

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

Number Eighteen

Pandora's
Box

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"I SEE our friend, S. Chapman, is still a defaulter," said I, as I ran my eye over the "personal" column of *The Times*.

Thorndyke looked up interrogatively.

"Chapman?" he repeated; "let me see, who is he?"

"The man with the box. I read you the advertisement the other day. Here it is again. 'If the box left in the luggage-room by S. Chapman is not claimed within a week from this date, it will be sold to defray expenses.—Alexander Butt, "Red Lion" Hotel, Stoke Varley, Kent.' That sounds like an ultimatum; but it has been appearing at intervals for the last month. As the first notice expired about three weeks ago, the question is, why doesn't Mr. Butt sell the box and have done with it?"

"He may have some qualms as to the legality of the proceeding," said Thorndyke. "It would be interesting to know what expenses he refers to and what is the value of the box."

The latter question was resolved a day or two later by the appearance in our chambers of an agitated gentleman, who gave his name as George Chapman. After apologising for his unannounced visit he explained:

"I have come to you on the advice of my solicitor and on behalf of my brother, Samuel, who has become involved in a most extraordinary and horrible set of complications. At present he is in custody of the police charged with an atrocious murder."

"That is certainly a rather serious complication," Thorndyke observed dryly. "Perhaps you had better give us an account of the circumstances—the whole set of circumstances, from the beginning."

"I will," said Mr. Chapman, "without any reservations. The only question is, which is the beginning? There are the business and the domestic affairs. Perhaps I had better begin with the business concerns. My brother was a sort of travelling agent for a firm of manufacturing jewellers. He held a stock of the goods, which he used as samples for large orders, but in the case of small retailers he actually supplied the goods himself. When travelling, he usually carried his stock in a small Gladstone bag, but he kept the bulk of it in a safe in his house, and he used to go home at week-ends, or oftener, to replenish his

travelling stock. Now, about two months ago he left home on a trip, but instead of taking a selection of his goods, he took the entire stock in a largish wooden box, leaving the safe empty. What he meant to do I don't know, and that's the fact. I offer no opinion. The circumstances were peculiar, as you will hear presently, and his proceedings were peculiar; for he went down to Stoke Varley—a village not far from Folkestone—put up at the 'Red Lion,' and deposited his box in the luggage-room that is kept for the use of commercial travellers; and then, after staying there for a few days, came up to London to make some arrangements for selling or letting his house—which, it seems, he had decided to leave. He came up in the evening, and the very next morning the first of his adventures befell, and a very alarming one it was.

“It appears that, as he was walking down a quiet street, he saw a lady's purse lying on the pavement. Naturally he picked it up, and as it contained nothing to show the name or address of the owner, he put it in his pocket, intending to hand it in at a police station. Shortly after this, he got into an omnibus, and a well-dressed woman entered at the same time and sat down next to him. Just as the conductor was coming in to collect the fares, the woman began to search her pocket excitedly, and then, turning to my brother, called on him loudly to return her purse. Of course, he said that he knew nothing about her purse, whereupon she roundly accused him of having picked her pocket, declaring to the conductor that she had felt him take out her purse, and demanding that the omnibus should be stopped and a policeman fetched. At this moment a policeman was seen on the pavement. The conductor stopped the omnibus and hailed the constable, who came, and having examined the floor of the vehicle without finding the missing purse, and taken the conductor's name and number, took my brother into custody and conducted him and the woman to the police station. Here the inspector took down from the woman a description of the stolen purse and its contents, which my brother, to his utter dismay, recognised as that of the purse which he had picked up and which was still in his pocket. Immediately, he gave the inspector an account of the incident and produced the purse; but it is hardly necessary to say that the inspector refused to take his explanation seriously.

“Then my brother did a thing which was natural enough, but which did not help him. Seeing that he was practically certain to be convicted—for there was really no answer to the charge—he gave a false name and refused his address. He was then locked up in a cell for the night, and the next morning was brought before the magistrate, who, having heard the evidence of the woman and the inspector and having listened without comment to my brother's story, committed him for trial at the Central Criminal Court, and refused bail. He was then removed to Brixton, where he was detained for nearly a month, pending

the opening of the sessions.

“At length the day of his trial drew near. But it was then found that the woman who had accused him had left her lodgings and could not be traced. As there was no one to prosecute, and as the disappearance of the woman put a rather new light upon my brother’s story, the case against him was allowed to drop, and he was released.

“He went home by train, and at the station he bought a copy of *The Times* to read on the way. Before opening it he chanced to run his eye over the ‘personal’ column, and there his attention was arrested by his own name in an advertisement——”

“Relating to a box?” said I.

