get the gold back; he doesn't want to know how the thieves contrived to steal it."

"That is a very just remark," answered Thorndyke. "My learned friend displays his customary robust common sense. Nevertheless, I think that a clear understanding of the mechanism of this robbery will prove very helpful to us, though I agree with you that we have spent enough time on securing our preliminary data. The important thing now is to pick up a trail from Garbridge. But I see our train is signalled. We had better hurry."

As the train rumbled into the station, we looked out for an empty smoking compartment, and having been fortunate enough to secure one, we settled ourselves in opposite corners and lighted our pipes. Then Thorndyke handed me his notebook and as I studied, with wrinkled brows, the apparently disconnected entries, he sat and observed me thoughtfully and with the faintest suspicion of a smile. Again and again I read through those notes with ever-

dwindling hopes of extracting the meaning that “stared me in the face.” Vainly did I endeavour to connect gum copal, scivelloes or beni-seed with the methods of the unknown robbers. The entries in the notebook persisted obstinately in remaining totally disconnected and hopelessly irrelevant. At last I shut the book with a savage snap and handed it back to its owner.

“It’s no use, Thorndyke,” I said. “I can’t see the faintest glimmer of light.”

“Well,” said he, “it isn’t of much consequence. The practical part of our task is before us, and it may turn out a pretty difficult part. But we have got to recover those bars if it is humanly possible. And here we are at our jumping-off place. This is Garbridge Station—and I see an old acquaintance of ours on the platform.”

I looked out, as the train slowed down, and there, sure enough, was no less a person than Inspector Badger of the Criminal Investigation Department.

“We could have done very well without Badger,” I remarked.

“Yes,” Thorndyke agreed, “but we shall have to take him into partnership, I expect. After all, we are on his territory and on the same errand. How do you do, inspector?” he continued, as the officer, having observed our descent from the carriage, hurried forward with unwonted cordiality.

“I rather expected to see you here, sir,” said he. “We heard that Mr. Halethorpe had consulted you. But this isn’t the London train.”

“No,” said Thorndyke. “We’ve been to Bellhaven, just to make sure that the bullion was in the case when it started.”

“I could have told you that two days ago,” said Badger. “We got on to the Customs people at once. That was all plain sailing; but the rest of it isn’t.”

“No clue as to how the case was taken away?”

“Oh, yes; that is pretty clear. It was hoisted out, and the dummy hoisted in, through the window of the station-master’s office. And the same night, two men were seen carrying a heavy package, about the size of the bullion-case, towards the marshes. But there the clue ends. The stuff seems to have vanished into thin air. Of course our people are on the look-out for it in various likely directions, but I am staying here with a couple of plain-clothes men. I’ve a conviction that it is still somewhere in this neighbourhood, and I mean to stick here in the hope that I may spot somebody trying to move it.”

As the inspector was speaking we had been walking slowly from the station towards the village, which was on the opposite side of the river. On the bridge Thorndyke halted and looked down the river and over the wide expanse

of marshy country.

“This is an ideal place for a bullion robbery,” he remarked. “A tidal river near to the sea and a network of creeks, in any one of which one could hide a boat or sink the booty below tide-marks. Have you heard of any strange craft having put in here?”

“Yes. There’s a little ramshackle bawley from Leigh—but her crew of two ragamuffins are not Leigh men. And they’ve made a mess of their visit—got their craft on the mud on the top of the spring tide. There she is, on that spit; and there she’ll be till next spring tide. But I’ve been over her carefully and I’ll swear the stuff isn’t aboard her. I had all the ballast out and emptied the lazarette and the chain locker.”

“And what about the barge?”

“She’s a regular trader here. Her crew—the skipper and his son—are quite respectable men and they belong here. There they go in that boat; I expect they are off on this tide. But they seem to be making for the bawley.”

As he spoke the inspector produced a pair of glasses, through which he watched the movements of the barge’s jolly-boat, and a couple of elderly fishermen, who were crossing the bridge, halted to look on. The barge’s boat ran alongside the stranded bawley, and one of the rowers hailed; whereupon two men tumbled up from the cabin and dropped into the boat, which immediately pushed off and headed for the barge.

