

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

Number Thirty One

The Case of
The White
Foot-prints

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“WELL,” said my friend Foxton, pursuing a familiar and apparently inexhaustible topic, “I’d sooner have your job than my own.”

“I’ve no doubt you would,” was my unsympathetic reply. “I never met a man who wouldn’t. We all tend to consider other men’s jobs in terms of their advantages and our own in terms of their drawbacks. It is human nature.”

“Oh, it’s all very well for you to be so beastly philosophical,” retorted Foxton. “You wouldn’t be if you were in my place. Here, in Margate, it’s measles, chicken-pox and scarlatina all the summer, and bronchitis, colds and rheumatism all the winter. A deadly monotony. Whereas you and Thorndyke sit there in your chambers and let your clients feed you up with the raw material of romance. Why, your life is a sort of everlasting Adelphi drama.”

“You exaggerate, Foxton,” said I. “We, like you, have our routine work, only it is never heard of outside the Law Courts; and you, like every other doctor, must run up against mystery and romance from time to time.”

Foxton shook his head as he held out his hand for my cup. “I don’t,” said he. “My practice yields nothing but an endless round of dull routine.”

And then, as if in commentary on this last statement, the housemaid burst into the room and, with hardly dissembled agitation, exclaimed:

“If you please, sir, the page from Beddingfield’s Boarding House says that a lady has been found dead in her bed and would you go round there immediately.”

“Very well, Jane,” said Foxton, and as the maid retired, he deliberately helped himself to another fried egg and, looking across the table at me, exclaimed: “Isn’t that always the way? Come immediately—now—this very instant, although the patient may have been considering for a day or two whether he’ll send for you or not. But directly he decides, you must spring out of bed, or jump up from your breakfast, and run.”

“That’s quite true,” I agreed; “but this really does seem to be an urgent case.”

“What’s the urgency?” demanded Foxton. “The woman is already dead. Anyone would think she was in imminent danger of coming to life again and

that my instant arrival was the only thing that could prevent such a catastrophe.”

“You’ve only a third-hand statement that she is dead,” said I. “It is just possible that she isn’t; and even if she is, as you will have to give evidence at the inquest, you don’t want the police to get there first and turn out the room before you’ve made your inspection.”

“Gad!” exclaimed Foxton. “I hadn’t thought of that. Yes. You’re right. I’ll hop round at once.”

He swallowed the remainder of the egg at a single gulp and rose from the table. Then he paused and stood for a few moments looking down at me irresolutely.

“I wonder, Jervis,” he said, “if you would mind coming round with me. You know all the medico-legal ropes, and I don’t. What do you say?”

I agreed instantly, having, in fact, been restrained only by delicacy from making the suggestion myself; and when I had fetched from my room my pocket camera and telescopic tripod, we set forth together without further delay.

Beddingfield’s Boarding House was but a few minutes’ walk from Foxton’s residence, being situated near the middle of Ethelred Road, Cliftonville, a quiet, suburban street which abounded in similar establishments, many of which, I noticed, were undergoing a spring-cleaning and renovation to prepare them for the approaching season.

“That’s the house,” said Foxton, “where that woman is standing at the front door. Look at the boarders, collected at the dining-room window. There’s a rare commotion in that house, I’ll warrant.”

Here, arriving at the house, he ran up the steps and accosted in sympathetic tones the elderly woman who stood by the open street door.

“What a dreadful thing this is, Mrs. Beddingfield! Terrible! Most distressing for you!”

“Ah, you’re right, Dr. Foxton,” she replied. “It’s an awful affair. Shocking. So bad for business, too. I do hope and trust there won’t be any scandal.”

“I’m sure I hope not,” said Foxton. “There shan’t be if I can help it. And as my friend, Dr. Jervis, who is staying with me for a few days, is a lawyer as well as a doctor, we shall have the best advice. When was the affair discovered?”

“Just before I sent for you, Dr. Foxton. The maid noticed that Mrs. Toussaint—that is the poor creature’s name—had not taken in her hot water, so she knocked at the door. As she couldn’t get any answer, she tried the door and found it bolted on the inside, and then she came and told me. I went up and knocked loudly, and then, as I couldn’t get any reply, I told our boy, James, to force the door open with a case-opener, which he did quite easily as the bolt was only a small one. Then I went in, all of a tremble, for I had a presentiment that there was something wrong; and there she was, lying stone dead, with a most ‘orrible stare on her face and an empty bottle in her hand.”

“A bottle, eh!” said Foxton.

“Yes. She’d made away with herself, poor thing; and all on account of some silly love affair—and it was hardly even that.”

“Ah,” said Foxton. “The usual thing. You must tell us about that later. Now we’d better go up and see the patient—at least the—er—perhaps you’ll show us the room, Mrs. Beddingfield.”

The landlady turned and preceded us up the stairs to the first-floor back, where she paused, and softly opening a door, peered nervously into the room. As we stepped past her and entered, she seemed inclined to follow, but, at a significant glance from me, Foxton persuasively ejected her and closed the door. Then we stood silent for a while and looked about us.

In the aspect of the room there was something strangely incongruous with the tragedy that had been enacted within its walls; a mingling of the commonplace and the terrible that almost amounted to anticlimax. Through the wide-open window the bright spring sunshine streamed in on the garish wall-paper and cheap furniture; from the street below, the periodic shouts of a man selling “sole and mack-ro!” broke into the brisk staccato of a barrel-organ, and both sounds mingled with a raucous voice close at hand, cheerfully trolling a popular song, and accounted for by a linen-clad elbow that bobbed in front of the window and evidently appertained to a house painter on an adjacent ladder.

It was all very commonplace and familiar and discordantly out of character with the stark figure that lay on the bed like a waxen effigy symbolic of tragedy. Here was none of that gracious somnolence in which death often presents itself with a suggestion of eternal repose. This woman was dead; horribly, aggressively dead. The thin, sallow face was rigid as stone, the dark eyes stared into infinite space with a horrid fixity that was quite disturbing to look on. And yet the posture of the corpse was not uneasy, being, in fact, rather curiously symmetrical, with both arms outside the bed-clothes and both hands closed, the right grasping, as Mrs. Beddingfield had said, an empty bottle.

“Well,” said Foxton, as he stood looking down on the dead woman, “it seems a pretty clear case. She appears to have laid herself out and kept hold of the bottle so that there should be no mistake. How long do you suppose this woman has been dead, Jervis?”

I felt the rigid limbs, and tested the temperature of the body surface.

“Not less than six hours,” I replied. “Probably more. I should say that she died about two o’clock this morning.”

“And that is about all we can say,” said Foxton, “until the post-mortem has been made. Everything looks quite straightforward. No signs of a struggle or marks of violence. That blood on the mouth is probably due to her biting her lip when she drank from the bottle. Yes; here’s a little cut on the inside of the lip, corresponding to the upper incisors. By the way, I wonder if there is anything left in the bottle.”

As he spoke, he drew the small, unlabelled, green glass phial from the closed hand—out of which it slipped quite easily—and held it up to the light.

“Yes,” he exclaimed, “there’s more than a drachm left; quite enough for an analysis. But I don’t recognise the smell. Do you?”

I sniffed at the bottle and was aware of a faint unfamiliar vegetable odour.

