

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

Number Seventeen

Mr. Ponting's
Alibi

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THORNDYKE looked doubtfully at the pleasant-faced, athletic-looking clergyman who had just come in, bearing Mr. Brodribb's card as an explanatory credential.

"I don't quite see," said he, "why Mr. Brodribb sent you to me. It seems to be a purely legal matter which he could have dealt with himself, at least as well as I can."

"He appeared to think otherwise," said the clergyman. ("The Revd. Charles Meade" was written on the card.) "At any rate," he added with a persuasive smile, "here I am, and I hope you are not going to send me away."

"I shouldn't offer that affront to my old friend Brodribb," replied Thorndyke, smiling in return; "so we may as well get to business, which, in the first place, involves the setting out of all the particulars. Let us begin with the lady who is the subject of the threats of which you spoke."

"Her name," said Mr. Meade, "is Miss Millicent Fawcett. She is a person of independent means, which she employs in works of charity. She was formerly a hospital sister, and she does a certain amount of voluntary work in the parish as a sort of district nurse. She has been a very valuable help to me and we have been close friends for several years; and I may add, as a very material fact, that she has consented to marry me in about two months' time. So that, you see, I am properly entitled to act on her behalf."

"Yes," agreed Thorndyke. "You are an interested party. And now, as to the threats. What do they amount to?"

"That," replied Meade, "I can't tell you. I gathered quite by chance, from some words that she dropped, that she had been threatened. But she was unwilling to say more on the subject, as she did not take the matter seriously. She is not at all nervous. However, I told her I was taking advice; and I hope you will be able to extract more details from her. For my own part, I am decidedly uneasy."

"And as to the person or persons who have uttered the threats. Who are they? and out of what circumstances have the threats arisen?"

"The person is a certain William Ponting, who is Miss Fawcett's step-brother—if that is the right term. Her father married, as his second wife, a Mrs.

Ponting, a widow with one son. This is the son. His mother died before Mr. Fawcett, and the latter, when he died, left his daughter, Millicent, sole heir to his property. That has always been a grievance to Ponting. But now he has another. Miss Fawcett made a will some years ago by which the bulk of her rather considerable property is left to two cousins, Frederick and James Barnett, the sons of her father's sister. A comparatively small amount goes to Ponting. When he heard this he was furious. He demanded a portion at least equal to the others, and has continued to make this demand from time to time. In fact, he has been extremely troublesome, and appears to be getting still more so. I gathered that the threats were due to her refusal to alter the will."

"But," said I, "doesn't he realise that her marriage will render that will null and void?"

"Apparently not," replied Meade; "nor, to tell the truth, did I realise it myself. Will she have to make a new will?"

"Certainly," I replied. "And as that new will may be expected to be still less favourable to him, that will presumably be a further grievance."

"One doesn't understand," said Thorndyke, "why he should excite himself so much about her will. What are their respective ages?"

"Miss Fawcett is thirty-six and Ponting is about forty."

"And what kind of man is he?" Thorndyke asked.

"A very unpleasant kind of man, I am sorry to say. Morose, rude, and violent-tempered. A spendthrift and a cadger. He has had quite a lot of money from Miss Fawcett—loans, which, of course, are never repaid. And he is none too industrious, though he has a regular job on the staff of a weekly paper. But he seems to be always in debt."

"We may as well note his address," said Thorndyke.

"He lives in a small flat in Bloomsbury—alone now, since he quarrelled with the man who used to share it with him. The address is 12 Borneo House, Devonshire Street."

"What sort of terms is he on with the cousins, his rivals?"

"No sort of terms now," replied Meade. "They used to be great friends. So much so that he took his present flat to be near them—they live in the adjoining flat, number 12 Sumatra House. But since the trouble about the will, he is hardly on speaking terms with them."

"They live together, then?"

“Yes, Frederick and his wife and James, who is unmarried. They are rather a queer lot, too. Frederick is a singer on the variety stage, and James accompanies him on various instruments. But they are both sporting characters of a kind, especially James, who does a bit on the turf and engages in other odd activities. Of course, their musical habits are a grievance to Ponting. He is constantly making complaints of their disturbing him at his work.”

Mr. Meade paused and looked wistfully at Thorndyke, who was making full notes of the conversation.

“Well,” said the latter, “we seem to have got all the facts excepting the most important—the nature of the threats. What do you want us to do?”

“I want you to see Miss Fawcett—with me, if possible—and induce her to give you such details as would enable you to put a stop to the nuisance. You couldn’t come to-night, I suppose? It is a beast of a night, but I would take you there in a taxi—it is only to Tooting Bec. What do you say?” he added eagerly, as Thorndyke made no objection. “We are sure to find her in, because her maid is away on a visit to her home and she is alone in the house.”

Thorndyke looked reflectively at his watch.

“Half-past eight,” he remarked, “and half an hour to get there. These threats are probably nothing but ill-temper. But we don’t know. There may be something more serious behind them; and, in law as in medicine, prevention is better than a post-mortem. What do you say, Jervis?”

What could I say? I would much sooner have sat by the fire with a book than turn out into the murk of a November night. But I felt it necessary, especially as Thorndyke had evidently made up his mind. Accordingly I made a virtue of necessity; and a couple of minutes later we had exchanged the cosy room for the chilly darkness of Inner Temple Lane, up which the gratified parson was speeding ahead to capture a taxi. At the top of the Lane we perceived him giving elaborate instructions to a taxi-driver as he held the door of the cab open; and Thorndyke, having carefully disposed of his research-case—which, to my secret amusement, he had caught up, from mere force of habit, as we started—took his seat, and Meade and I followed.

