

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

Number Twenty Eight

A Mystery
of the
Sand-Hills

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I HAVE occasionally wondered how often Mystery and Romance present themselves to us ordinary men of affairs only to be passed by without recognition. More often, I suspect, than most of us imagine. The uncanny tendency of my talented friend John Thorndyke to become involved in strange, mysterious and abnormal circumstances has almost become a joke against him. But yet, on reflection, I am disposed to think that his experiences have not differed essentially from those of other men, but that his extraordinary powers of observation and rapid inference have enabled him to detect abnormal elements in what, to ordinary men, appeared to be quite commonplace occurrences. Certainly this was so in the singular Roscoff case, in which, if I had been alone, I should assuredly have seen nothing to merit more than a passing attention.

It happened that on a certain summer morning—it was the fifteenth of August, to be exact—we were discussing this very subject as we walked across the golf-links from Sandwich towards the sea. I was spending a holiday in the old town with my wife, in order that she might paint the ancient streets, and we had induced Thorndyke to come down and stay with us for a few days. This was his last morning, and we had come forth betimes to stroll across the sand-hills to Shellness.

It was a solitary place in those days. When we came off the sand-hills on to the smooth, sandy beach, there was not a soul in sight, and our own foot-prints were the first to mark the firm strip of sand between high-water mark and the edge of the quiet surf.

We had walked a hundred yards or so when Thorndyke stopped and looked down at the dry sand above tide-marks and then along the wet beach.

“Would that be a shrimper?” he cogitated, referring to some impressions of bare feet in the sand. “If so, he couldn’t have come from Pegwell, for the River Stour bars the way. But he came out of the sea and seems to have made straight for the sand-hills.”

“Then he probably was a shrimper,” said I, not deeply interested.

“Yet,” said Thorndyke, “it was an odd time for a shrimper to be at work.”

“What was an odd time?” I demanded. “When was he at work?”

“He came out of the sea at this place,” Thorndyke replied, glancing at his watch, “at about half-past eleven last night, or from that to twelve.”

“Good Lord, Thorndyke!” I exclaimed, “how on earth do you know that?”

“But it is obvious, Anstey,” he replied. “It is now half-past nine, and it will be high-water at eleven, as we ascertained before we came out. Now, if you look at those foot-prints on the sand, you see that they stop short—or rather begin—about two-thirds of the distance from high-water mark to the edge of the surf. Since they are visible and distinct, they must have been made after last high-water. But since they do not extend to the water’s edge, they must have been made when the tide was going out; and the place where they begin is the place where the edge of the surf was when the foot-prints were made. But that place is, as we see, about an hour below the high-water mark. Therefore, when the man came out of the sea, the tide had been going down for an hour, roughly. As it is high-water at eleven this morning, it was high-water at about ten-forty last night; and as the man came out of the sea about an hour after high-water, he must have come out at, or about, eleven-forty. Isn’t that obvious?”

“Perfectly,” I replied, laughing. “It is as simple as sucking eggs when you think it out. But how the deuce do you manage always to spot these obvious things at a glance? Most men would have just glanced at those foot-prints and passed them without a second thought.”

“That,” he replied, “is a mere matter of habit; the habit of trying to extract the significance of simple appearances. It has become almost automatic with me.”

During our discussion we had been walking forward slowly, straying on to the edge of the sand-hills. Suddenly, in a hollow between the hills, my eye lighted upon a heap of clothes, apparently, to judge by their orderly disposal, those of a bather. Thorndyke also had observed them and we approached together and looked down on them curiously.

“Here is another problem for you,” said I. “Find the bather. I don’t see him anywhere.”

“You won’t find him here,” said Thorndyke. “These clothes have been out all night. Do you see the little spider’s web on the boots with a few dewdrops still clinging to it? There has been no dew forming for a good many hours. Let us have a look at the beach.”

We strode out through the loose sand and stiff, reedy grass to the smooth beach, and here we could plainly see a line of prints of naked feet leading

straight down to the sea, but ending abruptly about two-thirds of the way to the water's edge.

"This looks like your nocturnal shrimper," said I. "He seems to have gone into the sea here and come out at the other place. But if they are the same foot-prints, he must have forgotten to dress before he went home. It is a quaint affair."

"It is a most remarkable affair," Thorndyke agreed; "and if the foot-prints are not the same it will be still more inexplicable."