“No,” I answered. “It appears to be a watery solution of some kind, but I can’t give it a name. Where is the cork?”

“I haven’t seen it,” he replied. “Probably it is on the floor somewhere.”

We both stooped to look for the missing cork and presently found it in the shadow, under the little bedside table. But, in the course of that brief search, I found something else, which had indeed been lying in full view all the time—a wax match. Now a wax match is a perfectly innocent and very commonplace object, but yet the presence of this one gave me pause. In the first place, women do not, as a rule, use wax matches, though there was not much in that. What was more to the point was that the candlestick by the bedside contained a box of safety matches, and that, as the burned remains of one lay in the tray, it appeared to have been used to light the candle. Then why the wax match?

While I was turning over this problem Foxton had corked the bottle, wrapped it carefully in a piece of paper which he took from the dressing-table and bestowed it in his pocket.

“Well, Jervis,” said he, “I think we’ve seen everything. The analysis and the post-mortem will complete the case. Shall we go down and hear what Mrs. Beddingfield has to say?”

But that wax match, slight as was its significance, taken alone, had presented itself to me as the last of a succession of phenomena each of which was susceptible of a sinister interpretation, and the cumulative effect of these slight suggestions began to impress me somewhat strongly.

“One moment, Foxton,” said I. “Don’t let us take anything for granted. We are here to collect evidence, and we must go warily. There is such a thing as homicidal poisoning, you know.”

“Yes, of course,” he replied, “but there is nothing to suggest it in this case; at least, I see nothing. Do you?”

“Nothing very positive,” said I; “but there are some facts that seem to call for consideration. Let us go over what we have seen. In the first place, there is a distinct discrepancy in the appearance of the body. The general easy, symmetrical posture, like that of a figure on a tomb, suggests the effect of a slow painless poison. But look at the face. There is nothing reposeful about that. It is very strongly suggestive of pain or terror or both.”

“Yes,” said Foxton, “that is so. But you can’t draw any satisfactory conclusions from the facial expression of dead bodies. Why, men who have been hanged, or even stabbed, often look as peaceful as babes.”

“Still,” I urged, “it is a fact to be noted. Then there is that cut on the lip. It may have been produced in the way you suggest; but it may equally well be the result of pressure on the mouth.”

Foxton made no comment on this beyond a slight shrug of the shoulders, and I continued:

“Then there is the state of the hand. It was closed but it did not really grasp the object it contained. You drew the bottle out without any resistance. It simply lay in the closed hand. But that is not a normal state of affairs. As you know, when a person dies grasping any object, either the hand relaxes and lets it drop, or the muscular action passes into cadaveric spasm and grasps the object firmly. And lastly, there is this wax match. Where did it come from? The dead woman apparently lit her candle with a safety match from the box. It is a small matter, but it wants explaining.”

Foxton raised his eyebrows protestingly. “You’re like all specialists, Jervis,” said he. “You see your speciality in everything. And while you are straining these flimsy suggestions to turn a simple suicide into murder, you ignore the really conclusive fact that the door was bolted and had to be broken open before anyone could get in.”

“You are not forgetting, I suppose,” said I, “that the window was wide

open and that there were house painters about and possibly a ladder left standing against the house.”

“As to the ladder,” said Foxton, “that is a pure assumption; but we can easily settle the question by asking that fellow out there if it was or was not left standing last night.”

Simultaneously we moved towards the window; but half-way we both stopped short. For the question of the ladder had in a moment become negligible. Staring up at us from the dull red linoleum which covered the floor were the impressions of a pair of bare feet, imprinted in white paint with the distinctness of a woodcut. There was no need to ask if they had been made by the dead woman: they were unmistakably the feet of a man, and large feet at that. Nor could there be any doubt as to whence those feet had come. Beginning with startling distinctness under the window, the tracks diminished rapidly in intensity until they reached the carpeted portion of the room, where they vanished abruptly; and only by the closest scrutiny was it possible to detect the faint traces of the retiring tracks.

Foxton and I stood for some moments gazing in silence at the sinister white shapes; then we looked at one another.

“You’ve saved me from a most horrible blunder, Jervis,” said Foxton. “Ladder or no ladder, that fellow came in at the window; and he came in last night, for I saw them painting these window-sills yesterday afternoon. Which side did he come from, I wonder?”

We moved to the window and looked out on the sill. A set of distinct, though smeared impressions on the new paint gave unneeded confirmation and showed that the intruder had approached from the left side, close to which was a cast-iron stack-pipe, now covered with fresh green paint.

“So,” said Foxton, “the presence or absence of the ladder is of no significance. The man got into the window somehow, and that’s all that matters.”

“On the contrary,” said I, “the point may be of considerable importance in identification. It isn’t everyone who could climb up a stack-pipe, whereas most people could make shift to climb a ladder even if it were guarded by a plank. But the fact that the man took off his boots and socks suggests that he came up by the pipe. If he had merely aimed at silencing his foot-falls he would probably have removed his boots only.”

From the window we turned to examine more closely the foot-prints on the floor, and while I took a series of measurements with my spring tape, Foxton

entered them in my notebook.

“Doesn’t it strike you as rather odd, Jervis,” said he, “that neither of the little toes has made any mark?”

“It does indeed,” I replied. “The appearances suggest that the little toes were absent, but I have never met with such a condition. Have you?”

“Never. Of course one is acquainted with the supernumerary toe deformity, but I have never heard of congenitally deficient little toes.”

Once more we scrutinised the foot-prints, and even examined those on the window-sill, obscurely marked on the fresh paint; but, exquisitely distinct as were those on the linoleum, showing every wrinkle and minute skin-marking, not the faintest hint of a little toe was to be seen on either foot.

“It’s very extraordinary,” said Foxton. “He has certainly lost his little toes, if he ever had any. They couldn’t have failed to make some mark. But it’s a queer affair. Quite a windfall for the police, by the way; I mean for purposes of identification.”

“Yes,” I agreed, “and having regard to the importance of the foot-prints, I think it would be wise to get a photograph of them.”

“Oh, the police will see to that,” said Foxton. “Besides, we haven’t got a camera, unless you thought of using that little toy snapshotter of yours.”

As Foxton was no photographer I did not trouble to explain that my camera, though small, had been specially made for scientific purposes.

“Any photograph is better than none,” I said, and with this I opened the tripod and set it over one of the most distinct of the foot-prints, screwed the camera to the goose-neck, carefully framed the foot-print in the finder and adjusted the focus, finally making the exposure by means of an Antinous release. This process I repeated four times, twice on a right foot-print and twice on a left.

“Well,” Foxton remarked, “with all those photographs the police ought to be able to pick up the scent.”

“Yes, they’ve got something to go on; but they’ll have to catch their hare before they can cook him. He won’t be walking about bare-footed, you know.”

“No. It’s a poor clue in that respect. And now we may as well be off as we’ve seen all there is to see. I think we won’t have much to say to Mrs. Beddingfield. This is a police case, and the less I’m mixed up in it the better it will be for my practice.”

I was faintly amused at Foxton's caution when considered by the light of his utterances at the breakfast table. Apparently his appetite for mystery and romance was easily satisfied. But that was no affair of mine. I waited on the doorstep while he said a few—probably evasive—words to the landlady and then, as we started off together in the direction of the police station, I began to turn over in my mind the salient features of the case. For some time we walked on in silence, and must have been pursuing a parallel train of thought, for, when he at length spoke, he almost put my reflections into words.

