

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

Number Sixteen

The Naturalist
At Law

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Title: The Naturalist at Law

Date of first publication: 1929

Author: Richard Austin Freeman (1862-1943)

Date first posted: Aug. 23, 2018

Date last updated: Aug. 23, 2018

Faded Page eBook #20180886

This ebook was produced by: Delphine Lettau, Mark Akrigg, Jen Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>

A HUSH had fallen on the court as the coroner concluded his brief introductory statement and the first witness took up his position by the long table. The usual preliminary questions elicited that Simon Moffet, the witness aforesaid, was fifty-eight years of age, that he followed the calling of a shepherd and that he was engaged in supervising the flocks that fed upon the low-lying meadows adjoining the little town of Bantree in Buckinghamshire.

“Tell us how you came to discover the body,” said the coroner.

“’Twas on Wednesday morning, about half-past five,” Moffet began. “I was getting the sheep through the gate into the big meadow by Reed’s farm, when I happened to look down the dyke, and then I noticed a boot sticking up out of the water. Seemed to me as if there was a foot in it by the way it stuck up, so as soon as all the sheep was in, I shut the gate and walked down the dyke to have a look at un. When I got close I see the toe of another boot just alongside. Looks a bit queer, I thinks, but I couldn’t see anything more, ’cause the duck-weed is that thick as it looks as if you could walk on it. Howsoever, I clears away the weed with my stick, and then I see ’twas a dead man. Give me a rare turn, it did. He was a-layin’ at the bottom of the ditch with his head near the middle and his feet up close to the bank. Just then young Harry Walker comes along the cart-track on his way to work, so I shows him the body and sends him back to the town for to give notice at the police station.”

“And is that all you know about the affair?”

“Ay. Later on I see the sergeant come along with a man wheelin’ the stretcher, and I showed him where the body was and helped to pull it out and load it on the stretcher. And that’s all I know about it.”

On this the witness was dismissed and his place taken by a shrewd-looking, business-like police sergeant, who deposed as follows:

“Last Wednesday, the 8th of May, at 6.15 a.m., I received information from Henry Walker that a dead body was lying in the ditch by the cart-track leading from Ponder’s Road to Reed’s farm. I proceeded there forthwith, accompanied by Police-Constable Ketchum, and taking with us a wheeled stretcher. On the track I was met by the last witness, who conducted me to the place where the body was lying and where I found it in the position that he has described; but we had to clear away the duck-weed before we could see it

distinctly. I examined the bank carefully, but could see no trace of footprints, as the grass grows thickly right down to the water's edge. There were no signs of a struggle or any disturbance on the bank. With the aid of Moffet and Ketchum, I drew the body out and placed it on the stretcher. I could not see any injuries or marks of violence on the body or anything unusual about it. I conveyed it to the mortuary, and with Constable Ketchum's assistance removed the clothing and emptied the pockets, putting the contents of each pocket in a separate envelope and writing the description on each. In a letter-case from the coat pocket were some visiting cards bearing the name and address of Mr. Cyrus Pedley, of 21 Hawtrey Mansions, Kensington, and a letter signed Wilfred Pedley, apparently from deceased's brother. Acting on instructions, I communicated with him and served a summons to attend this inquest."

"With regard to the ditch in which you found the body," said the coroner, "can you tell us how deep it is?"

"Yes; I measured it with Moffet's crook and a tape measure. In the deepest part, where the body was lying, it is four feet two inches deep. From there it slopes up pretty sharply to the bank."

"So far as you can judge, if a grown man fell into the ditch by accident, would he have any difficulty in getting out?"

"None at all, I should say, if he were sober and in ordinary health. A man of medium height, standing in the middle at the deepest part, would have his head and shoulders out of water; and the sides are not too steep to climb up easily, especially with the grass and rushes on the bank to lay hold of."

"You say there were no signs of disturbance on the bank. Were there any in the ditch itself?"

"None that I could see. But, of course, signs of disturbance soon disappear in water. The duck-weed drifts about as the wind drives it, and there are creatures moving about on the bottom. I noticed that deceased had some weed grasped in one hand."

This concluded the sergeant's evidence, and as he retired, the name of Dr. Albert Parton was called. The new witness was a young man of grave and professional aspect, who gave his evidence with an extreme regard for clearness and accuracy.

"I have made an examination of the body of the deceased," he began, after the usual preliminaries. "It is that of a healthy man of about forty-five. I first saw it about two hours after it was found. It had then been dead from twelve to

fifteen hours. Later I made a complete examination. I found no injuries, marks of violence or any definite bruises, and no signs of disease.”

“Did you ascertain the cause of death?” the coroner asked.

“Yes. The cause of death was drowning.”

“You are quite sure of that?”

“Quite sure. The lungs contained a quantity of water and duck-weed, and there was more than a quart of water mixed with duck-weed and water-weed in the stomach. That is a clear proof of death by drowning. The water in the lungs was the immediate cause of death, by making breathing impossible, and as the water and weed in the stomach must have been swallowed, they furnish conclusive evidence that deceased was alive when he fell into the water.”

“The water and weed could not have got into the stomach after death?”

“No, that is quite impossible. They must have been swallowed when the head of the deceased was just below the surface; and the water must have been drawn into the lungs by spasmodic efforts to breathe when the mouth was under water.”

“Did you find any signs indicating that deceased might have been intoxicated?”

“No. I examined the water from the stomach very carefully with that question in view, but there was no trace of alcohol—or, indeed, of anything else. It was simple ditch-water. As the point is important I have preserved it, and——” here the witness produced a paper parcel which he unfastened, revealing a large glass jar containing about a quart of water plentifully sprinkled with duck-weed. This he presented to the coroner, who waved it away hastily and indicated the jury; to whom it was then offered and summarily rejected with emphatic head-shakes. Finally it came to rest on the table by the place where I was sitting with my colleague, Dr. Thorndyke, and our client, Mr. Wilfred Pedley. I glanced at it with faint interest, noting how the duck-weed plants had risen to the surface and floated, each with its tassel of roots hanging down into the water, and how a couple of tiny, flat shells, like miniature ammonites, had sunk and lay on the bottom of the jar. Thorndyke also glanced at it; indeed, he did more than glance, for he drew the jar towards him and examined its contents in the systematic way in which it was his habit to examine everything. Meanwhile the coroner asked:

“Did you find anything abnormal or unusual, or anything that could throw light on how deceased came to be in the water?”

