

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

Number Eleven

The Moabite  
Cipher

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A LARGE and motley crowd lined the pavements of Oxford Street as Thorndyke and I made our way leisurely eastward. Floral decorations and drooping bunting announced one of those functions inaugurated from time to time by a benevolent Government for the entertainment of fashionable loungers and the relief of distressed pickpockets. For a Russian Grand Duke, who had torn himself away, amidst valedictory explosions, from a loving if too demonstrative people, was to pass anon on his way to the Guildhall; and a British Prince, heroically indiscreet, was expected to occupy a seat in the ducal carriage.

Near Rathbone Place Thorndyke halted and drew my attention to a smart-looking man who stood lounging in a doorway, cigarette in hand.

“Our old friend Inspector Badger,” said Thorndyke. “He seems mightily interested in that gentleman in the light overcoat. How d’ye do, Badger?” for at this moment the detective caught his eye and bowed. “Who is your friend?”

“That’s what I want to know, sir,” replied the inspector. “I’ve been shadowing him for the last half-hour, but I can’t make him out, though I believe I’ve seen him somewhere. He don’t look like a foreigner, but he has got something bulky in his pocket, so I must keep him in sight until the Duke is safely past. I wish,” he added gloomily, “these beastly Russians would stop at home. They give us no end of trouble.”

“Are you expecting any—occurrences, then?” asked Thorndyke.

“Bless you, sir,” exclaimed Badger, “the whole route is lined with plain-clothes men. You see, it is known that several desperate characters followed the Duke to England, and there are a good many exiles living here, who would like to have a rap at him. Hallo! What’s he up to now?”

The man in the light overcoat had suddenly caught the inspector’s too inquiring eye, and forthwith dived into the crowd at the edge of the pavement. In his haste he trod heavily on the foot of a big, rough-looking man, by whom he was in a moment hustled out into the road with such violence that he fell sprawling face downwards. It was an unlucky moment. A mounted constable was just then backing in upon the crowd, and before he could gather the meaning of the shout that arose from the bystanders, his horse had set down one hind-hoof firmly on the prostrate man’s back.

The inspector signalled to a constable, who forthwith made a way for us through the crowd; but even as we approached the injured man, he rose stiffly and looked round with a pale, vacant face.

“Are you hurt?” Thorndyke asked gently, with an earnest look into the frightened, wondering eyes.

“No, sir,” was the reply; “only I feel queer—sinking—just here.”

He laid a trembling hand on his chest, and Thorndyke, still eyeing him anxiously, said in a low voice to the inspector: “Cab or ambulance, as quickly as you can.”

A cab was led round from Newman Street, and the injured man put into it. Thorndyke, Badger, and I entered, and we drove off up Rathbone Place. As we proceeded, our patient’s face grew more and more ashen, drawn, and anxious; his breathing was shallow and uneven, and his teeth chattered slightly. The cab swung round into Goodge Street, and then—suddenly, in the twinkling of an eye—there came a change. The eyelids and jaw relaxed, the eyes became filmy, and the whole form subsided into the corner in a shrunken heap, with the strange gelatinous limpness of a body that is dead as a whole, while its tissues are still alive.

“God save us! The man’s dead!” exclaimed the inspector in a shocked voice—for even policemen have their feelings. He sat staring at the corpse, as it nodded gently with the jolting of the cab, until we drew up inside the courtyard of the Middlesex Hospital, when he got out briskly, with suddenly renewed cheerfulness, to help the porter to place the body on the wheeled couch.

“We shall know who he is now, at any rate,” said he, as we followed the couch to the casualty-room. Thorndyke nodded unsympathetically. The medical instinct in him was for the moment stronger than the legal.

The house-surgeon leaned over the couch, and made a rapid examination as he listened to our account of the accident. Then he straightened himself up and looked at Thorndyke.

“Internal hæmorrhage, I expect,” said he. “At any rate, he’s dead, poor beggar!—as dead as Nebuchadnezzar. Ah! here comes a bobby; it’s his affair now.”

A sergeant came into the room, breathing quickly, and looked in surprise from the corpse to the inspector. But the latter, without loss of time, proceeded to turn out the dead man’s pockets, commencing with the bulky object that had first attracted his attention; which proved to be a brown-paper parcel tied up

with red tape.

“Pork-pie, begad!” he exclaimed with a crestfallen air as he cut the tape and opened the package. “You had better go through his other pockets, sergeant.”

The small heap of odds and ends that resulted from this process tended, with a single exception, to throw little light on the man’s identity; the exception being a letter, sealed, but not stamped, addressed in an exceedingly illiterate hand to Mr. Adolf Schönberg, 213, Greek Street, Soho.

“He was going to leave it by hand, I expect,” observed the inspector, with a wistful glance at the sealed envelope. “I think I’ll take it round myself, and you had better come with me, sergeant.”

He slipped the letter into his pocket, and, leaving the sergeant to take possession of the other effects, made his way out of the building.

“I suppose, doctor,” said he, as we crossed into Berners Street, “you are not coming our way? Don’t want to see Mr. Schönberg, h’m?”

Thorndyke reflected for a moment. “Well, it isn’t very far, and we may as well see the end of the incident. Yes; let us go together.”

No. 213, Greek Street, was one of those houses that irresistibly suggest to the observer the idea of a church organ, either jamb of the doorway being adorned with a row of brass bell-handles corresponding to the stop-knobs.

