

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

Number Three

Echo of a Mutiny

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I. Death on the Girdler

POPULAR belief ascribes to infants and the lower animals certain occult powers of divining character denied to the reasoning faculties of the human adult; and is apt to accept their judgment as finally over-riding the pronouncements of mere experience.

Whether this belief rests upon any foundation other than the universal love of paradox it is unnecessary to inquire. It is very generally entertained, especially by ladies of a certain social status; and by Mrs. Thomas Solly it was loyally maintained as an article of faith.

“Yes,” she moralised, “it’s surprisin’ how they know, the little children and the dumb animals. But they do. There’s no deceivin’ *them*. They can tell the gold from the dross in a moment, they can, and they reads the human heart like a book. Wonderful, I call it. I suppose it’s instinct.”

Having delivered herself of this priceless gem of philosophic thought, she thrust her arms elbow-deep into the foaming wash-tub and glanced admiringly at her lodger as he sat in the doorway, supporting on one knee an obese infant of eighteen months and on the other a fine tabby cat.

James Brown was an elderly sea-faring man, small and slight in build and in manner suave, insinuating and perhaps a trifle sly. But he had all the sailor’s love of children and animals, and the sailor’s knack of making himself acceptable to them, for, as he sat with an empty pipe wobbling in the grasp of his toothless gums, the baby beamed with humid smiles, and the cat, rolled into a fluffy ball and purring like a stocking-loom, worked its fingers ecstatically as if it were trying on a new pair of gloves.

“It must be mortal lonely out at the lighthouse,” Mrs. Solly resumed. “Only three men and never a neighbour to speak to; and, Lord! what a muddle they must be in with no woman to look after them and keep ’em tidy. But you won’t be overworked, Mr. Brown, in these long days; daylight till past nine o’clock. I don’t know what you’ll do to pass the time.”

“Oh, I shall find plenty to do, I expect,” said Brown, “what with cleanin’ the lamps and glasses and paintin’ up the ironwork. And that reminds me,” he

added, looking round at the clock, “that time’s getting on. High water at half-past ten, and here it’s gone eight o’clock.”

Mrs. Solly, acting on the hint, began rapidly to fish out the washed garments and wring them out into the form of short ropes. Then, having dried her hands on her apron, she relieved Brown of the protesting baby.

“Your room will be ready for you, Mr. Brown,” said she, “when your turn comes for a spell ashore; and main glad me and Tom will be to see you back.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Solly, ma’am,” answered Brown, tenderly placing the cat on the floor; “you won’t be more glad than what I will.” He shook hands warmly with his landlady, kissed the baby, chucked the cat under the chin, and, picking up his little chest by its becket, swung it on to his shoulder and strode out of the cottage.

His way lay across the marshes, and, like the ships in the offing, he shaped his course by the twin towers of Reculver that stood up grotesquely on the rim of the land; and as he trod the springy turf, Tom Solly’s fleecy charges looked up at him with vacant stares and valedictory bleatings. Once, at a dyke-gate, he paused to look back at the fair Kentish landscape: at the grey tower of St. Nicholas-at-Wade peeping above the trees and the far-away mill at Sarre, whirling slowly in the summer breeze; and, above all, at the solitary cottage where, for a brief spell in his stormy life, he had known the homely joys of domesticity and peace. Well, that was over for the present, and the lighthouse loomed ahead. With a half-sigh he passed through the gate and walked on towards Reculver.

Outside the whitewashed cottages with their official black chimneys a petty-officer of the coast-guard was adjusting the halyards of the flagstaff. He looked round as Brown approached, and hailed him cheerily.

“Here you are, then,” said he, “all figged out in your new togs, too. But we’re in a bit of a difficulty, d’ye see. We’ve got to pull up to Whitstable this morning, so I can’t send a man out with you and I can’t spare a boat.”

“Have I got to swim out, then?” asked Brown.

The coast-guard grinned. “Not in them new clothes, mate,” he answered. “No, but there’s old Willett’s boat; he isn’t using her to-day; he’s going over to Minster to see his daughter, and he’ll let us have the loan of the boat. But there’s no one to go with you, and I’m responsible to Willett.”

“Well, what about it?” asked Brown, with the deep-sea sailor’s (usually misplaced) confidence in his power to handle a sailing-boat. “D’ye think I can’t manage a tub of a boat? Me what’s used the sea since I was a kid of ten?”

“Yes,” said the coast-guard; “but who’s to bring her back?”

“Why, the man that I’m going to relieve,” answered Brown. “He don’t want to swim no more than what I do.”

The coast-guard reflected with his telescope pointed at a passing barge. “Well, I suppose it’ll be all right,” he concluded; “but it’s a pity they couldn’t send the tender round. However, if you undertake to send the boat back, we’ll get her afloat. It’s time you were off.”

He strolled away to the back of the cottages, whence he presently returned with two of his mates, and the four men proceeded along the shore to where Willett’s boat lay just above high-water mark.

The *Emily* was a beamy craft of the type locally known as a “half-share skiff,” solidly built of oak, with varnished planking and fitted with main and mizzen lugs. She was a good handful for four men, and, as she slid over the soft chalk rocks with a hollow rumble, the coast-guards debated the advisability of lifting out the bags of shingle with which she was ballasted. However, she was at length dragged down, ballast and all, to the water’s edge, and then, while Brown stepped the mainmast, the petty-officer gave him his directions. “What you’ve got to do,” said he, “is to make use of the flood-tide. Keep her nose nor’-east, and with this trickle of nor’-westerly breeze you ought to make the lighthouse in one board. Anyhow, don’t let her get east of the lighthouse, or, when the ebb sets in, you’ll be in a fix.”

To these admonitions Brown listened with jaunty indifference as he hoisted the sails and watched the incoming tide creep over the level shore. Then the boat lifted on the gentle swell. Putting out an oar, he gave a vigorous shove off that sent the boat, with a final scrape, clear of the beach, and then, having dropped the rudder on to its pintles, he seated himself and calmly belayed the main-sheet.

“There he goes,” growled the coast-guard; “makin’ fast his sheet. They *will* do it” (he invariably did it himself), “and that’s how accidents happen. I hope old Willett’ll see his boat back all right.”

He stood for some time watching the dwindling boat as it sidled across the smooth water; then he turned and followed his mates towards the station.

Out on the south-western edge of the Girdler Sand, just inside the two-fathom line, the spindle-shanked lighthouse stood a-straddle on its long screw-piles like some uncouth red-bodied wading-bird. It was now nearly half-flood tide. The highest shoals were long since covered, and the lighthouse rose above the smooth sea as solitary as a slaver becalmed in the “middle passage.”

On the gallery outside the lantern were two men, the entire staff of the building, of whom one sat huddled in a chair with his left leg propped up with pillows on another, while his companion rested a telescope on the rail and peered at the faint grey line of the distant land and the two tiny points that marked the twin spires of Reculver.

“I don’t see any signs of the boat, Harry,” said he.

The other man groaned. “I shall lose the tide,” he complained, “and then there’s another day gone.”

“They can pull you down to Birchington and put you in the train,” said the first man.

“I don’t want no trains,” growled the invalid. “The boat’ll be bad enough. I suppose there’s nothing coming our way, Tom?”

Tom turned his face eastward and shaded his eyes. “There’s a brig coming across the tide from the north,” he said. “Looks like a collier.” He pointed his telescope at the approaching vessel, and added: “She’s got two new cloths in her upper fore top-sail, one on each leech.”

The other man sat up eagerly. “What’s her trysail like, Tom?” he asked.

“Can’t see it,” replied Tom. “Yes, I can, now: it’s tanned. Why, that’ll be the old *Utopia*, Harry; she’s the only brig I know that’s got a tanned trysail.”

“Look here, Tom,” exclaimed the other, “if that’s the *Utopia*, she’s going to my home and I’m going aboard of her. Captain Mockett’ll give me a passage, I know.”