“Nothing whatever,” was the reply. “I found simply that deceased met his death by drowning.”

Here, as the witness seemed to have finished his evidence, Thorndyke interposed.

“The witness states, sir, there were no definite bruises. Does he mean that there were any marks that might have been bruises?”

The coroner glanced at Dr. Parton, who replied:

“There was a faint mark on the outside of the right arm, just above the elbow, which had somewhat the appearance of a bruise, as if the deceased had been struck with a stick. But it was very indistinct. I shouldn’t like to swear that it was a bruise at all.”

This concluded the doctor’s evidence, and when he had retired, the name of our client, Wilfred Pedley, was called. He rose, and having taken the oath and given his name and address, deposed:

“I have viewed the body of deceased. It is that of my brother, Cyrus Pedley, who is forty-three years of age. The last time I saw deceased alive was on Tuesday morning, the day before the body was found.”

“Did you notice anything unusual in his manner or state of mind?”

The witness hesitated but at length replied:

“Yes. He seemed anxious and depressed. He had been in low spirits for some time past, but on this occasion he seemed more so than usual.”

“Had you any reason to suspect that he might contemplate taking his life?”

“No,” the witness replied, emphatically, “and I do not believe that he would, under any circumstances, have contemplated suicide.”

“Have you any special reason for that belief?”

“Yes. Deceased was a highly conscientious man and he was in my debt. He had occasion to borrow two thousand pounds from me, and the debt was secured by an insurance on his life. If he had committed suicide that insurance would be invalidated and the debt would remain unpaid. From my knowledge of him, I feel certain that he would not have done such a thing.”

The coroner nodded gravely, and then asked:

“What was deceased’s occupation?”

“He was employed in some way by the Foreign Office, I don’t know in what capacity. I know very little about his affairs.”

“Do you know if he had any money worries or any troubles or embarrassments of any kind?”

“I have never heard of any; but deceased was a very reticent man. He lived alone in his flat, taking his meals at his club, and no one knew—at least, I did not—how he spent his time or what was the state of his finances. He was not married, and I am his only near relative.”

“And as to deceased’s habits. Was he ever addicted to taking more stimulants than was good for him?”

“Never,” the witness replied emphatically. “He was a most temperate and abstemious man.”

“Was he subject to fits of any kind, or fainting attacks?”

“I have never heard that he was.”

“Can you account for his being in this solitary place at this time—apparently about eight o’clock at night?”

“I cannot. It is a complete mystery to me. I know of no one with whom either of us was acquainted in this district. I had never heard of the place until I got the summons to the inquest.”

This was the sum of our client’s evidence, and, so far, things did not look very favourable from our point of view—we were retained on the insurance question, to rebut, if possible, the suggestion of suicide. However, the coroner was a discreet man, and having regard to the obscurity of the case—and perhaps to the interests involved—summed up in favour of an open verdict; and the jury, taking a similar view, found that deceased met his death by drowning, but under what circumstances there was no evidence to show.

“Well,” I said, as the court rose, “that leaves it to the insurance people to make out a case of suicide if they can. I think you are fairly safe, Mr. Pedley. There is no positive evidence.”

“No,” our client replied. “But it isn’t only the money I am thinking of. It would be some consolation to me for the loss of my poor brother if I had some idea how he met with his death, and could feel sure that it was an unavoidable misadventure. And for my own satisfaction—leaving the insurance out of the question—I should like to have definite proof that it was not suicide.”

He looked half-questioningly at Thorndyke, who nodded gravely.

“Yes,” the latter agreed, “the suggestion of suicide ought to be disposed of if possible, both for legal and sentimental reasons. How far away is the

mortuary?”

“A couple of minutes’ walk,” replied Mr. Pedley. “Did you wish to inspect the body?”

“If it is permissible,” replied Thorndyke; “and then I propose to have a look at the place where the body was found.”

“In that case,” our client said, “I will go down to the Station Hotel and wait for you. We may as well travel up to town together, and you can then tell me if you have seen any further light on the mystery.”

As soon as he was gone, Dr. Parton advanced, tying the string of the parcel which once more enclosed the jar of ditch-water.

“I heard you say, sir, that you would like to inspect the body,” said he. “If you like, I will show you the way to the mortuary. The sergeant will let us in, won’t you, sergeant? This gentleman is a doctor as well as a lawyer.”

“Bless you, sir,” said the sergeant, “I know who Dr. Thorndyke is, and I shall feel it an honour to show him anything he wishes to see.”

Accordingly we set forth together, Dr. Parton and Thorndyke leading the way.

“The coroner and the jury didn’t seem to appreciate my exhibit,” the former remarked with a faint grin, tapping the parcel as he spoke.

“No,” Thorndyke agreed; “and it is hardly reasonable to expect a layman to share our own matter-of-fact outlook. But you were quite right to produce the specimen. That ditch-water furnishes conclusive evidence on a vitally material question. Further, I would advise you to preserve that jar for the present, well covered and under lock and key.”

Parton looked surprised.

“Why?” he asked. “The inquest is over and the verdict pronounced.”

“Yes, but it was an open verdict, and an open verdict leaves the case in the air. The inquest has thrown no light on the question as to how Cyrus Pedley came by his death.”

“There doesn’t seem to me much mystery about it,” said the doctor. “Here is a man found drowned in a shallow ditch which he could easily have got out of if he had fallen in by accident. He was not drunk. Apparently he was not in a fit of any kind. There are no marks of violence and no signs of a struggle, and the man is known to have been in an extremely depressed state of mind. It looks like a clear case of suicide, though I admit that the jury were quite right,

in the absence of direct evidence.”