He produced from his pocket a small spring tape-measure with which he carefully took the lengths of two of the most distinct foot-prints and the length of the stride. Then we walked back along the beach to the other set of tracks, two of which he measured in the same manner.

"Apparently they are the same," he said, putting away his tape; "indeed, they could hardly be otherwise. But the mystery is, what has become of the man? He couldn't have gone away without his clothes, unless he is a lunatic, which his proceedings rather suggest. There is just the possibility that he went into the sea again and was drowned. Shall we walk along towards Shellness and see if we can find any further traces?"

We walked nearly half a mile along the beach, but the smooth surface of the sand was everywhere unbroken. At length we turned to retrace our steps; and at this moment I observed two men advancing across the sand-hills. By the time we had reached the mysterious heap of garments they were quite near, and, attracted no doubt by the intentness with which we were regarding the clothes, they altered their course to see what we were looking at. As they approached, I recognised one of them as a barrister named Hallett, a neighbour of mine in the Temple, whom I had already met in the town, and we exchanged greetings.

"What is the excitement?" he asked, looking at the heap of clothes and then glancing along the deserted beach; "and where is the owner of the togs? I don't see him anywhere."

"That is the problem," said I. "He seems to have disappeared."

"Gad!" exclaimed Hallett, "if he has gone home without his clothes, he'll create a sensation in the town! What?"

Here the other man, who carried a set of golf clubs, stooped over the clothes with a look of keen interest.

"I believe I recognise these things, Hallett; in fact, I am sure I do. That

waistcoat, for instance. You must have noticed that waistcoat. I saw you playing with the chap a couple of days ago. Tall, clean-shaven, dark fellow. Temporary member, you know. What was his name? Popoff, or something like that?"

"Roscoff," said Hallett. "Yes, by Jove, I believe you are right. And now I come to think of it, he mentioned to me that he sometimes came up here for a swim. He said he particularly liked a paddle by moonlight, and I told him he was a fool to run the risk of bathing in a lonely place like this, especially at night."

"Well, that is what he seems to have done," said Thorndyke, "for these clothes have certainly been here all night, as you can see by that spider's web."

"Then he has come to grief, poor beggar!" said Hallett; "probably got carried away by the current. There is a devil of a tide here on the flood."

He started to walk towards the beach, and the other man, dropping his clubs, followed.

"Yes," said Hallett, "that is what has happened. You can see his foot-prints plainly enough going down to the sea; but there are no tracks coming back."

"There are some tracks of bare feet coming out of the sea farther up the beach," said I, "which seem to be his."

Hallett shook his head. "They can't be his," he said, "for it is obvious that he never did come back. Probably they are the tracks of some shrimper. The question is, what are we to do? Better take his things to the dormy-house and then let the police know what has happened."

We went back and began to gather up the clothes, each of us taking one or two articles.

"You were right, Morris," said Hallett, as he picked up the shirt. "Here's his name, 'P. Roscoff,' and I see it is on the vest and the shorts, too. And I recognise the stick now—not that that matters, as the clothes are marked."

On our way across the links to the dormy-house mutual introductions took place. Morris was a London solicitor, and both he and Hallett knew Thorndyke by name.

"The coroner will have an expert witness," Hallett remarked as we entered the house. "Rather a waste in a simple case like this. We had better put the things in here."

He opened the door of a small room furnished with a good-sized table and

a set of lockers, into one of which he inserted a key.

“Before we lock them up,” said Thorndyke, “I suggest that we make and sign a list of them and of the contents of the pockets to put with them.”

“Very well,” agreed Hallett. “You know the ropes in these cases. I’ll write down the descriptions, if you will call them out.”

Thorndyke looked over the collection and first enumerated the articles: a tweed jacket and trousers, light, knitted wool waistcoat, black and yellow stripes, blue cotton shirt, net vest and shorts, marked in ink “P. Roscoff,” brown merino socks, brown shoes, tweed cap, and a walking-stick—a mottled Malacca cane with a horn crooked handle. When Hallett had written down this list, Thorndyke laid the clothes on the table and began to empty the pockets, one at a time, dictating the descriptions of the articles to Hallett while Morris took them from him and laid them on a sheet of newspaper. In the jacket pockets were a handkerchief, marked “P. R.”; a letter-case containing a few stamps, one or two hotel bills and local tradesmen’s receipts, and some visiting-cards inscribed: “Mr. Peter Roscoff, Bell Hotel, Sandwich”; a leather cigarette-case, a 3B pencil fitted with a point-protector, and a fragment of what Thorndyke decided to be vine charcoal.