“Precisely. Then you have seen it. Well, considering the value of the contents of that box, he was naturally rather anxious. At once he sent off a telegram saying that he would call on the following day before noon to claim the box and pay what was owing. And he did so. Yesterday morning he took an early train down to Stoke Varley and went straight to the ‘Red Lion.’ On his arrival he was asked to step into the coffee-room, which he did; and there he found three police officers, who forthwith arrested him on a charge of murder. But before going into the particulars of that charge I had better give you an account of his domestic affairs, on which this incredible and horrible accusation turns.

“My brother, I am sorry to say, was living with a woman who was not his wife. He had originally intended to marry her, but his association with her—which lasted over several years—did not encourage that intention. She was a terrible woman, and she led him a terrible life. Her temper was ungovernable; and when she had taken too much to drink—which was a pretty frequent occurrence—she was not only noisy and quarrelsome, but physically violent as well. Her antecedents were disreputable—she had been connected with the seamy side of the music-hall stage; her associations were disreputable; she brought questionable women to my brother’s house; she consorted with men of doubtful character, and her relations with them were equally doubtful. Indeed, with one of them, a man named Gamble, I should say that her relations were not doubtful at all, though I understand he was a married man.

“Well, my brother put up with her for years, living a life that cut him off from all decent society. But at last his patience gave way (and I may add that he made the acquaintance of a very desirable lady, who was willing to condone his past and marry him if he could secure a possible future). After a particularly outrageous scene, he ordered the woman—Rebecca Mings was her

name—out of the house and declared their relationship at an end.

“But she refused to be shaken off. She kept possession of the street-door key, and she returned again and again, and made a public scandal. The last time she created such an uproar when the door was bolted against her that a crowd collected in the street and my brother was forced to let her in. She stayed with him some hours, alone in the house—for the only servant he had was a ‘daily girl’ who left at three o’clock—and went away quite quietly about ten at night. But, although a good many people saw her go into the house, no one but my brother seems to have seen her leave it; a most disastrous circumstance, for, from the moment when she left the house, no one ever saw her again. She did not go to her lodgings that night. She disappeared utterly—until—but I must go back now to the ‘Red Lion’ at Stoke Varley.

“When my brother was arrested on the charge of having murdered Rebecca Mings, certain particulars were given to him; and when I went down there in response to a telegram, I gathered some more. The circumstances are these: About a fortnight after my brother had left to come to London, some of the ‘commercial’ who used the luggage-room complained of an unpleasant odour in it, which was presently traced to my brother’s box. As that box appeared to have been abandoned, the landlord became suspicious, and communicated with the police. They telephoned to the London police, who found my brother’s house shut up and his whereabouts unknown. Thereupon the local police broke open the box and found in it a woman’s left arm and a quantity of blood-stained clothing. On which they caused the advertisement to be put in *The Times*, and meanwhile they made certain inquiries. It appeared that my brother had spent part of his time at Stoke Varley fishing in the little river. On learning this, the police proceeded to dredge the river, and presently they brought up a right arm—apparently the fellow of the one found in the box—and a leg divided into three parts, evidently a woman’s. Now, as to the arm found in the box, there could be no question about its identity, for it bore a very distinct tattooed inscription consisting of the initials R. M. above a heart transfixed by an arrow, with the initials J. B. underneath. A few inquiries elicited the fact that the woman, Rebecca Mings, who had disappeared, bore such a tattooed mark on her left arm; and certain persons who had known her, having been sworn to secrecy, were shown the arm, and recognised the mark without hesitation. Further inquiries showed that Rebecca Mings was last seen alive entering my brother’s house, as I have described; and on this information the police broke into the house and searched it.”

“Do you know if they found anything?” Thorndyke asked.

“I don’t,” replied Chapman, “but I infer that they did. The police at Stoke

Varley were very courteous and kind, but they declined to give any particulars about the visit to the house. However, we shall hear at the inquest if they made any discoveries.”

“And is that all that you have to tell us?” asked Thorndyke.

“Yes,” was the reply, “and enough, too. I make no comment on my brother’s story, and I won’t ask whether you believe it. I don’t expect you to. The question is whether you would undertake the defence. I suppose it isn’t necessary for a lawyer to be convinced of his client’s innocence in order to convince the jury.”

“You are thinking of an advocate,” said Thorndyke. “I am not an advocate, and I should not defend a man whom I believed to be guilty. The most that I can do is to investigate the case. If the result of the investigation is to confirm the suspicions against your brother, I shall go no farther in the case. You will have to get an ordinary criminal barrister to defend your brother. If, on the other hand, I find reasonable grounds for believing him innocent, I will undertake the defence. What do you say to that?”