“Well,” said Thorndyke, “it will be my duty to contest that view if the insurance company dispute the claim on those grounds.”

“I can’t think what you will have to offer in answer to the suggestion of suicide,” said Parton.

“Neither can I, at present,” replied Thorndyke. “But the case doesn’t look to me quite so simple as it does to you.”

“You think it possible that an analysis of the contents of this jar may be called for?”

“That is a possibility,” replied Thorndyke. “But I mean that the case is obscure, and that some further inquiry into the circumstances of this man’s death is by no means unlikely.”

“Then,” said Parton, “I will certainly follow your advice and lock up this precious jar. But here we are at the mortuary. Is there anything in particular that you want to see?”

“I want to see all that there is to see,” Thorndyke replied. “The evidence has been vague enough so far. Shall we begin with that bruise or mark that you mentioned?”

Dr. Parton advanced to the grim, shrouded figure that lay on the slate-topped table, like some solemn effigy on an altar tomb, and drew back the sheet that covered it. We all approached, stepping softly, and stood beside the table, looking down with a certain awesome curiosity at the still, waxen figure that, but a few hours since, had been a living man like ourselves. The body was that of a good-looking, middle-aged man with a refined, intelligent face—slightly disfigured by a scar on the cheek—now set in the calm, reposeful expression that one so usually finds on the faces of the drowned; with drowsy, half-closed eyes and slightly parted lips that revealed a considerable gap in the upper front teeth.

Thorndyke stood awhile looking down on the dead man with a curious questioning expression. Then his eye travelled over the body, from the placid face to the marble-like torso and the hand which, though now relaxed, still lightly grasped a tuft of water-weed. The latter Thorndyke gently disengaged from the limp hand, and, after a glance at the dark green, feathery fronds, laid it down and stooped to examine the right arm at the spot above the elbow that Parton had spoken of.

“Yes,” he said, “I think I should call it a bruise, though it is very faint. As

you say, it might have been produced by a blow with a stick or rod. I notice that there are some teeth missing. Presumably he wore a plate?"

"Yes," replied Parton; "a smallish gold plate with four teeth on it—at least, so his brother told me. Of course, it fell out when he was in the water, but it hasn't been found; in fact, it hasn't been looked for."

Thorndyke nodded and then turned to the sergeant.

"Could I see what you found in the pockets?" he asked.

The sergeant complied readily, and my colleague watched his orderly procedure with evident approval. The collection of envelopes was produced from an attaché-case and conveyed to a side table, where the sergeant emptied out the contents of each into a little heap, opposite which he placed the appropriate envelope with its written description. Thorndyke ran his eye over the collection—which was commonplace enough—until he came to the tobacco pouch, from which protruded the corner of a scrap of crumpled paper. This he drew forth and smoothed out the creases, when it was seen to be a railway receipt for an excess fare.

"Seems to have lost his ticket or travelled without one," the sergeant remarked. "But not on this line."

"No," agreed Thorndyke. "It is the Tilbury and Southend line. But you notice the date. It is the 18th; and the body was found on the morning of Wednesday, the 19th. So it would appear that he must have come into this neighbourhood in the evening; and that he must have come either by way of London or by a very complicated cross-country route. I wonder what brought him here."

He produced his notebook and was beginning to copy the receipt when the sergeant said:

"You had better take the paper, sir. It is of no use to us now, and it isn't very easy to make out."

Thorndyke thanked the officer, and, handing me the paper, asked:

"What do you make of it, Jervis?"

I scrutinised the little crumpled scrap and deciphered with difficulty the hurried scrawl, scribbled with a hard, ill-sharpened pencil.

"It seems to read Ldn to 'C.B. or S.B., Hlt'—that is some 'Halt,' I presume. But the amount, 4/9, is clear enough, and that will give us a clue if we want one." I returned the paper to Thorndyke, who bestowed it in his

pocket-book and then remarked:

“I don’t see any keys.”

“No, sir,” replied the sergeant, “there aren’t any. Rather queer, that, for he must have had at least a latchkey. They must have fallen out into the water.”

“That is possible,” said Thorndyke, “but it would be worth while to make sure. Is there anyone who could show us the place where the body was found?”

“I will walk up there with you myself, sir, with pleasure,” said the sergeant, hastily repacking the envelopes. “It is only a quarter of an hour’s walk from here.”

“That is very good of you, sergeant,” my colleague responded; “and as we seem to have seen everything here, I propose that we start at once. You are not coming with us, Parton?”

“No,” the doctor replied. “I have finished with the case and I have got my work to do.” He shook hands with us heartily and watched us—with some curiosity, I think—as we set forth in company with the sergeant.

His curiosity did not seem to me to be unjustified. In fact, I shared it. The presence of the police officer precluded discussion, but as we took our way out of the town I found myself speculating curiously on my colleague’s proceedings. To me, suicide was written plainly on every detail of the case. Of course, we did not wish to take that view, but what other was possible? Had Thorndyke some alternative theory? Or was he merely, according to his invariable custom, making an impartial survey of everything, no matter how apparently trivial, in the hope of lighting on some new and informative fact?

The temporary absence of the sergeant, who had stopped to speak to a constable on duty, enabled me to put the question:

“Is this expedition intended to clear up anything in particular?”

“No,” he replied, “excepting the keys, which ought to be found. But you must see for yourself that this is not a straightforward case. That man did not come all this way merely to drown himself in a ditch. I am quite in the dark at present, so there is nothing for it but to examine everything with our own eyes and see if there is anything that has been overlooked that may throw some light on either the motive or the circumstances. It is always desirable to examine the scene of a crime or a tragedy.”

Here the return of the sergeant put a stop to the discussion and we proceeded on our way in silence. Already we had passed out of the town, and we now turned out of the main road into a lane or by-road, bordered by

meadows and orchards and enclosed by rather high hedgerows.