“You know, Jervis,” said he, “there ought to be a clue in those foot-prints. I realise that you can't tell how many toes a man has by looking at his booted feet. But those unusual foot-prints ought to give an expert a hint as to what sort of man to look for. Don't they convey any hint to you?”

I felt that Foxton was right; that if my brilliant colleague, Thorndyke, had been in my place, he would have extracted from those foot-prints some leading fact that would have given the police a start along some definite line of inquiry; and that belief, coupled with Foxton's challenge, put me on my mettle.

“They offer no particular suggestions to me at this moment,” said I, “but I think that, if we consider them systematically, we may be able to draw some useful deductions.”

“Very well,” said Foxton, “then let us consider them systematically. Fire away. I should like to hear how you work these things out.”

Foxton's frankly spectatorial attitude was a little disconcerting, especially as it seemed to commit me to a result that I was by no means confident of attaining. I therefore began a little diffidently.

“We are assuming that both the feet that made those prints were from some cause devoid of little toes. That assumption—which is almost certainly correct—we treat as a fact, and, taking it as our starting-point, the first step in the inquiry is to find some explanation of it. Now there are three possibilities, and only three: deformity, injury, and disease. The toes may have been absent from birth, they may have been lost as a result of mechanical injury, or they may have been lost by disease. Let us take those possibilities in order.

“Deformity we exclude since such a malformation is unknown to us.

“Mechanical injury seems to be excluded by the fact that the two little toes are on opposite sides of the body and could not conceivably be affected by any violence which left the intervening feet uninjured. This seems to narrow the possibilities down to disease; and the question that arises is, What diseases are there which might result in the loss of both little toes?”

I looked inquiringly at Foxton, but he merely nodded encouragingly. His rôle was that of listener.

“Well,” I pursued, “the loss of both toes seems to exclude local disease, just as it excluded local injury; and as to general diseases, I can think only of three which might produce this condition—Raynaud’s disease, ergotism, and frost-bite.”

“You don’t call frost-bite a general disease, do you?” objected Foxton.

“For our present purpose, I do. The effects are local, but the cause—low external temperature—affects the whole body and is a general cause. Well, now, taking the diseases in order, I think we can exclude Raynaud’s disease. It does, it is true, occasionally cause the fingers or toes to die and drop off, and the little toes would be especially liable to be affected as being most remote from the heart. But in such a severe case the other toes would be affected. They would be shrivelled and tapered, whereas, if you remember, the toes of these feet were quite plump and full, to judge by the large impressions they made. So I think we may safely reject Raynaud’s disease. There remain ergotism and frost-bite; and the choice between them is just a question of relative frequency. Frost-bite is more common; therefore frost-bite is more probable.”

“Do they tend equally to affect the little toes?” asked Foxton.

“As a matter of probability, yes. The poison of ergot acting from within, and intense cold acting from without, contract the small blood-vessels and arrest the circulation. The feet, being the most distant parts of the body from the heart, are the first to feel the effects; and the little toes, which are the most distant parts of the feet, are the most susceptible of all.”

Foxton reflected awhile, and then remarked:

“This is all very well, Jervis, but I don’t see that you are much forrader. This man has lost both his little toes, and on your showing, the probabilities are that the loss was due either to chronic ergot poisoning or to frost-bite, with a balance of probability in favour of frost-bite. That’s all. No proof, no verification. Just the law of probability applied to a particular case, which is always unsatisfactory. He may have lost his toes in some totally different way. But even if the probabilities work out correctly, I don’t see what use your conclusions would be to the police. They wouldn’t tell them what sort of man to look for.”

There was a good deal of truth in Foxton’s objection. A man who has suffered from ergotism or frost-bite is not externally different from any other

man. Still, we had not exhausted the case, as I ventured to point out.

“Don’t be premature, Foxton,” said I. “Let us pursue our argument a little farther. We have established a probability that this unknown man has suffered either from ergotism or frost-bite. That, as you say, is of no use by itself; but supposing we can show that these conditions tend to affect a particular class of persons, we shall have established a fact that will indicate a line of investigation. And I think we can. Let us take the case of ergotism first.

“Now, how is chronic ergot poisoning caused? Not by the medicinal use of the drug, but by the consumption of the diseased rye in which ergot occurs. It is therefore peculiar to countries in which rye is used extensively as food. Those countries, broadly speaking, are the countries of North-Eastern Europe, and especially Russia and Poland.

“Then take the case of frost-bite. Obviously, the most likely person to get frost-bitten is the inhabitant of a country with a cold climate. The most rigorous climates inhabited by white people are North America and North-Eastern Europe, especially Russia and Poland. So you see, the areas associated with ergotism and frost-bite overlap to some extent. In fact they do more than overlap; for a person even slightly affected by ergot would be specially liable to frost-bite, owing to the impaired circulation. The conclusion is that, racially, in both ergotism and frost-bite, the balance of probability is in favour of a Russian, a Pole, or a Scandinavian.

“Then in the case of frost-bite there is the occupation factor. What class of men tend most to become frost-bitten? Well, beyond all doubt, the greatest sufferers from frost-bite are sailors, especially those on sailing ships, and, naturally, on ships trading to arctic and sub-arctic countries. But the bulk of such sailing ships are those engaged in the Baltic and Archangel trade; and the crews of those ships are almost exclusively Scandinavians, Finns, Russians, and Poles. So that, again, the probabilities point to a native of North-Eastern Europe, and, taken as a whole, by the overlapping of factors, to a Russian, a Pole, or a Scandinavian.”

Foxton smiled sardonically. “Very ingenious, Jervis,” said he. “Most ingenious. As an academic statement of probabilities, quite excellent. But for practical purposes absolutely useless. However, here we are at the police station. I’ll just run in and give them the facts and then go on to the coroner’s office.”

“I suppose I’d better not come in with you?” I said.

“Well, no,” he replied. “You see, you have no official connection with the case, and they mightn’t like it. You’d better go and amuse yourself while I get

the morning's visits done. We can talk things over at lunch."

With this he disappeared into the police station, and I turned away with a smile of grim amusement. Experience is apt to make us a trifle uncharitable, and experience had taught me that those who are the most scornful of academic reasoning are often not above retailing it with some reticence as to its original authorship. I had a shrewd suspicion that Foxtton was at this very moment disgorging my despised "academic statement of probabilities" to an admiring police-inspector.

My way towards the sea lay through Ethelred Road, and I had traversed about half its length and was approaching the house of the tragedy when I observed Mrs. Beddingfield at the bay window. Evidently she recognised me, for a few moments later she appeared in outdoor clothes on the doorstep and advanced to meet me.

"Have you seen the police?" she asked as we met.

I replied that Dr. Foxtton was even now at the police station.

"Ah!" she said, "it's a dreadful affair; most unfortunate, too, just at the beginning of the season. A scandal is absolute ruin to a boarding-house. What do you think of the case? Will it be possible to hush it up? Dr. Foxtton said you were a lawyer, I think, Dr. Jervis?"

"Yes, I am a lawyer, but really I know nothing of the circumstances of this case. Did I understand that there had been something in the nature of a love affair?"

"Yes—at least—well, perhaps I oughtn't to have said that. But hadn't I better tell you the whole story?—that is, if I am not taking up too much of your time."