“I’ve no choice,” replied Chapman; “and I suppose if you find all the evidence against him, the defence won’t matter much.”

“I am afraid that is so,” said Thorndyke. “And now there are one or two questions to be cleared up. First, does your brother offer any explanation of the presence of these remains in his box?”

“He supposes that somebody at the ‘Red Lion’ must have taken the jewellery out and put the remains in. Anyone could get access to the luggage-room by asking for the key at the office.”

“Well,” said Thorndyke, “that is conceivable. Then, as to the person who might have made this exchange. Is there anyone who had any reason for wishing to make away with deceased?”

“No,” replied Chapman. “Plenty of people disliked her, but no one but my brother had any motive for getting rid of her.”

“You spoke of a man with whom she was on somewhat intimate terms. There had been no quarrel or breach there, I suppose?”

“The man Gamble, you mean. No, I should say they were the best of friends. Besides, Gamble had no responsibilities in regard to her. He could have dropped her whenever he was tired of her.”

“Do you know anything about him?” Thorndyke asked.

“Very little. He has been a rolling stone, and has been in all sorts of jobs, I believe. He was in the New Zealand trade for some time, and dealt in all sorts of things—among others, in smoked human heads; sold them to collectors and museums, I understand. So he would have had some previous experience,” Chapman added with a faint grin.

“Not in dismemberment,” said Thorndyke. “Those will have been ancient Maori heads—relics of the old head hunters. There are some in the Hunterian Museum. But, as you say, there seems to be no motive in Gamble’s case, even if there had been the opportunity; whereas, in your brother’s case, there seem to have been both the motive and the opportunity. I suppose your brother never threatened the deceased?”

“I am sorry to say he did,” replied Chapman. “On several occasions, and before witnesses, too, he threatened to put her out of the way. Of course he never meant it—he was really the mildest of men. But it was a foolish thing to do and most unfortunate, as things have turned out.”

“Well,” said Thorndyke, “I will look into the matter and let you know what I think of it. It is unnecessary to remark that appearances are not very encouraging.”

“No, I can see that,” said Chapman, rising and producing his card-case. “But we must hope for the best.” He laid his card on the table, and having shaken hands with us gloomily, took his departure.

“It doesn’t do to take things at their face value,” I remarked, when he had gone; “but I don’t think we have ever had a more hopeless-looking case. All it wants to complete it is the discovery of remains in Chapman’s house.”

“In that respect,” said Thorndyke, “it may already be complete. But it hardly wants that finishing touch. On the evidence that we have, any jury would find a verdict of ‘guilty’ without leaving the box. The only question for us is whether the face value of the evidence is its real value. If it is, the defence will be a mere formality.”

“I suppose,” said I, “you will begin the investigation at Stoke Varley?”

“Yes,” he replied. “We begin by checking the alleged facts. If they are really as stated, we shall probably need to go no farther. And we had better lose no time, as the remains may be moved into the jurisdiction of a London coroner, and we ought to see everything *in situ* as far as possible. I suggest that we postpone the rest of to-day’s business and start at once, taking Scotland Yard on the way to get authority to inspect the remains and the premises.”

In a few minutes we were ready for the expedition. While Thorndyke

packed the “research-case” with the necessary instruments, I gave instructions to our laboratory assistant, Polton, as to what was to be done in our absence, and then, when we had consulted the time-table, we set forth by way of the Embankment.

At Scotland Yard, on inquiring for our friend, Superintendent Miller, we received the slightly unwelcome news that he was at Stoke Varley, inquiring into the case. However, the authorisation was given readily enough, and, armed with this, we made our way to Charing Cross Station, arriving there in good time to catch our train.

We had just given up our tickets and turned out into the pleasant station approach of Stoke Varley when Thorndyke gave a soft chuckle. I looked at him inquiringly, and he explained: “Miller has had a telegram, and we are going to have facilities, with a little supervision.” Following the direction of his glance, I now observed the superintendent strolling towards us, trying to look surprised, but achieving only a somewhat sheepish grin.

“Well, I’m sure, gentlemen!” he exclaimed. “This is an unexpected pleasure. You don’t mean to say you are engaged in this treasure-trove case?”

“Why not?” asked Thorndyke.

“Well, I’ll tell you why not,” replied Miller. “Because it’s no go. You’ll only waste your time and injure your reputation. I may as well let you know, in confidence, that we’ve been through Chapman’s house in London. It wasn’t very necessary; but still, if there was a vacancy in his coffin for one or two more nails, we’ve knocked them in.”

“What did you find in his house?” Thorndyke asked.

