

RICHARD AUSTIN FREEMAN

THE RED THUMB MARK

Richard Austin Freeman

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R. Austin Freeman

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CHAPTER I

MY LEARNED BROTHER

"Conflagratam An° 1677. Fabricatam An° 1698. Richardo Powell Armiger Thesaurar." The words, set in four panels, which formed a frieze beneath the pediment of a fine brick portico, summarised the history of one of the tall houses at the upper end of King's Bench Walk and as I, somewhat absently, read over the inscription, my attention was divided between admiration of the exquisitely finished carved brickwork and the quiet dignity of the building, and an effort to reconstitute the dead and gone Richard Powell, and the stirring times in which he played his part.

I was about to turn away when the empty frame of the portico became occupied by a figure, and one so appropriate, in its wig and obsolete habiliments, to the old-world surroundings that it seemed to complete the picture, and I lingered idly to look at it. The barrister had halted in the doorway to turn over a sheaf of papers that he held in his hand, and, as he replaced the red tape which bound them together, he looked up and our eyes met. For a moment we regarded one another with the incurious gaze that casual strangers bestow on one another; then there was a flash of mutual recognition; the impassive and rather severe face of the lawyer softened into a genial smile, and the figure, detaching itself from its frame, came down the steps with a hand extended in cordial greeting.

"My dear Jervis," he exclaimed, as we clasped hands warmly, "this is a great and delightful surprise. How often have I thought of my old comrade and wondered if I should ever see him again, and lo! here he is, thrown up on the sounding beach of the Inner Temple, like the proverbial bread cast upon the waters."

"Your surprise, Thorndyke, is nothing to mine," I replied, "for your bread has at least returned as bread; whereas I am in the position of a man who, having cast his bread upon the waters, sees it return in the form of a buttered muffin or a Bath bun. I left a respectable medical practitioner and I find him transformed into a bewigged and begowned limb of the law."

Thorndyke laughed at the comparison.

"Likened not your old friend unto a Bath bun," said he. "Say, rather, that you left him a chrysalis and come back to find him a butterfly. But the change is not so great as you think. Hippocrates is only hiding under the gown of Solon, as you will understand when I explain my metamorphosis; and that I will do this very evening, if you have no engagement."

"I am one of the unemployed at present," I said, "and quite at your service."

"Then come round to my chambers at seven," said Thorndyke, "and we will have a chop and a pint of claret together and exchange autobiographies. I am due in court in a few minutes."

"Do you reside within that noble old portico?" I asked.

"No," replied Thorndyke. "I often wish I did. It would add several inches to one's stature to feel that the mouth of one's burrow was graced with a Latin inscription for admiring strangers to ponder over. No; my chambers are some doors further down—number 6A"—and he turned to point out the house as we crossed towards Crown Office Row.

At the top of Middle Temple Lane we parted, Thorndyke taking his way with fluttering gown towards the Law Courts, while I directed my steps westward towards Adam Street, the chosen haunt of the medical agent.

The soft-voiced bell of the Temple clock was telling out the hour of seven in muffled accents (as though it apologised for breaking the studious silence) as I emerged from the archway of Mitre Court and turned into King's Bench Walk.

The paved footway was empty save for a single figure, pacing slowly before the doorway of number 6A, in which, though the wig had now given place to a felt hat and the gown to a jacket, I had no difficulty in recognising my friend.

"Punctual to the moment, as of old," said he, meeting me half-way. "What a blessed virtue is punctuality, even in small things. I have just been taking the air in Fountain Court, and will now introduce you to my chambers. Here is my humble retreat."

We passed in through the common entrance and ascended the stone stairs to the first floor, where we were confronted by a massive door, above which my friend's name was written in white letters.

"Rather a forbidding exterior," remarked Thorndyke, as he inserted the latchkey, "but it is homely enough inside."

The heavy door swung outwards and disclosed a baize-covered inner door, which Thorndyke pushed open and held for me to pass in.

"You will find my chambers an odd mixture," said Thorndyke, "for they combine the attractions of an office, a museum, a laboratory and a workshop."

"And a restaurant," added a small, elderly man, who was decanting a bottle of claret by means of a glass syphon: "you forgot that, sir."

"Yes, I forgot that, Polton," said Thorndyke, "but I see you have not." He glanced towards a small table that had been placed near the fire and set out with the requisites for our meal.

"Tell me," said Thorndyke, as we made the initial onslaught on the products of Polton's culinary experiments, "what has been happening to you since you left the hospital six years ago?"

"My story is soon told," I answered, somewhat bitterly. "It is not an uncommon one. My funds ran out, as you know, rather unexpectedly. When I had paid my examination and registration fees the coffer was absolutely empty, and though, no doubt, a medical diploma contains—to use Johnson's phrase—the potentiality of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice, there is a vast difference in practice between the potential and the actual. I have, in fact, been earning a subsistence, sometimes as an assistant, sometimes as a *locum tenens*. Just now I've got no work to do, and so have entered my name on Turcival's list of eligibles."

Thorndyke pursed up his lips and frowned.

"It's a wicked shame, Jervis," said he presently, "that a man of your abilities and scientific acquirements should be frittering away his time on odd jobs like some half-qualified wastrel."

"It is," I agreed. "My merits are grossly undervalued by a stiff-necked and obtuse generation. But what would you have, my learned brother? If poverty steps behind you and claps the occulting bushel over your thirty thousand candle-power luminary, your brilliancy is apt to be obscured."

"Yes, I suppose that is so," grunted Thorndyke, and he remained for a time in deep thought.

"And now," said I, "let us have your promised explanation. I am positively frizzling with curiosity to know what chain of circumstances has converted John Evelyn Thorndyke from a medical practitioner into a luminary of the law."

Thorndyke smiled indulgently.

"The fact is," said he, "that no such transformation has occurred. John Evelyn Thorndyke is still a medical practitioner."

"What, in a wig and gown!" I exclaimed.

"Yes, a mere sheep in wolf's clothing," he replied. "I will tell you how it has come about. After you left the hospital, six years ago, I stayed on, taking up any small appointments that were going—assistant demonstrator—or curatorships and such like—hung about the chemical and physical laboratories, the museum and post mortem room, and meanwhile took my M.D. and D.Sc. Then I

got called to the bar in the hope of getting a coronership, but soon after this, old Stedman retired unexpectedly—you remember Stedman, the lecturer on medical jurisprudence—and I put in for the vacant post. Rather to my surprise, I was appointed lecturer, whereupon I dismissed the coronership from my mind, took my present chambers and sat down to wait for anything that might come."

"And what has come?" I asked.

"Why, a very curious assortment of miscellaneous practice," he replied. "At first I only got an occasional analysis in a doubtful poisoning case, but, by degrees, my sphere of influence has extended until it now includes all cases in which a special knowledge of medicine or physical science can be brought to bear upon law."

"But you plead in court, I observe," said I.

"Very seldom," he replied. "More usually I appear in the character of that *bête noir* of judges and counsel—the scientific witness. But in most instances I do not appear at all; I merely direct investigations, arrange and analyse the results, and prime the counsel with facts and suggestions for cross-examination."

"A good deal more interesting than acting as understudy for an absent g.p.," said I, a little enviously. "But you deserve to succeed, for you were always a deuce of a worker, to say nothing of your capabilities."

"Yes, I worked hard," replied Thorndyke, "and I work hard still; but I have my hours of labour and my hours of leisure, unlike you poor devils of general practitioners, who are liable to be dragged away from the dinner table or roused out of your first sleep by—confound it all! who can that be?"

For at this moment, as a sort of commentary on his self-congratulation, there came a smart rapping at the outer door.

"Must see who it is, I suppose," he continued, "though one expects people to accept the hint of a closed oak."

He strode across the room and flung open the door with an air of by no means gracious inquiry.

"It's rather late for a business call," said an apologetic voice outside, "but my client was anxious to see you without delay."