“You oughtn’t to go until you’re relieved, you know, Barnett,” said Tom doubtfully; “it’s against regulations to leave your station.”

“Regulations be blowed!” exclaimed Barnett. “My leg’s more to me than the regulations. I don’t want to be a cripple all my life. Besides, I’m no good here, and this new chap, Brown, will be coming out presently. You run up the signal, Tom, like a good comrade, and hail the brig.”

“Well, it’s your look-out,” said Tom, “and I don’t mind saying that if I was in your place I should cut off home and see a doctor, if I got the chance.” He sauntered off to the flag-locker, and, selecting the two code-flags, deliberately toggled them on to the halyards. Then, as the brig swept up within range, he hoisted the little balls of bunting to the flagstaff-head and jerked the halyards, when the two flags blew out making the signal “Need assistance.”

Promptly a coal-soiled answering pennant soared to the brig’s main-truck;

less promptly the collier went about, and, turning her nose down stream, slowly drifted stern-forwards towards the lighthouse. Then a boat slid out through her gangway, and a couple of men plied the oars vigorously.

“Lighthouse ahoy!” roared one of them, as the boat came within hail. “What’s amiss?”

“Harry Barnett has broke his leg,” shouted the lighthouse keeper, “and he wants to know if Captain Mockett will give him a passage to Whitstable.”

The boat turned back to the brig, and after a brief and bellowed consultation, once more pulled towards the lighthouse.

“Skipper says yus,” roared the sailor, when he was within ear-shot, “and he says look alive, ‘cause he don’t want to miss his tide.”

The injured man heaved a sigh of relief. “That’s good news,” said he, “though, how the blazes I’m going to get down the ladder is more than I can tell. What do you say, Jeffreys?”

“I say you’d better let me lower you with the tackle,” replied Jeffreys. “You can sit in the bight of a rope and I’ll give you a line to steady yourself with.”

“Ah, that’ll do, Tom,” said Barnett; “but, for the Lord’s sake, pay out the fall-rope gently.”

The arrangements were made so quickly that by the time the boat was fast alongside everything was in readiness, and a minute later the injured man, dangling like a gigantic spider from the end of the tackle, slowly descended, cursing volubly to the accompaniment of the creaking of the blocks. His chest and kit-bag followed, and, as soon as these were unhooked from the tackle, the boat pulled off to the brig, which was now slowly creeping stern-foremost past the lighthouse. The sick man was hoisted up the side, his chest handed up after him, and then the brig was put on her course due south across the Kentish Flats.

Jeffreys stood on the gallery watching the receding vessel and listening to the voices of her crew as they grew small and weak in the increasing distance. Now that his gruff companion was gone, a strange loneliness had fallen on the lighthouse. The last of the homeward-bound ships had long since passed up the Princes Channel and left the calm sea desolate and blank. The distant buoys, showing as tiny black dots on the glassy surface, and the spindly shapes of the beacons which stood up from invisible shoals, but emphasised the solitude of the empty sea, and the tolling of the bell buoy on the Shivering Sand, stealing faintly down the wind, sounded weird and mournful. The day’s work was

already done. The lenses were polished, the lamps had been trimmed, and the little motor that worked the fog-horn had been cleaned and oiled. There were several odd jobs, it is true, waiting to be done, as there always are in a lighthouse; but, just now, Jeffreys was not in a working humour. A new comrade was coming into his life to-day, a stranger with whom he was to be shut up alone, night and day, for a month on end, and whose temper and tastes and habits might mean for him pleasant companionship or jangling and discord without end. Who was this man Brown? What had he been? and what was he like? These were the questions that passed, naturally enough, through the lighthouse-keeper's mind and distracted him from his usual thoughts and occupations.

Presently a speck on the landward horizon caught his eye. He snatched up the telescope eagerly to inspect it. Yes, it was a boat; but not the coast-guard's cutter, for which he was looking. Evidently a fisherman's boat and with only one man in it. He laid down the telescope with a sigh of disappointment, and, filling his pipe, leaned on the rail with a dreamy eye bent on the faint grey line of the land.

Three long years had he spent in this dreary solitude, so repugnant to his active, restless nature: three blank, interminable years, with nothing to look back on but the endless succession of summer calms, stormy nights and the chilly fogs of winter, when the unseen steamers hooted from the void and the fog-horn bellowed its hoarse warning.

Why had he come to this God-forgotten spot? and why did he stay, when the wide world called to him? And then memory painted him a picture on which his mind's eye had often looked before and which once again arose before him, shutting out the vision of the calm sea and the distant land. It was a brightly-coloured picture. It showed a cloudless sky brooding over the deep blue tropic sea; and in the middle of the picture, see-sawing gently on the quiet swell, a white-painted barque.

Her sails were clewed up untidily, her swinging yards jerked at the slack braces and her untended wheel revolved to and fro to the oscillations of the rudder.

She was not a derelict, for more than a dozen men were on her deck; but the men were all drunk and mostly asleep, and there was never an officer among them.

Then he saw the interior of one of her cabins. The chart-rack, the tell-tale compass and the chronometers marked it as the captain's cabin. In it were four men, and two of them lay dead on the deck. Of the other two, one was a small,

cunning-faced man, who was, at the moment, kneeling beside one of the corpses to wipe a knife upon its coat. The fourth man was himself.

Again, he saw the two murderers stealing off in a quarter-boat, as the barque with her drunken crew drifted towards the spouting surf of a river-bar. He saw the ship melt away in the surf like an icicle in the sunshine; and, later, two shipwrecked mariners, picked up in an open boat and set ashore at an American port.

That was why he was here. Because he was a murderer. The other scoundrel, Amos Todd, had turned Queen's Evidence and denounced him, and he had barely managed to escape. Since then he had hidden himself from the great world, and here he must continue to hide, not from the law—for his person was unknown now that his shipmates were dead—but from the partner of his crime. It was the fear of Todd that had changed him from Jeffrey Rorke to Tom Jeffreys and had sent him to the Girdler, a prisoner for life. Todd might die—might even now be dead—but he would never hear of it: would never hear the news of his release.

He roused himself and once more pointed his telescope at the distant boat. She was considerably nearer now and seemed to be heading out towards the lighthouse. Perhaps the man in her was bringing a message; at any rate, there was no sign of the coast-guard's cutter.

He went in, and, betaking himself to the kitchen, busied himself with a few simple preparations for dinner. But there was nothing to cook, for there remained the cold meat from yesterday's cooking, which he would make sufficient, with some biscuit in place of potatoes. He felt restless and unstrung; the solitude irked him, and the everlasting wash of the water among the piles jarred on his nerves.

When he went out again into the gallery the ebb-tide had set in strongly and the boat was little more than a mile distant; and now, through the glass, he could see that the man in her wore the uniform cap of the Trinity House. Then the man must be his future comrade, Brown; but this was very extraordinary. What were they to do with the boat? There was no one to take her back.

The breeze was dying away. As he watched the boat, he saw the man lower the sail and take to his oars; and something of hurry in the way the man pulled over the gathering tide, caused Jeffreys to look round the horizon. And then, for the first time, he noticed a bank of fog creeping up from the east and already so near that the beacon on the East Girdler had faded out of sight. He hastened in to start the little motor that compressed the air for the fog-horn and waited awhile to see that the mechanism was running properly. Then, as the

deck vibrated to the roar of the horn, he went out once more into the gallery.

The fog was now all round the lighthouse and the boat was hidden from view. He listened intently. The enclosing wall of vapour seemed to have shut out sound as well as vision. At intervals the horn bellowed its note of warning, and then all was still save the murmur of the water among the piles below, and, infinitely faint and far away, the mournful tolling of the bell on the Shivering Sand.