“Them bawley blokes seems to be taking a passage along of old Bill Somers,” one of the fishermen remarked, levelling a small telescope at the barge as the boat drew alongside and the four men climbed on board. “Going to work their passage, too,” he added as the two passengers proceeded immediately to man the windlass while the crew let go the brails and hooked the main-sheet block to the traveller.

“Rum go,” commented Badger, glaring at the barge through his glasses; “but they haven’t taken anything aboard with them. I could see that.”

“You have overhauled the barge, I suppose?” said Thorndyke.

“Yes. Went right through her. Nothing there. She’s light. There was no place aboard her where you could hide a split-pea.”

“Did you get her anchor up?”

“No,” replied Badger. “I didn’t. I suppose I ought to have done so. However, they’re getting it up themselves now.” As he spoke, the rapid clink of a windlass-pawl was borne across the water, and through my prismatic

glasses I could see the two passengers working for all they were worth at the cranks. Presently the clink of the pawl began to slow down somewhat and the two bargemen, having got the sails set, joined the toilers at the windlass, but even then there was no great increase of speed.

“Anchor seems to come up uncommon heavy,” one of the fishermen remarked.

“Aye,” the other agreed. “Got foul of an old mooring, maybe.”

“Look out for the anchor, Badger,” Thorndyke said in a low voice, gazing steadily through his binocular. “It is out of the ground. The cable is up and down and the barge is drifting off on the tide.”

Even as he spoke the ring and stock of the anchor rose slowly out of the water, and now I could see that a second chain was shackled loosely to the cable, down which it had slid until it was stopped by the ring of the anchor. Badger had evidently seen it too, for he ejaculated, “Hallo!” and added a few verbal flourishes which I need not repeat. A few more turns of the windlass brought the flukes of the anchor clear of the water, and dangling against them was an undeniable wooden case, securely slung with lashings of stout chain. Badger cursed volubly, and, turning to the fishermen, exclaimed in a rather offensively peremptory tone:

“I want a boat. Now. This instant.”

The elder piscator regarded him doggedly and replied: “All right. I ain’t got no objection.”

“Where can I get a boat?” the inspector demanded, nearly purple with excitement and anxiety.

“Where do you think?” the mariner responded, evidently nettled by the inspector’s masterful tone. “Pastrycook’s? Or livery stables?”

“Look here,” said Badger. “I’m a police officer and I want to board that barge, and I am prepared to pay handsomely. Now where can I get a boat?”

“We’ll put you aboard of her,” replied the fisherman, “that is, if we can catch her. But I doubt it. She’s off, that’s what she is. And there’s something queer a-going on aboard of her,” he added in a somewhat different tone.

There was. I had been observing it. The case had been, with some difficulty, hoisted on board, and then suddenly there had broken out an altercation between the two bargees and their passengers, and this had now developed into what looked like a free fight. It was difficult to see exactly what was happening, for the barge was drifting rapidly down the river, and her sails,

blowing out first on one side and then on the other, rather obscured the view. Presently, however, the sails filled and a man appeared at the wheel; then the barge jibed round, and with a strong ebb tide and a fresh breeze, very soon began to grow small in the distance.

Meanwhile the fishermen had bustled off in search of a boat, and the inspector had raced to the bridge-head, where he stood gesticulating frantically and blowing his whistle, while Thorndyke continued placidly to watch the receding barge through his binocular.

“What are we going to do?” I asked, a little surprised at my colleague’s inaction.

“What can we do?” he asked in reply. “Badger will follow the barge. He probably won’t overtake her, but he will prevent her from making a landing until they get out into the estuary, and then he may possibly get assistance. The chase is in his hands.”

“Are we going with him?”

“I am not. This looks like being an all-night expedition, and I must be at our chambers to-morrow morning. Besides, the chase is not our affair. But if you would like to join Badger there is no reason why you shouldn’t. I can look after the practice.”

“Well,” I said, “I think I should rather like to be in at the death, if it won’t inconvenience you. But it is possible that they may get away with the booty.”

“Quite,” he agreed; “and then it would be useful to know exactly how and where it disappears. Yes, go with them, by all means, and keep a sharp lookout.”

At this moment Badger returned with the two plain-clothes men whom his whistle had called from their posts, and simultaneously a boat was seen approaching the steps by the bridge, rowed by the two fishermen. The inspector looked at us inquiringly. “Are you coming to see the sport?” he asked.