As the taxi trundled smoothly along the dark streets, Mr. Meade filled in the details of his previous sketch, and, in a simple, manly, unaffected way dilated upon his good fortune and the pleasant future that lay before him. It was not, perhaps, a romantic marriage, he admitted; but Miss Fawcett and he had been faithful friends for years, and faithful friends they would remain till death did them part. So he ran on, now gleefully, now with a note of anxiety, and we listened by no means unsympathetically, until at last the cab drew up at

a small, unpretentious house, standing in its own little grounds in a quiet suburban road.

“She is at home, you see,” observed Meade, pointing to a lighted ground-floor window. He directed the taxi-driver to wait for the return journey, and striding up the path, delivered a characteristic knock at the door. As this brought no response, he knocked again and rang the bell. But still there was no answer, though twice I thought I heard the sound of a bolt being either drawn or shot softly. Again Mr. Meade plied the knocker more vigorously, and pressed the push of the bell, which we could hear ringing loudly within.

“This is very strange,” said Meade, in an anxious tone, keeping his thumb pressed on the bell-push. “She can’t have gone out and left the electric light on. What had we better do?”

“We had better enter without more delay,” Thorndyke replied. “There were certainly sounds from within. Is there a side gate?”

Meade ran off towards the side of the house, and Thorndyke and I glanced at the lighted window, which was slightly open at the top.

“Looks a bit queer,” I remarked, listening at the letter-box.

Thorndyke assented gravely, and at this moment Meade returned, breathing hard.

“The side gate is bolted inside,” said he; and at this I recalled the stealthy sound of the bolt that I had heard. “What is to be done?”

Without replying, Thorndyke handed me his research-case, stepped across to the window, sprang up on the sill, drew down the upper sash and disappeared between the curtains into the room. A moment later the street door opened and Meade and I entered the hall. We glanced through the open doorway into the lighted room, and I noticed a heap of needlework thrown hastily on the dining-table. Then Meade switched on the hall light, and Thorndyke walked quickly past him to the half-open door of the next room. Before entering, he reached in and switched on the light; and as he stepped into the room he partly closed the door behind him.

“Don’t come in here, Meade!” he called out. But the parson’s eye, like my own, had seen something before the door closed: a great, dark stain on the carpet just within the threshold. Regardless of the admonition, he pushed the door open and darted into the room. Following him, I saw him rush forward, fling his arms up wildly, and with a dreadful, strangled cry, sink upon his knees beside a low couch on which a woman was lying.

“Merciful God!” he gasped. “She is dead! Is she dead, doctor? Can nothing be done?”

Thorndyke shook his head. “Nothing,” he said in a low voice. “She is dead.”

Poor Meade knelt by the couch, his hands clutching at his hair and his eyes riveted on the dead face, the very embodiment of horror and despair.

“God Almighty!” he exclaimed in the same strangled undertone. “How frightful! Poor, poor Millie! Dear, sweet friend!” Then suddenly—almost savagely—he turned to Thorndyke. “But it can’t be, doctor! It is impossible—unbelievable. That, I mean!” and he pointed to the dead woman’s right hand, which held an open razor.

Our poor friend had spoken my own thought. It was incredible that this refined, pious lady should have inflicted those savage wounds, that gaped scarlet beneath the waxen face. There, indeed, was the razor lying in her hand. But what was its testimony worth? My heart rejected it; but yet, unwillingly, I noted that the wounds seemed to support it; for they had been made from left to right, as they would have been if self-inflicted.

“It is hard to believe,” said Thorndyke, “but there is only one alternative. Someone should acquaint the police at once.”

“I will go,” exclaimed Meade, starting up. “I know the way and the cab is there.” He looked once more with infinite pity and affection at the dead woman. “Poor, sweet girl!” he murmured. “If we can do no more for you, we can defend your memory from calumny and call upon the God of Justice to right the innocent and punish the guilty.”

With these words and a mute farewell to his dead friend, he hurried from the room, and immediately afterwards we heard the street door close.

As he went out, Thorndyke’s manner changed abruptly. He had been deeply moved—as who would not have been—by this awful tragedy that had in a moment shattered the happiness of the genial, kindly parson. Now he turned to me with a face set and stern.

“This is an abominable affair, Jervis,” he said in an ominously quiet voice.

“You reject the suggestion of suicide, then?” said I, with a feeling of relief that surprised me.

“Absolutely,” he replied. “Murder shouts at us from everything that meets our eye. Look at this poor woman, in her trim nurse’s dress, with her unfinished needlework lying on the table in the next room and that

preposterous razor loose in her limp hand. Look at the savage wounds. Four of them, and the first one mortal. The great blood-stain by the door, the great blood-stain on her dress from the neck to the feet. The gashed collar, the cap-string cut right through. Note that the bleeding had practically ceased when she lay down. That is a group of visible facts that is utterly inconsistent with the idea of suicide. But we are wasting time. Let us search the premises thoroughly. The murderer has pretty certainly got away, but as he was in the house when we arrived, any traces will be quite fresh.”

As he spoke he took his electric lamp from the research-case and walked to the door.

“We can examine this room later,” he said, “but we had better look over the house. If you will stay by the stairs and watch the front and back doors, I will look through the upper rooms.”

He ran lightly up the stairs while I kept watch below, but he was absent less than a couple of minutes.

“There is no one there,” he reported, “and as there is no basement we will just look at this floor and then examine the grounds.”