“We found,” replied Miller, “in a cupboard in his bedroom, a good-sized bottle of hyoscine tablets, about two-thirds full—one-third missing. No great harm in that; he might have taken ’em himself. But when we went down into the cellar, we noticed that the place smelt—well, a bit graveyardy, so to speak. So we had a look round. It was a stone-floored cellar, not very even, but so far as we could see, none of the flagstones seemed to have been disturbed. We didn’t want the job of digging the whole of them up, so I just filled a bucket with water and poured it over the floor. Then I watched.

“In less than a minute one big flagstone near the middle went nearly dry, while the water still stood on all the others. ‘What O!’ says I. ‘Loose earth underneath here.’ So we got a crow-bar and prised up that big flag; and sure enough, underneath it we found a good-sized bundle done up in a sheet. I won’t go into unpleasant particulars—not that it would upset you, I suppose—

but that bundle contained human remains.”

“Any bones?” inquired Thorndyke.

“No. Mostly in’ards and some skin from the front of the body. We handed them over to the Home Office experts, and they examined them and made an analysis. Their report states that the remains are those of a woman of about thirty-five—that was about Mings’ age—and that the various organs contained a large quantity of hyoscine; more than enough to have caused death. So there you are. If you are going to conduct the defence, you won’t get much glory from it.”

“It is very good of you, Miller,” said Thorndyke, “to have given us this private information. It is very helpful, though I have not undertaken the defence. I have merely come down to check the facts and see if there is any material for a defence. And I shall go through the routine, as I am here. Where are the remains?”

“In the mortuary. I’ll show you the way, and as I happen to have the key in my pocket, I can let you in.”

We passed through the outskirts of the village—gathering a small train of stealthy followers, who dogged us to the door of the mortuary and hungrily watched us as the superintendent let us in and locked the door after us.

“There you are,” said Miller, indicating the slate table on which the remains lay, covered by a sheet soaked in an antiseptic. “I’ve seen all I want to see.” And he retired into a corner and lit his pipe.

The remnants of mortality, disclosed by the removal of the sheet, were dreadfully suggestive of crime in its most brutal and horrible form, but they offered little information. The dismemberment had been manifestly rude and unskilful, and the remains were clearly those of a woman of medium size and apparently in the prime of life. The principal interest centred in the left arm, the waxen skin of which bore a very distinct tattoo-mark, consisting of the initials R. M. over a very symmetrical heart, transfixcd by an arrow, beneath which were the initials J. B. The letters were Roman capitals about half an inch high, well-formed and finished with serifs, and the heart and arrow quite well drawn. I looked reflectively at the device, standing out in dull blue from its ivory-like background, and speculated vaguely as to who J. B. might have been and how many predecessors and successors he had had. And then my interest waned, and I joined the superintendent in the corner. It was a sordid case, and a conviction being a foregone conclusion, it did not seem to call for further attention.

Thorndyke, however, seemed to think otherwise. But that was his way. When he was engaged in an investigation he put out of his mind everything that he had been told and began from the very beginning. That was what he was doing now. He was inspecting these remains as if they had been the remains of some unidentified person. He made, and noted down, minute measurements of the limbs; he closely examined every square inch of surface; he scrutinised each finger separately, and then with the aid of his portable inking-plate and roller, took a complete set of finger-prints. He measured all the dimensions of the tattoo-marks with a delicate calliper-gauge, and then examined the marks themselves, first with a common lens and then with the high-power Coddington. The principles that he laid down in his lectures at the hospital were: "Accept no statement without verification; observe every fact independently for yourselves; and keep an open mind." And, certainly, no one ever carried out more conscientiously his own precepts.

"Do you know, Dr. Jervis," the superintendent whispered to me as Thorndyke brought his Coddington to bear on the tattoo-marks, "I believe this lens business is becoming a habit with the doctor. It's my firm conviction that if somebody were to blow up the Houses of Parliament, he'd go and examine the ruins through a magnifying glass. Just look at him poring over those tattooed letters that you could read plainly twenty feet away!"

Meanwhile, Thorndyke, unconscious of these criticisms, placidly continued his inspection. From the table, with its gruesome burden, he transferred his attention to the box, which had been placed on a bench by the window, examining it minutely inside and out; feeling with his fingers the dark grey paint with which it was coated and the white-painted initials, "S. C.," on the lid, which he also measured carefully. He even copied into his notebook the maker's name, which was stamped on a small brass label affixed to the inside of the lid, and the name of the lock-maker, and inspected the screws which had drawn from the wood when it was forced open. At length he put away his notebook, closed the research-case and announced that he had finished, adding the inquiry: "How do you get to the 'Red Lion' from here?"