"Come in, Mr. Lawley," said Thorndyke, rather stiffly, and, as he held the door open, the two visitors entered. They were both men—one middle-aged, rather foxy in appearance and of a typically legal aspect, and the other a fine, handsome young fellow of very prepossessing exterior, though at present rather pale and wild-looking, and evidently in a state of profound agitation.

"I am afraid," said the latter, with a glance at me and the dinner table, "that our visit—for which I am alone responsible—is a most unseasonable one. If we are really inconveniencing you, Dr. Thorndyke, pray tell us, and my business must wait."

Thorndyke had cast a keen and curious glance at the young man, and he now replied in a much more genial tone—

"I take it that your business is of a kind that will not wait, and as to inconveniencing us, why, my friend and I are both doctors, and, as you are aware, no doctor expects to call any part of the twenty-four hours his own unreservedly."

I had risen on the entrance of the two strangers, and now proposed to take a walk on the Embankment and return later, but the young man interrupted me.

"Pray don't go away on my account," he said. "The facts that I am about to lay before Dr. Thorndyke will be known to all the world by this time to-morrow, so there is no occasion for any show of secrecy."

"In that case," said Thorndyke, "let us draw our chairs up to the fire and fall to business forthwith. We had just finished our dinner and were waiting for the coffee, which I hear my man bringing down at this moment."

We accordingly drew up our chairs, and when Polton had set the coffee on the table and retired, the lawyer plunged into the matter without preamble.

CHAPTER II

THE SUSPECT

"I had better," said he, "give you a general outline of the case as it presents itself to the legal mind, and then my client, Mr. Reuben Hornby, can fill in the details if necessary, and answer any questions that you may wish to put to him.

"Mr. Reuben occupies a position of trust in the business of his uncle, John Hornby, who is a gold and silver refiner and dealer in precious metals generally. There is a certain amount of outside assay work carried on in the establishment, but the main business consists in the testing and refining of samples of gold sent from certain mines in South Africa.

"About five years ago Mr. Reuben and his cousin Walter—another nephew of John Hornby—left school, and both were articled to their uncle, with the view to their ultimately becoming partners in the house; and they have remained with him ever since, occupying, as I have said, positions of considerable responsibility.

"And now for a few words as to how business is conducted in Mr. Hornby's establishment. The samples of gold are handed over at the docks to some accredited representative of the firm—generally either Mr. Reuben or Mr. Walter—who has been despatched to meet the ship, and conveyed either to the bank or to the works according to circumstances. Of course every effort is made to have as little gold as possible on the premises, and the bars are always removed to the bank at the earliest opportunity; but it happens unavoidably that samples of considerable value have often to remain on the premises all night, and so the works are furnished with a large and powerful safe or strong room for their reception. This safe is situated in the private office under the eye of the principal, and, as an additional precaution, the caretaker, who acts as night-watchman, occupies a room directly over the office, and patrols the building periodically through the night.

"Now a very strange thing has occurred with regard to this safe. It happens that one of Mr. Hornby's customers in South Africa is interested in a diamond mine, and, although transactions in precious stones form no part of the business of the house, he has, from time to time, sent parcels of rough diamonds addressed to Mr. Hornby, to be either deposited in the bank or handed on to the diamond brokers.

"A fortnight ago Mr. Hornby was advised that a parcel of stones had been despatched by the *Elmina Castle*, and it appeared that the parcel was an unusually large one and contained stones of exceptional size and value. Under these circumstances Mr. Reuben was sent down to the docks at an early hour in the hope the ship might arrive in time for the stones to be lodged in the bank at once. Unfortunately, however, this was not the case, and the diamonds had to be taken to the works and locked up in the safe."

"Who placed them in the safe?" asked Thorndyke.

"Mr. Hornby himself, to whom Mr. Reuben delivered up the package on his return from the docks."

"Yes," said Thorndyke, "and what happened next?"

"Well, on the following morning, when the safe was opened, the diamonds had disappeared."

"Had the place been broken into?" asked Thorndyke.

"No. The place was all locked up as usual, and the caretaker, who had made his accustomed rounds, had heard nothing, and the safe was, outwardly, quite undisturbed. It had evidently been opened with keys and locked again after the stones were removed."

"And in whose custody were the keys of the safe?" inquired Thorndyke.

"Mr. Hornby usually kept the keys himself, but, on occasions, when he was absent from the office, he handed them over to one of his nephews—whichever happened to be in charge at the time.

But on this occasion the keys did not go out of his custody from the time when he locked up the safe, after depositing the diamonds in it, to the time when it was opened by him on the following morning."

"And was there anything that tended to throw suspicion upon anyone?" asked Thorndyke.

"Why, yes," said Mr. Lawley, with an uncomfortable glance at his client, "unfortunately there was. It seemed that the person who abstracted the diamonds must have cut or scratched his thumb or finger in some way, for there were two drops of blood on the bottom of the safe and one or two bloody smears on a piece of paper, and, in addition, a remarkably clear imprint of a thumb."

"Also in blood?" asked Thorndyke.

"Yes. The thumb had apparently been put down on one of the drops and then, while still wet with blood, had been pressed on the paper in taking hold of it or otherwise."

"Well, and what next?"

"Well," said the lawyer, fidgeting in his chair, "to make a long story short, the thumb-print has been identified as that of Mr. Reuben Hornby."

"Ha!" exclaimed Thorndyke. "The plot thickens with a vengeance. I had better jot down a few notes before you proceed any further."

He took from a drawer a small paper-covered notebook, on the cover of which he wrote "Reuben Hornby," and then, laying the book open on a blotting-pad, which he rested on his knee, he made a few brief notes.

"Now," he said, when he had finished, "with reference to this thumb-print. There is no doubt, I suppose, as to the identification?"

"None whatever," replied Mr. Lawley. "The Scotland Yard people, of course, took possession of the paper, which was handed to the director of the finger-print department for examination and comparison with those in their collection. The report of the experts is that the thumb-print does not agree with any of the thumb-prints of criminals in their possession; that it is a very peculiar one, inasmuch as the ridge-pattern on the bulb of the thumb—which is a remarkably distinct and characteristic one—is crossed by the scar of a deep cut, rendering identification easy and infallible; that it agrees in every respect with the thumb-print of Mr. Reuben Hornby, and is, in fact, his thumb-print beyond any possible doubt."

"Is there any possibility," asked Thorndyke, "that the paper bearing the thumb-print could have been introduced by any person?"

"No," answered the lawyer. "It is quite impossible. The paper on which the mark was found was a leaf from Mr. Hornby's memorandum book. He had pencilled on it some particulars relating to the diamonds, and laid it on the parcel before he closed up the safe."

"Was anyone present when Mr. Hornby opened the safe in the morning?" asked Thorndyke.

"No, he was alone," answered the lawyer. "He saw at a glance that the diamonds were missing, and then he observed the paper with the thumb-mark on it, on which he closed and locked the safe and sent for the police."

"Is it not rather odd that the thief did not notice the thumb-mark, since it was so distinct and conspicuous?"

"No, I think not," answered Mr. Lawley. "The paper was lying face downwards on the bottom of the safe, and it was only when he picked it up and turned it over that Mr. Hornby discovered the thumb-print. Apparently the thief had taken hold of the parcel, with the paper on it, and the paper had afterwards dropped off and fallen with the marked surface downwards—probably when the parcel was transferred to the other hand."

"You mentioned," said Thorndyke, "that the experts at Scotland Yard have identified this thumb-mark as that of Mr. Reuben Hornby. May I ask how they came to have the opportunity of making the comparison?"

"Ah!" said Mr. Lawley. "Thereby hangs a very curious tale of coincidences. The police, of course, when they found that there was so simple a means of identification as a thumb-mark, wished

to take thumb-prints of all the employees in the works; but this Mr. Hornby refused to sanction—rather quixotically, as it seems to me—saying that he would not allow his nephews to be subjected to such an indignity. Now it was, naturally, these nephews in whom the police were chiefly interested, seeing that they alone had had the handling of the keys, and considerable pressure was brought to bear upon Mr. Hornby to have the thumb-prints taken.