At length there came to his ear the muffled sound of oars working in the tholes; then, at the very edge of the circle of grey water that was visible, the boat appeared through the fog, pale and spectral, with a shadowy figure pulling furiously. The horn emitted a hoarse growl; the man looked round, perceived the lighthouse and altered his course towards it.

Jeffreys descended the iron stairway, and, walking along the lower gallery, stood at the head of the ladder earnestly watching the approaching stranger. Already he was tired of being alone. The yearning for human companionship had been growing ever since Barnett left. But what sort of comrade was this stranger who was coming into his life? And coming to occupy so dominant a place in it. It was a momentous question.

The boat swept down swiftly athwart the hurrying tide. Nearer it came and yet nearer: and still Jeffreys could catch no glimpse of his new comrade's face. At length it came fairly alongside and bumped against the fender-posts; the stranger whisked in an oar and grabbed a rung of the ladder, and Jeffreys dropped a coil of rope into the boat. And still the man's face was hidden.

Jeffreys leaned out over the ladder and watched him anxiously, as he made fast the rope, unhooked the sail from the traveller and unstepped the mast. When he had set all in order, the stranger picked up a small chest, and, swinging it over his shoulder, stepped on to the ladder. Slowly, by reason of his encumbrance, he mounted, rung by rung, with never an upward glance, and Jeffreys gazed down at the top of his head with growing curiosity. At last he reached the top of the ladder and Jeffreys stooped to lend him a hand. Then, for the first time, he looked up, and Jeffreys started back with a blanched face.

“God Almighty!” he gasped; “it's Amos Todd!”

As the newcomer stepped on the gallery, the fog-horn emitted a roar like that of some hungry monster. Jeffreys turned abruptly without a word, and walked to the stairs, followed by Todd, and the two men ascended with never a sound but the hollow clank of their footsteps on the iron plates. Silently Jeffreys stalked into the living-room and, as his companion followed, he turned and motioned to the latter to set down his chest.

“You ain’t much of a talker, mate,” said Todd, looking round the room in some surprise; “ain’t you going to say ‘good-morning’? We’re going to be good comrades, I hope. I’m Jim Brown, the new hand, I am; what might your name be?”

Jeffreys turned on him suddenly and led him to the window. “Look at me carefully, Amos Todd,” he said sternly, “and then ask yourself what my name is.”

At the sound of his voice Todd looked up with a start and turned pale as death. “It can’t be,” he whispered, “it can’t be Jeff Rorke!”

The other man laughed harshly, and, leaning forward, said in a low voice: “Hast thou found me, O mine enemy!”

“Don’t say that!” exclaimed Todd. “Don’t call me your enemy, Jeff. Lord knows but I’m glad to see you, though I’d never have known you without your beard, and with that grey hair. I’ve been to blame, Jeff, and I know it; but it ain’t no use raking up old grudges. Let bygones be bygones, Jeff, and let us be pals as we used to be.” He wiped his face with his handkerchief and watched his companion apprehensively.

“Sit down,” said Rorke, pointing to a shabby rep-covered arm-chair; “sit down and tell us what you’ve done with all that money. You’ve blued it all, I suppose, or you wouldn’t be here.”

“Robbed, Jeff,” answered Todd; “robbed of every penny. Ah! that was an unfortunate affair, that job on board the old *Sea-flower*. But it’s over and done with and we’d best forget it. They’re all dead but us, Jeff, so we’re safe enough so long as we keep our mouths shut; all at the bottom of the sea—and the best place for ’em, too.”

“Yes,” Rorke replied fiercely, “that’s the best place for your shipmates when they know too much; at the bottom of the sea or swinging at the end of a rope.” He paced up and down the little room with rapid strides, and each time that he approached Todd’s chair the latter shrank back with an expression of alarm.

“Don’t sit there staring at me,” said Rorke. “Why don’t you smoke or do something?”

Todd hastily produced a pipe from his pocket, and having filled it from a moleskin pouch, stuck it in his mouth while he searched for a match. Apparently he carried his matches loose in his pocket, for he presently brought one forth—a red-headed match, which, when he struck it on the wall, lighted with a pale-blue flame. He applied it to his pipe, sucking in his cheeks while he

kept his eyes fixed on his companion. Rorke, meanwhile, halted in his walk to cut some shavings from a cake of hard tobacco with a large clasp-knife; and, as he stood, he gazed with frowning abstraction at Todd.

“This pipe’s stopped,” said the latter, sucking ineffectually at the mouth-piece. “Have you got such a thing as a piece of wire, Jeff?”

“No, I haven’t,” replied Rorke; “not up here. I’ll get a bit from the store presently. Here, take this pipe till you can clean your own: I’ve got another in the rack there.” The sailor’s natural hospitality overcoming for the moment his animosity, he thrust the pipe that he had just filled towards Todd, who took it with a mumbled “Thank you” and an anxious eye on the open knife. On the wall beside the chair was a roughly-carved pipe-rack containing several pipes, one of which Rorke lifted out; and, as he leaned over the chair to reach it, Todd’s face went several shades paler.

“Well, Jeff,” he said, after a pause, while Rorke cut a fresh “fill” of tobacco, “are we going to be pals same as what we used to be?”

Rorke’s animosity lighted up afresh. “Am I going to be pals with the man that tried to swear away my life?” he said sternly; and after a pause he added: “That wants thinking about, that does; and meantime I must go and look at the engine.”

When Rorke had gone the new hand sat, with the two pipes in his hands, reflecting deeply. Abstractedly he stuck the fresh pipe into his mouth, and, dropping the stopped one into the rack, felt for a match. Still with an air of abstraction he lit the pipe, and, having smoked for a minute or two, rose from the chair and began softly to creep across the room, looking about him and listening intently. At the door he paused to look out into the fog, and then, having again listened attentively, he stepped on tip-toe out on to the gallery and along towards the stairway. Of a sudden the voice of Rorke brought him up with a start.

“Hallo, Todd! where are you off to?”

“I’m just going down to make the boat secure,” was the reply.

“Never you mind about the boat,” said Rorke. “I’ll see to her.”

“Right O, Jeff,” said Todd, still edging towards the stairway. “But I say, mate, where’s the other man—the man that I’m to relieve?”

“There ain’t any other man,” replied Rorke; “he went off aboard a collier.”

Todd’s face suddenly became grey and haggard. “Then, there’s no one here but us two!” he gasped; and then, with an effort to conceal his fear, he asked:

“But who’s going to take the boat back?”

“We’ll see about that presently,” replied Rorke; “you get along in and unpack your chest.”

He came out on the gallery as he spoke, with a lowering frown on his face. Todd cast a terrified glance at him, and then turned and ran for his life towards the stairway.

“Come back!” roared Rorke, springing forward along the gallery; but Todd’s feet were already clattering down the iron steps. By the time Rorke reached the head of the stairs, the fugitive was near the bottom; but here, in his haste, he stumbled, barely saving himself by the handrail, and when he recovered his balance Rorke was upon him. Todd darted to the head of the ladder, but, as he grasped the stanchion, his pursuer seized him by the collar. In a moment he had turned with his hand under his coat. There was a quick blow, a loud curse from Rorke, an answering yell from Todd, and a knife fell spinning through the air and dropped into the fore-peak of the boat below.

“You murderous little devil!” said Rorke in an ominously quiet voice, with his bleeding hand gripping his captive by the throat. “Handy with your knife as ever, eh? So you were off to give information, were you?”

“No, I wasn’t, Jeff,” replied Todd in a choking voice; “I wasn’t, s’elp me God. Let go, Jeff. I didn’t mean no harm. I was only——” With a sudden wrench he freed one hand and struck out frantically at his captor’s face. But Rorke warded off the blow, and, grasping the other wrist, gave a violent push and let go. Todd staggered backward a few paces along the staging, bringing up at the extreme edge; and here, for a sensible time, he stood with wide-open mouth and starting eye-balls, swaying and clutching wildly at the air. Then, with a shrill scream, he toppled backwards and fell, striking a pile in his descent and rebounding into the water.