“Doctor Jervis would like to come with you,” Thorndyke replied. “I have to get back to London. But you will be a fair boat-load without me.”

This appeared to be also the view of the two fishermen, as they brought up at the steps and observed the four passengers; but they made no demur beyond inquiring if there were not any more; and when we had taken our places in the stern sheets, they pushed off and pulled through the bridge and away down stream. Gradually, the village receded and the houses and the bridge grew

small and more distant, though they remained visible for a long time over the marshy levels; and still, as I looked back through my glasses, I could see Thorndyke on the bridge, watching the pursuit with his binocular to his eyes.

Meanwhile the fugitive barge, having got some two miles start, seemed to be drawing ahead. But it was only at intervals that we could see her, for the tide was falling fast and we were mostly hemmed in by the high, muddy banks. Only when we entered a straight reach of the river could we see her sails over the land; and every time that she came into view, she appeared perceptibly smaller.

When the river grew wider, the mast was stepped and a good-sized lug-sail hoisted, though one of the fishermen continued to ply his oar on the weather side, while the other took the tiller. This improved our pace appreciably; but still, whenever we caught a glimpse of the barge, it was evident that she was still gaining.

On one of these occasions the man at the tiller, standing up to get a better view, surveyed our quarry intently for nearly a minute and then addressed the inspector.

“She’s a-going to give us the go-by, mister,” he observed with conviction.

“Still gaining?” asked Badger.

“Aye. She’s a-going to slip across the tail of Foulness Sand into the deep channel. And that’s the last we shall see of her.”

“But can’t we get into the channel the same way?” demanded Badger.

“Well, d’ye see,” replied the fisherman, “ ’tis like this. Tide’s a-running out, but there’ll be enough for her. It’ll just carry her out through the Whitaker Channel and across the spit. Then it’ll turn, and up she’ll go, London way, on the flood. But we shall catch the flood-tide in the Whitaker Channel, and a rare old job we’ll have to get out; and when we do get out, that barge’ll be miles away.”

The inspector swore long and earnestly. He even alluded to himself as a “blithering idiot.” But that helped matters not at all. The fisherman’s dismal prophecy was fulfilled in every horrid detail. When we were approaching the Whitaker Channel the barge was just crossing the spit, and the last of the ebb-tide was trickling out. By the time we were fairly in the Channel the tide had turned and was already flowing in with a speed that increased every minute; while over the sand we could see the barge, already out in the open estuary, heading to the west on the flood-tide at a good six knots.

Poor Badger was frantic. With yearning eyes fixed on the dwindling barge, he cursed, entreated, encouraged and made extravagant offers. He even took an oar and pulled with such desperate energy that he caught a crab and turned a neat back somersault into the fisherman's lap. The two mariners pulled until their oars bent like canes; but still the sandy banks crept by, inch by inch, and ever the turbid water seemed to pour up the channel more and yet more swiftly. It was a fearful struggle and seemed to last for hours; and when, at last, the boat crawled out across the spit and the exhausted rowers rested on their oars, the sun was just setting and the barge had disappeared into the west.

I was really sorry for Badger. His oversight in respect of the anchor was a very natural one for a landsman, and he had evidently taken infinite pains over the case and shown excellent judgment in keeping a close watch on the neighbourhood of Garbridge; and now, after all his care, it looked as if both the robbers and their booty had slipped through his fingers. It was desperately bad luck.

"Well," said the elder fisherman, "they've give us a run for our money; but they've got clear away. What's to be done now, mister?"

Badger had nothing to suggest excepting that we should pull or sail up the river in the hope of getting some assistance on the way. He was in the lowest depths of despair and dejection. But now, when Fortune seemed to have deserted us utterly, and failure appeared to be an accomplished fact, Providence intervened.

A small steam vessel that had been approaching from the direction of the East Swin suddenly altered her course and bore down as if to speak us. The fisherman who had last spoken looked at her attentively for a few moments and then slapped his thigh. "Saved, by gum!" he exclaimed. "This'll do your trick, mister. Here comes a Customs cruiser."

Instantly the two fishermen bent to their oars to meet the oncoming craft, and in a few minutes we were alongside, Badger hailing like a bull of Bashan. A brief explanation to the officer in charge secured a highly sympathetic promise of help. We all scrambled up on deck; the boat was dropped astern at the scope of her painter; the engine-room bell jangled merrily, and the smart, yacht-like vessel began to forge ahead.