"I should be interested to hear what led to the disaster," said I.

"Then," she said, "I will tell you all about it. Will you come indoors, or shall I walk a little way with you?"

As I suspected that the police were at that moment on their way to the house, I chose the latter alternative and led her away seawards at a pretty brisk pace.

"Was this poor lady a widow?" I asked as we started up the street.

"No, she wasn't," replied Mrs. Beddingfield, "and that was the trouble. Her husband was abroad—at least, he had been, and he was just coming home. A pretty home-coming it will be for him, poor man. He is an officer in the civil

police at Sierra Leone, but he hasn't been there long. He went there for his health."

"What! To Sierra Leone!" I exclaimed, for the "White Man's Grave" seemed a queer health resort.

"Yes. You see, Mr. Toussaint is a French Canadian, and it seems that he has always been somewhat of a rolling stone. For some time he was in the Klondyke, but he suffered so much from the cold that he had to come away. It injured his health very severely; I don't quite know in what way, but I do know that he was quite a cripple for a time. When he got better he looked out for a post in a warm climate and eventually obtained the appointment of Inspector of Civil Police at Sierra Leone. That was about ten months ago, and when he sailed for Africa his wife came to stay with me, and has been here ever since."

"And this love affair that you spoke of?"

"Yes, but I oughtn't to have called it that. Let me explain what happened. About three months ago a Swedish gentleman—a Mr. Bergson—came to stay here, and he seemed to be very much smitten with Mrs. Toussaint."

"And she?"

"Oh, she liked him well enough. He is a tall, good-looking man—though for that matter he is no taller than her husband, nor any better looking. Both men are over six feet. But there was no harm so far as she was concerned, excepting that she didn't see the position quite soon enough. She wasn't very discreet, in fact I thought it necessary to give her a little advice. However, Mr. Bergson left here and went to live at Ramsgate to superintend the unloading of the ice ships (he came from Sweden in one), and I thought the trouble was at an end. But it wasn't, for he took to coming over to see Mrs. Toussaint, and of course I couldn't have that. So at last I had to tell him that he mustn't come to the house again. It was very unfortunate, for on that occasion I think he had been 'tasting,' as they say in Scotland. He wasn't drunk, but he was excitable and noisy, and when I told him he mustn't come again he made such a disturbance that two of the gentlemen boarders—Mr. Wardale and Mr. Macauley—had to interfere. And then he was most insulting to them, especially to Mr. Macauley, who is a coloured gentleman; called him a 'buck nigger' and all sorts of offensive names."

"And how did the coloured gentleman take it?"

"Not very well, I am sorry to say, considering that he is a gentleman—a law student with chambers in the Temple. In fact, his language was so objectionable that Mr. Wardale insisted on my giving him notice on the spot.

But I managed to get him taken in next door but one; you see, Mr. Wardale had been a Commissioner at Sierra Leone—it was through him that Mr. Toussaint got his appointment—so I suppose he was rather on his dignity with coloured people.”

“And was that the last you heard of Mr. Bergson?”

“He never came here again, but he wrote several times to Mrs. Toussaint, asking her to meet him. At last, only a few days ago, she wrote to him and told him that the acquaintance must cease.”

“And has it ceased?”

“As far as I know, it has.”

“Then, Mrs. Beddingfield,” said I, “what makes you connect the affair with—with what has happened?”

“Well, you see,” she explained, “there is the husband. He was coming home, and is probably in England already.”

“Indeed!” said I.

“Yes,” she continued. “He went up into the bush to arrest some natives belonging to one of these gangs of murderers—Leopard Societies, I think they are called—and he got seriously wounded. He wrote to his wife from hospital, saying that he would be sent home as soon as he was fit to travel, and about ten days ago she got a letter from him saying that he was coming by the next ship.

“I noticed that she seemed very nervous and upset when she got the letters from hospital, and still more so when the last letter came. Of course, I don’t know what he said to her in those letters. It may be that he had heard something about Mr. Bergson, and threatened to take some action. Of course, I can’t say. I only know that she was very nervous and restless, and when we saw in the paper four days ago that the ship he would be coming by had arrived in Liverpool, she seemed dreadfully upset. And she got worse and worse until—well, until last night.”

“Has anything been heard of the husband since the ship arrived?” I asked.

“Nothing whatever,” replied Mrs. Beddingfield, with a meaning look at me which I had no difficulty in interpreting. “No letter, no telegram, not a word. And you see, if he hadn’t come by that ship he would almost certainly have sent a letter by her. He must have arrived in England, but why hasn’t he turned up, or at least sent a wire? What is he doing? Why is he staying away? Can he have heard something? And what does he mean to do? That’s what kept the poor thing on wires, and that, I feel certain, is what drove her to make away

with herself.”

It was not my business to contest Mrs. Beddingfield’s erroneous deductions. I was seeking information—it seemed that I had nearly exhausted the present source. But one point required amplifying.

“To return to Mr. Bergson, Mrs. Beddingfield,” said I. “Do I understand that he is a seafaring man?”

“He was,” she replied. “At present he is settled at Ramsgate as manager of a company in the ice trade, but formerly he was a sailor. I have heard him say that he was one of the crew of an exploring ship that went in search of the North Pole and that he was locked up in the ice for months and months. I should have thought he would have had enough of ice after that.”

With this view I expressed warm agreement, and having now obtained all the information that appeared to be available, I proceeded to bring the interview to an end.

“Well, Mrs. Beddingfield,” I said, “it is a rather mysterious affair. Perhaps more light may be thrown on it at the inquest. Meanwhile, I should think that it will be wise of you to keep your own counsel as far as outsiders are concerned.”

The remainder of the morning I spent pacing the smooth stretch of sand that lies to the east of the jetty, and reflecting on the evidence that I had acquired in respect of this singular crime. Evidently there was no lack of clues in this case. On the contrary, there were two quite obvious lines of inquiry, for both the Swede and the missing husband presented the characters of the hypothetical murderer. Both had been exposed to the conditions which tend to produce frost-bite; one of them had probably been a consumer of rye meal, and both might be said to have a motive—though, to be sure, it was a very insufficient one—for committing the crime. Still, in both cases the evidence was merely speculative; it suggested a line of investigation, but it did nothing more.

When I met Foxton at lunch I was sensible of a curious change in his manner. His previous expansiveness had given place to marked reticence and a certain official secretiveness.

“I don’t think, you know, Jervis,” he said, when I opened the subject, “that we had better not discuss this affair. You see, I am the principal witness, and while the case is *sub judice*—well, in fact the police don’t want the case talked about.”

“But surely I am a witness, too, and an expert witness, moreover——”

“That isn’t the view of the police. They look on you as more or less of an amateur, and as you have no official connection with the case, I don’t think they propose to subpoena you. Superintendent Platt, who is in charge of the case, wasn’t very pleased at my having taken you to the house. Said it was quite irregular. Oh, and by the way, he says you must hand over those photographs.”

“But isn’t Platt going to have the foot-prints photographed on his own account?” I objected.

“Of course he is. He is going to have a set of proper photographs taken by an expert photographer—he was mightily amused when he heard about your little snapshot affair. Oh, you can trust Platt. He is a great man. He has had a course of instruction at the Finger-print Department in London.”