In spite of the audible thump of his head on the pile, he was not stunned, for, when he rose to the surface, he struck out vigorously, uttering short, stifled cries for help. Rorke watched him with set teeth and quickened breath, but made no move. Smaller and still smaller grew the head with its little circle of ripples, swept away on the swift ebb-tide, and fainter the bubbling cries that came across the smooth water. At length as the small black spot began to fade in the fog, the drowning man, with a final effort, raised his head clear of the surface and sent a last, despairing shriek towards the lighthouse. The fog-horn sent back an answering bellow; the head sank below the surface and was seen no more; and in the dreadful stillness that settled down upon the sea there sounded faint and far away the muffled tolling of a bell.

Rorke stood for some minutes immovable, wrapped in thought. Presently the distant hoot of a steamer's whistle aroused him. The ebb-tide shipping was beginning to come down and the fog might lift at any moment; and there was the boat still alongside. She must be disposed of at once. No one had seen her arrive and no one must see her made fast to the lighthouse. Once get rid of the boat and all traces of Todd's visit would be destroyed.

He ran down the ladder and stepped into the boat. It was perfectly simple. She was heavily ballasted and would go down like a stone if she filled.

He shifted some of the bags of shingle, and, lifting the bottom boards, pulled out the plug. Instantly a large jet of water spouted up into the bottom. Rorke looked at it critically, and, deciding that it would fill her in a few minutes, replaced the bottom boards; and having secured the mast and sail with a few turns of the sheet round a thwart, to prevent them from floating away, he cast off the mooring-rope and stepped on the ladder.

As the released boat began to move away on the tide, he ran up and mounted to the upper gallery to watch her disappearance. Suddenly he remembered Todd's chest. It was still in the room below. With a hurried glance around into the fog, he ran down to the room, and snatching up the chest, carried it out on the lower gallery. After another nervous glance around to assure himself that no craft was in sight, he heaved the chest over the handrail, and, when it fell with a loud splash into the sea, he waited to watch it float away after its owner and the sunken boat. But it never rose; and presently he returned to the upper gallery.

The fog was thinning perceptibly now, and the boat remained plainly visible as she drifted away. But she sank more slowly than he had expected, and presently as she drifted farther away, he fetched the telescope and peered at her with growing anxiety. It would be unfortunate if any one saw her; if she should be picked up here, with her plug out, it would be disastrous.

He was beginning to be really alarmed. Through the glass he could see that the boat was now rolling in a sluggish, water-logged fashion, but she still showed some inches of free-board, and the fog was thinning every moment.

Presently the blast of a steamer's whistle sounded close at hand. He looked round hurriedly and, seeing nothing, again pointed the telescope eagerly at the dwindling boat. Suddenly he gave a gasp of relief. The boat had rolled gunwale under; had staggered back for a moment and then rolled again, slowly, finally, with the water pouring in over the submerged gunwale.

In a few more seconds she had vanished. Rorke lowered the telescope and took a deep breath. Now he was safe. The boat had sunk unseen. But he was

better than safe: he was free.

His evil spirit, the standing menace of his life, was gone, and the wide world, the world of life, of action, of pleasure, called to him.

In a few minutes the fog lifted. The sun shone brightly on the red-funnelled cattle-boat whose whistle had startled him just now, the summer blue came back to sky and sea, and the land peeped once more over the edge of the horizon.

He went in, whistling cheerfully, and stopped the motor; returned to coil away the rope that he had thrown to Todd; and, when he had hoisted a signal for assistance, he went in once more to eat his solitary meal in peace and gladness.

II. *“The Singing Bone”*

(Related by CHRISTOPHER JERVIS, M.D.)

To every kind of scientific work a certain amount of manual labour naturally appertains, labour that cannot be performed by the scientist himself, since art is long but life is short. A chemical analysis involves a laborious “clean up” of apparatus and laboratory, for which the chemist has no time; the preparation of a skeleton—the maceration, bleaching, “assembling,” and riveting together of bones—must be carried out by someone whose time is not too precious. And so with other scientific activities. Behind the man of science with his outfit of knowledge is the indispensable mechanic with his outfit of manual skill.

Thorndyke’s laboratory assistant, Polton, was a fine example of the latter type; deft, resourceful, ingenious and untiring. He was somewhat of an inventive genius, too; and it was one of his inventions that connected us with the singular case that I am about to record.

Though by trade a watchmaker, Polton was, by choice, an optician. Optical apparatus was the passion of his life; and when, one day, he produced for our inspection an improved prism for increasing the efficiency of gas-buoys, Thorndyke at once brought the invention to the notice of a friend at the Trinity House.

As a consequence, we three—Thorndyke, Polton and I—found ourselves early on a fine July morning making our way down Middle Temple Lane bound for the Temple Pier. A small oil-launch lay alongside the pontoon, and, as we made our appearance, a red-faced, white-whiskered gentleman stood up

in the cockpit.

“Here’s a delightful morning, doctor,” he sang out in a fine, brassy, resonant, sea-faring voice; “sort of day for a trip to the lower river, hey? Hallo, Polton! Coming down to take the bread out of our mouths, are you? Ha, ha!” The cheery laugh rang out over the river and mingled with the throb of the engine as the little launch moved off from the pier.

Captain Grumpass was one of the Elder Brethren of the Trinity House. Formerly a client of Thorndyke’s, he had subsided, as Thorndyke’s clients were apt to do, into the position of a personal friend, and his hearty regard included our invaluable assistant.

“Nice state of things,” continued the captain, with a chuckle, “when a body of nautical experts have got to be taught their business by a parcel of lawyers or doctors, what? I suppose trade’s slack and ‘Satan findeth mischief still,’ hey, Polton?”

“There isn’t much doing on the civil side, sir,” replied Polton, with a quaint, crinkly smile, “but the criminals are still going strong.”

“Ha! mystery department still flourishing, what? And, by Jove! talking of mysteries, doctor, our people have got a queer problem to work out; something quite in your line—quite. Yes, and, by the Lord Moses, since I’ve got you here, why shouldn’t I suck your brains?”

“Exactly,” said Thorndyke. “Why shouldn’t you?”

“Well, then, I will,” said the captain, “so here goes, All hands to the pump!” He lit a cigar, and, after a few preliminary puffs, began: “The mystery, shortly stated, is this: one of our lighthousemen has disappeared—vanished off the face of the earth and left no trace. He may have bolted, he may have been drowned accidentally or he may have been murdered. But I’d better give you the particulars in order. At the end of last week a barge brought into Ramsgate a letter from the screw-pile lighthouse on the Girdler. There are only two men there, and it seems that one of them, a man named Barnett, had broken his leg, and he asked that the tender should be sent to bring him ashore. Well, it happened that the local tender, the *Warden*, was up on the slip in Ramsgate Harbour, having a scrape down, and wouldn’t be available for a day or two, so, as the case was urgent the officer at Ramsgate sent a letter to the lighthouse by one of the pleasure steamers saying that the man should be relieved by boat on the following morning, which was Saturday. He also wrote to a new hand who had just been taken on, a man named James Brown, who was lodging near Reculver, waiting his turn, telling him to go out on Saturday morning in the coast-guard’s boat; and he sent a third letter to the coast-guard at Reculver

asking him to take Brown out to the lighthouse and bring Barnett ashore. Well, between them, they made a fine muddle of it. The coast-guard couldn't spare either a boat or a man, so they borrowed a fisherman's boat, and in this the man Brown started off alone, like an idiot, on the chance that Barnett would be able to sail the boat back in spite of his broken leg.

"Meanwhile Barnett, who is a Whitstable man, had signalled a collier bound for his native town, and got taken off; so that the other keeper, Thomas Jeffreys, was left alone until Brown should turn up.