“That lot is not very illuminating,” remarked Morris, peering into the pockets of the letter-case. “No letter or anything indicating his permanent address. However, that isn’t our concern.” He laid aside the letter-case, and picking up a pocket-knife that Thorndyke had just taken from the trousers pocket, examined it curiously. “Queer knife, that,” he remarked. “Steel blade—mighty sharp, too—nail file and an ivory blade. Silly arrangement, it seems. A paper-knife is more convenient carried loose, and you don’t want a handle to it.”

“Perhaps it was meant for a fruit-knife,” suggested Hallett, adding it to the list and glancing at a little heap of silver coins that Thorndyke had just laid down. “I wonder,” he added, “what has made that money turn so black. Looks as if he had been taking some medicine containing sulphur. What do you think, doctor?”

“It is quite a probable explanation,” replied Thorndyke, “though we haven’t the means of testing it. But you notice that this vesta-box from the other pocket is quite bright, which is rather against your theory.”

He held out a little silver box bearing the engraved monogram “P. R.,” the burnished surface of which contrasted strongly with the dull brownish-black of the coins. Hallett looked at it with an affirmative grunt, and having entered it in his list and added a bunch of keys and a watch from the waistcoat pocket, laid

down his pen.

“That’s the lot, is it?” said he, rising and beginning to gather up the clothes. “My word! Look at the sand on the table! Isn’t it astonishing how saturated with sand one’s clothes become after a day on the links here? When I undress at night, the bath-room floor is like the bottom of a bird-cage. Shall I put the things in the locker now?”

“I think,” said Thorndyke, “that, as I may have to give evidence, I should like to look them over before you put them away.”

Hallett grinned. “There’s going to be some expert evidence after all,” he said. “Well, fire away, and let me know when you have finished. I am going to smoke a cigarette outside.”

With this, he and Morris sauntered out, and I thought it best to go with them, though I was a little curious as to my colleague’s object in examining these derelicts. However, my curiosity was not entirely balked, for my friends went no farther than the little garden that surrounded the house, and from the place where we stood I was able to look in through the window and observe Thorndyke’s proceedings.

Very methodical they were. First he laid on the table a sheet of newspaper and on this deposited the jacket, which he examined carefully all over, picking some small object off the inside near the front, and giving special attention to a thick smear of paint which I had noticed on the left cuff. Then, with his spring tape he measured the sleeves and other principal dimensions. Finally, holding the jacket upside down, he beat it gently with his stick, causing a shower of sand to fall on the paper. He then laid the jacket aside, and, taking from his pocket one or two seed-envelopes (which I believe he always carried), very carefully shot the sand from the paper into one of them and wrote a few words on it—presumably the source of the sand—and similarly disposing of the small object that he had picked off the surface.

This rather odd procedure was repeated with the other garments—a fresh sheet of newspaper being used for each—and with the socks, shoes, and cap. The latter he examined minutely, especially as to the inside, from which he picked out two or three small objects, which I could not see, but assumed to be hairs. Even the walking-stick was inspected and measured, and the articles from the pockets scrutinised afresh, particularly the curious pocket-knife, the ivory blade of which he examined on both sides through his lens.

Hallett and Morris glanced in at him from time to time with indulgent smiles, and the former remarked:

“I like the hopeful enthusiasm of the real pukka expert, and the way he refuses to admit the existence of the ordinary and commonplace. I wonder what he has found out from those things. But here he is. Well, doctor, what’s the verdict? Was it temporary insanity or misadventure?”

Thorndyke shook his head. “The inquiry is adjourned pending the production of fresh evidence,” he replied, adding: “I have folded the clothes up and put all the effects together in a paper parcel, excepting the stick.”

When Hallett had deposited the derelicts in the locker, he came out and looked across the links with an air of indecision.

“I suppose,” said he, “we ought to notify the police. I’ll do that. When do you think the body is likely to wash up, and where?”

“It is impossible to say,” replied Thorndyke. “The set of the current is towards the Thames, but the body might wash up anywhere along the coast. A case is recorded of a bather drowned off Brighton whose body came up six weeks later at Walton-on-the-Naze. But that was quite exceptional. I shall send the coroner and the Chief Constable a note with my address, and I should think you had better do the same. And that is all that we can do, until we get the summons for the inquest, if there ever is one.”