"Now then," said the officer, as his craft gathered way, "give us a description of this barge. What is she like?"

"She's a small stumpy," the senior fisherman explained, "flying light; wants paint badly; steers with a wheel; green transom with *Bluebell, Maldon*, cut in and gilded. Seemed to be keeping along the north shore."

With these particulars in his mind, the officer explored the western horizon with a pair of night-glasses, although it was still broad daylight. Presently he reported: "There's a stumpy in a line with the Blacktail Spit buoy. Just take a look at her." He handed his glasses to the fisherman, who, after a careful inspection of the stranger, gave it as his opinion that she was our quarry. "Probably makin' for Southend or Leigh," said he, and added: "I'll bet she's bound for Benfleet Creek. Nice quiet place, that, to land the stuff."

Our recent painful experience was now reversed, for as our swift little vessel devoured the miles of water, the barge, which we were all watching eagerly, loomed up larger every minute. By the time we were abreast of the Mouse Lightship, she was but a few hundred yards ahead, and even through my glasses, the name *Bluebell* was clearly legible. Badger nearly wept with delight; the officer in charge smiled an anticipatory smile; the deck-hands girded up their loins for the coming capture and the plain-clothes men each furtively polished a pair of handcuffs.

At length the little cruiser came fairly abreast of the barge—not unobserved by the two men on her deck. Then she sheered in suddenly and swept alongside. One hand neatly hooked a shroud with a grappling iron and made fast while a couple of preventive officers, the plain-clothes men and the inspector jumped down simultaneously on to the barge's deck. For a moment, the two bawley men were inclined to show fight; but the odds were too great. After a perfunctory scuffle they both submitted to be handcuffed and were at once hauled up on board the cruiser and lodged in the fore-peak under guard. Then the chief officer, the two fishermen and I jumped on board the barge and followed Badger down the companion hatch to the cabin.

It was a curious scene that was revealed in that little cupboard-like apartment by the light of Badger's electric torch. On each of the two lockers was stretched a man, securely lashed with lead-line and having drawn over his face a knitted stocking cap, while on the little triangular fixed table rested an iron-bound box which I instantly identified by my recollection of the description of the bullion-case in the ship's manifest. It was but the work of a minute to liberate the skipper and his son and send them up, wrathful but substantially uninjured, to refresh on the cruiser; and then the ponderous treasure-chest was borne in triumph by two muscular deck-hands, up the narrow steps, to be hoisted to the Government vessel.

"Well, well," said the inspector, mopping his face with his handkerchief, "all's well that ends well, but I thought I had lost the men and the stuff that time. What are you going to do? I shall stay on board as this boat is going right up to the Custom House in London; but if you want to get home sooner, I dare

say the chief officer will put you ashore at Southend.”

I decided to adopt this course, and I was accordingly landed at Southend Pier with a telegram from Badger to his head-quarters; and at Southend I was fortunate enough to catch an express train which brought me to Fenchurch Street while the night was still young.

When I reached our chambers, I found Thorndyke seated by the fire, serenely studying a brief. He stood up as I entered and, laying aside the brief, remarked:

“You are back sooner than I expected. How sped the chase? Did you catch the barge?”

“Yes. We’ve got the men and we’ve got the bullion. But we very nearly lost both”; and here I gave him an account of the pursuit and the capture, to which he listened with the liveliest interest. “That Customs cruiser was a piece of sheer luck,” said he, when I had concluded. “I am delighted. This capture simplifies the case for us enormously.”

“It seems to me to dispose of the case altogether,” said I. “The property is recovered and the thieves are in custody. But I think most of the credit belongs to Badger.”

Thorndyke smiled enigmatically. “I should let him have it all, Jervis,” he said; and then, after a reflective pause, he continued: “We will go round to Scotland Yard in the morning to verify the capture. If the package agrees with the description in the bill of lading, the case, as you say, is disposed of.”

“It is hardly necessary,” said I. “The marks were all correct and the Customs seals were unbroken—but still, I know you won’t be satisfied until you have verified everything for yourself. And I suppose you are right.”