"But Brown never did turn up. The coast-guard helped him to put off and saw him well out to sea, and the keeper, Jeffreys, saw a sailing-boat with one man in her, making for the lighthouse. Then a bank of fog came up and hid the boat, and when the fog cleared she was nowhere to be seen. Man and boat had vanished and left no sign."

"He may have been run down in the fog," Thorndyke suggested.

"He may," agreed the captain, "but no accident has been reported. The coast-guards think he may have capsized in a squall—they saw him make the sheet fast. But there weren't any squalls: the weather was quite calm."

"Was he all right and well when he put off?" inquired Thorndyke.

"Yes," replied the captain, "the coast-guards' report is highly circumstantial; in fact, it's full of silly details that have no bearing on anything. This is what they say." He pulled out an official letter and read: "When last seen, the missing man was seated in the boat's stern to windward of the helm. He had belayed the sheet. He was holding a pipe and tobacco-pouch in his hands and steering with his elbow. He was filling the pipe from the tobacco-pouch.' There! 'He was holding the pipe in his hand,' mark you! not with his toes; and he was filling it from a tobacco-pouch, whereas you'd have expected him to fill it from a coal-scuttle or a feeding-bottle. Bah!" The captain rammed the letter back in his pocket and puffed scornfully at his cigar.

"You are hardly fair to the coast-guard," said Thorndyke, laughing at the captain's vehemence. "The duty of a witness is to give *all* the facts, not a judicious selection."

"But, my dear sir," said Captain Grumpass, "what the deuce can it matter what the poor devil filled his pipe from?"

"Who can say?" answered Thorndyke. "It may turn out to be a highly material fact. One never knows beforehand. The value of a particular fact depends on its relation to the rest of the evidence."

"I suppose it does," grunted the captain; and he continued to smoke in reflective silence until we opened Blackwall Point, when he suddenly stood up.

"There's a steam trawler alongside our wharf," he announced. "Now what the deuce can she be doing there?" He scanned the little steamer attentively, and continued: "They seem to be landing something, too. Just pass me those glasses, Polton. Why, hang me! it's a dead body! But why on earth are they landing it on our wharf? They must have known you were coming, doctor."

As the launch swept alongside the wharf, the captain sprang up lightly and approached the group gathered round the body. "What's this?" he asked. "Why have they brought this thing here?"

The master of the trawler, who had superintended the landing, proceeded to explain.

"It's one of your men, sir," said he. "We saw the body lying on the edge of the South Shingles Sand, close to the beacon, as we passed at low water, so we put off the boat and fetched it aboard. As there was nothing to identify the man by, I had a look in his pockets and found this letter." He handed the captain an official envelope addressed to "Mr. J. Brown, c/o Mr. Solly, Shepherd, Reculver, Kent."

"Why, this is the man we were speaking about, doctor," exclaimed Captain Grumpass. "What a very singular coincidence. But what are we to do with the body?"

"You will have to write to the coroner," replied Thorndyke. "By the way, did you turn out all the pockets?" he asked, turning to the skipper of the trawler.

"No, sir," was the reply. "I found the letter in the first pocket that I felt in, so I didn't examine any of the others. Is there anything more that you want to know, sir?"

"Nothing but your name and address, for the coroner," replied Thorndyke, and the skipper, having given this information and expressed the hope that the coroner would not keep him "hanging about," returned to his vessel and pursued his way to Billingsgate.

"I wonder if you would mind having a look at the body of this poor devil, while Polton is showing us his contraptions," said Captain Grumpass.

"I can't do much without a coroner's order," replied Thorndyke; "but if it will give you any satisfaction, Jervis and I will make a preliminary inspection with pleasure."

“I should be glad if you would,” said the captain. “We should like to know that the poor beggar met his end fairly.”

The body was accordingly moved to a shed, and, as Polton was led away, carrying the black bag that contained his precious model, we entered the shed and commenced our investigation.

The deceased was a small, elderly man, decently dressed in a somewhat nautical fashion. He appeared to have been dead only two or three days, and the body, unlike the majority of seaborne corpses, was uninjured by fish or crabs. There were no fractured bones or other gross injuries, and no wounds, excepting a ragged tear in the scalp at the back of the head.

“The general appearance of the body,” said Thorndyke, when he had noted these particulars, “suggests death by drowning, though, of course, we can’t give a definite opinion until a *post mortem* has been made.”

“You don’t attach any significance to that scalp-wound, then?” I asked.

“As a cause of death? No. It was obviously inflicted during life, but it seems to have been an oblique blow that spent its force on the scalp, leaving the skull uninjured. But it is very significant in another way.”

“In what way?” I asked.

Thorndyke took out his pocket-case and extracted a pair of forceps. “Consider the circumstances,” said he. “This man put off from the shore to go to the lighthouse, but never arrived there. The question is, where did he arrive?” As he spoke he stooped over the corpse and turned back the hair round the wound with the beak of the forceps. “Look at those white objects among the hair, Jervis, and inside the wound. They tell us something, I think.”

I examined, through my lens, the chalky fragments to which he pointed. “These seem to be bits of shells and the tubes of some marine worm,” I said.

“Yes,” he answered; “the broken shells are evidently those of the acorn barnacle, and the other fragments are mostly pieces of the tubes of the common serpulæ. The inference that these objects suggest is an important one. It is that this wound was produced by some body encrusted by acorn barnacles and serpulæ; that is to say, by a body that is periodically submerged. Now, what can that body be, and how can the deceased have knocked his head against it?”

“It might be the stem of a ship that ran him down,” I suggested.

“I don’t think you would find many serpulæ on the stem of a ship,” said Thorndyke. “The combination rather suggests some stationary object between tide-marks, such as a beacon. But one doesn’t see how a man could knock his

head against a beacon, while, on the other hand, there are no other stationary objects out in the estuary to knock against except buoys, and a buoy presents a flat surface that could hardly have produced this wound. By the way, we may as well see what there is in his pockets, though it is not likely that robbery had anything to do with his death.”

“No,” I agreed, “and I see his watch is in his pocket; quite a good silver one,” I added, taking it out. “It has stopped at 12.13.”

“That may be important,” said Thorndyke, making a note of the fact; “but we had better examine the pockets one at a time, and put the things back when we have looked at them.”

The first pocket that we turned out was the left hip-pocket of the monkey jacket. This was apparently the one that the skipper had rifled, for we found in it two letters, both bearing the crest of the Trinity House. These, of course, we returned without reading, and then passed on to the right pocket. The contents of this were commonplace enough, consisting of a briar pipe, a moleskin pouch and a number of loose matches.

“Rather a casual proceeding, this,” I remarked, “to carry matches loose in the pocket, and a pipe with them, too.”

“Yes,” agreed Thorndyke; “especially with these very inflammable matches. You notice that the sticks had been coated at the upper end with sulphur before the red phosphorus heads were put on. They would light with a touch, and would be very difficult to extinguish; which, no doubt, is the reason that this type of match is so popular among seamen, who have to light their pipes in all sorts of weather.” As he spoke he picked up the pipe and looked at it reflectively, turning it over in his hand and peering into the bowl. Suddenly he glanced from the pipe to the dead man’s face and then, with the forceps, turned back the lips to look into the mouth.

“Let us see what tobacco he smokes,” said he.

I opened the sodden pouch and displayed a mass of dark, fine-cut tobacco. “It looks like shag,” I said.

“Yes, it is shag,” he replied; “and now we will see what is in the pipe. It has been only half smoked out.” He dug out the “dottle” with his pocket-knife on to a sheet of paper, and we both inspected it. Clearly it was not shag, for it consisted of coarsely-cut shreds and was nearly black.

“Shavings from a cake of ‘hard,’ ” was my verdict, and Thorndyke agreed as he shot the fragments back into the pipe.