To this we all agreed; and as the morning was now spent, we walked back together across the links to the town, where we encountered my wife returning homeward with her sketching kit. This Thorndyke and I took possession of, and having parted from Hallett and Morris opposite the Barbican, we made our way to our lodgings in quest of lunch. Naturally, the events of the morning were related to my wife and discussed by us all, but I noted that Thorndyke made no reference to his inspection of the clothes, and accordingly I said nothing about the matter before my wife; and no opportunity of opening the subject occurred until the evening, when I accompanied him to the station. Then, as we paced the platform while waiting for his train, I put my question:

“By the way, did you extract any information from those garments? I saw you going through them very thoroughly.”

“I got a suggestion from them,” he replied; “but it is such an odd one that I hardly like to mention it. Taking the appearances at their face value, the suggestion was that the clothes were not all those of the same man. There seemed to be traces of two men, one of whom appeared to belong to this district, while the other would seem to have been associated with the eastern coast of Thanet between Ramsgate and Margate, and by preference, on the scale of probabilities, to Dumpton or Broadstairs.”

“How on earth did you arrive at the localities?” I asked.

“Principally,” he replied, “by the peculiarities of the sand which fell from the garments and which was not the same in all of them. You see, Anstey,” he continued, “sand is analogous to dust. Both consist of minute fragments detached from larger masses; and just as, by examining microscopically the dust of a room, you can ascertain the colour and material of the carpets, curtains, furniture coverings, and other textiles, detached particles of which form the dust of that room, so, by examining sand, you can judge of the character of the cliffs, rocks, and other large masses that occur in the locality, fragments of which become ground off by the surf and incorporated in the sand of the beach. Some of the sand from these clothes is very characteristic and will probably be still more so when I examine it under the microscope.”

“But,” I objected, “isn’t there a fallacy in that line of reasoning? Might not one man have worn the different garments at different times and in different places?”

“That is certainly a possibility that has to be borne in mind,” he replied. “But here comes my train. We shall have to adjourn this discussion until you come back to the mill.”

As a matter of fact, the discussion was never resumed, for, by the time that I came back to “the mill,” the affair had faded from my mind, and the accumulations of grist monopolised my attention; and it is probable that it would have passed into complete oblivion but for the circumstance of its being revived in a very singular manner, which was as follows.

One afternoon about the middle of October my old friend, Mr. Brodribb, a well-known solicitor, called to give me some verbal instructions. When he had finished our business, he said:

“I’ve got a client waiting outside, whom I am taking up to introduce to Thorndyke. You’d better come along with us.”

“What is the nature of your client’s case?” I asked.

“Hanged if I know,” chuckled Brodribb. “He won’t say. That’s why I am taking him to our friend. I’ve never seen Thorndyke stumped yet, but I think this case will put the lid on him. Are you coming?”

“I am, most emphatically,” said I, “if your client doesn’t object.”

“He’s not going to be asked,” said Brodribb. “He’ll think you are part of the show. Here he is.”

In my outer office we found a gentlemanly, middle-aged man to whom

Brodribb introduced me, and whom he hustled down the stairs and up King's Bench Walk to Thorndyke's chambers. There we found my colleague earnestly studying a will with the aid of a watchmaker's glass, and Brodribb opened the proceedings without ceremony.

"I've brought a client of mine, Mr. Capes, to see you, Thorndyke. He has a little problem that he wants you to solve."

Thorndyke bowed to the client and then asked:

"What is the nature of the problem?"

"Ah!" said Brodribb, with a mischievous twinkle, "that's what you've got to find out. Mr. Capes is a somewhat reticent gentleman."

Thorndyke cast a quick look at the client and from him to the solicitor. It was not the first time that old Brodribb's high spirits had overflowed in the form of a "leg-pull," though Thorndyke had no more wholehearted admirer than the shrewd, facetious old lawyer.

Mr. Capes smiled a deprecating smile. "It isn't quite so bad as that," he said. "But I really can't give you much information. It isn't mine to give. I am afraid of telling someone else's secrets, if I say very much."

"Of course you mustn't do that," said Thorndyke. "But I suppose you can indicate in general terms the nature of your difficulty and the kind of help you want from us."

"I think I can," Mr. Capes replied. "At any rate, I will try. My difficulty is that a certain person with whom I wish to communicate has disappeared in what appears to me to be a rather remarkable manner. When I last heard from him, he was staying at a certain seaside resort and he stated in his letter that he was returning on the following day to his rooms in London. A few days later, I called at his rooms and found that he had not yet returned. But his luggage, which he had sent on independently, had arrived on the day which he had mentioned. So it is evident that he must have left his seaside lodgings. But from that day to this I have had no communication from him, and he has never returned to his rooms nor written to his landlady."