“I don’t see how that is going to help him, as there aren’t any finger-prints in this case.” This was a mere fly-cast on my part, but Foxton rose at once at the rather clumsy bait.

“Oh, aren’t there?” he exclaimed. “You didn’t happen to spot them, but they were there. Platt has got the prints of a complete right hand. This is in strict confidence, you know,” he added, with somewhat belated caution.

Foxton’s sudden reticence restrained me from uttering the obvious comment on the superintendent’s achievement. I returned to the subject of the photographs.

“Supposing I decline to hand over my film?” said I.

“But I hope you won’t—and in fact you mustn’t. I am officially connected with the case, and I’ve got to live with these people. As the police-surgeon, I am responsible for the medical evidence, and Platt expects me to get those photographs from you. Obviously you can’t keep them. It would be most irregular.”

It was useless to argue. Evidently the police did not want me to be introduced into the case, and after all, the superintendent was within his rights, if he chose to regard me as a private individual and to demand the surrender of the film.

Nevertheless I was loath to give up the photographs, at least, until I had carefully studied them. The case was within my own speciality of practice, and was a strange and interesting one. Moreover, it appeared to be in unskilful hands, judging from the finger-print episode, and then experience had taught me to treasure up small scraps of chance evidence, since one never knew when one might be drawn into a case in a professional capacity. In effect, I decided

not to give up the photographs, though that decision committed me to a ruse that I was not very willing to adopt. I would rather have acted quite straightforwardly.

“Well, if you insist, Foxton,” I said, “I will hand over the film or, if you like, I will destroy it in your presence.”

“I think Platt would rather have the film uninjured,” said Foxton. “Then he’ll know, you know,” he added with a sly grin.

In my heart, I thanked Foxton for that grin. It made my own guileful proceedings so much easier; for a suspicious man invites you to get the better of him if you can.

After lunch I went up to my room, locked the door and took the little camera from my pocket. Having fully wound up the film, I extracted it, wrapped it up carefully and bestowed it in my inside breast-pocket. Then I inserted a fresh film, and going to the open window, took four successive snapshots of the sky. This done, I closed the camera, slipped it into my pocket and went downstairs. Foxton was in the hall, brushing his hat, as I descended, and at once renewed his demand.

“About those photographs, Jervis,” said he, “I shall be looking in at the police station presently, so if you wouldn’t mind——”

“To be sure,” said I. “I will give you the film now, if you like.”

Taking the camera from my pocket, I solemnly wound up the remainder of the film, extracted it, stuck down the loose end with ostentatious care, and handed it to him.

“Better not expose it to the light,” I said, going the whole hog of deception, “or you may fog the exposures.”

Foxton took the spool from me as if it were hot—he was not a photographer—and thrust it into his handbag. He was still thanking me quite profusely when the front-door bell rang.

The visitor who stood revealed when Foxton opened the door was a small, spare gentleman with a complexion of the peculiar brown-papery quality that suggests long residence in the Tropics. He stepped in briskly and introduced himself and his business without preamble.

“My name is Wardale—boarder at Beddingfield’s. I’ve called with reference to the tragic event which——”

Here Foxton interposed in his frostiest official tone. “I am afraid, Mr.

Wardale, I can't give you any information about the case at present."

"I saw you two gentlemen at the house this morning," Mr. Wardale continued, but Foxton again cut him short.

"You did. We were there—or at least, I was—as the representative of the law, and while the case is *sub judice*——"

"It isn't yet," interrupted Wardale.

"Well, I can't enter into any discussion of it——"

"I am not asking you to," said Wardale, a little impatiently. "But I understand that one of you is Dr. Jervis."

"I am," said I.

"I must really warn you," Foxton began again; but Mr. Wardale interrupted testily:

"My dear sir, I am a lawyer and a magistrate and understand perfectly well what is and what is not permissible. I have come simply to make a professional engagement with Dr. Jervis."

"In what way can I be of service to you?" I asked.

"I will tell you," said Mr. Wardale. "This poor lady, whose death has occurred in so mysterious a manner, was the wife of a man who was, like myself, a servant of the Government of Sierra Leone. I was the friend of both of them; and in the absence of the husband, I should like to have the inquiry into the circumstances of this lady's death watched by a competent lawyer with the necessary special knowledge of medical evidence. Will you or your colleague, Dr. Thorndyke, undertake to watch the case for me?"

Of course I was willing to undertake the case and said so.

"Then," said Mr. Wardale, "I will instruct my solicitor to write to you and formally retain you in the case. Here is my card. You will find my name in the Colonial Office List, and you know my address here."

He handed me his card, wished us both good-afternoon, and then, with a stiff little bow, turned and took his departure.

"I think I had better run up to town and confer with Thorndyke," said I. "How do the trains run?"

"There is a good train in about three-quarters of an hour," replied Foxton.

"Then I will go by it, but I shall come down again to-morrow or the next day, and probably Thorndyke will come down with me."

“Very well,” said Foxton. “Bring him in to lunch or dinner, but I can’t put him up, I am afraid.”

“It would be better not,” said I. “Your friend, Platt, wouldn’t like it. He won’t want Thorndyke—or me either for that matter. And what about those photographs? Thorndyke will want them, you know.”

“He can’t have them,” said Foxton doggedly, “unless Platt is willing to hand them back; which I don’t suppose he will be.”

I had private reasons for thinking otherwise, but I kept them to myself; and as Foxton went forth on his afternoon round, I returned upstairs to pack my suit-case and write the telegram to Thorndyke informing him of my movements.

It was only a quarter past five when I let myself into our chambers in King’s Bench Walk. To my relief I found my colleague at home and our laboratory assistant, Polton, in the act of laying tea for two.

“I gather,” said Thorndyke as we shook hands, “that my learned brother brings grist to the mill?”

“Yes,” I replied. “Nominally a watching brief, but I think you will agree with me that it is a case for independent investigation.”

“Will there be anything in my line, sir?” inquired Polton, who was always agog at the word “investigation.”

“There is a film to be developed. Four exposures of white foot-prints on a dark ground.”

“Ah!” said Polton, “you’ll want good strong negatives and they ought to be enlarged if they are from the little camera. Can you give me the dimensions?”

I wrote out the measurements from my notebook and handed him the paper together with the spool of film, with which he retired gleefully to the laboratory.

“And now, Jervis,” said Thorndyke, “while Polton is operating on the film and we are discussing our tea, let us have a sketch of the case.”

I gave him more than a sketch, for the events were recent and I had carefully sorted out the facts during my journey to town, making rough notes which I now consulted. To my rather lengthy recital he listened in his usual attentive manner, without any comment, excepting in regard to my manœuvre to retain possession of the exposed film.

“It’s almost a pity you didn’t refuse,” said he. “They could hardly have enforced their demand, and my feeling is that it is more convenient as well as more dignified to avoid direct deception unless one is driven to it. But perhaps you considered that you were.”

As a matter of fact I had at the time, but I had since come to Thorndyke’s opinion. My little manœuvre was going to be a source of inconvenience presently.

“Well,” said Thorndyke, when I had finished my recital, “I think we may take it that the police theory is, in the main, your own theory derived from Foxton.”

“I think so, excepting that I learn from Foxton that Superintendent Platt has obtained the complete finger-prints of a right hand.”