After a rapid inspection of the ground-floor rooms, including the kitchen, we went out by the back door, which was unbolted, and inspected the grounds. These consisted of a largish garden with a small orchard at the side. In the former we could discover no traces of any kind, but at the end of the path that crossed the orchard we came on a possible clue. The orchard was enclosed by a five-foot fence, the top of which bristled with hooked nails; and at the point opposite to the path, Thorndyke’s lantern brought into view one or two wisps of cloth caught on the hooks.

“Someone has been over here,” said Thorndyke, “but as this is an orchard, there is nothing remarkable in the fact. However, there is no fruit on the trees now, and the cloth looks fairly fresh. There are two kinds, you notice: a dark blue and a black and white mixture of some kind.”

“Corresponding, probably, to the coat and trousers,” I suggested.

“Possibly,” he agreed, taking from his pocket a couple of the little seed-envelopes of which he always carried a supply. Very delicately he picked the tiny wisps of cloth from the hooks and bestowed each kind in a separate envelope. Having pocketed these, he leaned over the fence and threw the light of his lamp along the narrow lane or alley that divided the orchard from the adjoining premises. It was ungravelled and covered with a growth of rank grass, which suggested that it was little frequented. But immediately below

was a small patch of bare earth, and on this was a very distinct impression of a foot, covering several less distinct prints.

“Several people have been over here at different times,” I remarked.

“Yes,” Thorndyke agreed. “But that sharp footprint belongs to the last one over, and he is our concern. We had better not confuse the issues by getting over ourselves. We will mark the spot and explore from the other end.” He laid his handkerchief over the top of the fence and we then went back to the house.

“You are going to take a plaster cast, I suppose?” said I; and as he assented, I fetched the research-case from the drawing-room. Then we fixed the catch of the front-door latch and went out, drawing the door to after us.

We found the entrance to the alley about sixty yards from the gate, and entering it, walked slowly forwards, scanning the ground as we went. But the bright lamplight showed nothing more than the vague marks of trampling feet on the grass until we came to the spot marked by the handkerchief on the fence.

“It is a pity,” I remarked, “that this footprint has obliterated the others.”

“On the other hand,” he replied, “this one, which is the one that interests us, is remarkably clear and characteristic: a circular heel and a rubber sole of a recognisable pattern mended with a patch of cement paste. It is a footprint that could be identified beyond a doubt.”

As he was speaking, he took from the research-case the water-bottle, plaster-tin, rubber mixing-bowl and spoon, and a piece of canvas with which to “reinforce” the cast. Rapidly, he mixed a bowlful—extra thick, so that it should set quickly and hard—dipped the canvas into it, poured the remainder into the footprint, and laid the canvas on it.

“I will get you to stay here, Jervis,” said he, “until the plaster has set. I want to examine the body rather more thoroughly before the police arrive, particularly the back.”

“Why the back?” I asked.

“Did not the appearance of the body suggest to you the advisability of examining the back?” he asked, and then, without waiting for a reply, he went off, leaving the inspection-lamp with me.

His words gave me matter for profound thought during my short vigil. I recalled the appearance of the dead woman very vividly—indeed, I am not likely ever to forget it—and I strove to connect that appearance with his desire to examine the back of the corpse. But there seemed to be no connection at all.

The visible injuries were in front, and I had seen nothing to suggest the existence of any others. From time to time I tested the condition of the plaster, impatient to rejoin my colleague but fearful of cracking the thin cast by raising it prematurely. At length the plaster seemed to be hard enough, and trusting to the strength of the canvas, I prised cautiously at the edge, when, to my relief, the brittle plate came up safely and I lifted it clear. Wrapping it carefully in some spare rag, I packed it in the research-case, and then, taking this and the lantern, made my way back to the house.

When I had let down the catch and closed the front door, I went to the drawing-room, where I found Thorndyke stooping over the dark stain at the threshold and scanning the floor as if in search of something. I reported the completion of the cast and then asked him what he was looking for.

“I am looking for a button,” he replied. “There is one missing from the back; the one to which the collar was fastened.”

“Is it of any importance?” I asked.

“It is important to ascertain when and where it became detached,” he replied. “Let us have the inspection-lamp.”

I gave him the lamp, which he placed on the floor, turning it so that its beam of light travelled along the surface. Stooping to follow the light, I scrutinised the floor minutely but in vain.

“It may not be here at all,” said I; but at that moment the bright gleam, penetrating the darkness under a cabinet, struck a small object close to the wall. In a moment I had thrown myself prone on the carpet, and reaching under the cabinet, brought forth a largish mother-of-pearl button.

“You notice,” said Thorndyke, as he examined it, “that the cabinet is near the window, at the opposite end of the room to the couch. But we had better see that it is the right button.”

He walked slowly towards the couch, still stooping and searching the floor with the light. The corpse, I noticed, had been turned on its side, exposing the back and the displaced collar. Through the strained button-hole of the latter Thorndyke passed the button without difficulty.

“Yes,” he said, “that is where it came from. You will notice that there is a similar one in front. By the way,” he continued, bringing the lamp close to the surface of the grey serge dress, “I picked off one or two hairs—animal hairs; cat and dog they looked like. Here are one or two more. Will you hold the lamp while I take them off?”

“They are probably from some pets of hers,” I remarked, as he picked them off with his forceps and deposited them in one of the invaluable seed-envelopes. “Spinsters are a good deal addicted to pets, especially cats and dogs.”

“Possibly,” he replied. “But I could see none in front, where you would expect to find them, and there seem to be none on the carpet. Now let us replace the body as we found it and just have a look at our material before the police arrive. I expected them here before this.”