"However, he was obdurate, scouting the idea of any suspicion attaching to either of the gentlemen in whom he had reposed such complete confidence and whom he had known all their lives, and so the matter would probably have remained a mystery but for a very odd circumstance.

"You may have seen on the bookstalls and in shop windows an appliance called a 'Thumbograph,' or some such name, consisting of a small book of blank paper for collecting the thumb-prints of one's friends, together with an inking pad."

"I have seen those devices of the Evil One," said Thorndyke, "in fact, I have one, which I bought at Charing Cross Station."

"Well, it seems that some months ago Mrs. Hornby, the wife of John Hornby, purchased one of these toys—"

"As a matter of fact," interrupted Reuben, "it was my cousin Walter who bought the thing and gave it to her."

"Well, that is not material," said Mr. Lawley (though I observed that Thorndyke made a note of the fact in his book); "at any rate, Mrs. Hornby became possessed of one of these appliances and proceeded to fill it with the thumb-prints of her friends, including her two nephews. Now it happened that the detective in charge of this case called yesterday at Mr. Hornby's house when the latter was absent from home, and took the opportunity of urging her to induce her husband to consent to have the thumb-prints of her nephews taken for the inspection of the experts at Scotland Yard. He pointed out that the procedure was really necessary, not only in the interests of justice but in the interests of the young men themselves, who were regarded with considerable suspicion by the police, which suspicion would be completely removed if it could be shown by actual comparison that the thumb-print could not have been made by either of them. Moreover, it seemed that both the young men had expressed their willingness to have the test applied, but had been forbidden by their uncle. Then Mrs. Hornby had a brilliant idea. She suddenly remembered the 'Thumbograph,' and thinking to set the question at rest once for all, fetched the little book and showed it to the detective. It contained the prints of both thumbs of Mr. Reuben (among others), and, as the detective had with him a photograph of the incriminating mark, the comparison was made then and there; and you may imagine Mrs. Hornby's horror and amazement when it was made clear that the print of her nephew Reuben's left thumb corresponded in every particular with the thumb-print that was found in the safe.

"At this juncture Mr. Hornby arrived on the scene and was, of course, overwhelmed with consternation at the turn events had taken. He would have liked to let the matter drop and make good the loss of the diamonds out of his own funds, but, as that would have amounted practically to compounding a felony, he had no choice but to prosecute. As a result, a warrant was issued for the arrest of Mr. Reuben, and was executed this morning, and my client was taken forthwith to Bow Street and charged with the robbery."

"Was any evidence taken?" asked Thorndyke.

"No. Only evidence of arrest. The prisoner is remanded for a week, bail having been accepted in two sureties of five hundred pounds each."

Thorndyke was silent for a space after the conclusion of the narrative. Like me, he was evidently not agreeably impressed by the lawyer's manner, which seemed to take his client's guilt for granted, a position indeed not entirely without excuse having regard to the circumstances of the case.

"What have you advised your client to do?" Thorndyke asked presently.

"I have recommended him to plead guilty and throw himself on the clemency of the court as a first offender. You must see for yourself that there is no defence possible."

The young man flushed crimson, but made no remark.

"But let us be clear how we stand," said Thorndyke. "Are we defending an innocent man or are we endeavouring to obtain a light sentence for a man who admits that he is guilty?"

Mr. Lawley shrugged his shoulders.

"That question can be best answered by our client himself," said he.

Thorndyke directed an inquiring glance at Reuben Hornby, remarking—

"You are not called upon to incriminate yourself in any way, Mr. Hornby, but I must know what position you intend to adopt."

Here I again proposed to withdraw, but Reuben interrupted me.

"There is no need for you to go away, Dr. Jervis," he said. "My position is that I did not commit this robbery and that I know nothing whatever about it or about the thumb-print that was found in the safe. I do not, of course, expect you to believe me in the face of the overwhelming evidence against me, but I do, nevertheless, declare in the most solemn manner before God, that I am absolutely innocent of this crime and have no knowledge of it whatever."

"Then I take it that you did not plead 'guilty'?" said Thorndyke.

"Certainly not; and I never will," replied Reuben hotly.

"You would not be the first innocent man, by very many, who has entered that plea," remarked Mr. Lawley. "It is often the best policy, when the defence is hopelessly weak."

"It is a policy that will not be adopted by me," rejoined Reuben. "I may be, and probably shall be, convicted and sentenced, but I shall continue to maintain my innocence, whatever happens. Do you think," he added, turning to Thorndyke, "that you can undertake my defence on that assumption?"

"It is the only assumption on which I should agree to undertake the case," replied Thorndyke.

"And—if I may ask the question—" pursued Reuben anxiously, "do you find it possible to conceive that I may really be innocent?"

"Certainly I do," Thorndyke replied, on which I observed Mr. Lawley's eyebrows rise perceptibly. "I am a man of facts, not an advocate, and if I found it impossible to entertain the hypothesis of your innocence, I should not be willing to expend time and energy in searching for evidence to prove it. Nevertheless," he continued, seeing the light of hope break out on the face of the unfortunate young man, "I must impress upon you that the case presents enormous difficulties and that we must be prepared to find them insuperable in spite of all our efforts."

"I expect nothing but a conviction," replied Reuben in a calm and resolute voice, "and can face it like a man if only you do not take my guilt for granted, but give me a chance, no matter how small, of making a defence."

"Everything shall be done that I am capable of doing," said Thorndyke; "that I can promise you. The long odds against us are themselves a spur to endeavour, as far as I am concerned. And now, let me ask you, have you any cuts or scratches on your fingers?"

Reuben Hornby held out both his hands for my colleague's inspection, and I noticed that they were powerful and shapely, like the hands of a skilled craftsman, though faultlessly kept. Thorndyke set on the table a large condenser such as is used for microscopic work, and taking his client's hand, brought the bright spot of light to bear on each finger in succession, examining their tips and the parts around the nails with the aid of a pocket lens.

"A fine, capable hand, this," said he, regarding the member approvingly, as he finished his examination, "but I don't perceive any trace of a scar on either the right or left. Will you go over them, Jervis? The robbery took place a fortnight ago, so there has been time for a small cut or scratch to heal and disappear entirely. Still, the matter is worth noting."

He handed me the lens and I scrutinised every part of each hand without being able to detect the faintest trace of any recent wound.

"There is one other matter that must be attended to before you go," said Thorndyke, pressing the electric bell-push by his chair. "I will take one or two prints of the left thumb for my own information."

In response to the summons, Polton made his appearance from some lair unknown to me, but presumably the laboratory, and, having received his instructions, retired, and presently returned carrying a box, which he laid on the table. From this receptacle Thorndyke drew forth a bright copper plate mounted on a slab of hard wood, a small printer's roller, a tube of finger-print ink, and a number of cards with very white and rather glazed surfaces.

"Now, Mr. Hornby," said he, "your hands, I see, are beyond criticism as to cleanliness, but we will, nevertheless, give the thumb a final polish."

Accordingly he proceeded to brush the bulb of the thumb with a well-soaked badger-hair nail-brush, and, having rinsed it in water, dried it with a silk handkerchief, and gave it a final rub on a piece of chamois leather. The thumb having been thus prepared, he squeezed out a drop of the thick ink on to the copper plate and spread it out with the roller, testing the condition of the film from time to time by touching the plate with the tip of his finger and taking an impression on one of the cards.

When the ink had been rolled out to the requisite thinness, he took Reuben's hand and pressed the thumb lightly but firmly on to the inked plate; then, transferring the thumb to one of the cards, which he directed me to hold steady on the table, he repeated the pressure, when there was left on the card a beautifully sharp and clear impression of the bulb of the thumb, the tiny papillary ridges being shown with microscopic distinctness, and even the mouths of the sweat glands, which appeared as rows of little white dots on the black lines of the ridges. This manoeuvre was repeated a dozen times on two of the cards, each of which thus received six impressions. Thorndyke then took one or two rolled prints, *i.e.* prints produced by rolling the thumb first on the inked slab and then on the card, by which means a much larger portion of the surface of the thumb was displayed in a single print.

