

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

Number Fourteen

The Contents of
A Mare's Nest

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"It is very unsatisfactory," said Mr. Stalker, of the 'Griffin' Life Assurance Company, at the close of a consultation on a doubtful claim. "I suppose we shall have to pay up."

"I am sure you will," said Thorndyke. "The death was properly certified, the deceased is buried, and you have not a single fact with which to support an application for further inquiry."

"No," Stalker agreed. "But I am not satisfied. I don't believe that doctor really knew what she died from. I wish cremation were more usual."

"So, I have no doubt, has many a poisoner," Thorndyke remarked dryly.

Stalker laughed, but stuck to his point. "I know you don't agree," said he, "but from our point of view it is much more satisfactory to know that the extra precautions have been taken. In a cremation case, you have not to depend on the mere death certificate; you have the cause of death verified by an independent authority, and it is difficult to see how any miscarriage can occur."

Thorndyke shook his head. "It is a delusion, Stalker. You can't provide in advance for unknown contingencies. In practice, your special precautions degenerate into mere formalities. If the circumstances of a death appear normal, the independent authority will certify; if they appear abnormal, you won't get a certificate at all. And if suspicion arises only after the cremation has taken place, it can neither be confirmed nor rebutted."

"My point is," said Stalker, "that the searching examination would lead to discovery of a crime before cremation."

"That is the intention," Thorndyke admitted. "But no examination, short of an exhaustive post-mortem, would make it safe to destroy a body so that no reconsideration of the cause of death would be possible."

Stalker smiled as he picked up his hat. "Well," he said, "to a cobbler there is nothing like leather, and I suppose that to a toxicologist there is nothing like an exhumation," and with this parting shot he took his leave.

We had not seen the last of him, however. In the course of the same week he looked in to consult us on a fresh matter.

“A rather queer case has turned up,” said he. “I don’t know that we are deeply concerned in it, but we should like to have your opinion as to how we stand. The position is this: Eighteen months ago, a man named Ingle insured with us for fifteen hundred pounds, and he was then accepted as a first-class life. He has recently died—apparently from heart failure, the heart being described as fatty and dilated—and his wife, Sibyl, who is the sole legatee and executrix, has claimed payment. But just as we were making arrangements to pay, a caveat has been entered by a certain Margaret Ingle, who declares that she is the wife of the deceased and claims the estate as next-of-kin. She states that the alleged wife, Sibyl, is a widow named Huggard who contracted a bigamous marriage with the deceased, knowing that he had a wife living.”

“An interesting situation,” commented Thorndyke, “but, as you say, it doesn’t particularly concern you. It is a matter for the Probate Court.”

“Yes,” agreed Stalker. “But that is not all. Margaret Ingle not only charges the other woman with bigamy; she accuses her of having made away with the deceased.”

“On what grounds?”

“Well, the reasons she gives are rather shadowy. She states that Sibyl’s husband, James Huggard, died under suspicious circumstances—there seems to have been some suspicion that he had been poisoned—and she asserts that Ingle was a healthy, sound man and could not have died from the causes alleged.”

“There is some reason in that,” said Thorndyke, “if he was really a first-class life only eighteen months ago. As to the first husband, Huggard, we should want some particulars: as to whether there was an inquest, what was the alleged cause of death, and what grounds there were for suspecting that he had been poisoned. If there really were any suspicious circumstances, it would be advisable to apply to the Home Office for an order to exhume the body of Ingle and verify the cause of death.”

Stalker smiled somewhat sheepishly. “Unfortunately,” said he, “that is not possible. Ingle was cremated.”

“Ah!” said Thorndyke, “that is, as you say, unfortunate. It clearly increases the suspicion of poisoning, but destroys the means of verifying that suspicion.”

“I should tell you,” said Stalker, “that the cremation was in accordance with the provisions of the will.”

“That is not very material,” replied Thorndyke. “In fact, it rather accentuates the suspicious aspect of the case; for the knowledge that the death

of the deceased would be followed by cremation might act as a further inducement to get rid of him by poison. There were two death certificates, of course?"