Thorndyke raised his eyebrows. “Finger-prints!” he exclaimed, “Why, the fellow must be a mere simpleton. But there,” he added, “everybody—police, lawyers, magistrates and even judges—seems to lose every vestige of common sense as soon as the subject of finger-prints is raised. But it would be interesting to know how he got them and what they are like. We must try to find that out. However, to return to your case, since your theory and the police theory are probably the same, we may as well consider the value of your inferences.

“At present we are dealing with the case in the abstract. Our data are largely assumptions, and our inferences are largely derived from an application of the mathematical laws of probability. Thus we assume that a murder has been committed, whereas it may turn out to have been suicide. We assume the murder to have been committed by the person who made the foot-prints, and we assume that that person has no little toes, whereas he may have retracted little toes which do not touch the ground and so leave no impression. Assuming the little toes to be absent, we account for their absence by considering known cases in the order of their probability. Excluding—quite properly, I think—Raynaud’s disease, we arrive at frost-bite and ergotism. But two persons, both of whom are of a stature corresponding to the size of the foot-prints, may have had a motive—though a very inadequate one—for committing the crime, and both have been exposed to the conditions which tend to produce frost-bite, while one of them has probably been exposed to the conditions which tend to produce ergotism. The laws of probability point to both of these two men; and the chances in favour of the Swede being the murderer rather than the Canadian would be represented by the common factor—frost-bite—multiplied by the additional factor, ergotism. But this is purely speculative at present. There is no evidence that either man has ever been frost-

bitten or has ever eaten spurred rye. Nevertheless, it is a perfectly sound method at this stage. It indicates a line of investigation. If it should transpire that either man has suffered from frost-bite or ergotism, a definite advance would have been made. But here is Polton with a couple of finished prints. How on earth did you manage it in the time, Polton?"

"Why, you see, sir, I just dried the film with spirit," replied Polton. "It saves a lot of time. I will let you have a pair of enlargements in about a quarter of an hour."

Handing us the two wet prints, each stuck on a glass plate, he retired to the laboratory, and Thorndyke and I proceeded to scrutinise the photographs with the aid of our pocket lenses. The promised enlargements were really hardly necessary excepting for the purpose of comparative measurements, for the image of the white foot-print, fully two inches long, was so microscopically sharp that, with the assistance of the lens, the minutest detail could be clearly seen.

"There is certainly not a vestige of little toe," remarked Thorndyke, "and the plump appearance of the other toes supports your rejection of Raynaud's disease. Does the character of the foot-print convey any other suggestion to you, Jervis?"

"It gives me the impression that the man had been accustomed to go bare-footed in early life and had only taken to boots comparatively recently. The position of the great toe suggests this, and the presence of a number of small scars on the toes and ball of the foot seems to confirm it. A person walking bare-foot would sustain innumerable small wounds from treading on small, sharp objects."

Thorndyke looked dissatisfied. "I agree with you," he said, "as to the suggestion offered by the undeformed state of the great toes; but those little pits do not convey to me the impression of scars produced as you suggest. Still, you may be right."

Here our conversation was interrupted by a knock on the outer oak. Thorndyke stepped out through the lobby and I heard him open the door. A moment or two later he re-entered, accompanied by a short, brown-faced gentleman whom I instantly recognised as Mr. Wardale.

"I must have come up by the same train as you," he remarked as we shook hands, "and to a certain extent, I suspect, on the same errand. I thought I would like to put our arrangement on a business footing, as I am a stranger to both of you."

“What do you want us to do?” asked Thorndyke.

“I want you to watch the case, and, if necessary, to look into the facts independently.”

“Can you give us any information that may help us?”

Mr. Wardale reflected. “I don’t think I can,” he said at length. “I have no facts that you have not, and any surmises of mine might be misleading. I had rather you kept an open mind. But perhaps we might go into the question of costs.”

This, of course, was somewhat difficult, but Thorndyke contrived to indicate the probable liabilities involved to Mr. Wardale’s satisfaction.

“There is one other little matter,” said Wardale as he rose to depart. “I have got a suit-case here which Mrs. Beddingfield lent me to bring some things up to town. It is one that Mr. Macauley left behind when he went away from the boarding-house. Mrs. Beddingfield suggested that I might leave it at his chambers when I had finished with it; but I don’t know his address, excepting that it is somewhere in the Temple, and I don’t want to meet the fellow if he should happen to have come up to town.”

“Is it empty?” asked Thorndyke.

“Excepting for a suit of pyjamas and a pair of shocking old slippers.” He opened the suit-case as he spoke and exhibited its contents with a grin.

“Characteristic of a negro, isn’t it? Pink silk pyjamas and slippers about three sizes too small.”

“Very well,” said Thorndyke. “I will get my man to find out the address and leave it there.”

As Mr. Wardale went out, Polton entered with the enlarged photographs, which showed the foot-prints the natural size. Thorndyke handed them to me, and as I sat down to examine them he followed his assistant to the laboratory. He returned in a few minutes, and after a brief inspection of the photographs, remarked:

“They show us nothing more than we have seen, though they may be useful later. So your stock of facts is all we have to go on at present. Are you going home to-night?”

“Yes, I shall go back to Margate to-morrow.”

“Then, as I have to call at Scotland Yard, we may as well walk to Charing Cross together.”

As we walked down the Strand we gossiped on general topics, but before we separated at Charing Cross, Thorndyke reverted to the case.

“Let me know the date of the inquest,” said he, “and try to find out what the poison was—if it was really a poison.”

“The liquid that was left in the bottle seemed to be a watery solution of some kind,” said I, “as I think I mentioned.”

“Yes,” said Thorndyke. “Possibly a watery infusion of strophanthus.”

“Why strophanthus?” I asked.

“Why not?” demanded Thorndyke. And with this and an inscrutable smile, he turned and walked down Whitehall.

Three days later I found myself at Margate sitting beside Thorndyke in a room adjoining the Town Hall, in which the inquest on the death of Mrs. Toussaint was to be held. Already the coroner was in his chair, the jury were in their seats and the witnesses assembled in a group of chairs apart. These included Foxton, a stranger who sat by him—presumably the other medical witness—Mrs. Beddingfield, Mr. Wardale, the police superintendent and a well-dressed coloured man, whom I correctly assumed to be Mr. Macauley.

As I sat by my rather sphinx-like colleague my mind recurred for the hundredth time to his extraordinary powers of mental synthesis. That parting remark of his as to the possible nature of the poison had brought home to me in a flash the fact that he already had a definite theory of this crime, and that his theory was not mine nor that of the police. True, the poison might not be strophanthus after all, but that would not alter the position. He had a theory of the crime, but yet he was in possession of no facts excepting those with which I had supplied him. Therefore those facts contained the material for a theory, whereas I had deduced from them nothing but the bald, ambiguous mathematical probabilities.

The first witness called was naturally Dr. Foxton, who described the circumstances already known to me. He further stated that he had been present at the autopsy, that he had found, on the throat and limbs of the deceased, bruises that suggested a struggle and violent restraint. The immediate cause of death was heart failure, but whether that failure was due to shock, terror, or the action of a poison he could not positively say.

The next witness was a Dr. Prescott, an expert pathologist and toxicologist. He had made the autopsy and agreed with Dr. Foxton as to the cause of death.