"And now," said Thorndyke, "that we may be furnished with all the necessary means of comparison, we will take an impression in blood."

The thumb was accordingly cleansed and dried afresh, when Thorndyke, having pricked his own thumb with a needle, squeezed out a good-sized drop of blood on to a card.

"There," said he, with a smile, as he spread the drop out with the needle into a little shallow pool, "it is not every lawyer who is willing to shed his blood in the interests of his client."

He proceeded to make a dozen prints as before on two cards, writing a number with his pencil opposite each print as he made it.

"We are now," said he, as he finally cleansed his client's thumb, "furnished with the material for a preliminary investigation, and if you will now give me your address, Mr. Hornby, we may consider our business concluded for the present. I must apologise to you, Mr. Lawley, for having detained you so long with these experiments."

The lawyer had, in fact, been viewing the proceedings with hardly concealed impatience, and he now rose with evident relief that they were at an end.

"I have been highly interested," he said mendaciously, "though I confess I do not quite fathom your intentions. And, by the way, I should like to have a few words with you on another matter, if Mr. Reuben would not mind waiting for me in the square just a few minutes."

"Not at all," said Reuben, who was, I perceived, in no way deceived by the lawyer's pretence. "Don't hurry on my account; my time is my own—at present." He held out his hand to Thorndyke, who grasped it cordially.

"Good-bye, Mr. Hornby," said the latter. "Do not be unreasonably sanguine, but at the same time, do not lose heart. Keep your wits about you and let me know at once if anything occurs to you that may have a bearing on the case."

The young man then took his leave, and, as the door closed after him, Mr. Lawley turned towards Thorndyke.

"I thought I had better have a word with you alone," he said, "just to hear what line you propose to take up, for I confess that your attitude has puzzled me completely."

"What line would you propose?" asked Thorndyke.

"Well," said the lawyer, with a shrug of his shoulders, "the position seems to be this: our young friend has stolen a parcel of diamonds and has been found out; at least, that is how the matter presents itself to me."

"That is not how it presents itself to me," said Thorndyke drily. "He may have taken the diamonds or he may not. I have no means of judging until I have sifted the evidence and acquired a few more facts. This I hope to do in the course of the next day or two, and I suggest that we postpone the consideration of our plan of campaign until I have seen what line of defence it is possible to adopt."

"As you will," replied the lawyer, taking up his hat, "but I am afraid you are encouraging the young rogue to entertain hopes that will only make his fall the harder—to say nothing of our own position. We don't want to make ourselves ridiculous in court, you know."

"I don't, certainly," agreed Thorndyke. "However, I will look into the matter and communicate with you in the course of a day or two."

He stood holding the door open as the lawyer descended the stairs, and when the footsteps at length died away, he closed it sharply and turned to me with an air of annoyance.

"The 'young rogue,'" he remarked, "does not appear to me to have been very happy in his choice of a solicitor. By the way, Jervis, I understand you are out of employment just now?"

"That is so," I answered.

"Would you care to help me—as a matter of business, of course—to work up this case? I have a lot of other work on hand and your assistance would be of great value to me."

I said, with great truth, that I should be delighted.

"Then," said Thorndyke, "come round to breakfast to-morrow and we will settle the terms, and you can commence your duties at once. And now let us light our pipes and finish our yarns as though agitated clients and thick-headed solicitors had no existence."

CHAPTER III

A LADY IN THE CASE

When I arrived at Thorndyke's chambers on the following morning, I found my friend already hard at work. Breakfast was laid at one end of the table, while at the other stood a microscope of the pattern used for examining plate-cultures of micro-organisms, on the wide stage of which was one of the cards bearing six thumb-prints in blood. A condenser threw a bright spot of light on the card, which Thorndyke had been examining when I knocked, as I gathered from the position of the chair, which he now pushed back against the wall.

"I see you have commenced work on our problem," I remarked as, in response to a double ring of the electric bell, Polton entered with the materials for our repast.

"Yes," answered Thorndyke. "I have opened the campaign, supported, as usual, by my trusty chief-of-staff; eh! Polton?"

The little man, whose intellectual, refined countenance and dignified bearing seemed oddly out of character with the tea-tray that he carried, smiled proudly, and, with a glance of affectionate admiration at my friend, replied—

"Yes, sir. We haven't been letting the grass grow under our feet. There's a beautiful negative washing upstairs and a bromide enlargement too, which will be mounted and dried by the time you have finished your breakfast."

"A wonderful man that, Jervis," my friend observed as his assistant retired. "Looks like a rural dean or a chancery judge, and was obviously intended by Nature to be a professor of physics. As an actual fact he was first a watchmaker, then a maker of optical instruments, and now he is mechanical factotum to a medical jurist. He is my right-hand, is Polton; takes an idea before you have time to utter it—but you will make his more intimate acquaintance by-and-by."

"Where did you pick him up?" I asked.

"He was an in-patient at the hospital when I first met him, miserably ill and broken, a victim of poverty and undeserved misfortune. I gave him one or two little jobs, and when I found what class of man he was I took him permanently into my service. He is perfectly devoted to me, and his gratitude is as boundless as it is uncalled for."

"What are the photographs he was referring to?" I asked.

"He is making an enlarged *facsimile* of one of the thumb-prints on bromide paper and a negative of the same size in case we want the print repeated."

"You evidently have some expectation of being able to help poor Hornby," said I, "though I cannot imagine how you propose to go to work. To me his case seems as hopeless a one as it is possible to conceive. One doesn't like to condemn him, but yet his innocence seems almost unthinkable."

"It does certainly look like a hopeless case," Thorndyke agreed, "and I see no way out of it at present. But I make it a rule, in all cases, to proceed on the strictly classical lines of inductive inquiry—collect facts, make hypotheses, test them and seek for verification. And I always endeavour to keep a perfectly open mind."

"Now, in the present case, assuming, as we must, that the robbery has actually taken place, there are four conceivable hypotheses: (1) that the robbery was committed by Reuben Hornby; (2) that it was committed by Walter Hornby; (3) that it was committed by John Hornby, or (4) that it was committed by some other person or persons."

"The last hypothesis I propose to disregard for the present and confine myself to the examination of the other three."

"You don't think it possible that Mr. Hornby could have stolen the diamonds out of his own safe?" I exclaimed.

"I incline at present to no one theory of the matter," replied Thorndyke. "I merely state the hypotheses. John Hornby had access to the diamonds, therefore it is possible that he stole them."

"But surely he was responsible to the owners."

"Not in the absence of gross negligence, which the owners would have difficulty in proving. You see, he was what is called a gratuitous bailee, and in such a case no responsibility for loss lies with the bailee unless there has been gross negligence."

"But the thumb-mark, my dear fellow!" I exclaimed. "How can you possibly get over that?"

"I don't know that I can," answered Thorndyke calmly; "but I see you are taking the same view as the police, who persist in regarding a finger-print as a kind of magical touchstone, a final proof, beyond which inquiry need not go. Now, this is an entire mistake. A finger-print is merely a fact—a very important and significant one, I admit—but still a fact, which, like any other fact, requires to be weighed and measured with reference to its evidential value."

"And what do you propose to do first?"

"I shall first satisfy myself that the suspected thumb-print is identical in character with that of Reuben Hornby—of which, however, I have very little doubt, for the finger-print experts may fairly be trusted in their own speciality."

"And then?"

"I shall collect fresh facts, in which I look to you for assistance, and, if we have finished breakfast, I may as well induct you into your new duties."

He rose and rang the bell, and then, fetching from the office four small, paper-covered notebooks, laid them before me on the table.