"About how long ago was this?" Thorndyke asked.

"It is just about two months since I heard from him."

"You don't wish to give the name of the seaside resort where he was staying?"

"I think I had better not," answered Mr. Capes. "There are circumstances—"

they don't concern me, but they do concern him very much—which seem to make it necessary for me to say as little as possible.”

“And there is nothing further that you can tell us?”

“I am afraid not, excepting that, if I could get into communication with him I could tell him of something very much to his advantage and which might prevent him from doing something which it would be much better that he should not do.”

Thorndyke cogitated profoundly while Brodrigg watched him with undisguised enjoyment. Presently my colleague looked up and addressed our secretive client.

“Did you ever play the game of ‘Clumps,’ Mr. Capes? It is a somewhat legal form of game in which one player asks questions of the others, who are required to answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ in the proper witness-box style.”

“I know the game,” said Capes, looking a little puzzled, “but——”

“Shall we try a round or two?” asked Thorndyke, with an unmoved countenance. “You don't wish to make any statements, but if I ask you certain specific questions, will you answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’?”

Mr. Capes reflected awhile. At length he said:

“I am afraid I can't commit myself to a promise. Still, if you like to ask a question or two, I will answer them if I can.”

“Very well,” said Thorndyke, “then, as a start, supposing I suggest that the date of the letter that you received was the thirteenth of August? What do you say? Yes or no?”

Mr. Capes sat bolt upright and stared at Thorndyke open-mouthed.

“How on earth did you guess that?” he exclaimed in an astonished tone. “It's most extraordinary! But you are right. It was dated the thirteenth.”

“Then,” said Thorndyke, “as we have fixed the time we will have a try at the place. What do you say if I suggest that the seaside resort was in the neighbourhood of Broadstairs?”

Mr. Capes was positively thunderstruck. As he sat gazing at Thorndyke he looked like amazement personified.

“But,” he exclaimed, “you can't be guessing! You know! You know that he was at Broadstairs. And yet, how could you? I haven't even hinted at who he is.”

“I have a certain man in my mind,” said Thorndyke, “who may have disappeared from Broadstairs. Shall I suggest a few personal characteristics?”

Mr. Capes nodded eagerly and Thorndyke continued:

“If I suggest, for instance, that he was an artist—a painter in oil”—Capes nodded again—“that he was somewhat fastidious as to his pigments?”

“Yes,” said Capes. “Unnecessarily so in my opinion, and I am an artist myself. What else?”

“That he worked with his palette in his right hand and held his brush with his left?”

“Yes, yes,” exclaimed Capes, half-rising from his chair; “and what was he like?”

“By gum,” murmured Brodribb, “we haven’t stumped him after all.”

Evidently we had not, for he proceeded:

“As to his physical characteristics, I suggest that he was a shortish man—about five feet seven—rather stout, fair hair, slightly bald and wearing a rather large and ragged moustache.”

Mr. Capes was astonished—and so was I, for that matter—and for some moments there was a silence, broken only by old Brodribb, who sat chuckling softly and rubbing his hands. At length Mr. Capes said:

“You have described him exactly, but I needn’t tell you that. What I do not understand at all is how you knew that I was referring to this particular man, seeing that I mentioned no name. By the way, sir, may I ask when you saw him last?”

“I have no reason to suppose,” replied Thorndyke, “that I have ever seen him at all”; an answer that reduced Mr. Capes to a state of stupefaction and brought our old friend Brodribb to the verge of apoplexy. “This man,” Thorndyke continued, “is a purely hypothetical individual whom I have described from certain traces left by him. I have reason to believe that he left Broadstairs on the fourteenth of August and I have certain opinions as to what became of him thereafter. But a few more details would be useful, and I shall continue my interrogation. Now this man sent his luggage on separately. That suggests a possible intention of breaking his journey to London. What do you say?”

“I don’t know,” replied Capes, “but I think it probable.”

“I suggest that he broke his journey for the purpose of holding an interview

with some other person.”

“I cannot say,” answered Capes: “but if he did break his journey it would probably be for that purpose.”

“And supposing that interview to have taken place, would it be likely to be an amicable interview?”