It was past eleven in the following forenoon when we invaded Superintendent Miller’s office at Scotland Yard. That genial officer looked up from his desk as we entered and laughed joyously. “I told you so, Badger,” he chuckled, turning to the inspector, who had also looked up and was regarding us with a foxy smile. “I knew the doctor wouldn’t be satisfied until he had seen it with his own eyes. I suppose that is what you have come for, sir?”

“Yes,” was the reply. “It is a mere formality, of course, but, if you don’t mind——”

“Not in the least,” replied Miller. “Come along, Badger, and show the doctor your prize.”

The two officers conducted us to a room, which the superintendent unlocked, and which contained a small table, a measuring standard, a weighing machine, a set of Snellen's test-types, and the now historic case of bullion. The latter Thorndyke inspected closely, checking the marks and dimensions by his notes.

"I see you haven't opened it," he remarked.

"No," replied Miller. "Why should we? The Customs seals are intact."

"I thought you might like to know what was inside," Thorndyke explained.

The two officers looked at him quickly and the inspector exclaimed: "But we do know. It was opened and checked at the Customs."

"What do you suppose is inside?" Thorndyke asked.

"I don't suppose," Badger replied testily. "I know. There are four bars of gold inside."

"Well," said Thorndyke, "as the representative of the Insurance Company, I should like to see the contents of that case."

The two officers stared at him in amazement, as also, I must admit, did I. The implied doubt seemed utterly contrary to reason.

"This is scepticism with a vengeance!" said Miller. "How on earth is it possible—but there, I suppose if you are not satisfied, we should be justified _____"

He glanced at his subordinate, who snorted impatiently: "Oh, open it and let him see the bars. And then, I suppose, he will want us to make an assay of the metal."

The superintendent retired with wrinkled brows and presently returned with a screwdriver, a hammer and a case-opener. Very deftly he broke the seals, extracted the screws and prised up the lid of the case, inside which were one or two folds of thick canvas. Lifting these with something of a flourish, he displayed the upper pair of dull, yellow bars.

"Are you satisfied now, sir?" demanded Badger. "Or do you want to see the other two?"

Thorndyke looked reflectively at the two bars, and the two officers looked inquiringly at him (but one might as profitably have watched the expression on the face of a ship's figure-head). Then he took from his pocket a folding foot-rule and quickly measured the three dimensions of one of the bars.

"Is that weighing machine reliable?" he asked.

“It is correct to an ounce,” the superintendent replied, gazing at my colleague with a slightly uneasy expression. “Why?”

By way of reply Thorndyke lifted out the bar that he had measured and carrying it across to the machine, laid it on the platform and carefully adjusted the weights.

“Well?” the superintendent queried anxiously, as Thorndyke took the reading from the scale.

“Twenty-nine pounds, three ounces,” replied Thorndyke.

“Well?” repeated the superintendent. “What about it?”

Thorndyke looked at him impassively for a moment, and then, in the same quiet tone, answered: “Lead.”

“What!” the two officers shrieked in unison, darting across to the scale and glaring at the bar of metal. Then Badger recovered himself and expostulated, not without temper, “Nonsense, sir. Look at it. Can’t you see that it is gold?”

“I can see that it is gilded,” replied Thorndyke.

“But,” protested Miller, “the thing is impossible! What makes you think it is lead?”

“It is just a question of specific gravity,” was the reply. “This bar contains seventy-two cubic inches of metal and it weighs twenty-nine pounds, three ounces. Therefore it is a bar of lead. But if you are still doubtful, it is quite easy to settle the matter. May I cut a small piece off the bar?”

The superintendent gasped and looked at his subordinate. “I suppose,” said he, “under the circumstances—eh, Badger? Yes. Very well, doctor.”

Thorndyke produced a strong pocket-knife, and, having lifted the bar to the table, applied the knife to one corner and tapped it smartly with the hammer. The blade passed easily through the soft metal, and as the detached piece fell to the floor, the two officers and I craned forward eagerly. And then all possible doubts were set at rest. There was no mistaking the white, silvery lustre of the freshly-cut surface.

“Snakes!” exclaimed the superintendent. “This is a fair knock-out! Why, the blighters have got away with the stuff, after all! Unless,” he added, with a quizzical look at Thorndyke, “you know where it is, doctor. I expect you do.”

“I believe I do,” said Thorndyke, “and if you care to come down with me to the London Docks, I think I can hand it over to you.”