The other pockets yielded nothing of interest, except a pocket-knife, which Thorndyke opened and examined closely. There was not much money, though as much as one would expect, and enough to exclude the idea of robbery.

“Is there a sheath-knife on that strap?” Thorndyke asked, pointing to a narrow leather belt. I turned back the jacket and looked.

“There is a sheath,” I said, “but no knife. It must have dropped out.”

“That is rather odd,” said Thorndyke. “A sailor’s sheath-knife takes a deal of shaking out as a rule. It is intended to be used in working on the rigging when the man is aloft, so that he can get it out with one hand while he is holding on with the other. It has to be and usually is very secure, for the sheath holds half the handle as well as the blade. What makes one notice the matter in this case is that the man, as you see, carried a pocket-knife; and, as this would serve all the ordinary purposes of a knife, it seems to suggest that the sheath-knife was carried for defensive purposes: as a weapon, in fact. However, we can’t get much further in the case without a *post mortem*, and here comes the captain.”

Captain Grumpass entered the shed and looked down commiseratingly at the dead seaman.

“Is there anything, doctor, that throws any light on the man’s disappearance?” he asked.

“There are one or two curious features in the case,” Thorndyke replied; “but, oddly enough, the only really important point arises out of that statement of the coast-guard’s, concerning which you were so scornful.”

“You don’t say so!” exclaimed the captain.

“Yes,” said Thorndyke; “the coast-guard states that when last seen deceased was filling his pipe from his tobacco-pouch. Now his pouch contains shag; but the pipe in his pocket contains hard cut.”

“Is there no cake tobacco in any of the pockets?”

“Not a fragment. Of course, it is possible that he might have had a piece and used it up to fill the pipe; but there is no trace of any on the blade of his pocket-knife, and you know how this juicy black cake stains a knife-blade. His sheath-knife is missing, but he would hardly have used that to shred tobacco when he had a pocket-knife.”

“No,” assented the captain; “but are you sure he hadn’t a second pipe?”

“There was only one pipe,” replied Thorndyke, “and that was not his own.”

“Not his own!” exclaimed the captain, halting by a huge, chequered buoy to stare at my colleague; “how do you know it was not his own?”

“By the appearance of the vulcanite mouth-piece,” said Thorndyke. “It showed deep tooth-marks; in fact, it was nearly bitten through. Now a man who bites through his pipe usually presents certain definite physical peculiarities, among which is, necessarily, a fairly good set of teeth. But the dead man had not a tooth in his head.”

The captain cogitated a while, and then remarked: “I don’t quite see the bearing of this.”

“Don’t you?” said Thorndyke. “It seems to me highly suggestive. Here is a man who, when last seen, was filling his pipe with a particular kind of tobacco. He is picked up dead, and his pipe contains a totally different kind of tobacco. Where did that tobacco come from? The obvious suggestion is that he had met some one.”

“Yes, it does look like it,” agreed the captain.

“Then,” continued Thorndyke, “there is the fact that his sheath-knife is missing. That may mean nothing, but we have to bear it in mind. And there is another curious circumstance: there is a wound on the back of the head caused by a heavy bump against some body that was covered with acorn barnacles and marine worms. Now there are no piers or stages out in the open estuary. The question is, what could he have struck?”

“Oh, there is nothing in that,” said the captain. “When a body has been washing about in a tideway for close on three days——”

“But this is not a question of a body,” Thorndyke interrupted. “The wound was made during life.”

“The deuce it was!” exclaimed the captain. “Well, all I can suggest is that he must have fouled one of the beacons in the fog, stove in his boat and bumped his head, though, I must admit, that’s rather a lame explanation.” He stood for a minute gazing at his toes with a cogitative frown and then looked up at Thorndyke.

“I have an idea,” he said. “From what you say, this matter wants looking into pretty carefully. Now, I am going down on the tender to-day to make inquiries on the spot. What do you say to coming with me as adviser—as a matter of business, of course—you and Dr. Jervis? I shall start about eleven; we shall be at the lighthouse by three o’clock, and you can get back to town tonight, if you want to. What do you say?”

“There’s nothing to hinder us,” I put in eagerly, for even at Bugsby’s Hole the river looked very alluring on this summer morning.

“Very well,” said Thorndyke, “we will come. Jervis is evidently hankering for a sea-trip, and so am I, for that matter.”

“It’s a business engagement, you know,” the captain stipulated.

“Nothing of the kind,” said Thorndyke; “it’s unmitigated pleasure; the pleasure of the voyage and your high well-born society.”

“I didn’t mean that,” grumbled the captain, “but, if you are coming as guests, send your man for your night-gear and let us bring you back to-morrow evening.”

“We won’t disturb Polton,” said my colleague; “we can take the train from Blackwall and fetch our things ourselves. Eleven o’clock, you said?”

“Thereabouts,” said Captain Grumpass; “but don’t put yourselves out.”

The means of communication in London have reached an almost undesirable state of perfection. With the aid of the snorting train and the tinkling, two-wheeled “gondola,” we crossed and re-crossed the town with such celerity that it was barely eleven when we reappeared on Trinity Wharf with a joint Gladstone and Thorndyke’s little green case.

The tender had hauled out of Bow Creek, and now lay alongside the wharf with a great striped can buoy dangling from her derrick, and Captain Grumpass stood at the gangway, his jolly, red face beaming with pleasure. The buoy was safely stowed forward, the derrick hauled up to the mast, the loose shrouds rehooked to the screw-lanyards, and the steamer, with four jubilant hoots, swung round and shoved her sharp nose against the incoming tide.

For near upon four hours the ever-widening stream of the “London River” unfolded its moving panorama. The smoke and smell of Woolwich Reach gave place to lucid air made soft by the summer haze; the grey huddle of factories fell away and green levels of cattle-spotted marsh stretched away to the high land bordering the river valley. Venerable training ships displayed their chequered hulls by the wooded shore, and whispered of the days of oak and hemp, when the tall three-decker, comely and majestic, with her soaring heights of canvas, like towers of ivory, had not yet given place to the mud-coloured saucepans that fly the white ensign nowadays and devour the substance of the British taxpayer: when a sailor was a sailor and not a mere sea-faring mechanic. Sturdily breasting the flood-tide, the tender threaded her way through the endless procession of shipping; barges, billy-boys, schooners, brigs; lumpish Black-seamen, blue-funnelled China tramps, rickety Baltic

barques with twirling windmills, gigantic liners, staggering under a mountain of top-hamper. Erith, Purfleet, Greenhithe, Grays greeted us and passed astern. The chimneys of Northfleet, the clustering roofs of Gravesend, the populous anchorage and the lurking batteries, were left behind, and, as we swung out of the Lower Hope, the wide expanse of sea reach spread out before us like a great sheet of blue-shot satin.

About half-past twelve the ebb overtook us and helped us on our way, as we could see by the speed with which the distant land slid past, and the freshening of the air as we passed through it.

But sky and sea were hushed in a summer calm. Balls of fleecy cloud hung aloft, motionless in the soft blue; the barges drifted on the tide with drooping sails, and a big, striped bell buoy—surmounted by a staff and cage and labelled “Shivering Sand”—sat dreaming in the sun above its motionless reflection, to rouse for a moment as it met our wash, nod its cage drowsily, utter a solemn ding-dong, and fall asleep again.

It was shortly after passing the buoy that the gaunt shape of a screw-pile lighthouse began to loom up ahead, its dull-red paint turned to vermilion by the early afternoon sun. As we drew nearer, the name *Girdler*, painted in huge, white letters, became visible, and two men could be seen in the gallery around the lantern, inspecting us through a telescope.

“Shall you be long at the lighthouse, sir?” the master of the tender inquired of Captain Grumpass; “because we’re going down to the North-East Pan Sand to fix this new buoy and take up the old one.”