"Yes. The confirmatory certificate was given by Dr. Halbury, of Wimpole Street. The medical attendant was a Dr. Barber, of Howland Street. The deceased lived in Stock-Orchard Crescent, Holloway."

"A good distance from Howland Street," Thorndyke remarked. "Do you know if Halbury made a post-mortem? I don't suppose he did."

"No, he didn't," replied Stalker.

"Then," said Thorndyke, "his certificate is worthless. You can't tell whether a man has died from heart failure by looking at his dead body. He must have just accepted the opinion of the medical attendant. Do I understand that you want me to look into this case?"

"If you will. It is not really our concern whether or not the man was poisoned, though I suppose we should have a claim on the estate of the murderer. But we should like you to investigate the case; though how the deuce you are going to do it I don't quite see."

"Neither do I," said Thorndyke. "However, we must get into touch with the doctors who signed the certificates, and possibly they may be able to clear the whole matter up."

"Of course," said I, "there is the other body—that of Huggard—which might be exhumed—unless he was cremated, too."

"Yes," agreed Thorndyke; "and for the purposes of the criminal law, evidence of poisoning in that case would be sufficient. But it would hardly help the Griffin Company, which is concerned exclusively with Ingle deceased. Can you let us have a précis of the facts relating to this case, Stalker?"

"I have brought one with me," was the reply; "a short statement, giving names, addresses, dates, and other particulars. Here it is"; and he handed Thorndyke a sheet of paper bearing a tabulated statement.

When Stalker had gone Thorndyke glanced rapidly through the précis and then looked at his watch. "If we make our way to Wimpole Street at once," said he, "we ought to catch Halbury. That is obviously the first thing to do. He signed the 'C' certificate, and we shall be able to judge from what he tells us whether there is any possibility of foul play. Shall we start now?"

As I assented, he slipped the précis in his pocket and we set forth. At the

top of Middle Temple Lane we chartered a taxi by which we were shortly deposited at Dr. Halbury's door and a few minutes later were ushered into his consulting room, and found him shovelling a pile of letters into the waste-paper basket.

"How d'ye do?" he said briskly, holding out his hand. "I'm up to my eyes in arrears, you see. Just back from my holiday. What can I do for you?"

"We have called," said Thorndyke, "about a man named Ingle."

"Ingle—Ingle," repeated Halbury. "Now, let me see——"

"Stock-Orchard Crescent, Holloway," Thorndyke explained.

"Oh, yes. I remember him. Well, how is he?"

"He's dead," replied Thorndyke.

"Is he really?" exclaimed Halbury. "Now that shows how careful one should be in one's judgments. I half suspected that fellow of malingering. He was supposed to have a dilated heart, but I couldn't make out any appreciable dilatation. There was excited, irregular action. That was all. I had a suspicion that he had been dosing himself with trinitrine. Reminded me of the cases of cordite chewing that I used to meet with in South Africa. So he's dead, after all. Well, it's queer. Do you know what the exact cause of death was?"

"Failure of a dilated heart is the cause stated on the certificates—the body was cremated; and the 'C' Certificate was signed by you."

"By me!" exclaimed the physician. "Nonsense! It's a mistake. I signed a certificate for a Friendly Society—Mrs. Ingle brought it here for me to sign—but I didn't even know he was dead. Besides, I went away for my holiday a few days after I saw the man and only came back yesterday. What makes you think I signed the death certificate?"

Thorndyke produced Stalker's précis and handed it to Halbury, who read out his own name and address with a puzzled frown. "This is an extraordinary affair," said he. "It will have to be looked into."

"It will, indeed," assented Thorndyke; "especially as a suspicion of poisoning has been raised."

"Ha!" exclaimed Halbury. "Then it was trinitrine, you may depend. But I suspected him unjustly. It was somebody else who was dosing him; perhaps that sly-looking baggage of a wife of his. Is anyone in particular suspected?"

"Yes. The accusation, such as it is, is against the wife."

"H'm. Probably a true bill. But she's done us. Artful devil. You can't get

much evidence out of an urnful of ashes. Still, somebody has forged my signature. I suppose that is what the hussy wanted that certificate for—to get a specimen of my handwriting. I see the ‘B’ certificate was signed by a man named Meeking. Who’s he? It was Barber who called me in for an opinion.”