"One of these books," said he, "we will devote to data concerning Reuben Hornby. You will find out anything you can—anything, mind, no matter how trivial or apparently irrelevant—in any way connected with him and enter it in this book." He wrote on the cover "Reuben Hornby" and passed the book to me. "In this second book you will, in like manner, enter anything that you can learn about Walter Hornby, and, in the third book, data concerning John Hornby. As to the fourth book, you will keep that for stray facts connected with the case but not coming under either of the other headings. And now let us look at the product of Polton's industry."

He took from his assistant's hand a photograph ten inches long by eight broad, done on glazed bromide paper and mounted flatly on stiff card. It showed a greatly magnified *facsimile* of one of the thumb-prints, in which all the minute details, such as the orifices of the sweat glands and trifling irregularities in the ridges, which, in the original, could be seen only with the aid of a lens, were plainly visible to the naked eye. Moreover, the entire print was covered by a network of fine black lines, by which it was divided into a multitude of small squares, each square being distinguished by a number.

"Excellent, Polton," said Thorndyke approvingly; "a most admirable enlargement. You see, Jervis, we have photographed the thumb-print in contact with a numbered micrometer divided into square twelfths of an inch. The magnification is eight diameters, so that the squares are here each two-thirds of an inch in diameter. I have a number of these micrometers of different scales, and I find them invaluable in examining cheques, doubtful signatures and such like. I see you have packed up the camera and the microscope, Polton; have you put in the micrometer?"

"Yes, sir," replied Polton, "and the six-inch objective and the low-power eye-piece. Everything is in the case; and I have put 'special rapid' plates into the dark-slides in case the light should be bad."

"Then we will go forth and beard the Scotland Yard lions in their den," said Thorndyke, putting on his hat and gloves.

"But surely," said I, "you are not going to drag that great microscope to Scotland Yard, when you only want eight diameters. Haven't you a dissecting microscope or some other portable instrument?"

"We have a most delightful instrument of the dissecting type, of Polton's own make—he shall show it to you. But I may have need of a more powerful instrument—and here let me give you a word

of warning: whatever you may see me do, make no comments before the officials. We are seeking information, not giving it, you understand."

At this moment the little brass knocker on the inner door—the outer oak being open—uttered a timid and apologetic rat-tat.

"Who the deuce can that be?" muttered Thorndyke, replacing the microscope on the table. He strode across to the door and opened it somewhat brusquely, but immediately whisked his hat off, and I then perceived a lady standing on the threshold.

"Dr. Thorndyke?" she inquired, and as my colleague bowed, she continued, "I ought to have written to ask for an appointment but the matter is rather urgent—it concerns Mr. Reuben Hornby and I only learned from him this morning that he had consulted you."

"Pray come in," said Thorndyke. "Dr. Jervis and I were just setting out for Scotland Yard on this very business. Let me present you to my colleague, who is working up the case with me."

Our visitor, a tall handsome girl of twenty or thereabouts, returned my bow and remarked with perfect self-possession, "My name is Gibson—Miss Juliet Gibson. My business is of a very simple character and need not detain you many minutes."

She seated herself in the chair that Thorndyke placed for her, and continued in a brisk and business-like manner—

"I must tell you who I am in order to explain my visit to you. For the last six years I have lived with Mr. and Mrs. Hornby, although I am no relation to them. I first came to the house as a sort of companion to Mrs. Hornby, though, as I was only fifteen at the time, I need hardly say that my duties were not very onerous; in fact, I think Mrs. Hornby took me because I was an orphan without the proper means of getting a livelihood, and she had no children of her own.

"Three years ago I came into a little fortune which rendered me independent; but I had been so happy with my kind friends that I asked to be allowed to remain with them, and there I have been ever since in the position of an adopted daughter. Naturally, I have seen a great deal of their nephews, who spend a good part of their time at the house, and I need not tell you that the horrible charge against Reuben has fallen upon us like a thunderbolt. Now, what I have come to say to you is this: I do not believe that Reuben stole those diamonds. It is entirely out of character with all my previous experience of him. I am convinced that he is innocent, and I am prepared to back my opinion."

"In what way?" asked Thorndyke.

"By supplying the sinews of war," replied Miss Gibson. "I understand that legal advice and assistance involves considerable expense."

"I am afraid you are quite correctly informed," said Thorndyke.

"Well, Reuben's pecuniary resources are, I am sure, quite small, so it is necessary for his friends to support him, and I want you to promise me that nothing shall be left undone that might help to prove his innocence if I make myself responsible for any costs that he is unable to meet. I should prefer, of course, not to appear in the matter, if it could be avoided."

"Your friendship is of an eminently practical kind, Miss Gibson," said my colleague, with a smile. "As a matter of fact, the costs are no affair of mine. If the occasion arose for the exercise of your generosity you would have to approach Mr. Reuben's solicitor through the medium of your guardian, Mr. Hornby, and with the consent of the accused. But I do not suppose the occasion will arise, although I am very glad you called, as you may be able to give us valuable assistance in other ways. For example, you might answer one or two apparently impertinent questions."

"I should not consider any question impertinent that you considered necessary to ask," our visitor replied.

"Then," said Thorndyke, "I will venture to inquire if any special relations exist between you and Mr. Reuben."

"You look for the inevitable motive in a woman," said Miss Gibson, laughing and flushing a little. "No, there have been no tender passages between Reuben and me. We are merely old and intimate friends; in fact, there is what I may call a tendency in another direction—Walter Hornby."

"Do you mean that you are engaged to Mr. Walter?"

"Oh, no," she replied; "but he has asked me to marry him—he has asked me, in fact, more than once; and I really believe that he has a sincere attachment to me."

She made this latter statement with an odd air, as though the thing asserted were curious and rather incredible, and the tone was evidently noticed by Thorndyke as well as me for he rejoined—

"Of course he has. Why not?"

"Well, you see," replied Miss Gibson, "I have some six hundred a year of my own and should not be considered a bad match for a young man like Walter, who has neither property nor expectations, and one naturally takes that into account. But still, as I have said, I believe he is quite sincere in his professions and not merely attracted by my money."

"I do not find your opinion at all incredible," said Thorndyke, with a smile, "even if Mr. Walter were quite a mercenary young man—which, I take it, he is not."

Miss Gibson flushed very prettily as she replied—

"Oh, pray do not trouble to pay me compliments; I assure you I am by no means insensible of my merits. But with regard to Walter Hornby, I should be sorry to apply the term 'mercenary' to him, and yet—well, I have never met a young man who showed a stronger appreciation of the value of money. He means to succeed in life and I have no doubt he will."

"And do I understand that you refused him?"

"Yes. My feelings towards him are quite friendly, but not of such a nature as to allow me to contemplate marrying him."

"And now, to return for a moment to Mr. Reuben. You have known him for some years?"

"I have known him intimately for six years," replied Miss Gibson.

"And what sort of character do you give him?"

"Speaking from my own observation of him," she replied, "I can say that I have never known him to tell an untruth or do a dishonourable deed. As to theft, it is merely ridiculous. His habits have always been inexpensive and frugal, he is unambitious to a fault, and in respect to the 'main chance' his indifference is as conspicuous as Walter's keenness. He is a generous man, too, although careful and industrious."

"Thank you, Miss Gibson," said Thorndyke. "We shall apply to you for further information as the case progresses. I am sure that you will help us if you can, and that you can help us if you will, with your clear head and your admirable frankness. If you will leave us your card, Dr. Jervis and I will keep you informed of our prospects and ask for your assistance whenever we need it."

After our fair visitor had departed, Thorndyke stood for a minute or more gazing dreamily into the fire. Then, with a quick glance at his watch, he resumed his hat and, catching up the microscope, handed the camera case to me and made for the door.

"How the time goes!" he exclaimed, as we descended the stairs; "but it hasn't been wasted, Jervis, hey?"

"No, I suppose not," I answered tentatively.

"You suppose not!" he replied. "Why here is as pretty a little problem as you could desire—what would be called in the jargon of the novels, a psychological problem—and it is your business to work it out, too."

"You mean as to Miss Gibson's relations with these two young men?"

Thorndyke nodded.

"Is it any concern of ours?" I asked.