“Then you’d better put us off at the lighthouse and come back for us when you’ve finished the job,” was the reply. “I don’t know how long we shall be.”

The tender was brought to, a boat lowered, and a couple of hands pulled us across the intervening space of water.

“It will be a dirty climb for you in your shore-going clothes,” the captain remarked—he was as spruce as a new pin himself—“but the stuff will all wipe off.” We looked up at the skeleton shape. The falling tide had exposed some fifteen feet of the piles, and piles and ladder alike were swathed in sea-grass and encrusted with barnacles and worm-tubes. But we were not such town-sparrows as the captain seemed to think, for we both followed his lead without difficulty up the slippery ladder, Thorndyke clinging tenaciously to his little green case, from which he refused to be separated even for an instant.

“These gentlemen and I,” said the captain, as we stepped on the stage at the head of the ladder, “have come to make inquiries about the missing man,

James Brown. Which of you is Jeffreys?"

"I am, sir," replied a tall, powerful, square-jawed, beetle-browed man, whose left hand was tied up in a rough bandage.

"What have you been doing to your hand?" asked the captain.

"I cut it while I was peeling some potatoes," was the reply. "It isn't much of a cut, sir."

"Well, Jeffreys," said the captain, "Brown's body has been picked up and I want particulars for the inquest. You'll be summoned as a witness, I suppose, so come in and tell us all you know."

We entered the living-room and seated ourselves at the table. The captain opened a massive pocket-book, while Thorndyke, in his attentive, inquisitive fashion, looked about the odd, cabin-like room as if making a mental inventory of its contents.

Jeffreys' statement added nothing to what we already knew. He had seen a boat with one man in it making for the lighthouse. Then the fog had drifted up and he had lost sight of the boat. He started the fog-horn and kept a bright look-out, but the boat never arrived. And that was all he knew. He supposed that the man must have missed the lighthouse and been carried away on the ebb-tide, which was running strongly at the time.

"What time was it when you last saw the boat?" Thorndyke asked.

"About half-past eleven," replied Jeffreys.

"What was the man like?" asked the captain.

"I don't know, sir: he was rowing, and his back was towards me."

"Had he any kit-bag or chest with him?" asked Thorndyke.

"He'd got his chest with him," said Jeffreys.

"What sort of chest was it?" inquired Thorndyke.

"A small chest, painted green, with rope becketts."

"Was it corded?"

"It had a single cord round, to hold the lid down."

"Where was it stowed?"

"In the stern-sheets, sir."

"How far off was the boat when you last saw it?"

“About half-a-mile.”

“Half-a-mile!” exclaimed the captain. “Why, how the deuce could you see what the chest was like half-a-mile away?”

The man reddened and cast a look of angry suspicion at Thorndyke. “I was watching the boat through the glass, sir,” he replied sulkily.

“I see,” said Captain Grumpass. “Well, that will do, Jeffreys. We shall have to arrange for you to attend the inquest. Tell Smith I want to see him.”

The examination concluded, Thorndyke and I moved our chairs to the window, which looked out over the sea to the east. But it was not the sea or the passing ships that engaged my colleague’s attention. On the wall, beside the window, hung a rudely-carved pipe-rack containing five pipes. Thorndyke had noted it when we entered the room, and now, as we talked, I observed him regarding it from time to time with speculative interest.

“You men seem to be inveterate smokers,” he remarked to the keeper, Smith, when the captain had concluded the arrangements for the “shift.”

“Well, we do like our bit of ‘baccy, sir, and that’s a fact,” answered Smith. “You see, sir,” he continued, “it’s a lonely life, and tobacco’s cheap out here.”

“How is that?” asked Thorndyke.

“Why, we get it given to us. The small craft from foreign, especially the Dutchmen, generally heave us a cake or two when they pass close. We’re not ashore, you see, so there’s no duty to pay.”

“So you don’t trouble the tobacconists much? Don’t go in for cut tobacco?”

“No, sir; we’d have to buy it, and then the cut stuff wouldn’t keep. No, it’s hard tack to eat out here and hard tobacco to smoke.”

“I see you’ve got a pipe-rack, too, quite a stylish affair.”

“Yes,” said Smith, “I made it in my off-time. Keeps the place tidy and looks more ship-shape than letting the pipes lay about anywhere.”

“Someone seems to have neglected his pipe,” said Thorndyke, pointing to one at the end of the rack which was coated with green mildew.

“Yes; that’s Parsons, my mate. He must have left it when we went off near a month ago. Pipes do go mouldy in the damp air out here.”

“How soon does a pipe go mouldy if it is left untouched?” Thorndyke asked.

“It’s according to the weather,” said Smith. “When it’s warm and damp they’ll begin to go in about a week. Now here’s Barnett’s pipe that he’s left behind—the man that broke his leg, you know, sir—it’s just beginning to spot a little. He couldn’t have used it for a day or two before he went.”

“And are all these other pipes yours?”

“No, sir. This here one is mine. The end one is Jeffreys’, and I suppose the middle one is his too, but I don’t know it.”

“You’re a demon for pipes, doctor,” said the captain, strolling up at this moment; “you seem to make a special study of them.”

“The proper study of mankind is man,” replied Thorndyke, as the keeper retired, “and ‘man’ includes those objects on which his personality is impressed. Now a pipe is a very personal thing. Look at that row in the rack. Each has its own physiognomy which, in a measure, reflects the peculiarities of the owner. There is Jeffreys’ pipe at the end, for instance. The mouth-piece is nearly bitten through, the bowl scraped to a shell and scored inside and the brim battered and chipped. The whole thing speaks of rude strength and rough handling. He chews the stem as he smokes, he scrapes the bowl violently, and he bangs the ashes out with unnecessary force. And the man fits the pipe exactly: powerful, square-jawed and, I should say, violent on occasion.”

“Yes, he looks a tough customer, does Jeffreys,” agreed the captain.

“Then,” continued Thorndyke, “there is Smith’s pipe, next to it; ‘coked’ up until the cavity is nearly filled and burnt all round the edge; a talker’s pipe, constantly going out and being relit. But the one that interests me most is the middle one.”

“Didn’t Smith say that that was Jeffreys’ too?” I said.

“Yes,” replied Thorndyke, “but he must be mistaken. It is the very opposite of Jeffreys’ pipe in every respect. To begin with, although it is an old pipe, there is not a sign of any toothmark on the mouth-piece. It is the only one in the rack that is quite unmarked. Then the brim is quite uninjured: it has been handled gently, and the silver band is jet-black, whereas the band on Jeffreys’ pipe is quite bright.”

“I hadn’t noticed that it had a band,” said the captain. “What has made it so black?”

Thorndyke lifted the pipe out of the rack and looked at it closely. “Silver sulphide,” said he, “the sulphur no doubt derived from something carried in the pocket.”

“I see,” said Captain Grumpass, smothering a yawn and gazing out of the window at the distant tender. “Incidentally it’s full of tobacco. What moral do you draw from that?”

Thorndyke turned the pipe over and looked closely at the mouth-piece. “The moral is,” he replied, “that you should see that your pipe is clear before you fill it.” He pointed to the mouth-piece, the bore of which was completely stopped up with fine fluff.

“An excellent moral too,” said the captain, rising with another yawn. “If you’ll excuse me a minute I’ll just go and see what the tender is up to. She seems to be crossing to the East Girdler.” He reached the telescope down from its brackets and went out on to the gallery.

As the captain retreated, Thorndyke opened his pocket-knife, and, sticking the blade into the bowl of the pipe, turned the tobacco out into his hand.

“Shag, by Jove!” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” he answered, poking it back into the bowl. “Didn’t you expect it to be shag?”

“I don’t know that I expected anything,” I admitted. “The silver band was occupying my attention.”