“I must find out who he is,” replied Thorndyke. “Possibly Dr. Barber will know. I shall go and call on him now.”

“Yes,” said Dr. Halbury, shaking hands as we rose to depart, “you ought to see Barber. He knows the history of the case, at any rate.”

From Wimpole Street we steered a course for Howland Street, and here we had the good fortune to arrive just as Dr. Barber’s car drew up at the door. Thorndyke introduced himself and me, and then introduced the subject of his visit, but said nothing, at first, about our call on Dr. Halbury.

“Ingle,” repeated Dr. Barber. “Oh, yes, I remember him. And you say he is dead. Well, I’m rather surprised. I didn’t regard his condition as serious.”

“Was his heart dilated?” Thorndyke asked.

“Not appreciably. I found nothing organic; no valvular disease. It was more like a tobacco heart. But it’s odd that Meeking didn’t mention the matter to me—he was my locum, you know. I handed the case over to him when I went on my holiday. And you say he signed the death certificate?”

“Yes; and the ‘B’ certificate for cremation, too.”

“Very odd,” said Dr. Barber. “Just come in and let us have a look at the day book.”

We followed him into the consulting room, and there, while he was turning over the leaves of the day book, I ran my eye along the shelf over the writing-table from which he had taken it; on which I observed the usual collection of case books and books of certificates and notification forms, including the book of death certificates.

“Yes,” said Dr. Barber, “here we are; ‘Ingle, Mr., Stock-Orchard Crescent.’ The last visit was on the 4th of September, and Meeking seems to have given some sort of certificate. Wonder if he used a printed form.” He took down two of the books and turned over the counterfoils.

“Here we are,” he said presently; “‘Ingle, Jonathan, 4th September. Now recovered and able to resume duties.’ That doesn’t look like dying, does it? Still, we may as well make sure.”

He reached down the book of death certificates and began to glance

through the most recent entries.

“No,” he said, turning over the leaves, “there doesn’t seem to be—— Hullo! What’s this? Two blank counterfoils; and about the date, too; between the 2nd and 13th of September. Extraordinary! Meeking is such a careful, reliable man.”

He turned back to the day book and read through the fortnight’s entries. Then he looked up with an anxious frown.

“I can’t make this out,” he said. “There is no record of any patient having died in that period.”

“Where is Dr. Meeking at present?” I asked.

“Somewhere in the South Atlantic,” replied Barber. “He left here three weeks ago to take up a post on a Royal Mail Boat. So he couldn’t have signed the certificate in any case.”

That was all that Dr. Barber had to tell us, and a few minutes later we took our departure.

“This case looks pretty fishy,” I remarked, as we turned down Tottenham Court Road.

“Yes,” Thorndyke agreed. “There is evidently something radically wrong. And what strikes me especially is the cleverness of the fraud; the knowledge and judgment and foresight that are displayed.”

“She took pretty considerable risks,” I observed.

“Yes, but only the risks that were unavoidable. Everything that could be foreseen has been provided for. All the formalities have been complied with—in appearance. And you must notice, Jervis, that the scheme did actually succeed. The cremation has taken place. Nothing but the incalculable accident of the appearance of the real Mrs. Ingle, and her vague and apparently groundless suspicions, prevented the success from being final. If she had not come on the scene, no questions would ever have been asked.”

“No,” I agreed. “The discovery of the plot is a matter of sheer bad luck. But what do you suppose has really happened?”

Thorndyke shook his head.

“It is very difficult to say. The mechanism of the affair is obvious enough, but the motives and purpose are rather incomprehensible. The illness was apparently a sham, the symptoms being produced by nitro-glycerine or some similar heart poison. The doctors were called in, partly for the sake of

appearances and partly to get specimens of their handwriting. The fact that both the doctors happened to be away from home and one of them at sea at the time when verbal questions might have been asked—by the undertaker, for instance—suggests that this had been ascertained in advance. The death certificate forms were pretty certainly stolen by the woman when she was left alone in Barber’s consulting-room, and, of course, the cremation certificates could be obtained on application to the crematorium authorities. That is all plain sailing. The mystery is, what is it all about? Barber or Meeking would almost certainly have given a death certificate, although the death was unexpected, and I don’t suppose Halbury would have refused to confirm it. They would have assumed that their diagnosis had been at fault.”