"Certainly it is," he replied. "Everything is a concern of ours at this preliminary stage. We are groping about for a clue and must let nothing pass unscrutinised."

"Well, then, to begin with, she is not wildly infatuated with Walter Hornby, I should say."

"No," agreed Thorndyke, laughing softly; "we may take it that the canny Walter has not inspired a grand passion."

"Then," I resumed, "if I were a suitor for Miss Gibson's hand, I think I would sooner stand in Reuben's shoes than in Walter's."

"There again I am with you," said Thorndyke. "Go on."

"Well," I continued, "our fair visitor conveyed to me the impression that her evident admiration of Reuben's character was tempered by something that she had heard from a third party. That expression of hers, 'speaking from my own observation,' seemed to imply that her observations of him were not in entire agreement with somebody else's."

"Good man!" exclaimed Thorndyke, slapping me on the back, to the undissembled surprise of a policeman whom we were passing; "that is what I had hoped for in you—the capacity to perceive the essential underneath the obvious. Yes; somebody has been saying something about our client, and the thing that we have to find out is, what is it that has been said and who has been saying it. We shall have to make a pretext for another interview with Miss Gibson."

"By the way, why didn't you ask her what she meant?" I asked foolishly.

Thorndyke grinned in my face. "Why didn't you?" he retorted.

"No," I rejoined, "I suppose it is not politic to appear too discerning. Let me carry the microscope for a time; it is making your arm ache, I see."

"Thanks," said he, handing the case to me and rubbing his fingers; "it is rather ponderous."

"I can't make out what you want with this great instrument," I said. "A common pocket lens would do all that you require. Besides, a six-inch objective will not magnify more than two or three diameters."

"Two, with the draw-tube closed," replied Thorndyke, "and the low-power eye-piece brings it up to four. Polton made them both for me for examining cheques, bank-notes and other large objects. But you will understand when you see me use the instrument, and remember, you are to make no comments."

We had by this time arrived at the entrance to Scotland Yard, and were passing up the narrow thoroughfare, when we encountered a uniformed official who halted and saluted my colleague.

"Ah, I thought we should see you here before long, doctor," said he genially. "I heard this morning that you have this thumb-print case in hand."

"Yes," replied Thorndyke; "I am going to see what can be done for the defence."

"Well," said the officer as he ushered us into the building, "you've given us a good many surprises, but you'll give us a bigger one if you can make anything of this. It's a foregone conclusion, I should say."

"My dear fellow," said Thorndyke, "there is no such thing. You mean that there is a *prima facie* case against the accused."

"Put it that way if you like," replied the officer, with a sly smile, "but I think you will find this about the hardest nut you ever tried your teeth on—and they're pretty strong teeth too, I'll say that. You had better come into Mr. Singleton's office," and he conducted us along a corridor and into a large, barely-furnished room, where we found a sedate-looking gentleman seated at a large writing table.

"How-d'ye-do, doctor?" said the latter, rising and holding out his hand. "I can guess what you've come for. Want to see that thumb-print, eh?"

"Quite right," answered Thorndyke, and then, having introduced me, he continued: "We were partners in the last game, but we are on opposite sides of the board this time."

"Yes," agreed Mr. Singleton; "and we are going to give you check-mate."

He unlocked a drawer and drew forth a small portfolio, from which he extracted a piece of paper which he laid on the table. It appeared to be a sheet torn from a perforated memorandum block,

and bore the pencilled inscription: "Handed in by Reuben at 7.3 p.m., 9.3.01. J. H." At one end was a dark, glossy blood-stain, made by the falling of a good-sized drop, and this was smeared slightly, apparently by a finger or thumb having been pressed on it. Near to it were two or three smaller smears and a remarkably distinct and clean print of a thumb.

Thorndyke gazed intently at the paper for a minute or two, scrutinising the thumb-print and the smears in turn, but making no remark, while Mr. Singleton watched his impassive face with expectant curiosity.

"Not much difficulty in identifying that mark," the official at length observed.

"No," agreed Thorndyke; "it is an excellent impression and a very distinctive pattern, even without the scar."

"Yes," rejoined Mr. Singleton; "the scar makes it absolutely conclusive. You have a print with you, I suppose?"

"Yes," replied Thorndyke, and he drew from a wide flap-pocket the enlarged photograph, at the sight of which Mr. Singleton's face broadened into a smile.

"You don't want to put on spectacles to look at that," he remarked; "not that you gain anything by so much enlargement; three diameters is ample for studying the ridge-patterns. I see you have divided it up into numbered squares—not a bad plan; but ours—or rather Galton's, for we borrowed the method from him—is better for this purpose."

He drew from the portfolio a half-plate photograph of the thumb-print which appeared magnified to about four inches in length. The print was marked by a number of figures written minutely with a fine-pointed pen, each figure being placed on an "island," a loop, a bifurcation or some other striking and characteristic portion of the ridge-pattern.

"This system of marking with reference numbers," said Mr. Singleton, "is better than your method of squares, because the numbers are only placed at points which are important for comparison, whereas your squares or the intersections of the lines fall arbitrarily on important or unimportant points according to chance. Besides, we can't let you mark our original, you know, though, of course, we can give you a photograph, which will do as well."

"I was going to ask you to let me take a photograph presently," said Thorndyke.

"Certainly," replied Mr. Singleton, "if you would rather have one of your own taking. I know you don't care to take anything on trust. And now I must get on with my work, if you will excuse me. Inspector Johnson will give you any assistance you may require."

"And see that I don't pocket the original," added Thorndyke, with a smile at the inspector who had shown us in.

"Oh, I'll see to that," said the latter, grinning; and, as Mr. Singleton returned to his table, Thorndyke unlocked the microscope case and drew forth the instrument.

"What, are you going to put it under the microscope?" exclaimed Mr. Singleton, looking round with a broad smile.

"Must do something for my fee, you know," replied Thorndyke, as he set up the microscope and screwed on two extra objectives to the triple nose-piece.

"You observe that there is no deception," he added to the inspector, as he took the paper from Mr. Singleton's table and placed it between two slips of glass.

"I'm watching you, sir," replied the officer, with a chuckle; and he did watch, with close attention and great interest, while Thorndyke laid the glass slips on the microscope stage and proceeded to focus.

I also watched, and was a good deal exercised in my mind by my colleague's proceedings. After a preliminary glance with the six-inch glass, he swung round the nose-piece to the half-inch objective and slipped in a more powerful eye-piece, and with this power he examined the blood-stains carefully, and then moved the thumb-print into the field of vision. After looking at this for some time with deep attention, he drew from the case a tiny spirit lamp which was evidently filled with an alcoholic

solution of some sodium salt, for when he lit it I recognised the characteristic yellow sodium flame. Then he replaced one of the objectives by a spectroscopic attachment, and having placed the little lamp close to the microscope mirror, adjusted the spectroscope. Evidently my friend was fixing the position of the "D" line (or sodium line) in the spectrum.

Having completed the adjustments, he now examined afresh the blood-smears and the thumb-print, both by transmitted and reflected light, and I observed him hurriedly draw one or two diagrams in his notebook. Then he replaced the spectroscope and lamp in the case and brought forth the micrometer—a slip of rather thin glass about three inches by one and a half—which he laid over the thumb-print in the place of the upper plate of glass.

Having secured it in position by the clips, he moved it about, comparing its appearance with that of the lines on the large photograph, which he held in his hand. After a considerable amount of adjustment and readjustment, he appeared to be satisfied, for he remarked to me—

"I think I have got the lines in the same position as they are on our print, so, with Inspector Johnson's assistance, we will take a photograph which we can examine at our leisure."

He extracted the camera—a quarter-plate instrument—from its case and opened it. Then, having swung the microscope on its stand into a horizontal position, he produced from the camera case a slab of mahogany with three brass feet, on which he placed the camera, and which brought the latter to a level with the eye-piece of the microscope.