“This is Ponder’s Road,” said the sergeant. “It leads to Renham, a couple of miles farther on, where it joins the Aylesbury Road. The cart track is on the left a little way along.”

A few minutes later we came to our turning, a narrow and rather muddy lane, the entrance to which was shaded by a grove of tall elms. Passing through this shady avenue, we came out on a grass-covered track, broken by deep wagon-ruts and bordered on each side by a ditch, beyond which was a wide expanse of marshy meadows.

“This is the place,” said the sergeant, halting by the side of the right-hand ditch and indicating a spot where the rushes had been flattened down. “It was just as you see it now, only the feet were just visible sticking out of the duck-weed, which had drifted back after Moffet had disturbed it.”

We stood awhile looking at the ditch, with its thick mantle of bright green, spotted with innumerable small dark objects and showing here and there a faint track where a water-vole had swum across.

“Those little dark objects are water-snails, I suppose,” said I, by way of making some kind of remark.

“Yes,” replied Thorndyke; “the common Amber shell, I think—*Succinea putris*.” He reached out his stick and fished up a sample of the duck-weed, on which one or two of the snails were crawling. “Yes,” he repeated. “*Succinea putris* it is; a queer little left-handed shell, with the spire, as you see, all lop-sided. They have a habit of swarming in this extraordinary way. You notice that the ditch is covered with them.”

I had already observed this, but it hardly seemed to be worth commenting on under the present circumstances—which was apparently the sergeant’s view also, for he looked at Thorndyke with some surprise, which developed into impatience when my colleague proceeded further to expand on the subject of natural history.

“These water-weeds,” he observed, “are very remarkable plants in their various ways. Look at this duck-weed, for instance. Just a little green oval disc with a single root hanging down into the water, like a tiny umbrella with a long handle; and yet it is a complete plant, and a flowering plant, too.” He picked a specimen off the end of his stick and held it up by its root to exhibit its umbrella-like form; and as he did so, he looked in my face with an expression that I felt to be somehow significant; but of which I could not extract the meaning. But there was no difficulty in interpreting the expression on the

sergeant's face. He had come here on business and he wanted to "cut the cackle and get to the hosses."

"Well, sergeant," said Thorndyke, "there isn't much to see, but I think we ought to have a look for those keys. He must have had keys of some kind, if only a latchkey; and they must be in this ditch."

The sergeant was not enthusiastic. "I've no doubt you are right, sir," said he; "but I don't see that we should be much forrader if we found them. However, we may as well have a look, only I can't stay more than a few minutes. I've got my work to do at the station."

"Then," said Thorndyke, "let us get to work at once. We had better hook out the weed and look it over; and if the keys are not in that, we must try to expose the bottom where the body was lying. You must tell us if we are working in the right place."

With this he began, with the crooked handle of his stick, to rake up the tangle of weed that covered the bottom of the ditch and drag the detached masses ashore, piling them on the bank and carefully looking them through to see if the keys should chance to be entangled in their meshes. In this work I took my part under the sergeant's direction, raking in load after load of the delicate, stringy weed, on the pale green ribbon-like leaves of which multitudes of the water-snails were creeping; and sorting over each batch in hopeless and fruitless search for the missing keys. In about ten minutes we had removed the entire weedy covering from the bottom of the ditch over an area of from eight to nine feet—the place which, according to the sergeant, the body had occupied; and as the duck-weed had been caught by the tangled masses of water-weed that we had dragged ashore, we now had an uninterrupted view of the cleared space save for the clouds of mud that we had stirred up.

"We must give the mud a few minutes to settle," said Thorndyke.

"Yes," the sergeant agreed, "it will take some time; and as it doesn't really concern me now that the inquest is over, I think I will get back to the station if you will excuse me."

Thorndyke excused him very willingly, I think, though politely and with many thanks for his help. When he had gone I remarked:

"I am inclined to agree with the sergeant. If we find the keys we shan't be much forrader."

"We shall know that he had them with him," he replied. "Though, of course, if we don't find them, that will not prove that they are not here. Still, I

think we should try to settle the question.”

His answer left me quite unconvinced; but the care with which he searched the ditch and sorted out the weed left me in no doubt that, to him, the matter seemed to be of some importance. However, nothing came of the search. If the keys were there they were buried in the mud, and eventually we had to give up the search and make our way back towards the station.

As we passed out of the lane into Ponder’s Road, Thorndyke stopped at the entrance, under the trees, by a little triangle of turf which marked the beginning of the lane, and looked down at the muddy ground.

“Here is quite an interesting thing, Jervis,” he remarked, “which shows us how standardised objects tend to develop an individual character. These are the tracks of a car, or more probably a tradesman’s van, which was fitted with Barlow tyres. Now there must be thousands of vans fitted with these tyres; they are the favourite type for light covered vans, and when new they are all alike and indistinguishable. Yet this tyre—of the off hind-wheel—has acquired a character which would enable one to pick it out with certainty from ten thousand others. First, you see, there is a deep cut in the tyre at an angle of forty-five, then a kidney-shaped ‘Blakey’ has stuck in the outer tyre without puncturing the inner; and finally some adhesive object—perhaps a lump of pitch from a newly-mended road—has become fixed on just behind the ‘Blakey.’ Now, if we make a rough sketch of those three marks and indicate their distance apart, thus”—here he made a rapid sketch in his notebook, and wrote in the intervals in inches—“we have the means of swearing to the identity of a vehicle which we have never seen.”

“And which,” I added, “had for some reason swerved over to the wrong side of the road. Yes, I should say that tyre is certainly unique. But surely most tyres are identifiable when they have been in use for some time.”

“Exactly,” he replied. “That was my point. The standardised thing is devoid of character only when it is new.”

It was not a very subtle point, and as it was fairly obvious I made no comment, but presently reverted to the case of Pedley deceased.