“Do you think it could have been suicide, or an inadvertent overdose of trinitrine?”

“Hardly. If it was suicide, it was deliberate, for the purpose of getting the insurance money for the woman, unless there was some further motive behind. And the cremation, with all its fuss and formalities, is against suicide; while the careful preparation seems to exclude inadvertent poisoning. Then, what was the motive for the sham illness except as a preparation for an abnormal death?”

“That is true,” said I. “But if you reject suicide, isn’t it rather remarkable that the victim should have provided for his own cremation?”

“We don’t know that he did,” replied Thorndyke. “There is a suggestion of a capable forger in this business. It is quite possible that the will itself is a forgery.”

“So it is!” I exclaimed. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

“You see,” continued Thorndyke, “the appearances suggest that cremation was a necessary part of the programme; otherwise these extraordinary risks would not have been taken. The woman was sole executrix and could have ignored the cremation clause. But if the cremation was necessary, why was it necessary? The suggestion is that there was something suspicious in the appearance of the body; something that the doctors would certainly have observed or that would have been discovered if an exhumation had taken place.”

“You mean some injury or visible signs of poisoning?”

“I mean something discoverable by examination even after burial.”

“But what about the undertaker? Wouldn’t he have noticed anything palpably abnormal?”

“An excellent suggestion, Jervis. We must see the undertaker. We have his address: Kentish Town Road—a long way from deceased’s house, by the way. We had better get on a bus and go there now.”

A yellow omnibus was approaching as he spoke. We hailed it and sprang on, continuing our discussion as we were borne northward.

Mr. Burrell, the undertaker, was a pensive-looking, profoundly civil man who was evidently in a small way, for he combined with his funeral functions general carpentry and cabinet making. He was perfectly willing to give any required information, but he seemed to have very little to give.

“I never really saw the deceased gentleman,” he said in reply to Thorndyke’s cautious inquiries. “When I took the measurements, the corpse was covered with a sheet; and as Mrs. Ingle was in the room, I made the business as short as possible.”

“You didn’t put the body in the coffin, then?”

“No. I left the coffin at the house, but Mrs. Ingle said that she and the deceased gentleman’s brother would lay the body in it.”

“But didn’t you see the corpse when you screwed the coffin-lid down?”

“I didn’t screw it down. When I got there it was screwed down already. Mrs. Ingle said they had to close up the coffin, and I dare say it was necessary. The weather was rather warm; and I noticed a strong smell of formalin.”

“Well,” I said, as we walked back down the Kentish Town Road, “we haven’t got much more forward.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” replied Thorndyke. “We have a further instance of the extraordinary adroitness with which this scheme was carried out; and we have confirmation of our suspicion that there was something unusual in the appearance of the body. It is evident that this woman did not dare to let even the undertaker see it. But one can hardly help admiring the combination of daring and caution, the boldness with which these risks were taken, and the care and judgment with which they were provided against. And again I point out that the risks were justified by the result. The secret of that man’s death appears to have been made secure for all time.”

It certainly looked as if the mystery with which we were concerned were beyond the reach of investigation. Of course, the woman could be prosecuted for having forged the death certificates, to say nothing of the charge of bigamy. But that was no concern of ours or Stalker’s. Jonathan Ingle was dead, and no one could say how he died.

On our arrival at our chambers we found a telegram that had just arrived, announcing that Stalker would call on us in the evening; and as this seemed to suggest that he had some fresh information we looked forward to his visit with considerable interest. Punctually at six o'clock he made his appearance and at once opened the subject.

"There are some new developments in this Ingle case," said he. "In the first place, the woman, Huggard, has bolted. I went to the house to make a few inquiries and found the police in possession. They had come to arrest her on the bigamy charge, but she had got wind of their intentions and cleared out. They made a search of the premises, but I don't think they found anything of interest except a number of rifle cartridges; and I don't know that they are of much interest either, for she could hardly have shot him with a rifle."