These the sergeant examined with the air of an expert musician, and having, as it were, gauged the capacity of the instrument, selected the middle knob on the right-hand side and pulled it briskly; whereupon a first-floor window was thrown up and a head protruded. But it afforded us a momentary glimpse only, for, having caught the sergeant’s upturned eye, it retired with surprising precipitancy, and before we had time to speculate on the apparition, the street-door was opened and a man emerged. He was about to close the door after him when the inspector interposed.

“Does Mr. Adolf Schönberg live here?”

The new-comer, a very typical Jew of the red-haired type, surveyed us thoughtfully through his gold-rimmed spectacles as he repeated the name.

“Schönberg—Schönberg? Ah, yes! I know. He lives on the third-floor. I saw him go up a short time ago. Third-floor back”; and indicating the open door with a wave of the hand, he raised his hat and passed into the street.

“I suppose we had better go up,” said the inspector, with a dubious glance

at the row of bell-pulls. He accordingly started up the stairs, and we all followed in his wake.

There were two doors at the back on the third-floor, but as the one was open, displaying an unoccupied bedroom, the inspector rapped smartly on the other. It flew open almost immediately, and a fierce-looking little man confronted us with a hostile stare.

“Well?” said he.

“Mr. Adolf Schönberg?” inquired the inspector.

“Well? What about him?” snapped our new acquaintance.

“I wished to have a few words with him,” said Badger.

“Then what the deuce do you come banging at *my* door for?” demanded the other.

“Why, doesn’t he live here?”

“No. First-floor front,” replied our friend, preparing to close the door.

“Pardon me,” said Thorndyke, “but what is Mr. Schönberg like? I mean \_\_\_\_\_”

“Like?” interrupted the resident. “He’s like a blooming Sheeny, with a carrotty beard and gold gig-lamps!” and, having presented this impressionist sketch, he brought the interview to a definite close by slamming the door and turning the key.

With a wrathful exclamation, the inspector turned towards the stairs, down which the sergeant was already clattering in hot haste, and made his way back to the ground-floor, followed, as before, by Thorndyke and me. On the doorstep we found the sergeant breathlessly interrogating a smartly-dressed youth, whom I had seen alight from a hansom as we entered the house, and who now stood with a notebook tucked under his arm, sharpening a pencil with deliberate care.

“Mr. James saw him come out, sir,” said the sergeant. “He turned up towards the Square.”

“Did he seem to hurry?” asked the inspector.

“Rather,” replied the reporter. “As soon as you were inside, he went off like a lamplighter. You won’t catch him now.”

“We don’t want to catch him,” the detective rejoined gruffly; then, backing out of earshot of the eager pressman, he said in a lower tone: “That was Mr.

Schönberg, beyond a doubt, and it is clear that he has some reason for making himself scarce; so I shall consider myself justified in opening that note.”

He suited the action to the word, and, having cut the envelope open with official neatness, drew out the enclosure.

“My hat!” he exclaimed, as his eye fell upon the contents. “What in creation is this? It isn’t shorthand, but what the deuce is it?”

He handed the document to Thorndyke, who, having held it up to the light and felt the paper critically, proceeded to examine it with keen interest. It consisted of a single half-sheet of thin notepaper, both sides of which were covered with strange, crabbed characters, written with a brownish-black ink in continuous lines, without any spaces to indicate the divisions into words; and, but for the modern material which bore the writing, it might have been a portion of some ancient manuscript or forgotten codex.

“What do you make of it, doctor?” inquired the inspector anxiously, after a pause, during which Thorndyke had scrutinised the strange writing with knitted brows.

“Not a great deal,” replied Thorndyke. “The character is the Moabite or Phœnician—primitive Semitic, in fact—and reads from right to left. The language I take to be Hebrew. At any rate, I can find no Greek words, and I see here a group of letters which *may* form one of the few Hebrew words that I know—the word *badim*, ‘lies.’ But you had better get it deciphered by an expert.”

“If it is Hebrew,” said Badger, “we can manage it all right. There are plenty of Jews at our disposal.”

“You had much better take the paper to the British Museum,” said Thorndyke, “and submit it to the keeper of the Phœnician antiquities for decipherment.”

Inspector Badger smiled a foxy smile as he deposited the paper in his pocket-book. “We’ll see what we can make of it ourselves first,” he said; “but many thanks for your advice, all the same, doctor. No, Mr. James, I can’t give you any information just at present; you had better apply at the hospital.”

“I suspect,” said Thorndyke, as we took our way homewards, “that Mr. James has collected enough material for his purpose already. He must have followed us from the hospital, and I have no doubt that he has his report, with ‘full details,’ mentally arranged at this moment. And I am not sure that he didn’t get a peep at the mysterious paper, in spite of the inspector’s precautions.”

“By the way,” I said, “what do you make of the document?”

“A cipher, most probably,” he replied. “It is written in the primitive Semitic alphabet, which, as you know, is practically identical with primitive Greek. It is written from right to left, like the Phœnician, Hebrew, and Moabite, as well as the earliest Greek, inscriptions. The paper is common cream-laid notepaper, and the ink is ordinary indelible Chinese ink, such as is used by draughtsmen. Those are the facts, and without further study of the document itself, they don’t carry us very far.”

“Why do you think it is a cipher rather than a document in straightforward Hebrew?”

“Because it is obviously a secret message of some kind. Now, every educated Jew knows more or less Hebrew, and, although he is able to read and write only the modern square Hebrew character, it is so easy to transpose one alphabet into another that the mere language would afford no security. Therefore, I expect that, when the experts translate this document, the translation or transliteration will be a mere farrago of unintelligible nonsense. But we shall see, and meanwhile the facts that we have offer several interesting suggestions which are well worth consideration.”