"It's only a few minutes' walk," said Miller. "I'll show you the way. But you're wasting your time, doctor, you are indeed. You see," he continued, when he had locked up the mortuary and pocketed the key, "that suggestion of Chapman's is ridiculous on the face of it. Just imagine a man bringing a portmanteau full of human remains into the luggage-room of a commercial hotel, opening it and opening another man's box, and swapping the contents of the one for the other with the chance of one of the commercials coming in at any moment. Supposing one of 'em had, what would he have had to say?"

‘Hallo!’ says the baggy, ‘you seem to have got somebody’s arm in your box.’ ‘So I have,’ says Chapman. ‘I expect it’s my wife’s. Careless woman! must have dropped it in when she was packing the box.’ Bah! It’s a fool’s explanation. Besides, how could he have got Chapman’s box open? We couldn’t. It was a first-class lock. We had to break it open, but it hadn’t been broken open before. No, sir, that cat won’t jump. Still, you needn’t take my word for it. Here is the place, and here is Mr. Butt, himself, standing at his own front door looking as pleasant as the flowers in May, like the lump of sugar that you put in a fly-trap to induce ’em to walk in.”

The landlord, who had overheard—without difficulty—the concluding passage of Miller’s peroration, smiled genially; and when the purpose of the visit had been explained, suggested a “modest quencher” in the private parlour as an aid to conversation.

“I wanted,” said Thorndyke, waiving the suggestion of the “quencher,” “to ascertain whether Chapman’s theory of an exchange of contents could be seriously entertained.”

“Well, sir,” said the landlord, “the fact is that it couldn’t. That room is a public room, and people may be popping in there at any time all day. We don’t usually keep it locked. It isn’t necessary. We know most of our customers, and the contents of the packages that are stowed in the room are principally travellers’ samples of no considerable value. The thing would have been impossible in the daytime, and we lock the room up at night.”

“Have you had any strangers staying with you in the interval between Chapman’s going away and the discovery of the remains?”

“Yes. There was a Mr. Doler; he had two cabin trunks and a uniform case which went to the luggage-room. And then there was a lady, Mrs. Murchison. She had a lot of stuff in there: a small, flat trunk, a hat-box, and a big dress-basket—one of these great basket pantechnicons that ladies take about with them. And there was another gentleman—I forget his name, but you will see it in the visitors’ book—he had a couple of largish portmanteaux in there. Perhaps you would like to see the book?”

“I should,” said Thorndyke; and when the book was produced and the names of the guests pointed out he copied the entries into his notebook, adding the particulars of their luggage.

“And now, sir,” said Miller, “I suppose you won’t be happy until you’ve seen the room itself?”

“Your insight is really remarkable, superintendent,” my colleague replied.

“Yes, I should like to see the room.”

There was little enough to see, however, when we arrived there. The key was in the door, and the latter was not only unlocked but stood ajar; and when we pushed it open and entered we saw a small room, empty save for a collection of portmanteaux, trunks, and Gladstone bags. The only noteworthy fact was that it was at the end of a corridor, covered with linoleum, so that anyone inside would have a few seconds' notice of another person's approach. But evidently that would have been of little use in the alleged circumstances. For the hypothetical criminal must have emptied Chapman's box of the jewellery before he could put the incriminating objects into it; so that, apart from the latter, the arrival of an inopportune visitor would have found him apparently in the act of committing a robbery. The suggestion was obviously absurd.

“By the way,” said Thorndyke, as we descended the stairs, “where is the central character of this drama—Chapman? He is not here, I suppose?”

“Yes, he is,” replied Miller. “He is committed for trial, but we are keeping him here until we know where the inquest is to be held. You would probably like to have a few words with him? Well, I'll take you along to the police station and tell them who you are, and then perhaps you would like to come back here and have some lunch or dinner before you return to town.”

I warmly seconded the latter proposal, and the arrangement having been made, we set forth for the police station, which we gathered from Miller was incorporated with a small local prison. Here we were shown into what appeared to be a private office, and presently a sergeant entered, ushering in a man whom we at once recognised from his resemblance to our client, Mr. George Chapman, disguised though it was by his pallor, his unshaven face, and his air of abject misery. The sergeant, having announced him by name, withdrew with the superintendent and locked the door on the outside. As soon as we were alone, Thorndyke rapidly acquainted the prisoner with the circumstances of his brother's visit and then continued:

“Now, Mr. Chapman, you want me to undertake your defence. If I do so, I must have all the facts. If there is anything known to you that your brother has not told me, I ask you to tell it to me without reservation.”

Chapman shook his head wearily.