"What kind of cartridges were they?" Thorndyke asked.

Stalker put his hand in his pocket.

"The inspector let me have one to show you," said he; and he laid on the table a military cartridge of the pattern of some twenty years ago. Thorndyke picked it up, and taking from a drawer a pair of pliers drew the bullet out of the case and inserted into the latter a pair of dissecting forceps. When he withdrew the forceps, their points grasped one or two short strings of what looked like cat-gut.

"Cordite!" said I. "So Halbury was probably right, and this is how she got her supply." Then, as Stalker looked at me inquiringly, I gave him a short account of the results of our investigations.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, "the plot thickens. This juggling with the death certificates seems to connect itself with another kind of juggling that I came to tell you about. You know that Ingle was Secretary and Treasurer to a company that bought and sold land for building estates. Well, I called at their office after I left you and had a little talk with the chairman. From him I learned that Ingle had practically complete control of the financial affairs of the company, that he received and paid all moneys and kept the books. Of late, however, some of the directors have had a suspicion that all was not well with the finances, and at last it was decided to have the affairs of the company thoroughly overhauled by a firm of chartered accountants. This decision was communicated to Ingle, and a couple of days later a letter arrived from his wife saying that he had had a severe heart attack and asking that the audit of the books might be postponed until he recovered and was able to attend at the office."

"And was it postponed?" I asked.

“No,” replied Stalker. “The accountants were asked to get to work at once, which they did; with the result that they discovered a number of discrepancies in the books and a sum of about three thousand pounds unaccounted for. It isn’t quite obvious how the frauds were carried out, but it is suspected that some of the returned cheques are fakes with forged endorsements.”

“Did the company communicate with Ingle on the subject?” asked Thorndyke.

“No. They had a further letter from Mrs. Ingle—that is, Huggard—saying that Ingle’s condition was very serious; so they decided to wait until he had recovered. Then, of course, came the announcement of his death, on which the matter was postponed pending the probate of the will. I suppose a claim will be made on the estate, but as the executrix has absconded, the affair has become rather complicated.”

“You were saying,” said Thorndyke, “that the fraudulent death certificates seem to be connected with these frauds on the company. What kind of connection do you assume?”

“I assume—or, at least, suggest,” replied Stalker, “that this was a case of suicide. The man, Ingle, saw that his frauds were discovered, or were going to be, and that he was in for a long term of penal servitude, so he just made away with himself. And I think that if the murder charge could be dropped, Mrs. Huggard might be induced to come forward and give evidence as to the suicide.”

Thorndyke shook his head.

“The murder charge couldn’t be dropped,” said he. “If it was suicide, Huggard was certainly an accessory; and in law, an accessory to suicide is an accessory to murder. But, in fact, no official charge of murder has been made, and at present there are no means of sustaining such a charge. The identity of the ashes might be assumed to be that stated in the cremation order, but the difficulty is the cause of death. Ingle was admittedly ill. He was attended for heart disease by three doctors. There is no evidence that he did not die from that illness.”

“But the illness was due to cordite poisoning,” said I.

“That is what we believe. But no one could swear to it. And we certainly could not swear that he died from cordite poisoning.”

“Then,” said Stalker, “apparently there is no means of finding out whether his death was due to natural causes, suicide, or murder?”

“There is only one chance,” replied Thorndyke. “It is just barely possible that the cause of death might be ascertainable by an examination of the ashes.”

“That doesn’t seem very hopeful,” said I. “Cordite poisoning would certainly leave no trace.”

“We mustn’t assume that he died from cordite poisoning,” said Thorndyke. “Probably he did not. That may have masked the action of a less obvious poison, or death might have been produced by some new agent.”

“But,” I objected, “how many poisons are there that could be detected in the ashes? No organic poison would leave any traces, nor would metallic poisons such as mercury, antimony, or arsenic.”