“I don’t quite see why you are taking all this trouble. The insurance claim is not likely to be contested. No one can prove that it was a case of suicide, though I should think no one will feel any doubt that it was, at least that is my own feeling.”

Thorndyke looked at me with an expression of reproach.

“I am afraid that my learned friend has not been making very good use of

his eyes,” said he. “He has allowed his attention to be distracted by superficial appearances.”

“You don’t think that it was suicide, then?” I asked, considerably taken aback.

“It isn’t a question of thinking,” he replied. “It was certainly not suicide. There are the plainest indications of homicide; and, of course, in the particular circumstances, homicide means murder.”

I was thunderstruck. In my own mind I had dismissed the case somewhat contemptuously as a mere commonplace suicide. As my friend had truly said, I had accepted the obvious appearances and let them mislead me, whereas Thorndyke had followed his golden rule of accepting nothing and observing everything. But what was it that he had observed? I knew that it was useless to ask, but still I ventured on a tentative question.

“When did you come to the conclusion that it was a case of homicide?”

“As soon as I had had a good look at the place where the body was found,” he replied promptly.

This did not help me much, for I had given very little attention to anything but the search for the keys. The absence of those keys was, of course, a suspicious fact, if it was a fact. But we had not proved their absence; we had only failed to find them.

“What do you propose to do next?” I asked.

“Evidently,” he answered, “there are two things to be done. One is to test the murder theory—to look for more evidence for or against it; the other is to identify the murderer, if possible. But really the two problems are one, since they involve the questions, Who had a motive for killing Cyrus Pedley? and Who had the opportunity and the means?”

Our discussion brought us to the station, where, outside the hotel, we found Mr. Pedley waiting for us.

“I am glad you have come,” said he. “I was beginning to fear that we should lose this train. I suppose there is no new light on this mysterious affair?”

“No,” Thorndyke replied. “Rather there is a new problem. No keys were found in your brother’s pockets, and we have failed to find them in the ditch; though, of course, they may be there.”

“They must be,” said Pedley. “They must have fallen out of his pocket and

got buried, in the mud, unless he lost them previously, which is most unlikely. It is a pity, though. We shall have to break open his cabinets and drawers, which he would have hated. He was very fastidious about his furniture.”

“You will have to break into his flat, too,” said I.

“No,” he replied, “I shan’t have to do that. I have a duplicate of his latchkey. He had a spare bedroom which he let me use if I wanted to stay in town.” As he spoke, he produced his key-bunch and exhibited a small Chubb latchkey. “I wish we had the others, though,” he added.

Here the up-train was heard approaching and we hurried on to the platform, selecting an empty first-class compartment as it drew up. As soon as the train had started, Thorndyke began his inquiries, to which I listened attentively.

“You said that your brother had been anxious and depressed lately. Was there anything more than this? Any nervousness or foreboding?”

“Well, yes,” replied Pedley. “Looking back, I seem to see that the possibility of death was in his mind. A week or two ago he brought his will to me to see if it was quite satisfactory to me as the principal beneficiary; and he handed to me his last receipt for the insurance premium. That looks a little suggestive.”

“It does,” Thorndyke agreed. “And as to his occupation and his associates, what do you know about them?”

“His private friends are mostly my own, but of his official associates I know nothing. He was connected with the Foreign Office; but in what capacity I don’t know at all. He was extremely reticent on the subject. I only know that he travelled about a good deal, presumably on official business.”

This was not very illuminating, but it was all our client had to tell; and the conversation languished somewhat until the train drew up at Marylebone, when Thorndyke said, as if by an after-thought:

“You have your brother’s latchkey. How would it be if we just took a glance at the flat? Have you time now?”

“I will make time,” was the reply, “if you want to see the flat. I don’t see what you could learn from inspecting it; but that is your affair. I am in your hands.”

“I should like to look round the rooms,” Thorndyke answered; and as our client assented, we approached a taxi-cab and entered while Pedley gave the driver the necessary directions. A quarter of an hour later we drew up opposite a tall block of buildings, and Mr. Pedley, having paid off the cab, led the way

to the lift.

The dead man's flat was on the third floor, and, like the others, was distinguished only by the number on the door. Mr. Pedley inserted the key into the latch, and having opened the door, preceded us across the small lobby into the sitting-room.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, as he entered, "this solves your problem." As he spoke, he pointed to the table, on which lay a small bunch of keys, including a latchkey similar to the one that he had shown us.

"But," he continued, "it is rather extraordinary. It just shows what a very disturbed state his mind must have been in."

"Yes," Thorndyke agreed, looking critically about the room; "and as the latchkey is there, it raises the question whether the keys may have been out of his possession. Do you know what the various locked receptacles contain?"

"I know pretty well what is in the bureau; but as to the cupboard above it, I have never seen it open and don't know what he kept in it. I always assumed that he reserved it for his official papers. I will just see if anything seems to have been disturbed."

He unlocked and opened the flap of the old-fashioned bureau and pulled out the small drawers one after the other, examining the contents of each. Then he opened each of the larger drawers and turned over the various articles in them. As he closed the last one, he reported: "Everything seems to be in order—cheque-book, insurance policy, a few share certificates, and so on. Nothing seems to have been touched. Now we will try the cupboard, though I don't suppose its contents would be of much interest to anyone but himself. I wonder which is the key."

He looked at the keyhole and made a selection from the bunch, but it was evidently the wrong key. He tried another and yet another with a like result, until he had exhausted the resources of the bunch.

"It is very remarkable," he said. "None of these keys seems to fit. I wonder if he kept this particular key locked up or hidden. It wasn't in the bureau. Will you try what you can do?"

He handed the bunch to Thorndyke, who tried all the keys in succession with the same result. None of them was the key belonging to the lock. At length, having tried them all, he inserted one and turned it as far as it would go. Then he gave a sharp pull; and immediately the door came open.

"Why, it was unlocked after all!" exclaimed Mr. Pedley. "And there is

nothing in it. That is why there was no key on the bunch. Apparently he didn't use the cupboard."