“I know nothing more than you know,” said he. “The whole affair is a mystery that I can make nothing of. I don't expect you to believe me. Who would, with all this evidence against me? But I swear to God that I know nothing of this abominable crime. When I brought that box down here, it

contained my stock of jewellery and nothing else; and after I put it in the luggage-room, I never opened it.”

“Do you know of anybody who might have had a motive for getting rid of Rebecca Mings?”

“Not a soul,” replied Chapman. “She led me the devil’s own life, but she was popular enough with her own friends. And she was an attractive woman in her way: a fine, well-built woman, rather big—she stood five-feet-seven—with a good complexion and very handsome golden hair. Such as her friends were—they were a shady lot—I think they were fond of her, and I don’t believe she had any enemies.”

“Some hyoscine was found in your house,” said Thorndyke. “Do you know anything about it?”

“Yes. I got it when I suffered from neuralgia. But I never took any. My doctor heard about it and sent me to the dentist. The bottle was never opened. It contained a hundred tablets.”

“And with regard to the box,” said Thorndyke. “Had you had it long?”

“Not very long. I bought it at Fletchers, in Holborn, about six months ago.”

“And you have nothing more to tell us?”

“No,” he replied. “I wish I had”; and then, after a pause, he asked with a wistful look at Thorndyke: “Are you going to undertake my defence, sir? I can see that there is very little hope, but I should like to be given just a chance.”

I glanced at Thorndyke, expecting at the most a cautious and conditional reply. To my astonishment he answered:

“There is no need to take such a gloomy view of the case, Mr. Chapman. I shall undertake the defence, and I think you have quite a fair chance of an acquittal.”

On this amazing reply I reflected, not without some self-condemnation, during our walk to the hotel and the meal that preceded our departure. For it was evident that I had missed something vital. Thorndyke was a cautious man and little given to making promises or forecasts of results. He must have picked up some evidence of a very conclusive kind; but what that evidence could be, I found it impossible to imagine. The superintendent, too, was puzzled, I could see, for Thorndyke made no secret of his intention to go on with the case. But Miller’s delicate attempts to pump him came to nothing; and when he had escorted us to the station and our train moved off, I could see him standing on the platform, gently scratching the back of his head and gazing

speculatively at our retreating carriage.

As soon as we were clear of the station, I opened my attack.

“What on earth,” I demanded, “did you mean by giving that poor devil, Chapman, hopes of acquittal? I can’t see that he has a dog’s chance.”

Thorndyke looked at me gravely.

“My impression is, Jervis,” he said, “that you have not kept an open mind in this case. You have allowed yourself to fall under the suggestive influence of the obvious; whereas the function of the investigator is to consider the possible alternatives of the obvious inference. And you have not brought your usual keen attention to bear on the facts. If you had considered George Chapman’s statement attentively you would have noticed that it contained some very curious and significant suggestions; and if you had examined those dismembered remains critically, you would have seen that they confirmed those suggestions in a very remarkable manner.”

“As to George Chapman’s statement,” said I, “the only suggestive point that I recall is the reference to those Maori heads. But, as you, yourself, pointed out, the dealers in those heads don’t do the dismemberment.”

Thorndyke shook his head a little impatiently.

“Tut, tut, Jervis,” said he, “that isn’t the point at all. Any fool can cut up a dead body as this one has been cut up. The point is that that statement, carefully considered, yields a definite and consistent alternative to the theory that Samuel Chapman killed this woman and dismembered her body; and that alternative theory is supported by the appearance of these remains. I think you will see the point if you recall Chapman’s statement, and reflect on the possible bearing of the various incidents that he described.”

In this, however, Thorndyke was unduly optimistic. I recalled the statement completely enough, and reflected on it frequently and profoundly during the next few days; but the more I thought of it the more conclusive did the case against the accused appear.

Meanwhile, my colleague appeared to be taking no steps in the matter, and I assumed that he was waiting for the inquest. It is true that, when, on one occasion, he had accompanied me towards the City, and leaving me in Queen Victoria Street disappeared into the premises of Messrs. Burden Brothers, lock manufacturers, I was inclined to associate his proceedings with his minute examination of the lock at Stoke Varley. And, again, when our laboratory assistant, Polton, was seen to issue forth, top-hatted and armed with an umbrella and an attaché-case, I suspected some sort of “private inquiries,”

possibly connected with the case. But from Thorndyke I could get no information at all. My tentative “pumpings” elicited one unvarying reply. “You have the facts, Jervis. You heard George Chapman’s statement, and you have seen the remains. Give me a reasonable theory and I will discuss it with pleasure.” And that was how the matter remained. I had no reasonable theory—other than that of the police—and there was accordingly no discussion.