“No,” Thorndyke agreed. “But there are other metallic poisons which could be easily recovered from the ashes; lead, tin, gold, and silver, for instance. But it is useless to discuss speculative probabilities. The only chance that we have of obtaining any new facts is by an examination of the ashes. It seems infinitely improbable that we shall learn anything from it, but there is the bare possibility and we ought not to leave it untried.”

Neither Stalker nor I made any further remark, but I could see that the same thought was in both our minds. It was not often that Thorndyke was “gravelled”; but apparently the resourceful Mrs. Huggard had set him a problem that was beyond even his powers. When an investigator of crime is reduced to the necessity of examining a potful of ashes in the wild hope of ascertaining from them how the deceased met his death, one may assume that he is at the very end of his tether. It is a forlorn hope indeed.

Nevertheless, Thorndyke seemed to view the matter quite cheerfully, his only anxiety being lest the Home Secretary should refuse to make the order authorising the examination. And this anxiety was dispelled a day or two later by the arrival of a letter giving the necessary authority, and informing him that a Dr. Hemming—known to us both as an expert pathologist—had been deputed to be present at the examination and to confer with him as to the necessity for a chemical analysis.

On the appointed day Dr. Hemming called at our chambers and we set forth together for Liverpool Street; and as we drove thither it became evident to me that his view of our mission was very similar to my own. For, though he talked freely enough, and on professional topics, he maintained a most discreet silence on the subject of the forthcoming inspection; indeed, the first reference to the subject was made by Thorndyke himself just as the train was approaching Corfield, where the crematorium was situated.

“I presume,” said he, “you have made all necessary arrangements, Hemming?”

“Yes,” was the reply. “The superintendent will meet us and will conduct us to the catacombs, and there, in our presence, will take the casket from its niche in the columbarium and have it conveyed to the office, where the examination will be made. I thought it best to use these formalities, though, as the casket is sealed and bears the name of the deceased, there is not much point in them.”

“No,” said Thorndyke, “but I think you were right. It would be easy to challenge the identity of a mass of ashes if all precautions were not taken, seeing that the ashes themselves are unidentifiable.”

“That was what I felt,” said Hemming; and then, as the train slowed down, he added: “This is our station, and that gentleman on the platform, I suspect, is the superintendent.”

The surmise turned out to be correct; but the cemetery official was not the only one present bearing that title; for as we were mutually introducing ourselves, a familiar tall figure approached up the platform from the rear of the train—our old friend Superintendent Miller of the Criminal Investigation Department.

“I don’t wish to intrude,” said he, as he joined the group and was presented by Thorndyke to the strangers, “but we were notified by the Home Office that an investigation was to be made, so I thought I would be on the spot to pick up any crumbs of information that you may drop. Of course, I am not asking to be present at the examination.”

“You may as well be present as an additional witness to the removal of the urn,” said Thorndyke; and Miller accordingly joined the party, which now made its way from the station to the cemetery.

The catacombs were in a long, low arcaded building at the end of the pleasantly-wooded grounds, and on our way thither we passed the crematorium, a smallish, church-like edifice with a perforated chimney-shaft partly concealed by the low spire. Entering the catacombs, we were conducted to the “columbarium,” the walls of which were occupied by a multitude of niches or pigeon-holes, each niche accommodating a terra-cotta urn or casket. The superintendent proceeded to near the end of the gallery, where he halted, and opening the register, which he had brought with him, read out a number and the name “Jonathan Ingle,” and then led us to a niche bearing that number and name, in which reposed a square casket, on which was inscribed the name and date of death. When we had verified these particulars, the casket was tenderly lifted from its place by two attendants, who carried it to a well-lighted

room at the end of the building, where a large table by a window had been covered with white paper. Having placed the casket on the table, the attendants retired, and the superintendent then broke the seals and removed the cover.

For a while we all stood looking in at the contents of the casket without speaking; and I found myself contrasting them with what would have been revealed by the lifting of a coffin-lid. Truly corruption had put on incorruption. The mass of snow-white, coral-like fragments, delicate, fragile, and lace-like in texture, so far from being repulsive in aspect, were almost attractive. I ran my eye, with an anatomist's curiosity, over these dazzling remnants of what had lately been a man, half-unconsciously seeking to identify and give a name to particular fragments, and a little surprised at the difficulty of determining that this or that irregularly-shaped white object was a part of any one of the bones with which I had thought myself so familiar.