The front of the camera was fitted with a short sleeve of thin black leather, and into this the eye-piece end of the microscope was now passed, the sleeve being secured round the barrel of the microscope by a stout indiarubber band, thus producing a completely light-tight connection.

Everything was now ready for taking the photograph. The light from the window having been concentrated on the thumb-print by means of a condenser, Thorndyke proceeded to focus the image on the ground-glass screen with extreme care and then, slipping a small leather cap over the objective, introduced the dark slide and drew out the shutter.

"I will ask you to sit down and remain quite still while I make the exposure," he said to me and the inspector. "A very little vibration is enough to destroy the sharpness of the image."

We seated ourselves accordingly, and Thorndyke then removed the cap, standing motionless, watch in hand, while he exposed the first plate.

"We may as well take a second, in case this should not turn out quite perfect," he said, as he replaced the cap and closed the shutter.

He reversed the dark slide and made another exposure in the same way, and then, having removed the micrometer and replaced it by a slip of plain glass, he made two more exposures.

"There are two plates left," he remarked, as he drew out the second dark slide. "I think I will take a record of the blood-stain on them."

He accordingly made two more exposures—one of the larger blood-stain and one of the smaller smears.

"There," said he, with an air of satisfaction, as he proceeded to pack up what the inspector described as his "box of tricks." "I think we have all the data that we can squeeze out of Scotland Yard, and I am very much obliged to you, Mr. Singleton, for giving so many facilities to your natural enemy, the counsel for the defence."

"Not our natural enemies, doctor," protested Mr. Singleton. "We work for a conviction, of course, but we don't throw obstacles in the way of the defence. You know that perfectly well."

"Of course I do, my dear sir," replied Thorndyke, shaking the official by the hand. "Haven't I benefited by your help a score of times? But I am greatly obliged all the same. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, doctor. I wish you luck, though I fear you will find it 'no go' this time."

"We shall see," replied Thorndyke, and with a friendly wave of the hand to the inspector he caught up the two cases and led the way out of the building.

CHAPTER IV

CONFIDENCES

During our walk home my friend was unusually thoughtful and silent, and his face bore a look of concentration under which I thought I could detect, in spite of his habitually impassive expression, a certain suppressed excitement of a not entirely unpleasurable kind. I forbore, however, from making any remarks or asking questions, not only because I saw that he was preoccupied, but also because, from my knowledge of the man, I judged that he would consider it his duty to keep his own counsel and to make no unnecessary confidences even to me.

On our arrival at his chambers he immediately handed over the camera to Polton with a few curt directions as to the development of the plates, and, lunch being already prepared, we sat down at the table without delay.

We had proceeded with our meal in silence for some time when Thorndyke suddenly laid down his knife and fork and looked into my face with a smile of quiet amusement.

"It has just been borne in upon me, Jervis," said he, "that you are the most companionable fellow in the world. You have the heaven-sent gift of silence."

"If silence is the test of companionability," I answered, with a grin, "I think I can pay you a similar compliment in even more emphatic terms."

He laughed cheerfully and rejoined—

"You are pleased to be sarcastic, I observe; but I maintain my position. The capacity to preserve an opportune silence is the rarest and most precious of social accomplishments. Now, most men would have plied me with questions and babbled comments on my proceedings at Scotland Yard, whereas you have allowed me to sort out, without interruption, a mass of evidence while it is still fresh and impressive, to docket each item and stow it away in the pigeonholes of my brain. By the way, I have made a ridiculous oversight."

"What is that?" I asked.

"The 'Thumbograph.' I never ascertained whether the police have it or whether it is still in the possession of Mrs. Hornby."

"Does it matter?" I inquired.

"Not much; only I must see it. And perhaps it will furnish an excellent pretext for you to call on Miss Gibson. As I am busy at the hospital this afternoon and Polton has his hands full, it would be a good plan for you to drop in at Endsley Gardens—that is the address, I think—and if you can see Miss Gibson, try to get a confidential chat with her, and extend your knowledge of the manners and customs of the three Messieurs Hornby. Put on your best bedside manner and keep your weather eye lifting. Find out everything you can as to the characters and habits of those three gentlemen, regardless of all scruples of delicacy. Everything is of importance to us, even to the names of their tailors."

"And with regard to the 'Thumbograph'?"

"Find out who has it, and, if it is still in Mrs. Hornby's possession, get her to lend it to us or—what might, perhaps, be better—get her permission to take a photograph of it."

"It shall be done according to your word," said I. "I will furbish up my exterior, and this very afternoon make my first appearance in the character of Paul Pry."

About an hour later I found myself upon the doorstep of Mr. Hornby's house in Endsley Gardens listening to the jangling of the bell that I had just set in motion.

"Miss Gibson, sir?" repeated the parlourmaid in response to my question. "She *was* going out, but I am not sure whether she has gone yet. If you will step in, I will go and see."

I followed her into the drawing-room, and, threading my way amongst the litter of small tables and miscellaneous furniture by which ladies nowadays convert their special domain into the semblance of a broker's shop, let go my anchor in the vicinity of the fireplace to await the parlourmaid's report.

I had not long to wait, for in less than a minute Miss Gibson herself entered the room. She wore her hat and gloves, and I congratulated myself on my timely arrival.

"I didn't expect to see you again so soon, Dr. Jervis," she said, holding out her hand with a frank and friendly manner, "but you are very welcome all the same. You have come to tell me something?"

"On the contrary," I replied, "I have come to ask you something."

"Well, that is better than nothing," she said, with a shade of disappointment. "Won't you sit down?"

I seated myself with caution on a dwarf chair of scrofulous aspect, and opened my business without preamble.

"Do you remember a thing called a 'Thumbograph'?"

"Indeed I do," she replied with energy. "It was the cause of all this trouble."

"Do you know if the police took possession of it?"

"The detective took it to Scotland Yard that the finger-print experts might examine it and compare the two thumb-prints; and they wanted to keep it, but Mrs. Hornby was so distressed at the idea of its being used in evidence that they let her have it back. You see, they really had no further need of it, as they could take a print for themselves when they had Reuben in custody; in fact, he volunteered to have a print taken at once, as soon as he was arrested, and that was done."

"So the 'Thumbograph' is now in Mrs. Hornby's possession?"

"Yes, unless she has destroyed it. She spoke of doing so."

"I hope she has not," said I, in some alarm, "for Dr. Thorndyke is extremely anxious, for some reason, to examine it."

"Well, she will be down in a few minutes, and then we shall know. I told her you were here. Have you any idea what Dr. Thorndyke's reason is for wanting to see it?"

"None whatever," I replied. "Dr. Thorndyke is as close as an oyster. He treats me as he treats every one else—he listens attentively, observes closely, and says nothing."

"It doesn't sound very agreeable," mused Miss Gibson; "and yet he seemed very nice and sympathetic."

"He *is* very nice and sympathetic," I retorted with some emphasis, "but he doesn't make himself agreeable by divulging his clients' secrets."

"I suppose not; and I regard myself as very effectively snubbed," said she, smiling, but evidently somewhat piqued by my not very tactful observation.

I was hastening to repair my error with apologies and self-accusations, when the door opened and an elderly lady entered the room. She was somewhat stout, amiable and placid of mien, and impressed me (to be entirely truthful) as looking rather foolish.

"Here is Mrs. Hornby," said Miss Gibson, presenting me to her hostess; and she continued, "Dr. Jervis has come to ask about the 'Thumbograph.' You haven't destroyed it, I hope?"

"No, my dear," replied Mrs. Hornby. "I have it in my little bureau. What did Dr. Jervis wish to know about it?"

Seeing that she was terrified lest some new and dreadful surprise should be sprung upon her, I hastened to reassure her.

"My colleague, Dr. Thorndyke, is anxious to examine it. He is directing your nephew's defence, you know."

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Hornby. "Juliet told me about him. She says he is a dear. Do you agree with her?"

Here I caught Miss Gibson's eye, in which was a mischievous twinkle, and noted a little deeper pink in her cheeks.