“As, for instance——?”

“Now, my dear Jervis,” said Thorndyke, shaking an admonitory forefinger at me, “don’t, I pray you, give way to mental indolence. You have these few facts that I have mentioned. Consider them separately and collectively, and in their relation to the circumstances. Don’t attempt to suck my brain when you have an excellent brain of your own to suck.”

On the following morning the papers fully justified my colleague’s opinion of Mr. James. All the events which had occurred, as well as a number that had not, were given in the fullest and most vivid detail, a lengthy reference being made to the paper “found on the person of the dead anarchist,” and “written in a private shorthand or cryptogram.”

The report concluded with the gratifying—though untrue—statement that “in this intricate and important case, the police have wisely secured the assistance of Dr. John Thorndyke, to whose acute intellect and vast experience the portentous cryptogram will doubtless soon deliver up its secret.”

“Very flattering,” laughed Thorndyke, to whom I read the extract on his return from the hospital, “but a little awkward if it should induce our friends to deposit a few trifling mementoes in the form of nitro-compounds on our main staircase or in the cellars. By the way, I met Superintendent Miller on London



Bridge. The ‘cryptogram,’ as Mr. James calls it, has set Scotland Yard in a mighty ferment.”

“Naturally. What have they done in the matter?”

“They adopted my suggestion, after all, finding that they could make nothing of it themselves, and took it to the British Museum. The Museum people referred them to Professor Poppelbaum, the great palæographer, to whom they accordingly submitted it.”

“Did he express any opinion about it?”

“Yes, provisionally. After a brief examination, he found it to consist of a number of Hebrew words sandwiched between apparently meaningless groups of letters. He furnished the Superintendent off-hand with a translation of the words, and Miller forthwith struck off a number of hectograph copies of it, which he has distributed among the senior officials of his department; so that at present”—here Thorndyke gave vent to a soft chuckle—“Scotland Yard is engaged in a sort of missing word—or, rather, missing sense—competition. Miller invited me to join in the sport, and to that end presented me with one of the hectograph copies on which to exercise my wits, together with a photograph of the document.”

“And shall you?” I asked.

“Not I,” he replied, laughing. “In the first place, I have not been formally consulted, and consequently am a passive, though interested, spectator. In the second place, I have a theory of my own which I shall test if the occasion arises. But if you would like to take part in the competition, I am authorised to show you the photograph and the translation. I will pass them on to you, and I wish you joy of them.”

He handed me the photograph and a sheet of paper that he had just taken from his pocket-book, and watched me with grim amusement as I read out the first few lines.



“It doesn’t look very promising at first sight,” I remarked. “What is the Professor’s theory?”

“His theory—provisionally, of course—is that the words form the message, and the groups of letters represent mere filled-up spaces between the words.”

“But surely,” I protested, “that would be a very transparent device.”

Thorndyke laughed. “There is a childlike simplicity about it,” said he, “that is highly attractive—but discouraging. It is much more probable that the words are dummies, and that the letters contain the message. Or, again, the solution may lie in an entirely different direction. But listen! Is that cab coming here?”

It was. It drew up opposite our chambers, and a few moments later a brisk step ascending the stairs heralded a smart rat-tat at our door. Flinging open the latter, I found myself confronted by a well-dressed stranger, who, after a quick glance at me, peered inquisitively over my shoulder into the room.

“I am relieved, Dr. Jervis,” said he, “to find you and Dr. Thorndyke at home, as I have come on somewhat urgent professional business. My name,” he continued, entering in response to my invitation, “is Barton, but you don’t know me, though I know you both by sight. I have come to ask you if one of you—or, better still, both—could come to-night and see my brother.”

“That,” said Thorndyke, “depends on the circumstances and on the whereabouts of your brother.”

“The circumstances,” said Mr. Barton, “are, in my opinion, highly suspicious, and I will place them before you—of course, in strict confidence.”

Thorndyke nodded and indicated a chair.

“My brother,” continued Mr. Barton, taking the proffered seat, “has recently married for the second time. His age is fifty-five, and that of his wife twenty-six, and I may say that the marriage has been—well, by no means a success. Now, within the last fortnight, my brother has been attacked by a mysterious and extremely painful affection of the stomach, to which his doctor seems unable to give a name. It has resisted all treatment hitherto. Day by day the pain and distress increase, and I feel that, unless something decisive is done, the end cannot be far off.”

“Is the pain worse after taking food?” inquired Thorndyke.

“That’s just it!” exclaimed our visitor. “I see what is in your mind, and it has been in mine, too; so much so that I have tried repeatedly to obtain samples of the food that he is taking. And this morning I succeeded.” Here he took from his pocket a wide-mouthed bottle, which, disengaging from its paper

wrappings, he laid on the table. "When I called, he was taking his breakfast of arrowroot, which he complained had a gritty taste, supposed by his wife to be due to the sugar. Now I had provided myself with this bottle, and, during the absence of his wife, I managed unobserved to convey a portion of the arrowroot that he had left into it, and I should be greatly obliged if you would examine it and tell me if this arrowroot contains anything that it should not."

He pushed the bottle across to Thorndyke, who carried it to the window, and, extracting a small quantity of the contents with a glass rod, examined the pasty mass with the aid of a lens; then, lifting the bell-glass cover from the microscope, which stood on its table by the window, he smeared a small quantity of the suspected matter on to a glass slip, and placed it on the stage of the instrument.