Thorndyke looked critically at the single vacant shelf, drawing his finger along it in two places and inspecting his finger-tips. Then he turned his attention to the lock, which was of the kind that is screwed on the inside of the door, leaving the bolt partly exposed. He took the bolt in his fingers and pushed it out and then in again; and by the way it moved I could see that the spring was broken. On this he made no comment, but remarked:

"The cupboard has been in use pretty lately. You can see the trace of a largish volume—possibly a box-file—on the shelf. There is hardly any dust there, whereas the rest of the shelf is fairly thickly coated. However, that does not carry us very far; and the appearance of the rooms is otherwise quite normal."

"Quite," agreed Pedley. "But why shouldn't it be? You didn't suspect _____"

"I was merely testing the suggestion offered by the absence of the keys," said Thorndyke. "By the way, have you communicated with the Foreign Office?"

"No," was the reply, "but I suppose I ought to. What had I better say to them?"

"I should merely state the facts in the first instance. But you can, if you like, say that I definitely reject the idea of suicide."

"I am glad to hear you say that," said Pedley. "Can I give any reasons for your opinion?"

"Not in the first place," replied Thorndyke. "I will consider the case and let you have a reasoned report in a day or two, which you can show to the Foreign Office and also to the insurance company."

Mr. Pedley looked as if he would have liked to ask some further questions, but as Thorndyke now made his way to the door, he followed in silence, pocketing the keys as we went out. He accompanied us down to the entry and there we left him, setting forth in the direction of South Kensington Station.

"It looked to me," said I, as soon as we were out of ear-shot, "as if that lock had been forced. What do you think?"

"Well," he answered, "locks get broken in ordinary use, but taking all the facts together, I think you are right. There are too many coincidences for reasonable probability. First, this man leaves his keys, including his latchkey,

on the table, which is an extraordinary thing to do. On that very occasion, he is found dead under inexplicable circumstances. Then, of all the locks in his rooms, the one which happens to be broken is the one of which the key is not on the bunch. That is a very suspicious group of facts.”

“It is,” I agreed. “And if there is, as you say—though I can’t imagine on what grounds—evidence of foul play, that makes it still more suspicious. But what is the next move? Have you anything in view?”

“The next move,” he replied, “is to clear up the mystery of the dead man’s movements on the day of his death. The railway receipt shows that on that day he travelled down somewhere into Essex. From that place, he took a long, cross-country journey of which the destination was a ditch by a lonely meadow in Buckinghamshire. The questions that we have to answer are, What was he doing in Essex? Why did he make that strange journey? Did he make it alone? and, if not, Who accompanied him?”

“Now, obviously, the first thing to do is to locate that place in Essex; and when we have done that, to go down there and see if we can pick up any traces of the dead man.”

“That sounds like a pretty vague quest,” said I; “but if we fail, the police may be able to find out something. By the way, we want a new *Bradshaw*.”

“An excellent suggestion, Jervis,” said he. “I will get one as we go into the station.”

A few minutes later, as we sat on a bench waiting for our train, he passed to me the open copy of *Bradshaw*, with the crumpled railway receipt.

“You see,” said he, “it was apparently ‘G.B.Hlt.’ and the fare from London was four and ninepence. Here is Great Buntingfield Halt, the fare to which is four and ninepence. That must be the place. At any rate, we will give it a trial. May I take it that you are coming to lend a hand? I shall start in good time tomorrow morning.”

I assented emphatically. Never had I been more completely in the dark than I was in this case, and seldom had I known Thorndyke to be more positive and confident. Obviously, he had something up his sleeve; and I was racked with curiosity as to what that something was.

On the following morning we made a fairly early start, and half-past ten found us seated in the train, looking out across a dreary waste of marshes, with the estuary of the Thames a mile or so distant. For the first time in my

recollection Thorndyke had come unprovided with his inevitable “research case,” but I noted that he had furnished himself with a botanist’s vasculum—or tin collecting-case—and that his pocket bulged as if he had some other appliances concealed about his person. Also that he carried a walking-stick that was strange to me.

“This will be our destination, I think,” he said, as the train slowed down; and sure enough it presently came to rest beside a little makeshift platform on which was displayed the name “Great Buntingfield Halt.” We were the only passengers to alight, and the guard, having noted the fact, blew his whistle and dismissed the little station with a contemptuous wave of his flag.

Thorndyke lingered on the platform after the train had gone, taking a general survey of the country. Half a mile away to the north a small village was visible; while to the south the marshes stretched away to the river, their bare expanse unbroken save by a solitary building whose unredeemed hideousness proclaimed it a factory of some kind. Presently the station-master approached deferentially, and as we proffered our tickets, Thorndyke remarked:

“You don’t seem overburdened with traffic here.”

“No, sir. You’re right,” was the emphatic reply. “ ’Tis a dead-alive place. Excepting the people at the Golomite Works and one now and then from the village, no one uses the halt. You’re the first strangers I’ve seen for more than a month.”

“Indeed,” said Thorndyke. “But I think you are forgetting one. An acquaintance of mine came here last Tuesday—and by the same token, he hadn’t got a ticket and had to pay his fare.”

“Oh, I remember,” the station-master replied. “You mean a gentleman with a scar on his cheek. But I don’t count him as a stranger. He has been here before; I think he is connected with the works, as he always goes up their road.”

“Do you happen to remember what time he came back?” Thorndyke asked.

“He didn’t come back at all,” was the reply. “I am sure of that, because I work the halt and level crossing by myself. I remember thinking it queer that he didn’t come back, because the ticket that he had lost was a return. He must have gone back in the van belonging to the works—that one that you see coming towards the crossing.”

As he spoke, he pointed to a van that was approaching down the factory road—a small covered van with the name “Golomite Works” painted, not on

the cover, but on a board that was attached to it. The station-master walked towards the crossing to open the gates, and we followed; and when the van had passed, Thorndyke wished our friend "Good morning," and led the way along the road, looking about him with lively interest and rather with the air of one looking for something in particular.