We turned the body back into its original position, and taking the research-case and the lamp, went into the dining-room. Here Thorndyke rapidly set up the little travelling microscope, and bringing forth the seed-envelopes, began to prepare slides from the contents of some while I prepared the others. There was time only for a very hasty examination, which Thorndyke made as soon as the specimens were mounted.

“The clothing,” he reported, with his eye at the microscope, “is woollen in both cases. Fairly good quality. The one a blue serge, apparently indigo dyed; the other a mixture of black and white, no other colour. Probably a fine tabby or a small shepherd’s plaid.”

“Serge coat and shepherd’s plaid trousers,” I suggested. “Now see what the hairs are.” I handed him the slide, on which I had roughly mounted the collection in oil of lavender, and he placed it on the stage.

“There are three different kinds of hairs here,” he reported, after a rapid inspection. “Some are obviously from a cat—a smoky Persian. Others are long, rather fine tawny hairs from a dog. Probably a Pekinese. But there are two that I can’t quite place. They look like monkey’s hairs, but they are a very unusual colour. There is a perceptible greenish tint, which is extremely uncommon in mammalian hairs. But I hear the taxi approaching. We need not be expansive to the local police as to what we have observed. This will probably be a case for the C.I.D.”

I went out into the hall and opened the door as Meade came up the path, followed by two men; and as the latter came into the light, I was astonished to recognise in one of them our old friend, Detective-Superintendent Miller, the other being, apparently, the station superintendent.

“We have kept Mr. Meade a long time,” said Miller, “but we knew you were here, so the time wouldn’t be wasted. Thought it best to get a full statement before we inspected the premises. How do, doctor?” he added, shaking hands with Thorndyke. “Glad to see you here. I suppose you have got all the facts. I understood so from Mr. Meade.”

“Yes,” replied Thorndyke, “we have all the antecedents of the case, and we arrived within a few minutes of the death of the deceased.”

“Ha!” exclaimed Miller. “Did you? And I expect you have formed an opinion on the question as to whether the injuries were self-inflicted?”

“I think,” said Thorndyke, “that it would be best to act on the assumption that they were not—and to act promptly.”

“Pre—cisely,” Miller agreed emphatically. “You mean that we had better find out at once where a certain person was at—— What time did you arrive here?”

“It was two minutes to nine when the taxi stopped,” replied Thorndyke; “and, as it is now only twenty-five minutes to ten, we have good time if Mr. Meade can spare us the taxi. I have the address.”

“The taxi is waiting for you,” said Mr. Meade, “and the man has been paid for both journeys. I shall stay here in case the superintendent wants anything.” He shook our hands warmly, and as we bade him farewell and noted the dazed, despairing expression and lines of grief that had already eaten into the face that had been so blithe and hopeful, we both thought bitterly of the few fatal minutes that had made us too late to save the wreckage of his life.

We were just turning away when Thorndyke paused and again faced the clergyman.

“Can you tell me,” he asked, “whether Miss Fawcett had any pets? Cats, dogs, or other animals?”

Meade looked at him in surprise, and Superintendent Miller seemed to prick up his ears. But the former answered simply: “No. She was not very fond of animals; she reserved her affections for men and women.”

Thorndyke nodded gravely, and picking up the research-case walked slowly out of the room, Miller and I following.

As soon as the address had been given to the driver and we had taken our seats in the taxi, the superintendent opened the examination-in-chief.

“I see you have got your box of magic with you, doctor,” he said, cocking his eye at the research-case. “Any luck?”

“We have secured a very distinctive footprint,” replied Thorndyke, “but it may have no connection with the case.”

“I hope it has,” said Miller. “A good cast of a footprint which you can let the jury compare with the boot is first-class evidence.” He took the cast, which

I had produced from the research-case, and turning it over tenderly and gloatingly, exclaimed: “Beautiful! beautiful! Absolutely distinctive! There can’t be another exactly like it in the world. It is as good as a finger-print. For the Lord’s sake take care of it. It means a conviction if we can find the boot.”

The superintendent’s efforts to engage Thorndyke in discussion were not very successful, and the conversational brunt was borne by me. For we both knew my colleague too well to interrupt him if he was disposed to be meditative. And such was now his disposition. Looking at him as he sat in his corner, silent but obviously wrapped in thought, I knew that he was mentally sorting out the data and testing the hypotheses that they yielded.

“Here we are,” said Miller, opening the door as the taxi stopped. “Now what are we going to say? Shall I tell him who I am?”

“I expect you will have to,” replied Thorndyke, “if you want him to let us in.”

“Very well,” said Miller. “But I shall let you do the talking, because I don’t know what you have got up your sleeve.”

Thorndyke’s prediction was verified literally. In response to the third knock, with an obbligato accompaniment on the bell, wrathful footsteps—I had no idea footsteps could be so expressive—advanced rapidly along the lobby, the door was wrenched open—but only for a few inches—and an angry, hairy face appeared in the opening.

“Now then,” the hairy person demanded, “what the deuce do you want?”

“Are you Mr. William Ponting?” the superintendent inquired.

“What the devil is that to do with you?” was the genial answer—in the Scottish mode.

“We have business,” Miller began persuasively.

“So have I,” the presumable Ponting replied, “and mine won’t wait.”

“But our business is very important,” Miller urged.

“So is mine,” snapped Ponting, and would have shut the door but for Miller’s obstructing foot, at which he kicked viciously, but with unsatisfactory results, as he was shod in light slippers, whereas the superintendent’s boots were of constabulary solidity.