Presently Hemming looked up at Thorndyke and asked: "Do you observe anything abnormal in the appearance of these ashes? I don't."

"Perhaps," replied Thorndyke, "we had better turn them out on to the table, so that we can see the whole of them."

This was done very gently, and then Thorndyke proceeded to spread out the heap, touching the fragments with the utmost delicacy—for they were extremely fragile and brittle—until the whole collection was visible.

"Well," said Hemming, when we had once more looked them over critically, "what do you say? I can see no trace of any foreign substance. Can you?"

"No," replied Thorndyke. "And there are some other things that I can't see. For instance, the medical referee reported that the proposer had a good set of sound teeth. Where are they? I have not seen a single fragment of a tooth. Yet teeth are far more resistant to fire than bones, especially the enamel caps."

Hemming ran a searching glance over the mass of fragments and looked up with a perplexed frown.

"I certainly can't see any sign of teeth," he admitted; "and it is rather curious, as you say. Does the fact suggest any particular significance to you?"

By way of reply, Thorndyke delicately picked up a flat fragment and silently held it out towards us. I looked at it and said nothing; for a very strange suspicion was beginning to creep into my mind.

"A piece of a rib," said Hemming. "Very odd that it should have broken across so cleanly. It might have been cut with a saw."

Thorndyke laid it down and picked up another, larger fragment, which I had already noticed.

“Here is another example,” said he, handing it to our colleague.

“Yes,” agreed Hemming. “It is really rather extraordinary. It looks exactly as if it had been sawn across.”

“It does,” agreed Thorndyke. “What bone should you say it is?”

“That is what I was just asking myself,” replied Hemming, looking at the fragment with a sort of half-vexed smile. “It seems ridiculous that a competent anatomist should be in any doubt with as large a portion as this, but really I can’t confidently give it a name. The shape seems to me to suggest a tibia, but of course it is much too small. Is it the upper end of the ulna?”

“I should say no,” answered Thorndyke. Then he picked out another of the larger fragments, and handing it to Hemming, asked him to name it.

Our friend began to look somewhat worried.

“It is an extraordinary thing, you know,” said he, “but I can’t tell you what bone it is part of. It is clearly the shaft of a long bone, but I’m hanged if I can say which. It is too big for a metatarsal and too small for any of the main limb bones. It reminds one of a diminutive thigh bone.”

“It does,” agreed Thorndyke; “very strongly.” While Hemming had been speaking he had picked out four more large fragments, and these he now laid in a row with the one that had seemed to resemble a tibia in shape. Placed thus together, the five fragments bore an obvious resemblance.

“Now,” said he, “look at these. There are five of them. They are parts of limb bones, and the bones of which they are parts were evidently exactly alike, excepting that three were apparently from the left side and two from the right. Now, you know, Hemming, a man has only four limbs and of those only two contain similar bones. Then two of them show distinct traces of what looks like a saw-cut.”

Hemming gazed at the row of fragments with a frown of deep cogitation.

“It is very mysterious,” he said. “And looking at them in a row they strike me as curiously like tibiae—in shape; not in size.”

“The size,” said Thorndyke, “is about that of a sheep’s tibia.”

“A sheep’s!” exclaimed Hemming, staring in amazement, first at the calcined bones and then at my colleague.

“Yes; the upper half, sawn across in the middle of the shank.”

Hemming was thunderstruck.

“It is an astounding affair!” he exclaimed. “You mean to suggest——”

“I suggest,” said Thorndyke, “that there is not a sign of a human bone in the whole collection. But there are very evident traces of at least five legs of mutton.”

For a few moments there was a profound silence, broken only by a murmur of astonishment from the cemetery official and a low chuckle from Superintendent Miller, who had been listening with absorbed interest. At length Hemming spoke.

“Then, apparently, there was no corpse in the coffin at all?”