We had covered about two-thirds of the distance to the factory when the road approached a wide ditch; and from the attention with which my friend regarded it, I suspected that this was the something for which he had been looking. It was, however, quite unapproachable, for it was bordered by a wide expanse of soft mud thickly covered with rushes and trodden deeply by cattle. Nevertheless, Thorndyke followed its margin, still looking about him keenly, until, about a couple of hundred yards from the factory, I observed a small decayed wooden staging or quay, apparently the remains of a vanished footbridge. Here Thorndyke halted, and unbuttoning his coat, began to empty out his pockets, producing first the vasculum, then a small case containing three wide-mouthed bottles—both of which he deposited on the ground—and finally a sort of miniature landing-net, which he proceeded to screw on to the ferrule of his stick.

"I take it," said I, "that these proceedings are a blind to cover some sort of observations."

"Not at all," he replied. "We are engaged in the study of pond and ditch natural history, and a most fascinating and instructive study it is. The variety of forms is endless. This ditch, you observe, like the one at Bantree, is covered with a dense growth of duck-weed: but whereas that ditch was swarming with succineæ, here there is not a single succinea to be seen."

I grunted a sulky assent, and watched suspiciously as he filled the bottles with water from the ditch and then made a preliminary sweep with his net.

"Here is a trial sample," said he, holding the loaded net towards me. "Duck-weed, horn-weed, *Planorbis nautilus*, but no succineæ. What do you think of it, Jervis?"

I looked distastefully at the repulsive mess, but yet with attention, for I realised that there was a meaning in his question. And then, suddenly, my attention sharpened. I picked out of the net a strand of dark green, plummy weed and examined it.

"So this is horn-weed," I said. "Then it was a piece of horn-weed that Cyrus Pedley held grasped in his hand; and now I come to think of it, I don't remember seeing any horn-weed in the ditch at Bantree."

He nodded approvingly. "There wasn't any," said he.

"And these little ammonite-like shells are just like those that I noticed at the bottom of Dr. Parton's jar. But I don't remember seeing any in the Bantree ditch."

"There were none there," said he. "And the duck-weed?"

"Oh, well," I replied, "duck-weed is duck-weed, and there's an end of it."

He chuckled aloud at my answer, and quoting:

"A primrose by the river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,"

bestowed a part of the catch in the vasculum, then turned once more to the ditch and began to ply his net vigorously, emptying out each netful on the grass, looking it over quickly and then making a fresh sweep, dragging the net each time through the mud at the bottom. I watched him now with a new and very lively interest; for enlightenment was dawning, mingled with some self-contempt and much speculation as to how Thorndyke had got his start in this case.

But I was not the only interested watcher. At one of the windows of the factory I presently observed a man who seemed to be looking our way. After a few seconds' inspection he disappeared, to reappear almost immediately with a pair of field-glasses, through which he took a long look at us. Then he disappeared again, but in less than a minute I saw him emerge from a side door and advance hurriedly towards us.

"We are going to have a notice of ejection served on us, I fancy," said I.

Thorndyke glanced quickly at the approaching stranger but continued to ply his net, working, as I noticed, methodically from left to right. When the man came within fifty yards he hailed us with a brusque inquiry as to what our business was. I went forward to meet him and, if possible, to detain him in conversation; but this plan failed, for he ignored me and bore straight down on Thorndyke.

"Now, then," said he, "what's the game? What are you doing here?"

Thorndyke was in the act of raising his net from the water, but he now suddenly let it fall to the bottom of the ditch while he turned to confront the stranger.

"I take it that you have some reason for asking," said he.

"Yes, I have," the other replied angrily and with a slight foreign accent that

agreed with his appearance—he looked like a Slav of some sort. “This is private land. It belongs to the factory. I am the manager.”

“The land is not enclosed,” Thorndyke remarked.

“I tell you the land is private land,” the fellow retorted excitedly. “You have no business here. I want to know what you are doing.”

“My good sir,” said Thorndyke, “there is no need to excite yourself. My friend and I are just collecting botanical and other specimens.”

“How do I know that?” the manager demanded. He looked round suspiciously and his eye lighted on the vasculum. “What have you got in that thing?” he asked.

“Let him see what is in it,” said Thorndyke, with a significant look at me.

Interpreting this as an instruction to occupy the man’s attention for a few moments, I picked up the vasculum and placed myself so that he must turn his back to Thorndyke to look into it. I fumbled awhile with the catch, but at length opened the case and began to pick out the weed strand by strand. As soon as the stranger’s back was turned Thorndyke raised his net and quickly picked out of it something which he slipped into his pocket. Then he advanced towards us, sorting out the contents of his net as he came.

“Well,” he said, “you see we are just harmless naturalists. By the way, what did you think we were looking for?”

“Never mind what I thought,” the other replied fiercely. “This is private land. You have no business here, and you have got to clear out.”

“Very well,” said Thorndyke. “As you please. There are plenty of other ditches.” He took the vasculum and the case of bottles, and having put them in his pocket, unscrewed his net, wished the stranger “Good-morning,” and turned back towards the station. The man stood watching us until we were near the level crossing, when he, too, turned back and retired to the factory.

“I saw you take something out of the net,” said I. “What was it?”

He glanced back to make sure that the manager was out of sight. Then he put his hand in his pocket, drew it out closed, and suddenly opened it. In his palm lay a small gold dental plate with four teeth on it.

“My word!” I exclaimed; “this clenches the matter with a vengeance. That is certainly Cyrus Pedley’s plate. It corresponds exactly to the description.”

“Yes,” he replied, “it is practically a certainty. Of course, it will have to be identified by the dentist who made it. But it is a foregone conclusion.”

I reflected as we walked towards the station on the singular sureness with which Thorndyke had followed what was to me an invisible trail. Presently I said:

“What is puzzling me is how you got your start in this case. What gave you the first hint that it was homicide and not suicide or misadventure?”