“Now, look here,” said Miller, dropping his conciliatory manner very completely, “you’d better stop this nonsense. I am a police officer, and I am going to come in”; and with this he inserted a massive shoulder and pushed the

door open.

“Police officer, are you?” said Ponting. “And what might your business be with me?”

“That is what I have been waiting to tell you,” said Miller. “But we don’t want to do our talking here.”

“Very well,” growled Ponting. “Come in. But understand that I am busy. I’ve been interrupted enough this evening.”

He led the way into a rather barely furnished room with a wide bay-window in which was a table fitted with a writing-slope and lighted by an electric standard lamp. A litter of manuscript explained the nature of his business and his unwillingness to receive casual visitors. He sulkily placed three chairs, and then, seating himself, glowered at Thorndyke and me.

“Are they police officers, too?” he demanded.

“No,” replied Miller, “they are medical gentlemen. Perhaps you had better explain the matter, doctor,” he added, addressing Thorndyke, who thereupon opened the proceedings.

“We have called,” said he, “to inform you that Miss Millicent Fawcett died suddenly this evening.”

“The devil!” exclaimed Ponting. “That’s sudden with a vengeance. What time did this happen?”

“About a quarter to nine.”

“Extraordinary!” muttered Ponting. “I saw her only the day before yesterday, and she seemed quite well then. What did she die of?”

“The appearances,” replied Thorndyke, “suggest suicide.”

“Suicide!” gasped Ponting. “Impossible! I can’t believe it. Do you mean to tell me she poisoned herself?”

“No,” said Thorndyke, “it was not poison. Death was caused by injuries to the throat inflicted with a razor.”

“Good God!” exclaimed Ponting. “What a horrible thing! But,” he added, after a pause, “I can’t believe she did it herself, and I don’t. Why should she commit suicide? She was quite happy, and she was just going to be married to that mealy-faced parson. And a razor, too! How do you suppose she came by a razor? Women don’t shave. They smoke and drink and swear, but they haven’t taken to shaving yet. I don’t believe it. Do you?”

He glared ferociously at the superintendent, who replied:

“I am not sure that I do. There’s a good deal in what you’ve just said, and the same objections had occurred to us. But you see, if she didn’t do it herself, someone else must have done it, and we should like to find out who that someone is. So we begin by ascertaining where any possible persons may have been at a quarter to nine this evening.”

Ponting smiled like an infuriated cat.

“So you think me a possible person, do you?” said he.

“Everyone is a possible person,” Miller replied blandly, “especially when he is known to have uttered threats.”

The reply sobered Ponting considerably. For a few moments he sat, looking reflectively at the superintendent; then, in comparatively quiet tones, he said:

“I have been working here since six o’clock. You can see the stuff for yourself, and I can prove that it has been written since six.”

The superintendent nodded, but made no comment, and Ponting gazed at him fixedly, evidently thinking hard. Suddenly he broke into a harsh laugh.

“What is the joke?” Miller inquired stolidly.

“The joke is that I have got another alibi—a very complete one. There are compensations in every evil. I told you I had been interrupted in my work already this evening. It was those fools next door, the Barnetts—cousins of mine. They are musicians, save the mark! Variety stage, you know. Funny songs and jokes for mental defectives. Well, they practise their infernal ditties in their rooms, and the row comes into mine, and an accursed nuisance it is. However, they have agreed not to practise on Thursdays and Fridays—my busy nights—and usually they don’t. But to-night, just as I was in the thick of my writing, I suddenly heard the most unholy din; that idiot, Fred Barnett, bawling one of his imbecile songs—‘When the pigs their wings have folded,’ and balderdash of that sort—and the other donkey accompanying him on the clarinet, if you please! I stuck it for a minute or two. Then I rushed round to their flat and raised Cain with the bell and knocker. Mrs. Fred opened the door, and I told her what I thought of it. Of course she was very apologetic, said they had forgotten that it was Thursday and promised that she would make her husband stop. And I suppose she did, for by the time I got back to my rooms the row had ceased. I could have punched the whole lot of them into a jelly, but it was all for the best as it turns out.”

“What time was it when you went round there?” asked Miller.

“About five minutes past nine,” replied Ponting. “The church bell had struck nine when the row began.”

“Hm!” grunted Miller, glancing at Thorndyke. “Well, that is all we wanted to know, so we need not keep you from your work any longer.”

He rose, and being let out with great alacrity, stumped down the stairs, followed by Thorndyke and me. As we came out into the street, he turned to us with a deeply disappointed expression.

“Well,” he exclaimed, “this is a suck-in. I was in hopes that we had pounced on our quarry before he had got time to clear away the traces. And now we’ve got it all to do. You can’t get round an alibi of that sort.”

I glanced at Thorndyke to see how he was taking this unexpected check. He was evidently puzzled, and I could see by the expression of concentration in his face that he was trying over the facts and inferences in new combinations to meet this new position. Probably he had noticed, as I had, that Ponting was wearing a tweed suit, and that therefore the shreds of clothing from the fence could not be his unless he had changed. But the alibi put him definitely out of the picture, and, as Miller had said, we now had nothing to give us a lead.

Suddenly Thorndyke came out of his reverie and addressed the superintendent.

“We had better put this alibi on the basis of ascertained fact. It ought to be verified at once. At present we have only Ponting’s unsupported statement.”

“It isn’t likely that he would risk telling a lie,” Miller replied gloomily.

“A man who is under suspicion of murder will risk a good deal,” Thorndyke retorted, “especially if he is guilty. I think we ought to see Mrs. Barnett before there is any opportunity of collusion.”