He had examined the liquid contained in the bottle taken from the hand of the deceased and found it to be a watery infusion or decoction of strophanthus seeds. He had analysed the fluid contained in the stomach and found it to consist largely of the same infusion.

“Is infusion of strophanthus seeds used in medicine?” the coroner asked.

“No,” was the reply. “The tincture is the form in which strophanthus is administered unless it is given in the form of strophanthine.”

“Do you consider that the strophanthus caused or contributed to death?”

“It is difficult to say,” replied Dr. Prescott. “Strophanthus is a heart poison, and there was a very large poisonous dose. But very little had been absorbed, and the appearances were not inconsistent with death from shock.”

“Could death have been self-produced by the voluntary taking of the poison?” asked the coroner.

“I should say, decidedly not. Dr. Foxton’s evidence shows that the bottle was almost certainly placed in the hands of the deceased after death, and this is in complete agreement with the enormous dose and small absorption.”

“Would you say that appearances point to suicidal or homicidal poisoning?”

“I should say that they point to homicidal poisoning, but that death was probably due mainly to shock.”

This concluded the expert’s evidence. It was followed by that of Mrs. Beddingfield, which brought out nothing new to me but the fact that a trunk had been broken open and a small attaché case belonging to the deceased abstracted and taken away.

“Do you know what the deceased kept in that case?” the coroner asked.

“I have seen her put her husband’s letters into it. She had quite a number of them. I don’t know what else she kept in it except, of course, her cheque book.”

“Had she any considerable balance at the bank?”

“I believe she had. Her husband used to send most of his pay home and she used to pay it in and leave it with the bank. She might have two or three hundred pounds to her credit.”

As Mrs. Beddingfield concluded Mr. Wardale was called, and he was followed by Mr. Macauley. The evidence of both was quite brief and concerned entirely with the disturbance made by Bergson, whose absence from

the court I had already noted.

The last witness was the police superintendent, and he, as I had expected, was decidedly reticent. He did refer to the foot-prints, but, like Foxton—who presumably had his instructions—he abstained from describing their peculiarities. Nor did he say anything about finger-prints. As to the identity of the criminal, that had to be further inquired into. Suspicion had at first fastened upon Bergson, but it had since transpired that the Swede sailed from Ramsgate on an ice-ship two days before the occurrence of the tragedy. Then suspicion had pointed to the husband, who was known to have landed at Liverpool four days before the death of his wife and who had mysteriously disappeared. But he (the superintendent) had only that morning received a telegram from the Liverpool police informing him that the body of Toussaint had been found floating in the Mersey, and that it bore a number of wounds of an apparently homicidal character. Apparently he had been murdered and his corpse thrown into the river.

“This is very terrible,” said the coroner. “Does this second murder throw any light on the case which we are investigating?”

“I think it does,” replied the officer, without any great conviction, however, “but it is not advisable to go into details.”

“Quite so,” agreed the coroner. “Most inexpedient. But are we to understand that you have a clue to the perpetrator of this crime—assuming a crime to have been committed?”

“Yes,” replied Platt. “We have several important clues.”

“And do they point to any particular individual?”

The superintendent hesitated. “Well—” he began, with some embarrassment, but the coroner interrupted him.

“Perhaps the question is indiscreet. We mustn’t hamper the police, gentlemen, and the point is not really material to our inquiry. You would rather we waived that question, superintendent?”

“If you please, sir,” was the emphatic reply.

“Have any cheques from the deceased woman’s cheque-book been presented at the bank?”

“Not since her death. I inquired at the bank only this morning.”

This concluded the evidence, and after a brief but capable summing-up by the coroner, the jury returned a verdict of “wilful murder against some person

unknown.”

As the proceedings terminated, Thorndyke rose and turned round, and then to my surprise I perceived Superintendent Miller, of the Criminal Investigation Department, who had come in unperceived by me and was sitting immediately behind us.

“I have followed your instructions, sir,” said he, addressing Thorndyke, “but before we take any definite action I should like to have a few words with you.”

He led the way to an adjoining room, and as we entered we were followed by Superintendent Platt and Dr. Foxton.

“Now, doctor,” said Miller, carefully closing the door, “I have carried out your suggestions. Mr. Macauley is being detained, but before we commit ourselves to an arrest, we must have something to go upon. I shall want you to make out a prima facie case.”

“Very well,” said Thorndyke, laying upon the table the small, green suitcase that was his almost invariable companion.

“I’ve seen that prima facie case before,” Miller remarked with a grin, as Thorndyke unlocked it and drew out a large envelope. “Now, what have you got there?”

As Thorndyke extracted from the envelope Polton’s enlargements of my small photographs, Platt’s eyes appeared to bulge, while Foxton gave me a quick glance of reproach.

“These,” said Thorndyke, “are the full-sized photographs of the foot-prints of the suspected murderer. Superintendent Platt can probably verify them.”

Rather reluctantly Platt produced from his pocket a pair of whole-plate photographs, which he laid beside the enlargements.

“Yes,” said Miller, after comparing them, “they are the same foot-prints. But you say, doctor, that they are Macauley’s foot-prints. Now, what evidence have you?”

Thorndyke again had recourse to the green case, from which he produced two copper plates mounted on wood and coated with printing ink.

“I propose,” said he, lifting the plates out of their protecting frame, “that we take prints of Macauley’s feet and compare them with the photographs.”

“Yes,” said Platt. “And then there are the finger-prints that we’ve got. We can test those, too.”

“You don’t want finger-prints if you’ve got a set of toe-prints,” objected Miller.

“With regard to those finger-prints,” said Thorndyke. “May I ask if they were obtained from the bottle?”

“They were,” Platt admitted.

“And were there any other finger-prints?”

“No,” replied Platt. “These were the only ones.”

As he spoke he laid on the table a photograph showing the prints of the thumb and fingers of a right hand.

Thorndyke glanced at the photograph and, turning to Miller, said:

“I suggest that those are Dr. Foxton’s finger-prints.”

“Impossible!” exclaimed Platt, and then suddenly fell silent.

“We can soon see,” said Thorndyke, producing from the case a pad of white paper. “If Dr. Foxton will lay the finger-tips of his right hand first on this inked plate and then on the paper, we can compare the prints with the photograph.”

Foxton placed his fingers on the blackened plate and then pressed them on the paper pad, leaving on the latter four beautifully clear, black finger-prints. These Superintendent Platt scrutinised eagerly, and as his glance travelled from the prints to the photographs he broke into a sheepish grin.

“Sold again!” he muttered. “They are the same prints.”

“Well,” said Miller in a tone of disgust, “you must have been a mug not to have thought of that when you knew that Dr. Foxton had handled the bottle.”

“The fact, however, is important,” said Thorndyke. “The absence of any finger-prints but Dr. Foxton’s not only suggests that the murderer took the precaution to wear gloves, but especially it proves that the bottle was not handled by the deceased during life. A suicide’s hands will usually be pretty moist and would leave conspicuous, if not very clear, impressions.”

“Yes,” agreed Miller, “that is quite true. But with regard to these foot-prints. We can’t compel this man to let us examine his feet without arresting him. Don’t think, Dr. Thorndyke, that I suspect you of guessing. I’ve known you too long for that. You’ve got your facts all right, I don’t doubt, but you must let us have enough to justify our arrest.”