“It was the old story, Jervis,” he replied; “just a matter of observing and remembering apparently trivial details. Here, by the way, is a case in point.”

He stopped and looked down at a set of tracks in the soft, earth road—apparently those of the van which we had seen cross the line. I followed the direction of his glance and saw the clear impression of a Blakey’s protector, preceded by that of a gash in the tyre and followed by that of a projecting lump.

“But this is astounding!” I exclaimed. “It is almost certainly the same track that we saw in Ponder’s Road.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “I noticed it as we came along.” He brought out his spring-tape and notebook, and handing the latter to me, stooped and measured the distances between the three impressions. I wrote them down as he called them out, and then we compared them with the note made in Ponder’s Road. The measurements were identical, as were the relative positions of the impressions.

“This is an important piece of evidence,” said he. “I wish we were able to take casts, but the notes will be pretty conclusive. And now,” he continued as we resumed our progress towards the station, “to return to your question. Parton’s evidence at the inquest proved that Cyrus Pedley was drowned in water which contained duck-weed. He produced a specimen and we both saw it. We saw the duck-weed in it and also two *Planorbis* shells. The presence of those two shells proved that the water in which he was drowned must have swarmed with them. We saw the body, and observed that one hand grasped a wisp of horn-weed. Then we went to view the ditch and we examined it. That was when I got, not a mere hint, but a crucial and conclusive fact. The ditch was covered with duck-weed, as we expected. *But it was the wrong duck-weed.*”

“The wrong duck-weed!” I exclaimed. “Why, how many kinds of duck-weed are there?”

“There are four British species,” he replied. “The Greater Duck-weed, the Lesser Duck-weed, the Thick Duck-weed, and the Ivy-leaved Duck-weed. Now the specimens in Parton’s jar I noticed were the Greater Duck-weed,

which is easily distinguished by its roots, which are multiple and form a sort of tassel. But the duck-weed on the Bantree ditch was the Lesser Duck-weed, which is smaller than the other, but is especially distinguished by having only a single root. It is impossible to mistake one for the other.

“Here, then, was practically conclusive evidence of murder. Cyrus Pedley had been drowned in a pond or ditch. But not in the ditch in which his body was found. Therefore his dead body had been conveyed from some other place and put into this ditch. Such a proceeding furnishes *prima facie* evidence of murder. But as soon as the question was raised, there was an abundance of confirmatory evidence. There was no horn-weed or Planorbis shells in the ditch, but there were swarms of succineæ, some of which would inevitably have been swallowed with the water. There was an obscure linear pressure mark on the arm of the dead man, just above the elbow: such a mark as might be made by a cord if a man were pinioned to render him helpless. Then the body would have had to be conveyed to this place in some kind of vehicle; and we found the traces of what appeared to be a motor-van, which had approached the cart-track on the wrong side of the road, as if to pull up there. It was a very conclusive mass of evidence; but it would have been useless but for the extraordinarily lucky chance that poor Pedley had lost his railway ticket and preserved the receipt; by which we were able to ascertain where he was on the day of his death and in what locality the murder was probably committed. But that is not the only way in which Fortune has favoured us. The station-master’s information was, and will be, invaluable. Then it was most fortunate for us that there was only one ditch on the factory land; and that that ditch was accessible at only one point, which must have been the place where Pedley was drowned.”

“The duck-weed in this ditch is, of course, the Greater Duck-weed?”

“Yes. I have taken some specimens as well as the horn-weed and shells.”

He opened the vasculum and picked out one of the tiny plants, exhibiting the characteristic tassel of roots.

“I shall write to Parton and tell him to preserve the jar and the horn-weed if it has not been thrown away. But the duck-weed alone, produced in evidence, would be proof enough that Pedley was not drowned in the Bantree ditch; and the dental plate will show where he was drowned.”

“Are you going to pursue the case any farther?” I asked.

“No,” he replied. “I shall call at Scotland Yard on my way home and report what I have learned and what I can prove in court. Then I shall have finished with the case. The rest is for the police, and I imagine they won’t have much

difficulty. The circumstances seem to tell their own story. Pedley was employed by the Foreign Office, probably on some kind of secret service. I imagine that he discovered the existence of a gang of evil-doers—probably foreign revolutionaries, of whom we may assume that our friend the manager of the factory is one; that he contrived to associate himself with them and to visit the factory occasionally to ascertain what was made there besides Golomite—if Golomite is not itself an illicit product. Then I assume that he was discovered to be a spy, that he was lured down here; that he was pinioned and drowned some time on Tuesday night and his body put into the van and conveyed to a place miles away from the scene of his death, where it was deposited in a ditch apparently identical in character with that in which he was drowned. It was an extremely ingenious and well-thought-out plan. It seemed to have provided for every kind of inquiry, and it very narrowly missed being successful.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “But it didn’t provide for Dr. John Thorndyke.”

“It didn’t provide for a searching examination of all the details,” he replied; “and no criminal plan that I have ever met has done so. The completeness of the scheme is limited by the knowledge of the schemers, and, in practice, there is always something overlooked. In this case, the criminals were unlearned in the natural history of ditches.”

Thorndyke’s theory of the crime turned out to be substantially correct. The Golomite Works proved to be a factory where high explosives were made by a gang of cosmopolitan revolutionaries who were all known to the police. But the work of the latter was simplified by a detailed report which the dead man had deposited at his bank and which was discovered in time to enable the police to raid the factory and secure the whole gang. When once they were under lock and key, further information was forthcoming; for a charge of murder against them jointly soon produced King’s Evidence sufficient to procure a conviction of the three actual perpetrators of the murder.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story is Number Sixteen from the book
“The Famous Cases of Dr. Thorndyke
Thirty-seven of his criminal
investigations as set down by
R. Austin Freeman.”

also known as

“Dr. Thorndyke His Famous Cases as
Described by R. Austin Freeman”.

First published July 1929
Hodder & Stoughton, London

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 Naturalist at Law* by Richard Austin Freeman]