The superintendent's face brightened appreciably. Not so Badger's. That afflicted officer flung down the chip of metal that he had been examining, and turning to Thorndyke, demanded sourly: "Why didn't you tell us this before, sir? You let me go off chivvying that damn barge, and you knew all the time that the stuff wasn't on board."

"My dear Badger," Thorndyke expostulated, "don't you see that these lead bars are essential to our case? They prove that the gold bars were never landed and that they are consequently still on the ship. Which empowers us to detain any gold that we may find on her."

"There, now, Badger," said the superintendent, "it's no use for you to argue with the doctor. He's like a giraffe. He can see all round him at once. Let us get on to the Docks."

Having locked the room, we all sallied forth, and, taking a train at Charing Cross Station, made our way by Mark Lane and Fenchurch Street to Wapping, where, following Thorndyke, we entered the Docks and proceeded straight to a wharf near the Wapping entrance. Here Thorndyke exchanged a few words with a Customs official, who hurried away and presently returned accompanied by an officer of higher rank. The latter, having saluted Thorndyke and cast a slightly amused glance at our little party, said: "They've landed that package that you spoke about. I've had it put in my office for the present. Will you come and have a look at it?"

We followed him to his office behind a long row of sheds, where, on a table, was a strong wooden case, somewhat larger than the "bullion"-case, while on the desk a large, many-leaved document lay open.

"This is your case, I think," said the official; "but you had better check it by the manifest. Here is the entry: 'One case containing seventeen and three-quarter dozen brass six-inch by three-eighths screw-bolts with nuts. Dimensions, sixteen inches by thirteen by nine. Gross weight a hundred and nineteen pounds; net weight a hundred and thirteen pounds.' Consigned to 'Jackson and Walker, 593 Great Alie Street, London, E.' Is that the one?"

"That is the one," Thorndyke replied.

"Then," said our friend, "we'll get it open and have a look at those brass screw-bolts."

With a dexterity surprising in an official of such high degree, he had the screws out in a twinkling, and prising up the lid, displayed a fold of coarse canvas. As he lifted this the two police officers peered eagerly into the case; and suddenly the eager expression on Badger's face changed to one of bitter

disappointment.

“You’ve missed fire this time, sir,” he snapped. “This is just a case of brass bolts.”

“Gold bolts, inspector,” Thorndyke corrected, placidly. He picked out one and handed it to the astonished detective. “Did you ever feel a brass bolt of that weight?” he asked.

“Well, it certainly is devilish heavy,” the inspector admitted, weighing it in his hand and passing it on to Miller.

“Its weight, as stated on the manifest,” said Thorndyke, “works out at well over eight and a half ounces, but we may as well check it.” He produced from his pocket a little spring balance, to which he slung the bolt. “You see,” he said, “it weighs eight ounces and two-thirds. But a brass bolt of the same size would weigh only three ounces and four-fifths. There is not the least doubt that these bolts are gold; and as you see that their aggregate weight is a hundred and thirteen while the weight of the four missing bars is a hundred and thirteen pounds, two ounces, it is a reasonable inference that these bolts represent those bars; and an uncommonly good job they made of the melting to lose only two ounces. Has the consignee’s agent turned up yet?”

“He is waiting outside,” replied the officer, with a pleased smile, “hopping about like a pea in a frying-pan. I’ll call him in.”

He did so, and a small, seedy man of strongly Semitic aspect approached the door with nervous caution and a rather pale face. But when his beady eye fell on the open case and the portentous assembly in the office, he turned about and fled along the wharf as if the hosts of the Philistines were at his heels.

“Of course it is all perfectly simple, as you say,” I replied to Thorndyke as we strolled back up Nightingale Lane, “but I don’t see where you got your start. What made you think that the stolen case was a dummy?”