"I observe a number of crystalline particles in this," he said, after a brief inspection, "which have the appearance of arsenious acid."

"Ah!" ejaculated Mr. Barton, "just what I feared. But are you certain?"

"No," replied Thorndyke; "but the matter is easily tested."

He pressed the button of the bell that communicated with the laboratory, a summons that brought the laboratory assistant from his lair with characteristic promptitude.

"Will you please prepare a Marsh's apparatus, Polton," said Thorndyke.

"I have a couple ready, sir," replied Polton.

"Then pour the acid into one and bring it to me, with a tile."

As his familiar vanished silently, Thorndyke turned to Mr. Barton.

"Supposing we find arsenic in this arrowroot, as we probably shall, what do you want us to do?"

"I want you to come and see my brother," replied our client.

"Why not take a note from me to his doctor?"

"No, no; I want you to come—I should like you both to come—and put a stop at once to this dreadful business. Consider! It's a matter of life and death. You won't refuse! I beg you not to refuse me your help in these terrible circumstances."

"Well," said Thorndyke, as his assistant reappeared, "let us first see what the test has to tell us."

Polton advanced to the table, on which he deposited a small flask, the

contents of which were in a state of brisk effervescence, a bottle labelled "calcium hypochlorite," and a white porcelain tile. The flask was fitted with a safety-funnel and a glass tube drawn out to a fine jet, to which Polton cautiously applied a lighted match. Instantly there sprang from the jet a tiny, pale violet flame. Thorndyke now took the tile, and held it in the flame for a few seconds, when the appearance of the surface remained unchanged save for a small circle of condensed moisture. His next proceeding was to thin the arrowroot with distilled water until it was quite fluid, and then pour a small quantity into the funnel. It ran slowly down the tube into the flask, with the bubbling contents of which it became speedily mixed. Almost immediately a change began to appear in the character of the flame, which from a pale violet turned gradually to a sickly blue, while above it hung a faint cloud of white smoke. Once more Thorndyke held the tile above the jet, but this time, no sooner had the pallid flame touched the cold surface of the porcelain, than there appeared on the latter a glistening black stain.

"That is pretty conclusive," observed Thorndyke, lifting the stopper out of the reagent bottle, "but we will apply the final test." He dropped a few drops of the hypochlorite solution on to the tile, and immediately the black stain faded away and vanished. "We can now answer your question, Mr. Barton," said he, replacing the stopper as he turned to our client. "The specimen that you brought us certainly contains arsenic, and in very considerable quantities."

"Then," exclaimed Mr. Barton, starting from his chair, "you will come and help me to rescue my brother from this dreadful peril. Don't refuse me, Dr. Thorndyke, for mercy's sake, don't refuse."

Thorndyke reflected for a moment.

"Before we decide," said he, "we must see what engagements we have."

With a quick, significant glance at me, he walked into the office, whither I followed in some bewilderment, for I knew that we had no engagements for the evening.

"Now, Jervis," said Thorndyke, as he closed the office door, "what are we to do?"

"We must go, I suppose," I replied. "It seems a pretty urgent case."

"It does," he agreed. "Of course, the man may be telling the truth, after all."

"You don't think he is, then?"

"No. It is a plausible tale, but there is too much arsenic in that arrowroot.

Still, I think I ought to go. It is an ordinary professional risk. But there is no reason why you should put your head into the noose.”

“Thank you,” said I, somewhat huffily. “I don’t see what risk there is, but if any exists I claim the right to share it.”

“Very well,” he answered with a smile, “we will both go. I think we can take care of ourselves.”

He re-entered the sitting-room, and announced his decision to Mr. Barton, whose relief and gratitude were quite pathetic.

“But,” said Thorndyke, “you have not yet told us where your brother lives.”

“Rexford,” was the reply—“Rexford, in Essex. It is an out-of-the-way place, but if we catch the seven-fifteen train from Liverpool Street, we shall be there in an hour and a half.”

“And as to the return? You know the trains, I suppose?”

“Oh yes,” replied our client; “I will see that you don’t miss your train back.”

“Then I will be with you in a minute,” said Thorndyke; and, taking the still-bubbling flask, he retired to the laboratory, whence he returned in a few minutes carrying his hat and overcoat.

The cab which had brought our client was still waiting, and we were soon rattling through the streets towards the station, where we arrived in time to furnish ourselves with dinner-baskets and select our compartment at leisure.

During the early part of the journey our companion was in excellent spirits. He dispatched the cold fowl from the basket and quaffed the rather indifferent claret with as much relish as if he had not had a single relation in the world, and after dinner he became genial to the verge of hilarity. But, as time went on, there crept into his manner a certain anxious restlessness. He became silent and preoccupied, and several times furtively consulted his watch.

“The train is confoundedly late!” he exclaimed irritably. “Seven minutes behind time already!”

“A few minutes more or less are not of much consequence,” said Thorndyke.

“No, of course not; but still—— Ah, thank Heaven, here we are!”

He thrust his head out of the off-side window, and gazed eagerly down the line; then, leaping to his feet, he bustled out on to the platform while the train

was still moving.

Even as we alighted a warning bell rang furiously on the up-platform, and as Mr. Barton hurried us through the empty booking-office to the outside of the station, the rumble of the approaching train could be heard above the noise made by our own train moving off.