“I am afraid not. I suspect that my—er—acquaintance might have made certain proposals which would have been unacceptable, but which he might have been able to enforce. However, that is only surmise,” Capes added hastily. “I really know nothing more than I have told you, excepting the missing man’s name, and that I would rather not mention.”

“It is not material,” said Thorndyke, “at least, not at present. If it should become essential, I will let you know.”

“M—yes,” said Mr. Capes. “But you were saying that you had certain opinions as to what has become of this person.”

“Yes,” Thorndyke replied; “speculative opinions. But they will have to be verified. If they turn out to be correct—or incorrect either—I will let you know in the course of a few days. Has Mr. Brodribb your address?”

“He has; but you had better have it, too.”

He produced his card, and, after an ineffectual effort to extract a statement from Thorndyke, took his departure.

The third act of this singular drama opened in the same setting as the first, for the following Sunday morning found my colleague and me following the path from Sandwich to the sea. But we were not alone this time. At our side marched Major Robertson, the eminent dog-trainer, and behind him trotted one of his superlatively educated fox-hounds.

We came out on the shore at the same point as on the former occasion, and, turning towards Shellness, walked along the smooth sand with a careful eye on the not very distinctive landmarks. At length Thorndyke halted.

“This is the place,” said he. “I fixed it in my mind by that distant tree, which coincides with the chimney of that cottage on the marshes. The clothes lay in that hollow between the two big sand-hills.”

We advanced to the spot, but, as a hollow is useless as a landmark, Thorndyke ascended the nearest sand-hill and stuck his stick in the summit and tied his handkerchief to the handle.

“That,” said he, “will serve as a centre which we can keep in sight, and if we describe a series of gradually widening concentric circles round it, we shall cover the whole ground completely.”

“How far do you propose to go?” asked the major.

“We must be guided by the appearance of the ground,” replied Thorndyke. “But the circumstances suggest that if there is anything buried, it can’t be very far from where the clothes were laid. And it is pretty certain to be in a hollow.”

The major nodded; and when he had attached a long leash to the dog’s collar, we started, at first skirting the base of the sand-hill, and then, guided by our own footmarks in the loose sand, gradually increasing the distance from the high mound, above which Thorndyke’s handkerchief fluttered in the light breeze. Thus we continued, walking slowly, keeping close to the previously made circle of foot-prints and watching the dog; who certainly did a vast amount of sniffing, but appeared to let his mind run unduly on the subject of rabbits.

In this way half an hour was consumed, and I was beginning to wonder whether we were going after all to draw a blank, when the dog’s demeanour underwent a sudden change. At the moment we were crossing a range of high sand-hills, covered with stiff, reedy grass and stunted gorse, and before us lay a deep hollow, naked of vegetation and presenting a bare, smooth surface of the characteristic greyish-yellow sand. On the side of the hill the dog checked, and, with upraised muzzle, began to sniff the air with a curiously suspicious expression, clearly unconnected with the rabbit question. On this, the major unfastened the leash, and the dog, left to his own devices, put his nose to the ground and began rapidly to cast to and fro, zigzagging down the side of the hill and growing every moment more excited. In the same sinuous manner he proceeded across the hollow until he reached a spot near the middle; and here he came to a sudden stop and began to scratch up the sand with furious eagerness.

“It’s a find, sure enough!” exclaimed the major, nearly as excited as his pupil; and, as he spoke, he ran down the hill-side, followed by me and Thorndyke, who, as he reached the bottom, drew from his “poacher’s pocket” a large fern-trowel in a leather sheath. It was not a very efficient digging implement, but it threw up the loose sand faster than the scratchings of the dog.

It was easy ground to excavate. Working at the spot that the dog had located, Thorndyke had soon hollowed out a small cavity some eighteen inches deep. Into the bottom of this he thrust the pointed blade of the big trowel. Then

he paused and looked round at the major and me, who were craning eagerly over the little pit.

“There is something there,” said he. “Feel the handle of the trowel.”

I grasped the wooden handle, and, working it gently up and down, was aware of a definite but somewhat soft resistance. The major verified my observation and then Thorndyke resumed his digging, widening the pit and working with increased caution. Ten minutes' more careful excavation brought into view a recognisable shape—a shoulder and upper arm; and following the lines of this, further diggings disclosed the form of a head and shoulders plainly discernible though still shrouded in sand. Finally, with the point of the trowel and a borrowed handkerchief—mine—the adhering sand was cleared away; and then, from the bottom of the deep, funnel-shaped hole, there looked up at us, with a most weird and horrible effect, the discoloured face of a man.