On a certain evening, a couple of days before the inquest—which had been postponed in the hope that some further remains might be discovered—I observed signs of an expected visitor: a small table placed by the supernumerary arm-chair and furnished with a tray bearing a siphon, a whisky-decanter and a box of cigars. Thorndyke caught my inquiring glance at these luxuries, for which neither of us had any use, and proceeded to explain.

“I have asked Miller to look in this evening—he is due now. I have been working at this Chapman case, and, as it is now complete, I propose to lay my cards on the table.”

“Is that safe?” said I. “Supposing the police still go for a conviction and try to forestall your evidence?”

“They won’t,” he replied. “They couldn’t. And it would be most improper to let the case go for trial on a false theory. But here is Miller; and a mighty twitter he is in, I have no doubt.”

He was. Without even waiting for the customary cigar, he plumped down into the chair, and dragging a letter from his pocket, fixed a glare of astonishment on my placid colleague.

“This letter of yours, sir,” said he, “is perfectly incomprehensible to me. You say that you are prepared to put us in possession of the facts of this Chapman case. But we are in possession of the facts already. We are absolutely certain of a conviction. Let me remind you, sir, of what those facts are. We have got a dead body which has been identified beyond all doubt. Part of that body was found in a box which is the property of Samuel Chapman, which was brought by him and deposited by him at the ‘Red Lion’ Hotel. Another part of that body was found in his dwelling-house. A supply of poison—an uncommon poison, too—similar to that which killed the dead person, has also been found in his house; and the dead body is that of a woman with whom Chapman was known to be on terms of enmity and whom he has threatened, in the presence of witnesses, to kill. Now, sir, what have you got to say to those facts?”

Thorndyke regarded the agitated detective with a quiet smile. “My comments, Miller,” said he, “can be put in a nut-shell. You have got the wrong

man, you have got the wrong box, and you have got the wrong body.”

The superintendent was thunderstruck, and no wonder. So was I. As to Miller, he drew himself forward until he was sitting on the extreme edge of the chair, and for some moments stared at my impassive colleague in speechless amazement. At length he burst out:

“But, my dear sir! This is sheer nonsense—at least, that’s what it sounds like, though I know it can’t be. Let’s begin with the body. You say it’s the wrong one.”

“Yes. Rebecca Mings was a biggish woman. Her height was five-feet-seven. This woman was not more than five-feet-four.”

“Bah!” exclaimed Miller. “You can’t judge to an inch or two from parts of a dismembered body. You are forgetting the tattoo-mark. That clenches the identity beyond any possible doubt.”

“It does, indeed,” said Thorndyke. “That is the crucial evidence. Rebecca Mings had a certain tattoo-mark on her left forearm. This woman had not.”

“Had not!” shrieked Miller, coming yet farther forward on his chair. (I expected, every moment, to see him sitting on the floor.) “Why, I saw it; and so did you.”

“I am speaking of the woman, not of the body,” said Thorndyke. “The mark that you saw was a post-mortem tattoo-mark. It was made after death. But the fact that it was made after death is good evidence that it was not there during life.”

“Moses!” exclaimed the superintendent. “This is a facer. Are you perfectly sure it was done after death?”

“Quite sure. The appearance, through a powerful lens, is unmistakable. Tattoo-marks are made, as you know, of course, by painting Indian ink on the skin and pricking it in with fine needles. In the living skin the needle-wounds heal up at once and disappear, but in the dead skin the needle-holes remain unclosed and can be easily seen with a lens. In this case the skin had been well washed and the surface pressed with some smooth object; but the holes were plainly visible and the ink was still in them.”

“Well, I’m sure!” said Miller. “I never heard of tattooing a dead body before.”

“Very few people have, I expect,” said Thorndyke. “But there is one class of persons who know all about it: the persons who deal in Maori heads.”

“Indeed?” queried Miller. “How does it concern them?”

“Those heads are usually elaborately tattooed, and the value of a head depends on the quality of the tattooing. Now, when those heads became objects of trade, the dealers conceived the idea of touching up defective specimens by additional tattooing on the dead head, and from this they proceeded to obtain heads which had no tattoo-marks, and turn them into tattooed heads.”

“Well, to be sure,” said the superintendent, with a grin, “what wicked men there are in the world, aren’t there, Dr. Jervis?”

I murmured a vague assent, but I was principally conscious of a desire to kick myself for having failed to pick this invaluable clue out of George Chapman’s statement.

“And now,” said Miller, “we come to the box. How do you know it is the wrong one?”