“My carriage doesn’t seem to have arrived yet,” exclaimed Mr. Barton, looking anxiously up the station approach. “If you will wait here a moment, I will go and make inquiries.”

He darted back into the booking-office and through it on to the platform, just as the up-train roared into the station. Thorndyke followed him with quick but stealthy steps, and, peering out of the booking-office door, watched his proceedings; then he turned and beckoned to me.

“There he goes,” said he, pointing to an iron footbridge that spanned the line; and, as I looked, I saw, clearly defined against the dim night sky, a flying figure racing towards the “up” side.

It was hardly two-thirds across when the guard’s whistle rang out its shrill warning.

“Quick, Jervis,” exclaimed Thorndyke; “she’s off!”

He leaped down on to the line, whither I followed instantly, and, crossing the rails, we clambered up together on to the footboard opposite an empty first-class compartment. Thorndyke’s magazine knife, containing, among other implements, a railway-key, was already in his hand. The door was speedily unlocked, and, as we entered, Thorndyke ran through and looked out on to the platform.

“Just in time!” he exclaimed. “He is in one of the forward compartments.”

He relocked the door, and, seating himself, proceeded to fill his pipe.

“And now,” said I, as the train moved out of the station, “perhaps you will explain this little comedy.”

“With pleasure,” he replied, “if it needs any explanation. But you can hardly have forgotten Mr. James’s flattering remarks in his report of the Greek Street incident, clearly giving the impression that the mysterious document was in my possession. When I read that, I knew I must look out for some attempt to recover it, though I hardly expected such promptness. Still, when Mr. Barton called without credentials or appointment, I viewed him with some suspicion. That suspicion deepened when he wanted us both to come. It deepened further when I found an impossible quantity of arsenic in his sample,

and it gave place to certainty when, having allowed him to select the trains by which we were to travel, I went up to the laboratory and examined the timetable; for I then found that the last train for London left Rexford ten minutes after we were due to arrive. Obviously this was a plan to get us both safely out of the way while he and some of his friends ransacked our chambers for the missing document.”

“I see; and that accounts for his extraordinary anxiety at the lateness of the train. But why did you come, if you knew it was a ‘plant’?”

“My dear fellow,” said Thorndyke, “I never miss an interesting experience if I can help it. There are possibilities in this, too, don’t you see?”

“But supposing his friends have broken into our chambers already?”

“That contingency has been provided for; but I think they will wait for Mr. Barton—and us.”

Our train, being the last one up, stopped at every station, and crawled slothfully in the intervals, so that it was past eleven o’clock when we reached Liverpool Street. Here we got out cautiously, and, mingling with the crowd, followed the unconscious Barton up the platform, through the barrier, and out into the street. He seemed in no special hurry, for, after pausing to light a cigar, he set off at an easy pace up New Broad Street.

Thorndyke hailed a hansom, and, motioning me to enter, directed the cabman to drive to Clifford’s Inn Passage.

“Sit well back,” said he, as we rattled away up New Broad Street. “We shall be passing our gay deceiver presently—in fact, there he is, a living, walking illustration of the folly of underrating the intelligence of one’s adversary.”

At Clifford’s Inn Passage we dismissed the cab, and, retiring into the shadow of the dark, narrow alley, kept an eye on the gate of Inner Temple Lane. In about twenty minutes we observed our friend approaching on the south side of Fleet Street. He halted at the gate, plied the knocker, and after a brief parley with the night-porter vanished through the wicket. We waited yet five minutes more, and then, having given him time to get clear of the entrance, we crossed the road.

The porter looked at us with some surprise.

“There’s a gentleman just gone down to your chambers, sir,” said he. “He told me you were expecting him.”

“Quite right,” said Thorndyke, with a dry smile, “I was. Good-night.”



We slunk down the lane, past the church, and through the gloomy cloisters, giving a wide berth to all lamps and lighted entries, until, emerging into Paper Buildings, we crossed at the darkest part to King's Bench Walk, where Thorndyke made straight for the chambers of our friend Anstey, which were two doors above our own.

"Why are we coming here?" I asked, as we ascended the stairs.

But the question needed no answer when we reached the landing, for through the open door of our friend's chambers I could see in the darkened room Anstey himself with two uniformed constables and a couple of plain-clothes men.

"There has been no signal yet, sir," said one of the latter, whom I recognised as a detective-sergeant of our division.

"No," said Thorndyke, "but the M.C. has arrived. He came in five minutes before us."

"Then," exclaimed Anstey, "the ball will open shortly, ladies and gents. The boards are waxed, the fiddlers are tuning up, and——"

"Not quite so loud, if you please, sir," said the sergeant. "I think there is somebody coming up Crown Office Row."

The ball had, in fact, opened. As we peered cautiously out of the open window, keeping well back in the darkened room, a stealthy figure crept out of the shadow, crossed the road, and stole noiselessly into the entry of Thorndyke's chambers. It was quickly followed by a second figure, and then by a third, in which I recognised our elusive client.

"Now listen for the signal," said Thorndyke. "They won't waste time. Confound that clock!"

The soft-voiced bell of the Inner Temple clock, mingling with the harsher tones of St. Dunstan's and the Law Courts, slowly told out the hour of midnight; and as the last reverberations were dying away, some metallic object, apparently a coin, dropped with a sharp clink on to the pavement under our window.

At the sound the watchers simultaneously sprang to their feet.