“Yes, that is an interesting point,” said Thorndyke, “but let us see what the obstruction consists of.” He opened the green case, and, taking out a dissecting needle, neatly extracted a little ball of fluff from the bore of the pipe. Laying this on a glass slide, he teased it out in a drop of glycerine and put on a cover-glass while I set up the microscope.

“Better put the pipe back in the rack,” he said, as he laid the slide on the stage of the instrument. I did so and then turned, with no little excitement, to watch him as he examined the specimen. After a brief inspection he rose and waved his hand towards the microscope.

“Take a look at it, Jervis,” he said, “and let us have your learned opinion.”

I applied my eye to the instrument, and, moving the slide about, identified the constituents of the little mass of fluff. The ubiquitous cotton fibre was, of course, in evidence, and a few fibres of wool, but the most remarkable objects were two or three hairs—very minute hairs of a definite zigzag shape and having a flat expansion near the free end like the blade of a paddle.

“These are the hairs of some small animal,” I said; “not a mouse or rat or any rodent, I should say. Some small insectivorous animal, I fancy. Yes! Of course! They are the hairs of a mole.” I stood up, and, as the importance of the

discovery flashed on me, I looked at my colleague in silence.

“Yes,” he said, “they are unmistakable; and they furnish the keystone of the argument.”

“You think that this is really the dead man’s pipe, then?” I said.

“According to the law of multiple evidence,” he replied, “it is practically a certainty. Consider the facts in sequence. Since there is no sign of mildew on it, this pipe can have been here only a short time, and must belong either to Barnett, Smith, Jeffreys or Brown. It is an old pipe, but it has no tooth-marks on it. Therefore it has been used by a man who has no teeth. But Barnett, Smith and Jeffreys all have teeth and mark their pipes, whereas Brown had no teeth. The tobacco in it is shag. But these three men do not smoke shag, whereas Brown had shag in his pouch. The silver band is encrusted with sulphide; and Brown carried sulphur-tipped matches loose in his pocket with his pipe. We find hairs of a mole in the bore of the pipe; and Brown carried a moleskin pouch in the pocket in which he appears to have carried his pipe. Finally, Brown’s pocket contained a pipe which was obviously not his and which closely resembled that of Jeffreys; it contained tobacco similar to that which Jeffreys smokes and different from that in Brown’s pouch. It appears to me quite conclusive, especially when we add to this evidence the other items that are in our possession.”

“What items are they?” I asked.

“First there is the fact that the dead man had knocked his head heavily against some periodically submerged body covered with acorn barnacles and serpulæ. Now the piles of this lighthouse answer to the description exactly, and there are no other bodies in the neighbourhood that do: for even the beacons are too large to have produced that kind of wound. Then the dead man’s sheath-knife is missing, and Jeffreys has a knife-wound on his hand. You must admit that the circumstantial evidence is overwhelming.”

At this moment the captain bustled into the room with the telescope in his hand. “The tender is coming up towing a strange boat,” he said. “I expect it’s the missing one, and, if it is, we may learn something. You’d better pack up your traps and get ready to go on board.”

We packed the green case and went out into the gallery, where the two keepers were watching the approaching tender; Smith frankly curious and interested, Jeffreys restless, fidgety and noticeably pale. As the steamer came opposite the lighthouse, three men dropped into the boat and pulled across, and one of them—the mate of the tender—came climbing up the ladder.

“Is that the missing boat?” the captain sang out.

“Yes, sir,” answered the officer, stepping on to the staging and wiping his hands on the reverse aspect of his trousers, “we saw her lying on the dry patch of the East Girdler. There’s been some hanky-panky in this job, sir.”

“Foul play, you think, hey?”

“Not a doubt of it, sir. The plug was out and lying loose in the bottom, and we found a sheath-knife sticking into the kelson forward among the coils of the painter. It was stuck in hard as if it had dropped from a height.”

“That’s odd,” said the captain. “As to the plug, it might have got out by accident.”

“But it hadn’t, sir,” said the mate. “The ballast-bags had been shifted along to get the bottom boards up. Besides, sir, a seaman wouldn’t let the boat fill; he’d have put the plug back and baled out.”

“That’s true,” replied Captain Grumpass; “and certainly the presence of the knife looks fishy. But where the deuce could it have dropped from, out in the open sea? Knives don’t drop from the clouds—fortunately. What do you say, doctor?”

“I should say that it is Brown’s own knife, and that it probably fell from this staging.”

Jeffreys turned swiftly, crimson with wrath. “What d’ye mean?” he demanded. “Haven’t I said that the boat never came here?”

“You have,” replied Thorndyke; “but if that is so how do you explain the fact that your pipe was found in the dead man’s pocket and that the dead man’s pipe is at this moment in your pipe-rack?”

The crimson flush on Jeffreys’ face faded as quickly as it had come. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he faltered.

“I’ll tell you,” said Thorndyke. “I will relate what happened and you shall check my statements. Brown brought his boat alongside and came up into the living-room, bringing his chest with him. He filled his pipe and tried to light it, but it was stopped and wouldn’t draw. Then you lent him a pipe of yours and filled it for him. Soon afterwards you came out on this staging and quarrelled. Brown defended himself with his knife, which dropped from his hand into the boat. You pushed him off the staging and he fell, knocking his head on one of the piles. Then you took the plug out of the boat and sent her adrift to sink, and you flung the chest into the sea. This happened about ten minutes past twelve. Am I right?”

Jeffreys stood staring at Thorndyke, the picture of amazement and consternation; but he uttered no word in reply.

“Am I right?” Thorndyke repeated.

“Strike me blind!” muttered Jeffreys. “Was you here, then? You talk as if you had been. Anyhow,” he continued, recovering somewhat, “you seem to know all about it. But you’re wrong about one thing. There was no quarrel. This chap, Brown, didn’t take to me and he didn’t mean to stay out here. He was going to put off and go ashore again and I wouldn’t let him. Then he hit out at me with his knife and I knocked it out of his hand and he staggered backwards and went overboard.”

“And did you try to pick him up?” asked the captain.

“How could I,” demanded Jeffreys, “with the tide racing down and me alone on the station? I’d never have got back.”

“But what about the boat, Jeffreys? Why did you scuttle her?”

“The fact is,” replied Jeffreys, “I got in a funk, and I thought the simplest plan was to send her to the cellar and know nothing about it. But I never shoved him over. It was an accident, sir; I swear it!”

“Well, that sounds a reasonable explanation,” said the captain. “What do you say, doctor?”

“Perfectly reasonable,” replied Thorndyke, “and, as to its truth, that is no affair of ours.”

“No. But I shall have to take you off, Jeffreys, and hand you over to the police. You understand that?”

“Yes, sir, I understand,” answered Jeffreys.

“That was a queer case, that affair on the Girdler,” remarked Captain Grumpass, when he was spending an evening with us some six months later. “A pretty easy let off for Jeffreys, too—eighteen months, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was a very queer case indeed,” said Thorndyke. “There was something behind that ‘accident,’ I should say. Those men had probably met before.”

“So I thought,” agreed the captain. “But the queerest part of it to me was the way you nosed it all out. I’ve had a deep respect for briar pipes since then. It was a remarkable case,” he continued. “The way in which you made that

pipe tell the story of the murder seems to me like sheer enchantment.”

“Yes,” said I; “it spoke like the magic pipe—only that wasn’t a tobacco-pipe—in the German folk-story of the ‘Singing Bone.’ Do you remember it? A peasant found the bone of a murdered man and fashioned it into a pipe. But when he tried to play on it, it burst into a song of its own—

‘My brother slew me and buried my bones
Beneath the sand and under the stones.’ ”

“A pretty story,” said Thorndyke, “and one with an excellent moral. The inanimate things around us have each of them a song to sing to us if we are but ready with attentive ears.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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[The end of *The Echo of a Mutiny* by Richard Austin Freeman]