“No,” answered Thorndyke. “The weight was made up, and the ashes furnished, by joints of butcher’s meat. I dare say, if we go over the ashes carefully, we shall be able to judge what they were. But it is hardly necessary. The presence of five legs of mutton and the absence of a single recognisable fragment of a human skeleton, together with the forged certificates, gives us a pretty conclusive case. The rest, I think we can leave to Superintendent Miller.”

“I take it, Thorndyke,” said I, as the train moved out of the station, “that you came here expecting to find what you did find?”

“Yes,” he replied. “It seemed to me the only possibility, having regard to all the known facts.”

“When did it first occur to you?”

“It occurred to me as a possibility as soon as we discovered that the cremation certificates had been forged; but it was the undertaker’s statement that seemed to clench the matter.”

“But he distinctly stated that he measured the body.”

“True. But there was nothing to show that it was a dead body. What was perfectly clear was that there was something that must on no account be seen; and when Stalker told us of the embezzlement we had a body of evidence that could point to only one conclusion. Just consider that evidence.

“Here we had a death, preceded by an obviously sham illness and followed by cremation with forged certificates. Now, what was it that had happened? There were four possible hypotheses. Normal death, suicide, murder, and

fictitious death. Which of these hypotheses fitted the facts?

“Normal death was apparently excluded by the forged certificates.

“The theory of suicide did not account for the facts. It did not agree with the careful, elaborate preparation. And why the forged certificates? If Ingle had really died, Meeking would have certified the death. And why the cremation? There was no purpose in taking those enormous risks.

“The theory of murder was unthinkable. These certificates were almost certainly forged by Ingle himself, who we know was a practised forger. But the idea of the victim arranging for his own cremation is an absurdity.

“There remained only the theory of fictitious death; and that theory fitted all the facts perfectly. First, as to the motive. Ingle had committed a felony. He had to disappear. But what kind of disappearance could be so effectual as death and cremation? Both the prosecutors and the police would forthwith write him off and forget him. Then there was the bigamy—a criminal offence in itself. But death would not only wipe that off; after ‘death’ he could marry Huggard regularly under another name, and he would have shaken off his deserted wife for ever. And he stood to gain fifteen hundred pounds from the Insurance Company. Then see how this theory explained the other facts. A fictitious death made necessary a fictitious illness. It necessitated the forged certificates, since there was no corpse. It made cremation highly desirable; for suspicion might easily have arisen, and then the exhumation of a coffin containing a dummy would have exploded the fraud. But successful cremation would cover up the fraud for ever. It explained the concealment of the corpse from the undertaker, and it even explained the smell of formalin which he noticed.”

“How did it?” I asked.

“Consider, Jervis,” he replied. “The dummy in this coffin had to be a dummy of flesh and bone which would yield the correct kind of ash. Joints of butcher’s meat would fulfil the conditions. But the quantity required would be from a hundred and fifty to two hundred pounds. Now Ingle could not go to the butcher and order a whole sheep to be sent the day before the funeral. The joints would have to be bought gradually and stored. But the storage of meat in warm weather calls for some kind of preservative; and formalin is highly effective, as it leaves no trace after burning.

“So you see that the theory of fictitious death agreed with all the known circumstances, whereas the alternative theories presented inexplicable discrepancies and contradictions. Logically, it was the only possible theory, and, as you have seen, experiment proved it to be the true one.”

As Thorndyke concluded, Dr. Hemming took his pipe from his mouth and laughed softly.

“When I came down to-day,” said he, “I had all the facts which you had communicated to the Home Office, and I was absolutely convinced that we were coming to examine a mare’s nest. And yet, now I have heard your exposition, the whole thing looks perfectly obvious.”

“That is usually the case with Thorndyke’s conclusions,” said I. “They are perfectly obvious—when you have heard the explanation.”

Within a week of our expedition, Ingle was in the hands of the police. The apparent success of the cremation adventure had misled him to a sense of such complete security that he had neglected to cover his tracks, and he had accordingly fallen an easy prey to our friend Superintendent Miller. The police were highly gratified, and so were the directors of the Griffin Life Assurance Company.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

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

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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

[The end of *The Contents of a Mare's Nest* by Richard Austin Freeman]