"You two go first," said the sergeant, addressing the uniformed men, who thereupon stole noiselessly, in their rubber-soled boots, down the stone stairs and along the pavement. The rest of us followed, with less attention to silence, and as we ran up to Thorndyke's chambers, we were aware of quick but stealthy footsteps on the stairs above.

“They’ve been at work, you see,” whispered one of the constables, flashing his lantern on to the iron-bound outer door of our sitting-room, on which the marks of a large jemmy were plainly visible.

The sergeant nodded grimly, and, bidding the constables to remain on the landing, led the way upwards.

As we ascended, faint rustlings continued to be audible from above, and on the second-floor landing we met a man descending briskly, but without hurry, from the third. It was Mr. Barton, and I could not but admire the composure with which he passed the two detectives. But suddenly his glance fell on Thorndyke, and his composure vanished. With a wild stare of incredulous horror, he halted as if petrified; then he broke away and raced furiously down the stairs, and a moment later a muffled shout and the sound of a scuffle told us that he had received a check. On the next flight we met two more men, who, more hurried and less self-possessed, endeavoured to push past; but the sergeant barred the way.

“Why, bless me!” exclaimed the latter, “it’s Moakey; and isn’t that Tom Harris?”

“It’s all right, sergeant,” said Moakey plaintively, striving to escape from the officer’s grip. “We’ve come to the wrong house, that’s all.”

The sergeant smiled indulgently. “I know,” he replied. “But you’re always coming to the wrong house, Moakey; and now you’re just coming along with me to the right house.”

He slipped his hand inside his captive’s coat, and adroitly fished out a large, folding jemmy; whereupon the discomfited burglar abandoned all further protest.

On our return to the first-floor, we found Mr. Barton sulkily awaiting us, handcuffed to one of the constables, and watched by Polton with pensive disapproval.

“I needn’t trouble you to-night, doctor,” said the sergeant, as he marshalled his little troop of captors and captives. “You’ll hear from us in the morning. Good-night, sir.”

The melancholy procession moved off down the stairs, and we retired into our chambers with Anstey to smoke a last pipe.

“A capable man, that Barton,” observed Thorndyke—“ready, plausible, and ingenious, but spoilt by prolonged contact with fools. I wonder if the police will perceive the significance of this little affair.”

“They will be more acute than I am if they do,” said I.

“Naturally,” interposed Anstey, who loved to “cheek” his revered senior, “because there isn’t any. It’s only Thorndyke’s bounce. He is really in a deuce of a fog himself.”

However this may have been, the police were a good deal puzzled by the incident, for, on the following morning, we received a visit from no less a person than Superintendent Miller, of Scotland Yard.

“This is a queer business,” said he, coming to the point at once—“this burglary, I mean. Why should they want to crack your place, right here in the Temple, too? You’ve got nothing of value here, have you? No ‘hard stuff,’ as they call it, for instance?”

“Not so much as a silver teaspoon,” replied Thorndyke, who had a conscientious objection to plate of all kinds.

“It’s odd,” said the superintendent, “deuced odd. When we got your note, we thought these anarchist idiots had mixed you up with the case—you saw the papers, I suppose—and wanted to go through your rooms for some reason. We thought we had our hands on the gang, instead of which we find a party of common crooks that we’re sick of the sight of. I tell you, sir, it’s annoying when you think you’ve hooked a salmon, to bring up a blooming eel.”

“It must be a great disappointment,” Thorndyke agreed, suppressing a smile.

“It is,” said the detective. “Not but what we’re glad enough to get these beggars, especially Halkett, or Barton, as he calls himself—a mighty slippery customer is Halkett, and mischievous, too—but we’re not wanting any disappointments just now. There was that big jewel job in Piccadilly, Taplin and Horne’s; I don’t mind telling you that we’ve not got the ghost of a clue. Then there’s this anarchist affair. We’re all in the dark there, too.”

“But what about the cipher?” asked Thorndyke.

“Oh, hang the cipher!” exclaimed the detective irritably. “This Professor Poppelbaum may be a very learned man, but he doesn’t help *us* much. He says the document is in Hebrew, and he has translated it into Double Dutch. Just listen to this!” He dragged out of his pocket a bundle of papers, and, dabbing down a photograph of the document before Thorndyke, commenced to read the Professor’s report.

“‘The document is written in the characters of the well-known inscription of Mesha, King of Moab’ (who the devil’s he? Never heard of him. Well

known, indeed!) ‘The language is Hebrew, and the words are separated by groups of letters, which are meaningless, and obviously introduced to mislead and confuse the reader. The words themselves are not strictly consecutive, but, by the interpolation of certain other words, a series of intelligible sentences is obtained, the meaning of which is not very clear, but is no doubt allegorical. The method of decipherment is shown in the accompanying tables, and the full rendering suggested on the enclosed sheet. It is to be noted that the writer of this document was apparently quite unacquainted with the Hebrew language, as appears from the absence of any grammatical construction.’ That’s the Professor’s report, doctor, and here are the tables showing how he worked it out. It makes my head spin to look at ’em.”

He handed to Thorndyke a bundle of ruled sheets, which my colleague examined attentively for a while, and then passed on to me.

“This is very systematic and thorough,” said he. “But now let us see the final result at which he arrives.”