“There has been time for collusion already,” said Miller. “Still, you are quite right, and I see there is a light in their sitting-room, if that is it, next to Ponting’s. Let us go up and settle the matter now. I shall leave you to examine the witness and say what you think it best to say.”

We entered the building and ascended the stairs to the Barnetts’ flat, where Miller rang the bell and executed a double knock. After a short interval the door was opened and a woman looked out at us inquisitively.

“Are you Mrs. Frederick Barnett?” Thorndyke inquired. The woman admitted her identity in a tone of some surprise, and Thorndyke explained:

“We have called to make a few inquiries concerning your neighbour, Mr. Ponting, and also about certain matters relating to your family. I am afraid it is a rather unseasonable hour for a visit, but as the affair is of some importance and time is an object, I hope you will overlook that.”

Mrs. Barnett listened to this explanation with a puzzled and rather suspicious air. After a few moments’ hesitation, she said:

“I think you had better see my husband. If you will wait here a moment I will go and tell him.” With this, she pushed the door to, without actually closing it, and we heard her retire along the lobby, presumably to the sitting-room. For, during the short colloquy, I had observed a door at the end of the lobby, partly open, through which I could see the end of a table covered with a red cloth.

The “moment” extended to a full minute, and the superintendent began to show signs of impatience.

“I don’t see why you didn’t ask her the simple question straight out,” he said, and the same question had occurred to me. But at this point footsteps were heard approaching, the door opened, and a man confronted us, holding the door open with his left hand, his right being wrapped in a handkerchief. He looked suspiciously from one to the other of us, and asked stiffly:

“What is it that you want to know? And would you mind telling me who you are?”

“My name is Thorndyke,” was the reply. “I am the legal adviser of the Reverend Charles Meade, and these two gentlemen are interested parties. I want to know what you can tell me of Mr. Ponting’s recent movements—to-day, for instance. When did you last see him?”

The man appeared to be about to refuse any conversation, but suddenly altered his mind, reflected for a few moments, and then replied:

“I saw him from my window at his—they are bay-windows—about half-past eight. But my wife saw him later than that. If you will come in she can tell you the time exactly.” He led the way along the lobby with an obviously puzzled air. But he was not more puzzled than I, or than Miller, to judge by the bewildered glance that the superintendent cast at me, as he followed our host along the lobby. I was still meditating on Thorndyke’s curiously indirect methods when the sitting-room door was opened; and then I got a minor surprise of another kind. When I had last looked into the room, the table had been covered by a red cloth. It was now bare; and when we entered the room I saw that the red cover had been thrown over a side table, on which was some

bulky and angular object. Apparently it had been thought desirable to conceal that object, whatever it was, and as we took our seats beside the bare table, my mind was busy with conjectures as to what that object could be.

Mr. Barnett repeated Thorndyke's question to his wife, adding: "I think it must have been a little after nine when Ponting came round. What do you say?"

"Yes," she replied, "it would be, for I heard it strike nine just before you began your practice, and he came a few minutes after."

"You see," Barnett explained, "I am a singer, and my brother, here, accompanies me on various instruments, and of course we have to practise. But we don't practise on the nights when Ponting is busy—Thursdays and Fridays—as he said that the music disturbed him. To-night, however, we made a little mistake. I happen to have got a new song that I am anxious to get ready—it has an illustrative accompaniment on the clarinet, which my brother will play. We were so much taken up with the new song that we all forgot what day of the week it was, and started to have a good practice. But before we had got through the first verse, Ponting came round, battering at the door like a madman. My wife went out and pacified him, and of course we shut down for the evening."

While Mr. Barnett was giving his explanation, I looked about the room with vague curiosity. Somehow—I cannot tell exactly how—I was sensible of something queer in the atmosphere of this place; of a certain indefinite sense of tension. Mrs. Barnett looked pale and flurried. Her husband, in spite of his volubility, seemed ill at ease, and the brother, who sat huddled in an easy-chair, nursing a dark-coloured Persian cat, stared into the fire, and neither moved nor spoke. And again I looked at the red table-cloth and wondered what it covered.

"By the way," said Barnett, after a brief pause, "what is the point of these inquiries of yours? About Ponting, I mean. What does it matter to you where he was this evening?"

As he spoke, he produced a pipe and tobacco-pouch and proceeded to fill the former, holding it in his bandaged right hand and filling it with his left. The facility with which he did this suggested that he was left-handed, an inference that was confirmed by the ease with which he struck the match with his left hand, and by the fact that he wore a wrist-watch on his right wrist.

"Your question is a perfectly natural one," said Thorndyke. "The answer to it is that a very terrible thing has happened. Miss Millicent Fawcett, who is, I think, a connection of yours, met her death this evening under circumstances

of grave suspicion. She died, either by her own hand or by the hand of a murderer, a few minutes before nine o'clock. Hence it has become necessary to ascertain the whereabouts at that time of any persons on whom suspicion might reasonably fall."

"Good God!" exclaimed Barnett. "What a shocking thing!"

The exclamation was followed by a deep silence, amidst which I could hear the barking of a dog in an adjacent room, the unmistakable sharp, treble yelp of a Pekinese. And again I seemed to be aware of a strange sense of tension in the occupants of this room. On hearing Thorndyke's answer, Mrs. Barnett had turned deadly pale and let her head fall forward on her hand. Her husband had sunk on to a chair, and he, too, looked pale and deeply shocked, while the brother continued to stare silently into the fire.