Thorndyke’s answer was to plunge once more into the inexhaustible green

case, from which he now produced two objects wrapped in tissue paper. The paper being removed, there was revealed what looked like a model of an excessively shabby pair of brown shoes.

“These,” said Thorndyke, exhibiting the “models” to Superintendent Miller—who viewed them with an undisguised grin—“are plaster casts of the interiors of a pair of slippers—very old and much too tight—belonging to Mr. Macauley. His name was written inside them. The casts have been waxed and painted with raw umber, which has been lightly rubbed off, thus accentuating the prominences and depressions. You will notice that the impressions of the toes on the soles and of the ‘knuckles’ on the uppers appear as prominences; in fact we have in these casts a sketchy reproduction of the actual feet.

“Now, first as to dimensions. Dr. Jervis’s measurements of the foot-prints give us ten inches and three-quarters as the extreme length and four inches and five-eighths as the extreme width at the heads of the metatarsus. On these casts, as you see, the extreme length is ten inches and five-eighths—the loss of one-eighth being accounted for by the curve of the sole—and the extreme width is four inches and a quarter—three-eighths being accounted for by the lateral compression of a tight slipper. The agreement of the dimensions is remarkable, considering the unusual size. And now as to the peculiarities of the feet. You notice that each toe has made a perfectly distinct impression on the sole, excepting the little toe, of which there is no trace in either cast. And, turning to the uppers, you notice that the knuckles of the toes appear quite distinct and prominent—again excepting the little toes, which have made no impression at all. Thus it is not a case of retracted little toes, for they would appear as an extra prominence. Then, looking at the feet as a whole, it is evident that the little toes are absent; there is a distinct hollow where there should be a prominence.”

“M’yes,” said Miller dubiously, “it’s all very neat. But isn’t it just a bit speculative?”

“Oh, come, Miller,” protested Thorndyke; “just consider the facts. Here is a suspected murderer known to have feet of an unusual size and presenting a very rare deformity; and here are a pair of feet of that same unusual size and presenting that same rare deformity; and they are the feet of a man who had actually lived in the same house as the murdered woman and who, at the date of the crime, was living only two doors away. What more would you have?”

“Well, there is the question of motive,” objected Miller.

“That hardly belongs to a *prima facie* case,” said Thorndyke. “But even if it did, is there not ample matter for suspicion? Remember who the murdered

woman was, what her husband was, and who this Sierra Leone gentleman is.”

“Yes, yes; that’s true,” said Miller somewhat hastily, either perceiving the drift of Thorndyke’s argument (which I did not), or being unwilling to admit that he was still in the dark. “Yes, we’ll have the fellow in and get his actual foot-prints.”

He went to the door and, putting his head out, made some sign, which was almost immediately followed by a trampling of feet, and Macauley entered the room, followed by two large plain-clothes policemen. The negro was evidently alarmed, for he looked about him with the wild expression of a hunted animal. But his manner was aggressive and truculent.

“Why am I being interfered with in this impertinent manner?” he demanded in the deep, buzzing voice characteristic of the male negro.

“We want to have a look at your feet, Mr. Macauley,” said Miller. “Will you kindly take off your shoes and socks?”

“No,” roared Macauley. “I’ll see you damned first.”

“Then,” said Miller, “I arrest you on a charge of having murdered——”

The rest of the sentence was drowned in a sudden uproar. The tall, powerful negro, bellowing like an angry bull, had whipped out a large, strangely shaped knife and charged furiously at the superintendent. But the two plain-clothes men had been watching him from behind and now sprang upon him, each seizing an arm. Two sharp, metallic clicks in quick succession, a thunderous crash and an ear-splitting yell, and the formidable barbarian lay prostrate on the floor with one massive constable sitting astride his chest and the other seated on his knees.

“Now’s your chance, doctor,” said Miller. “I’ll get his shoes and socks off.”

As Thorndyke re-inked his plates, Miller and the local superintendent expertly removed the smart patent shoes and the green silk socks from the feet of the writhing, bellowing negro. Then Thorndyke rapidly and skilfully applied the inked plates to the soles of the feet—which I steadied for the purpose—and followed up with a dexterous pressure of the paper pad, first to one foot and then—having torn off the printed sheet—to the other. In spite of the difficulties occasioned by Macauley’s struggles, each sheet presented a perfectly clear and sharp print of the sole of the foot, even the ridge-patterns of the toes and ball of the foot being quite distinct. Thorndyke laid each of the new prints on the table beside the corresponding large photograph, and invited the two superintendents to compare them.

“Yes,” said Miller—and Superintendent Platt nodded his acquiescence—“there can’t be a shadow of a doubt. The ink-prints and the photographs are identical, to every line and skin-marking. You’ve made out your case, doctor, as you always do.”

“So you see,” said Thorndyke, as we smoked our evening pipes on the old stone pier, “your method was a perfectly sound one, only you didn’t apply it properly. Like too many mathematicians, you started on your calculations before you had secured your data. If you had applied the simple laws of probability to the real data, they would have pointed straight to Macauley.”

“How do you suppose he lost his little toes?” I asked.

“I don’t suppose at all. Obviously it was a case of double ainhum.”

“Ainhum!” I exclaimed with a sudden flash of recollection.

“Yes; that was what you overlooked. You compared the probabilities of three diseases either of which only very rarely causes the loss of even one little toe and infinitely rarely causes the loss of both, and none of which conditions is confined to any definite class of persons; and you ignored ainhum, a disease which attacks almost exclusively the little toe, causing it to drop off, and quite commonly destroys both little toes—a disease, moreover, which is confined to the black-skinned races. In European practice ainhum is unknown, but in Africa, and to a less extent, in India, it is quite common. If you were to assemble all the men in the world who have lost both little toes, more than nine-tenths of them would be suffering from ainhum; so that, by the laws of probability, your foot-prints were, by nine chances to one, those of a man who had suffered from ainhum, and therefore a black-skinned man. But as soon as you had established a black man as the probable criminal, you opened up a new field of corroborative evidence. There was a black man on the spot. That man was a native of Sierra Leone and almost certainly a man of importance there. But the victim’s husband had deadly enemies in the native secret societies of Sierra Leone. The letters of the husband to the wife probably contained matter incriminating certain natives of Sierra Leone. The evidence became cumulative, you see. Taken as a whole, it pointed plainly to Macauley, apart from the new fact of the murder of Toussaint in Liverpool, a city with a considerable floating population of West Africans.”

“And I gather from your reference to the African poison, strophanthus, that you fixed on Macauley at once when I gave you my sketch of the case?”

“Yes; especially when I saw your photographs of the foot-prints with the

absent little toes and those characteristic chigger-scars on the toes that remained. But it was sheer luck that enabled me to fit the keystone into its place and turn mere probability into virtual certainty. I could have embraced the magician Wardale when he brought us the magic slippers. Still, it isn't an absolute certainty, even now, though I expect it will be by to-morrow."

And Thorndyke was right. That very evening the police entered Macauley's chambers in Tanfield Court, where they discovered the dead woman's attaché case. It still contained Toussaint's letters to his wife, and one of those letters mentioned by name, as members of a dangerous secret society, several prominent Sierra Leone men, including the accused David Macauley.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

This story is Number Thirty One 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.

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[The end of *The Case of the White Foot-prints* by Richard Austin Freeman]