*Analysis of the cipher with transliterations into modern square Hebrew characters and translation into English. N.B. The cipher reads from right to left.*

Moabite Hebrew Translation	Space זא	Word מזאד זים	Space אג	Word אזו עיר	Space גא	Word זיא אי
		LIES		CITY		WOG
Moabite Hebrew Translation	זמ	גזפ קול	גזז	זאח טרף	חז	גזג גול
		NOISE		PREY		ROBBERY
Moabite Hebrew Translation	מא	מזא אין	פח	מא רעש	זא	מזמ זוט
		WHEEL		RATTLING		WHIP
Moabite Hebrew Translation	זא	מזז ום	אג	מזמ סדנה	גאח	מזמ ום
		DAY		CHARIOT		HORSE

THE PROFESSOR’S ANALYSIS.

“It may be all very systematic,” growled the superintendent, sorting out his papers, “but I tell you, sir, it’s all BOSH!” The latter word he jerked out

viciously, as he slapped down on the table the final product of the Professor's labours. "There," he continued, "that's what he calls the 'full rendering,' and I reckon it'll make your hair curl. It might be a message from Bedlam."

Thorndyke took up the first sheet, and as he compared the constructed renderings with the literal translation, the ghost of a smile stole across his usually immovable countenance.

"The meaning is certainly a little obscure," he observed, "though the reconstruction is highly ingenious; and, moreover, I think the Professor is probably right. That is to say, the words which he has supplied are probably the omitted parts of the passages from which the words of the cryptogram were taken. What do you think, Jervis?"

He handed me the two papers, of which one gave the actual words of the cryptogram, and the other a suggested reconstruction, with omitted words supplied. The first read:

"Woe city lies robbery prey  
noise whip rattling wheel horse  
chariot day darkness gloominess  
cloud darkness morning mountain  
people strong fire them flame."

Turning to the second paper, I read out the suggested rendering:

*"Woe to the bloody city! It is full of lies and robbery; the prey departeth not. The noise of a whip, and the noise of the rattling of the wheels, and of the prancing horses, and of the jumping chariots.*

*"A day of darkness and of gloominess, a day of clouds, and of thick darkness, as the morning spread upon the mountains, a great people and a strong.*

*"A fire devoureth before them, and behind them a flame burneth."*

Here the first sheet ended, and, as I laid it down, Thorndyke looked at me inquiringly.

"There is a good deal of reconstruction in proportion to the original matter," I objected. "The Professor has 'supplied' more than three-quarters of the final rendering."

"Exactly," burst in the superintendent; "it's all Professor and no

cryptogram.”

“Still, I think the reading is correct,” said Thorndyke. “As far as it goes, that is.”

“Good Lord!” exclaimed the dismayed detective. “Do you mean to tell me, sir, that that balderdash is the real meaning of the thing?”

“I don’t say that,” replied Thorndyke. “I say it is correct as far as it goes; but I doubt its being the solution of the cryptogram.”

“Have you been studying that photograph that I gave you?” demanded Miller, with sudden eagerness.

“I have looked at it,” said Thorndyke evasively, “but I should like to examine the original if you have it with you.”

“I have,” said the detective. “Professor Poppelbaum sent it back with the solution. You can have a look at it, though I can’t leave it with you without special authority.”

He drew the document from his pocket-book and handed it to Thorndyke, who took it over to the window and scrutinised it closely. From the window he drifted into the adjacent office, closing the door after him; and presently the sound of a faint explosion told me that he had lighted the gas-fire.

“Of course,” said Miller, taking up the translation again, “this gibberish is the sort of stuff you might expect from a parcel of crack-brained anarchists; but it doesn’t seem to mean anything.”

“Not to us,” I agreed; “but the phrases may have some prearranged significance. And then there are the letters between the words. It is possible that they may really form a cipher.”

“I suggested that to the Professor,” said Miller, “but he wouldn’t hear of it. He is sure they are only dummies.”

“I think he is probably mistaken, and so, I fancy, does my colleague. But we shall hear what he has to say presently.”

“Oh, I know what he will say,” growled Miller. “He will put the thing under the microscope, and tell us who made the paper, and what the ink is composed of, and then we shall be just where we were.” The superintendent was evidently deeply depressed.

We sat for some time pondering in silence on the vague sentences of the Professor’s translation, until, at length, Thorndyke reappeared, holding the document in his hand. He laid it quietly on the table by the officer, and then

inquired:

“Is this an official consultation?”

“Certainly,” replied Miller. “I was authorised to consult you respecting the translation, but nothing was said about the original. Still, if you want it for further study, I will get it for you.”

“No, thank you,” said Thorndyke. “I have finished with it. My theory turned out to be correct.”

“Your theory!” exclaimed the superintendent, eagerly. “Do you mean to say——?”

“And, as you are consulting me officially, I may as well give you this.”

He held out a sheet of paper, which the detective took from him and began to read.

“What is this?” he asked, looking up at Thorndyke with a puzzled frown. “Where did it come from?”

“It is the solution of the cryptogram,” replied Thorndyke.

The detective re-read the contents of the paper, and, with the frown of perplexity deepening, once more gazed at my colleague.

“This is a joke, sir; you are fooling me,” he said sulkily.

“Nothing of the kind,” answered Thorndyke. “That is the genuine solution.”

“But it’s impossible!” exclaimed Miller. “Just look at it, Dr. Jervis.”

I took the paper from his hand, and, as I glanced at it, I had no difficulty in understanding his surprise. It bore a short inscription in printed Roman capitals, thus:

“THE PICKERDILLEY STUF IS UP THE CHIMBLY 416 WARDOUR ST 2ND  
FLOUR BACK IT WAS HID BECOS OF OLD MOAKEYS JOOD MOAKEY IS A  
BLITER.”