At this moment Thorndyke astonished me by an exhibition of what seemed—under the tragic circumstances—the most outrageous bad manners and bad taste. Rising from his chair with his eyes fixed on a print which hung on the wall above the red-covered table, he said:

"That looks like one of Cameron's etchings," and forthwith stepped across the room to examine it, resting his hand, as he leaned forward, on the object covered by the cloth.

"Mind where you are putting your hand, sir!" Fred Barnett called out, springing to his feet.

Thorndyke looked down at his hand, and deliberately raising a corner of the cloth, looked under. "There is no harm done," he remarked quietly, letting the cloth drop; and with another glance at the print, he went back to his chair.

Once more a deep silence fell upon the room, and I had a vague feeling that the tension had increased. Mrs. Barnett was as white as a ghost and seemed to catch at her breath. Her husband watched her with a wild, angry expression and smoked furiously, while the superintendent—also conscious of something abnormal in the atmosphere of the room—looked furtively from the woman to the man and from him to Thorndyke.

Yet again in the silence the shrill barking of the Pekinese dog broke out, and somehow that sound connected itself in my mind with the Persian cat that dozed on the knees of the immovable man by the fire. I looked at the cat and at the man, and even as I looked, I was startled by a most extraordinary apparition. Above the man's shoulder, slowly rose a little round head like the head of a diminutive, greenish-brown man. Higher and higher the tiny monkey raised itself, resting on its little hands to peer at the strangers. Then, with

sudden coyness, like a shy baby, it popped down out of sight.

I was thunderstruck. The cat and the dog I had noted merely as a curious coincidence. But the monkey—and such an unusual monkey, too—put coincidences out of the question. I stared at the man in positive stupefaction. Somehow that man was connected with that unforgettable figure lying upon the couch miles away. But how? When that deed of horror was doing, he had been here in this very room. Yet, in some way, he had been concerned in it. And suddenly a suspicion dawned upon me that Thorndyke was waiting for the actual perpetrator to arrive.

“It is a most ghastly affair,” Barnett repeated presently in a husky voice. Then, after a pause, he asked: “Is there any sort of evidence as to whether she killed herself or was killed by somebody else?”

“I think that my friend, here, Detective-Superintendent Miller, has decided that she was murdered.” He looked at the bewildered superintendent, who replied with an inarticulate grunt.

“And is there any clue as to who the—the murderer may be? You spoke of suspected persons just now.”

“Yes,” replied Thorndyke, “there is an excellent clue, if it can only be followed up. We found a most unmistakable footprint; and what is more, we took a plaster cast of it. Would you like to see the cast?”

Without waiting for a reply, he opened the research-case and took out the cast, which he placed in my hands.

“Just take it round and show it to them,” he said.

The superintendent had witnessed Thorndyke’s amazing proceedings with an astonishment that left him speechless. But now he sprang to his feet, and, as I walked round the table, he pressed beside me to guard the precious cast from possible injury. I laid it carefully down on the table, and as the light fell on it obliquely, it presented a most striking appearance—that of a snow-white boot-sole on which the unshapely patch, the circular heel, and the marks of wear were clearly visible.

The three spectators gathered round, as near as the superintendent would let them approach, and I observed them closely, assuming that this incomprehensible move of Thorndyke’s was a device to catch one or more of them off their guard. Fred Barnett looked at the cast stolidly enough, though his face had gone several shades paler, but Mrs. Barnett stared at it with starting eyeballs and dropped jaw—the very picture of horror and dismay. As to James Barnett, whom I now saw clearly for the first time, he stood behind

the woman with a singularly scared and haggard face, and his eyes riveted on the white boot-sole. And now I could see that he wore a suit of blue serge and that the front both of his coat and waistcoat were thickly covered with the shed hairs of his pets.

There was something very uncanny about this group of persons gathered around that accusing footprint, all as still and rigid as statues and none uttering a sound. But something still more uncanny followed. Suddenly the deep silence of the room was shattered by the shrill notes of a clarinet, and a brassy voice burst forth:

“When the pigs their wings have folded
And the cows are in their nest——”

We all spun round in amazement, and at the first glance the mystery of the crime was solved. There stood Thorndyke with the red table-cover at his feet, and at his side, on the small table, a massively-constructed phonograph of the kind used in offices for dictating letters, but fitted with a convoluted metal horn in place of the rubber ear-tubes.

A moment of astonished silence was succeeded by a wild confusion. Mrs. Barnett uttered a piercing shriek and fell back on to a chair, her husband broke away and rushed at Thorndyke, who instantly gripped his wrist and pinioned him, while the superintendent, taking in the situation at a glance, fastened on the unresisting James and forced him down into a chair. I ran round, and having stopped the machine—for the preposterous song was hideously incongruous with the tragedy that was enacting—went to Thorndyke’s assistance and helped him to remove his prisoner from the neighbourhood of the instrument.

“Superintendent Miller,” said Thorndyke, still maintaining a hold on his squirming captive, “I believe you are a justice of the peace?”

“Yes,” was the reply, “*ex officio*.”

“Then,” said Thorndyke, “I accuse these three persons of being concerned in the murder of Miss Millicent Fawcett; Frederick Barnett as the principal who actually committed the murder, James Barnett as having aided him by holding the arms of the deceased, and Mrs. Barnett as an accessory before the fact in that she worked this phonograph for the purpose of establishing a false alibi.”

“I knew nothing about it!” Mrs. Barnett shrieked hysterically. “They never told me why they wanted me to work the thing.”

“We can’t go into that now,” said Miller. “You will be able to make your

defence at the proper time and place. Can one of you go for assistance or must I blow my whistle?"