In that face, the passing weeks had wrought inevitable changes, on which I need not dwell. But the features were easily recognisable, and I could see at once that the man corresponded completely with Thorndyke's description. The cheeks were full; the hair on the temples was of a pale, yellowish brown; a straggling, fair moustache covered the mouth; and, when the sand had been sufficiently cleared away, I could see a small, tonsure-like bald patch near the back of the crown. But I could see something more than this. On the left temple, just behind the eyebrow, was a ragged, shapeless wound such as might have been made by a hammer.

“That turns into certainty what we have already surmised,” said Thorndyke, gently pressing the scalp around the wound. “It must have killed him instantly. The skull is smashed in like an egg-shell. And this is undoubtedly the weapon,” he added, drawing out of the sand beside the body a big, hexagon-headed screw-bolt, “very prudently buried with the body. And that is all that really concerns us. We can leave the police to finish the disinterment; but you notice, Anstey, that the corpse is nude with the exception of the vest and probably the pants. The shirt has disappeared. Which is exactly what we should have expected.”

Slowly, but with the feeling of something accomplished, we took our way back to the town, having collected Thorndyke's stick on the way. Presently, the major left us, to look up a friend at the club house on the links. As soon as we were alone, I put in a demand for an elucidation.

“I see the general trend of your investigations,” said I, “but I can't imagine how they yielded so much detail; as to the personal appearance of this man, for instance.”

“The evidence in this case,” he replied, “was analogous to circumstantial evidence. It depended on the cumulative effect of a number of facts, each separately inconclusive, but all pointing to the same conclusion. Shall I run over the data in their order and in accordance with their connections?”

I gave an emphatic affirmative, and he continued:

“We begin, naturally, with the first fact, which is, of course, the most interesting and important; the fact which arrests attention, which shows that something has to be explained and possibly suggests a line of inquiry. You remember that I measured the foot-prints in the sand for comparison with the other foot-prints. Then I had the dimensions of the feet of the presumed bather. But as soon as I looked at the shoes which purported to be those of that bather, I felt a conviction that his feet would never go into them.

“Now, that was a very striking fact—if it really was a fact—and it came on top of another fact hardly less striking. That bather had gone into the sea; and at a considerable distance he had unquestionably come out again. There could be no possible doubt. In foot-measurements and length of stride the two sets of tracks were identical; and there were no other tracks. That man had come ashore and he had remained ashore. But yet he had not put on his clothes. He couldn’t have gone away naked; but, obviously, he was not there. As a criminal lawyer, you must admit that there was *prima facie* evidence of something very abnormal and probably criminal.

“On our way to the dormy-house, I carried the stick in the same hand as my own and noted that it was very little shorter. Therefore it was a tall man’s stick. Apparently, then, the stick did not belong to the shoes, but to the man who had made the foot-prints. Then, when we came to the dormy-house, another striking fact presented itself. You remember that Hallett commented on the quantity of sand that fell from the clothes on to the table. I am astonished that he did not notice the very peculiar character of that sand. It was perfectly unlike the sand which would fall from his own clothes. The sand on the sand-hills is dune sand—wind-borne sand, or, as the legal term has it, æolian sand; and it is perfectly characteristic. As it has been carried by the wind, it is necessarily fine. The grains are small; and as the action of the wind sorts them out, they are extremely uniform in size. Moreover, by being continually blown about and rubbed together, they become rounded by mutual attrition. And then dune sand is nearly pure sand, composed of grains of silica unmixed with other substances.

“Beach sand is quite different. Much of it is half-formed, freshly-broken-down silica and is often very coarse; and, as I pointed out at the time, it is mixed with all sorts of foreign substances derived from masses in the

neighbourhood. This particular sand was loaded with black and white particles, of which the white were mostly chalk, and the black particles of coal. Now there is very little chalk in the Shellness sand, as there are no cliffs quite near, and chalk rapidly disappears from sand by reason of its softness; and there is no coal.”

“Where does the coal come from?” I asked.

“Principally from the Goodwins,” he replied. “It is derived from the cargoes of colliers whose wrecks are embedded in those sands, and from the bunkers of wrecked steamers. This coal sinks down through the seventy-odd feet of sand and at last works out at the bottom, where it drifts slowly across the floor of the sea in a north-westerly direction until some easterly gale throws it up on the Thanet shore between Ramsgate and Foreness Point. Most of it comes up at Dumpton and Broadstairs, where you may see the poor people, in the winter, gathering coal pebbles to feed their fires.