“Then that fellow wasn’t an anarchist at all!” I exclaimed.

“No,” said Miller. “He was one of Moakey’s gang. We suspected Moakey of being mixed up with that job, but we couldn’t fix it on him. By Jove!” he added, slapping his thigh, “if this is right, and I can lay my hands on the loot! Can you lend me a bag, doctor? I’m off to Wardour Street this very moment.”

We furnished him with an empty suit-case, and, from the window, watched him making for Mitre Court at a smart double.

“I wonder if he will find the booty,” said Thorndyke. “It just depends on whether the hiding-place was known to more than one of the gang. Well, it has been a quaint case and instructive, too. I suspect our friend Barton and the evasive Schönberg were the collaborators who produced that curiosity of literature.”

“May I ask how you deciphered the thing?” I said. “It didn’t appear to take long.”

“It didn’t. It was merely a matter of testing a hypothesis; and you ought not to have to ask that question,” he added, with mock severity, “seeing that you had what turn out to have been all the necessary facts, two days ago. But I will prepare a document and demonstrate to you to-morrow morning.”

“So Miller was successful in his quest,” said Thorndyke, as we smoked our morning pipes after breakfast. “The ‘entire swag,’ as he calls it, was ‘up the chimbley,’ undisturbed.”

He handed me a note which had been left, with the empty suit-case, by a messenger, shortly before, and I was about to read it when an agitated knock was heard at our door. The visitor, whom I admitted, was a rather haggard and dishevelled elderly gentleman, who, as he entered, peered inquisitively through his concave spectacles from one of us to the other.

“Allow me to introduce myself, gentlemen,” said he. “I am Professor Poppelbaum.”

Thorndyke bowed and offered a chair.

“I called yesterday afternoon,” our visitor continued, “at Scotland Yard, where I heard of your remarkable decipherment and of the convincing proof of its correctness. Thereupon I borrowed the cryptogram, and have spent the entire night in studying it, but I cannot connect your solution with any of the characters. I wonder if you would do me the great favour of enlightening me as to your method of decipherment, and so save me further sleepless nights? You may rely on my discretion.”

“Have you the document with you?” asked Thorndyke.

The Professor produced it from his pocket-book, and passed it to my colleague.



“You observe, Professor,” said the latter, “that this is a laid paper, and has no water-mark?”

“Yes, I noticed that.”

“And that the writing is in indelible Chinese ink?”

“Yes, yes,” said the savant impatiently; “but it is the inscription that interests me, not the paper and ink.”

“Precisely,” said Thorndyke. “Now, it was the ink that interested me when I caught a glimpse of the document three days ago. ‘Why,’ I asked myself, ‘should anyone use this troublesome medium’—for this appears to be stick ink—‘when good writing ink is to be had?’ What advantages has Chinese ink over writing ink? It has several advantages as a drawing ink, but for writing purposes it has only one: it is quite unaffected by wet. The obvious inference, then, was that this document was, for some reason, likely to be exposed to wet. But this inference instantly suggested another, which I was yesterday able to put to the test—thus.”

He filled a tumbler with water, and, rolling up the document, dropped it in. Immediately there began to appear on it a new set of characters of a curious grey colour. In a few seconds Thorndyke lifted out the wet paper, and held it up to the light, and now there was plainly visible an inscription in transparent lettering, like a very distinct water-mark. It was in printed Roman capitals, written across the other writing, and read:

“THE PICKERDILLEY STUF IS UP THE CHIMBLY 416 WARDOUR ST 2ND  
FLOUR BACK IT WAS HID BECOS OF OLD MOAKEYS JOOD MOAKEY IS A  
BLITER.”

The Professor regarded the inscription with profound disfavour.

“How do you suppose this was done?” he asked gloomily.

“I will show you,” said Thorndyke. “I have prepared a piece of paper to demonstrate the process to Dr. Jervis. It is exceedingly simple.”

He fetched from the office a small plate of glass, and a photographic dish in which a piece of thin notepaper was soaking in water.

“This paper,” said Thorndyke, lifting it out and laying it on the glass, “has been soaking all night, and is now quite pulpy.”

He spread a dry sheet of paper over the wet one, and on the former wrote heavily with a hard pencil, “Moakey is a bliter.” On lifting the upper sheet, the writing was seen to be transferred in a deep grey to the wet paper, and when

the latter was held up to the light the inscription stood out clear and transparent as if written with oil.

“When this dries,” said Thorndyke, “the writing will completely disappear, but it will reappear whenever the paper is again wetted.”

The Professor nodded.

“Very ingenious,” said he—“a sort of artificial palimpsest, in fact. But I do not understand how that illiterate man could have written in the difficult Moabite script.”

“He did not,” said Thorndyke. “The ‘cryptogram’ was probably written by one of the leaders of the gang, who, no doubt, supplied copies to the other members to use instead of blank paper for secret communications. The object of the Moabite writing was evidently to divert attention from the paper itself, in case the communication fell into the wrong hands, and I must say it seems to have answered its purpose very well.”

The Professor started, stung by the sudden recollection of his labours.

“Yes,” he snorted; “but I am a scholar, sir, not a policeman. Every man to his trade.”

He snatched up his hat, and with a curt “Good-morning,” flung out of the room in dudgeon.

Thorndyke laughed softly.

“Poor Professor!” he murmured. “Our playful friend Barton has much to answer for.”

## THE END

### TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

[The end of *The Moabite Cipher* by Richard Austin Freeman]