"You had better go, Jervis," said Thorndyke. "I can hold this man until reinforcements arrive. Send a constable up and then go on to the station. And leave the outer door ajar."

I followed these directions, and having found the police station, presently returned to the flat with four constables and a sergeant in two taxis.

When the prisoners had been removed, together with the three animals—the latter in charge of a zoophilist constable—we searched the bedrooms. Frederick Barnett had changed his clothing completely, but in a locked drawer—the lock of which Thorndyke picked neatly, to the superintendent's undisguised admiration—we found the discarded garments, including a pair of torn shepherd's plaid trousers, covered with blood-stains, and a new, empty razor-case. These things, together with the wax cylinder of the phonograph, Miller made up into a neat parcel and took away with him.

"Of course," said I, as we walked homewards, "the general drift of this case is quite obvious. But it seemed to me that you went to the Barnetts' flat with a definite purpose already formed, and with a definite suspicion in your mind. Now, I don't see how you came to suspect the Barnetts."

"I think you will," he replied, "if you will recall the incidents in their order from the beginning, including poor Meade's preliminary statement. To begin with the appearances of the body: the suggestion of suicide was transparently false. To say nothing of its incongruity with the character and circumstances of the deceased and the very unlikely weapon used, there were the gashed collar and the cut cap-string. As you know, it is a well-established rule that suicides do not damage their clothing. A man who cuts his own throat doesn't cut his collar. He takes it off. He removes all obstructions. Naturally, for he wishes to complete the act as easily and quickly as possible, and he has time for preparation. But the murderer must take things as he finds them and execute his purpose as best he can.

"But further; the wounds were inflicted near the door, but the body was on the couch at the other end of the room. We saw, from the absence of bleeding, that she was dying—in fact, apparently dead—when she lay down. She must therefore have been carried to the couch after the wounds were inflicted.

"Then there were the blood-stains. They were all in front, and the blood had run down vertically. Then she must have been standing upright while the

blood was flowing. Now there were four wounds, and the first one was mortal. It divided the common carotid artery and the great veins. On receiving that wound she would ordinarily have fallen down. But she did not fall, or there would have been a blood-stain across the neck. Why did she not fall? The obvious suggestion was that someone was holding her up. This suggestion was confirmed by the absence of cuts on her hands—which would certainly have been cut if someone had not been holding them. It was further confirmed by the rough crumpling of the collar at the back: so rough that the button was torn off. And we found that button near the door.

“Further, there were the animal hairs. They were on the back only. There were none on the front—where they would have been if derived from the animals—or anywhere else. And we learned that she kept no animals. All these appearances pointed to the presence of two persons, one of whom stood behind her and held her arms while the other stood in front and committed the murder. The cloth on the fence supported this view, being probably derived from two different pairs of trousers. The character of the wounds made it nearly certain that the murderer was left-handed.

“While we were returning in the cab, I reflected on these facts and considered the case generally. First, what was the motive? There was nothing to suggest robbery, nor was it in the least like a robber’s crime. What other motive could there be? Well, here was a comparatively rich woman who had made a will in favour of certain persons, and she was going to be married. On her marriage the will would automatically become void, and she was not likely to make another will so favourable to those persons. Here, then, was a possible motive, and that motive applied to Ponting, who had actually uttered threats and was obviously suspect.

“But, apart from those threats, Ponting was not the principal suspect, for he benefited only slightly under the will. The chief beneficiaries were the Barnetts, and Miss Fawcett’s death would benefit them, not only by securing the validity of the will, but by setting the will into immediate operation. And there were two of them. They therefore fitted the circumstances better than Ponting did. And when we came to interview Ponting, he went straight out of the picture. His manuscript would probably have cleared him—with his editor’s confirmation. But the other alibi was conclusive.

“What instantly struck me, however, was that Ponting’s alibi was also an alibi for the Barnetts. But there was this difference: Ponting had been seen; the Barnetts had only been heard. Now, it has often occurred to me that a very effective false alibi could be worked with a gramophone or a phonograph—especially with one on which one can make one’s own records. This idea now

recurred to me; and at once it was supported by the appearance of an arranged effect. Ponting was known to be at work. It was practically certain that a blast of ‘music’ would bring him out. Then he would be available, if necessary, as a witness to prove an alibi. It seemed to be worth while to investigate.

“When we came to the flat we encountered a man with an injured hand—the right. It would have been more striking if it had been his left. But it presently turns out that he is left-handed; which is still more striking as a coincidence. This man is extraordinarily ready to answer questions which most persons would have refused to answer at all. Those answers contain the alibi.

“Then there was the incident of the table-cover—I think you noticed it. That cover was on the large table when we arrived, but it was taken off and thrown over something, evidently to conceal it. But I need not pursue the details. When I had seen the cat, heard the dog, and then seen the monkey, I determined to see what was under the table-cover; and finding that it was a phonograph with the cylinder record still on the drum, I decided to ‘go Nap’ and chance making a mistake. For until we had tried the record, the alibi remained. If it had failed, I should have advised Miller to hold a boot parade. Fortunately we struck the right record and completed the case.”

Mrs. Barnett’s defence was accepted by the magistrate and the charge against her was dismissed. The other two were committed for trial, and in due course paid the extreme penalty. “Yet another illustration,” was Thorndyke’s comment, “of the folly of that kind of criminal who won’t let well alone, and who will create false clues. If the Barnetts had not laid down those false tracks, they would probably never have been suspected. It was their clever alibi that led us straight to their door.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story is Number seventeen 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 *Mr. Ponting's Alibi* by Richard Austin Freeman]