“That,” replied Thorndyke, “is proved even more conclusively. The original box was made by Fletchers, in Holborn. It was sold to Chapman, and his initials painted on it, on the 9th of last April. I have seen the entry in the day-book. The locks of these boxes are made by Burden Brothers of Queen Victoria Street, and as they are quite high-class locks each is given a registered number, which is stamped on the lock. The number on the box that you have is 5007, and Burden’s books show that it was made and sold to Fletchers about the middle of July—the sale was dated the 13th. Therefore this cannot be Chapman’s box.”

“Apparently not,” Miller agreed. “But whose box is it? And what has become of Chapman’s box?”

“That,” replied Thorndyke, “was presumably taken away in Mrs. Murchison’s dress-basket.”

“Then who the deuce is Mrs. Murchison?” demanded the superintendent.

“I should say,” replied Thorndyke, “that she was formerly known as Rebecca Mings.”

“The deceased!” exclaimed Miller, falling back in his chair with a guffaw. “My eye! What a lark it is! But she must have some sauce, to walk off with the jewellery and leave her own dismembered remains in exchange! By the way, whose remains are they?”

“We shall come to that presently,” Thorndyke answered. “Now we have to consider the man you have in custody.”

“Yes,” agreed Miller, “we must settle about him. Of course if it isn’t his box, and the body isn’t Mings’ body, that puts him out of it so far. But there are those remains that we dug up in his cellar. What about them?”

“That question,” replied Thorndyke, “will, I think, be answered by a general review of the case. But I must remind you that if the box is not Chapman’s, it is some other person’s; that is to say, that if Chapman goes out of the case, as to the Stoke Varley incidents, someone else comes in. So, if the body is not Mings’ body, it is some other woman’s, and that other woman must have disappeared. And now let us review the case as a whole.

“You know about the pocket-picking charge. It was obviously a false charge, deliberately prepared by ‘planting’ the purse; that is, it was a conspiracy. Now what was the object of this conspiracy? Clearly it was to get Chapman out of the way while the boxes were exchanged at Stoke Varley, and the remains deposited in the river and elsewhere. Then who were the conspirators—other than the agent who planted the purse?

“They—if there were more than one—must have had access to Mings, dead or alive, in order to make the exact copy, or tracing, of her tattoo-mark. They must have had some knowledge of the process of post-mortem tattooing. They must have had access to Chapman’s house. And, since they had in their possession the dead body of a woman, they must have been associated with some woman who has disappeared.

“Who is there who answers this description? Well, of course, Mings had access to herself, though she could hardly have taken a tracing from her own arm, and she had access to Chapman’s house, since she had possession of the latchkey. Then there is a man named Gamble, with whom Mings was on terms of great intimacy. Now Gamble was formerly a dealer in tattooed Maori heads, so he may be assumed to know something about post-mortem tattooing. And I have ascertained that Gamble’s wife has disappeared from her usual places of resort. So here are two persons who, together, agree with the description of the conspirators. And now let us consider the train of events in connection with the dates.

“On July the 29th Chapman came to town from Stoke Varley. On the 30th he was arrested as a pickpocket. On the 31st he was committed for trial. On the 2nd of August Mrs. Gamble went away to the country. No one seems to have seen her go, but that is the date on which she is reported to have gone. On August the 5th Mrs. Murchison deposited at Stoke Varley a box which must have been purchased between the 13th of July and the 4th of August, and which contained a woman’s arm. On the 14th of August that box was opened by the police. On the 18th human remains were discovered in Chapman’s

house. On the 27th Chapman was released from Brixton. On the 28th he was arrested for murder at Stoke Varley. I think, Miller, you will agree that that is a very striking succession of dates.”

“Yes,” Miller agreed. “It looks like a true bill. If you will give me Mr. Gamble’s address, I’ll call on him.”

“I’m afraid you won’t find him at home,” said Thorndyke. “He has gone into the country, too; and I gather from his landlord, who holds a returned cheque, that Mr. Gamble’s banking account has gone into the country with him.”

“Then,” said the superintendent, “I suppose I must take a trip into the country, too.”

“Well, Thorndyke,” I said, as I laid down the paper containing the report of the trial of Gamble and Mings for the murder of Theresa Gamble, one morning about four months later, “you ought to be very highly gratified. After sentencing Gamble to death and Mings to fifteen years’ penal servitude, the judge took the opportunity to compliment the police on their ingenuity in unravelling this crime, and the Home Office experts on their skill in detecting the counterfeit tattoo-marks. What do you think of that?”

“I think,” replied Thorndyke, “that his lordship showed a very proper and appreciative spirit.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story is Number Eighteen 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 *Pandora's Box* by Richard Austin Freeman]