“At first,” Thorndyke replied, “it was just a matter of alternative hypotheses. It was purely speculative. The robbery described by Halethorpe was a very crude affair. It was planned in quite the wrong way. Noting this, I naturally asked myself: What is the right way to steal a case of gold ingots? Now, the outstanding difficulty in such a robbery arises from the ponderous nature of the thing stolen, and the way to overcome that difficulty is to get away with the booty at leisure before the robbery is discovered—the longer the better. It is also obvious that if you can delude someone into stealing your dummy you will have covered up your tracks most completely; for if that someone is caught, the issues are extremely confused, and if he is not caught,

all the tracks lead away from you. Of course, he will discover the fraud when he tries to dispose of the swag, but his lips are sealed by the fact that he has, himself, committed a felony. So that is the proper strategical plan; and, though it was wildly improbable, and there was nothing whatever to suggest it, still, the possibility that this crude robbery might cover a more subtle one had to be borne in mind. It was necessary to make absolutely certain that the gold bars were really in the case when it left Bellhaven. I had practically no doubt that they were. Our visit to the Custom House was little more than a formality, just to give us an undeniable datum from which to make our start. We had to find somebody who had actually seen the case open and verified the contents, and when we found that man—Mr. Byrne—it instantly became obvious that the wildly improbable thing had really happened. The gold bars had already disappeared. I had calculated the approximate size of the real bars. They would contain forty-two cubic inches, and would be about seven inches by three by two. The dimensions given by Byrne—evidently correct, as shown by those of the case, which the bars fitted pretty closely—were impossible. If those bars had been gold, they would have weighed two hundred pounds, instead of the hundred and thirteen pounds shown on his report. The astonishing thing is that Byrne did not observe the discrepancy. There are not many Customs officers who would have let it pass.”

“Isn’t it rather odd,” I asked, “that the thieves should have gambled on such a remote chance?”

“It is pretty certain,” he replied, “that they were unaware of the risk they were taking. Probably they assumed—as most persons would have done—that a case of bullion would be merely inspected and passed. Few persons realise the rigorous methods of the Customs officers. But to resume: It was obvious that the ‘gold’ bars that Byrne had examined were dummies. The next question was, where were the real bars? Had they been made away with, or were they still on the ship? To settle this question I decided to go through the manifest and especially through the column of net weights. And there, presently, I came upon a package the net weight of which was within two ounces of the weight of the stolen bars. And that package was a parcel of brass screw-bolts—on a homeward-bound ship! But who on earth sends brass bolts from Africa to London? The anomaly was so striking that I examined the entry more closely, and then I found—by dividing the net weight by the number of bolts—that each of these little bolts weighed over half a pound. But, if this were so, those bolts could be of no other metal than gold or platinum, and were almost certainly gold. Also, their aggregate weight was exactly that of the stolen bars, less two ounces, which probably represented loss in melting.”

“And the scriverloes,” said I, “and the gum copal and the kola nuts; what was their bearing on the inquiry? I can’t, even now, trace any connection.”

Thorndyke cast an astonished glance at me, and then replied with a quiet chuckle: “There wasn’t any. Those notes were for the benefit of the shipping gentleman. As he would look over my shoulder, I had to give him something to read and think about. If I had noted only the brass bolts, I should have virtually informed him of the nature of my suspicions.”

“Then, really, you had the case complete when we left Bellhaven?”

“Theoretically, yes. But we had to recover the stolen case, for without those lead ingots we could not prove that the gold bolts were stolen property, any more than one could prove a murder without evidence of the death of the victim.”

“And how do you suppose the robbery was carried out? How was the gold got out of the ship’s strong-room?”

“I should say it was never there. The robbers, I suspect, are the ship’s mate, the chief engineer and possibly the purser. The mate controls the stowage of cargo, and the chief engineer controls the repair shop and has the necessary skill and knowledge to deal with the metal. On receiving the advice of the bullion consignment, I imagine they prepared the dummy case in agreement with the description. When the bullion arrived, the dummy case would be concealed on deck and the exchange made as soon as the bullion was put on board. The dummy would be sent to the strong-room and the real case carried to a prepared hiding-place. Then the engineer would cut up the bars, melt them piecemeal and cast them into bolts in an ordinary casting-flask, using an iron bolt as a model, and touching up the screw-threads with a die. The mate could enter the case on the manifest when he pleased, and send the bill of lading by post to the nominal consignee. That is what I imagine to have been the procedure.”

Thorndyke’s solution turned out to be literally correct. The consignee, pursued by Inspector Badger along the quay, was arrested at the dock gates and immediately volunteered King’s evidence. Thereupon the mate, the chief engineer and the purser of the steamship *Labadi* were arrested and brought to trial; when they severally entered a plea of guilty and described the method of the robbery almost in Thorndyke’s words.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

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[The end of *The Stolen Ingots* by Richard Austin Freeman]