“This sand, then, almost certainly came from the Thanet coast; but the missing man, Roscoff, had been staying in Sandwich, playing golf on the sand-hills. This was another striking discrepancy, and it made me decide to examine the clothes exhaustively, garment by garment. I did so; and this is what I found.

“The jacket, trousers, socks and shoes were those of a shortish, rather stout man, as shown by measurements, and the cap was his, since it was made of the same cloth as the jacket and trousers.

“The waistcoat, shirt, underclothes and stick were those of a tall man.

“The garments, socks and shoes of the short man were charged with Thanet beach sand, and contained no dune sand, excepting the cap, which might have fallen off on the sand-hills.

“The waistcoat was saturated with dune sand and contained no beach sand, and a little dune sand was obtained from the shirt and undergarments. That is to say, that the short man’s clothes contained beach sand only, while the tall man’s clothes contained only dune sand.

“The short man’s clothes were all unmarked; the tall man’s clothes were either marked or conspicuously recognisable, as the waistcoat and also the stick.

“The garments of the short man which had been left were those that could not have been worn by a tall man without attracting instant attention and the shoes could not have been put on at all; whereas the garments of the short man which had disappeared—the waistcoat, shirt and underclothes—were those

that could have been worn by a tall man without attracting attention. The obvious suggestion was that the tall man had gone off in the short man's shirt and waistcoat but otherwise in his own clothes.

"And now as to the personal characteristics of the short man. From the cap I obtained five hairs. They were all blonde, and two of them were of the peculiar, atrophic, 'point of exclamation' type that grow at the margin of a bald area. Therefore he was a fair man and partially bald. On the inside of the jacket, clinging to the rough tweed, I found a single long, thin, fair moustache hair, which suggested a long, soft moustache. The edge of the left cuff was thickly marked with oil-paint—not a single smear, but an accumulation such as a painter picks up when he reaches with his brush hand across a loaded palette. The suggestion—not very conclusive—was that he was an oil-painter and left-handed. But there was strong confirmation. There was an artist's pencil—3B—and a stump of vine charcoal such as an oil-painter might carry. The silver coins in his pocket were blackened with sulphide as they would be if a piece of artist's soft, vulcanised rubber has been in the pocket with them. And there was the pocket-knife. It contained a sharp steel pencil-blade, a charcoal file and an ivory palette-blade; and that palette-blade had been used by a left-handed man."

"How did you arrive at that?" I asked.

"By the bevels worn at the edges," he replied. "An old palette-knife used by a right-handed man shows a bevel of wear on the under side of the left-hand edge and the upper side of the right-hand edge; in the case of a left-handed man the wear shows on the under side of the right-hand edge and the upper side of the left-hand edge. This, being an ivory blade, showed the wear very distinctly and proved conclusively that the user was left-handed; and as an ivory palette-knife is used only by fastidiously careful painters for such pigments as the cadmiums, which might be discoloured by a steel blade, one was justified in assuming that he was somewhat fastidious as to his pigments."

As I listened to Thorndyke's exposition I was profoundly impressed. His conclusions, which had sounded like mere speculative guesses, were, I now realised, based upon an analysis of the evidence as careful and as impartial as the summing up of a judge. And these conclusions he had drawn instantaneously from the appearances of things that had been before my eyes all the time and from which I had learned nothing.

"What do you suppose is the meaning of the affair?" I asked presently. "What was the motive of the murder?"

"We can only guess," he replied. "But, interpreting Capes' hints, I should

suspect that our artist friend was a blackmailer; that he had come over here to squeeze Roscoff—perhaps not for the first time—and that his victim lured him out on the sand-hills for a private talk and then took the only effective means of ridding himself of his persecutor. That is my view of the case; but, of course, it is only surmise.”

Surmise as it was, however, it turned out to be literally correct. At the inquest Capes had to tell all that he knew; which was uncommonly little, though no one was able to add to it. The murdered man, Joseph Bertrand, had fastened on Roscoff and made a regular income by blackmailing him. That much Capes knew; and he knew that the victim had been in prison and that that was the secret. But who Roscoff was and what was his real name—for Roscoff was apparently a *nom de guerre*—he had no idea. So he could not help the police. The murderer had got clear away and there was no hint as to where to look for him; and so far as I know, nothing has ever been heard of him since.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story is Number Twenty Eight 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 *A Mystery of the Sand-Hills* by Richard Austin Freeman]