"Well," I answered dubiously, "I have never considered my colleague in the capacity of a dear, but I have a very high opinion of him in every respect."

"That, no doubt, is the masculine equivalent," said Miss Gibson, recovering from the momentary embarrassment that Mrs. Hornby's artless repetition of her phrase had produced. "I think the feminine expression is more epigrammatic and comprehensive. But to return to the object of Dr. Jervis's visit. Would you let him have the 'Thumbograph,' aunt, to show to Dr. Thorndyke?"

"Oh, my dear Juliet," replied Mrs. Hornby, "I would do anything—anything—to help our poor boy. I will never believe that he could be guilty of theft—common, vulgar theft. There has been some dreadful mistake—I am convinced there has—I told the detectives so. I assured them that Reuben could not have committed the robbery, and that they were totally mistaken in supposing him to be capable of such an action. But they would not listen to me, although I have known him since he was a little child, and ought to be able to judge, if anyone is. Diamonds, too! Now, I ask you, what could Reuben want with diamonds? and they were not even cut."

Here Mrs. Hornby drew forth a lace-edged handkerchief and mopped her eyes.

"I am sure Dr. Thorndyke will be very much interested to see this little book of yours," said I, with a view to stemming the tide of her reflections.

"Oh, the 'Thumbograph,'" she replied. "Yes, I will let him have it with the greatest pleasure. I am so glad he wishes to see it; it makes one feel hopeful to know that he is taking so much interest in the case. Would you believe it, Dr. Jervis, those detective people actually wanted to keep it to bring up in evidence against the poor boy. My 'Thumbograph,' mind you. But I put my foot down there and they had to return it. I was resolved that they should not receive any assistance from me in their efforts to involve my nephew in this horrible affair."

"Then, perhaps," said Miss Gibson, "you might give Dr. Jervis the 'Thumbograph' and he can hand it to Dr. Thorndyke."

"Of course I will," said Mrs. Hornby; "instantly; and you need not return it, Dr. Jervis. When you have finished with it, fling it into the fire. I wish never to see it again."

But I had been considering the matter, and had come to the conclusion that it would be highly indiscreet to take the book out of Mrs. Hornby's custody, and this I now proceeded to explain.

"I have no idea," I said, "for what purpose Dr. Thorndyke wishes to examine the 'Thumbograph,' but it occurs to me that he may desire to put it in evidence, in which case it would be better that it should not go out of your possession for the present. He merely commissioned me to ask for your permission to take a photograph of it."

"Oh, if he wants a photograph," said Mrs. Hornby, "I could get one done for him without any difficulty. My nephew Walter would take one for us, I am sure, if I asked him. He is so clever, you know—is he not, Juliet, dear?"

"Yes, aunt," replied Miss Gibson quickly, "but I expect Dr. Thorndyke would rather take the photograph himself."

"I am sure he would," I agreed. "In fact, a photograph taken by another person would not be of much use to him."

"Ah," said Mrs. Hornby in a slightly injured tone, "you think Walter is just an ordinary amateur; but if I were to show you some of the photographs he has taken you would really be surprised. He is remarkably clever, I assure you."

"Would you like us to bring the book to Dr. Thorndyke's chambers?" asked Miss Gibson. "That would save time and trouble."

"It is excessively good of you—" I began.

"Not at all. When shall we bring it? Would you like to have it this evening?"

"We should very much," I replied. "My colleague could then examine it and decide what is to be done with it. But it is giving you so much trouble."

"It is nothing of the kind," said Miss Gibson. "You would not mind coming with me this evening, would you, aunt?"

"Certainly not, my dear," replied Mrs. Hornby, and she was about to enlarge on the subject when Miss Gibson rose and, looking at her watch, declared that she must start on her errand at once. I also rose to make my adieux, and she then remarked—

"If you are walking in the same direction as I am, Dr. Jervis, we might arrange the time of our proposed visit as we go along."

I was not slow to avail myself of this invitation, and a few seconds later we left the house together, leaving Mrs. Hornby smiling fatuously after us from the open door.

"Will eight o'clock suit you, do you think?" Miss Gibson asked, as we walked up the street.

"It will do excellently, I should say," I answered. "If anything should render the meeting impossible I will send you a telegram. I could wish that you were coming alone, as ours is to be a business conference."

Miss Gibson laughed softly—and a very pleasant and musical laugh it was.

"Yes," she agreed. "Dear Mrs. Hornby is a little diffuse and difficult to keep to one subject; but you must be indulgent to her little failings; you would be if you had experienced such kindness and generosity from her as I have."

"I am sure I should," I rejoined; "in fact, I am. After all, a little diffuseness of speech and haziness of ideas are no great faults in a generous and amiable woman of her age."

Miss Gibson rewarded me for these highly correct sentiments with a little smile of approval, and we walked on for some time in silence. Presently she turned to me with some suddenness and a very earnest expression, and said—

"I want to ask you a question, Dr. Jervis, and please forgive me if I beg you to put aside your professional reserve just a little in my favour. I want you to tell me if you think Dr. Thorndyke has any kind of hope or expectation of being able to save poor Reuben from the dreadful peril that threatens him."

This was a rather pointed question, and I took some time to consider it before replying.

"I should like," I replied at length, "to tell you as much as my duty to my colleague will allow me to; but that is so little that it is hardly worth telling. However, I may say this without breaking any confidence: Dr. Thorndyke has undertaken the case and is working hard at it, and he would, most assuredly, have done neither the one nor the other if he had considered it a hopeless one."

"That is a very encouraging view of the matter," said she, "which, had, however, already occurred to me. May I ask if anything came of your visit to Scotland Yard? Oh, please don't think me encroaching; I am so terribly anxious and troubled."

"I can tell you very little about the results of our expedition, for I know very little; but I have an idea that Dr. Thorndyke is not dissatisfied with his morning's work. He certainly picked up some facts, though I have no idea of their nature, and as soon as we reached home he developed a sudden desire to examine the 'Thumbograph.'"

"Thank you, Dr. Jervis," she said gratefully. "You have cheered me more than I can tell you, and I won't ask you any more questions. Are you sure I am not bringing you out of the way?"

"Not at all," I answered hastily. "The fact is, I had hoped to have a little chat with you when we had disposed of the 'Thumbograph,' so I can regard myself as combining a little business with a great deal of pleasure if I am allowed to accompany you."

She gave me a little ironical bow as she inquired—

"And, in short, I may take it that I am to be pumped?"

"Come, now," I retorted. "You have been plying the pump handle pretty vigorously yourself. But that is not my meaning at all. You see, we are absolute strangers to all the parties concerned in this case, which, of course, makes for an impartial estimate of their characters. But, after all, knowledge is more useful to us than impartiality. There is our client, for instance. He impressed us both very

favourably, I think; but he might have been a plausible rascal with the blackest of records. Then you come and tell us that he is a gentleman of stainless character and we are at once on firmer ground."

"I see," said Miss Gibson thoughtfully; "and suppose that I or some one else had told you things that seemed to reflect on his character. Would they have influenced you in your attitude towards him?"

"Only in this," I replied; "that we should have made it our business to inquire into the truth of those reports and ascertain their origin."

"That is what one should always do, I suppose," said she, still with an air of deep thoughtfulness which encouraged me to inquire—

"May I ask if anyone to your knowledge has ever said anything to Mr. Reuben's disadvantage?"

She pondered for some time before replying, and kept her eyes bent pensively on the ground. At length she said, not without some hesitation of manner—

"It is a small thing and quite without any bearing on this affair. But it has been a great trouble to me since it has to some extent put a barrier between Reuben and me; and we used to be such close friends. And I have blamed myself for letting it influence me—perhaps unjustly—in my opinion of him. I will tell you about it, though I expect you will think me very foolish.

"You must know, then, that Reuben and I used, until about six months ago, to be very much together, though we were only friends, you understand. But we were on the footing of relatives, so there was nothing out of the way in it. Reuben is a keen student of ancient and mediaeval art, in which I also am much interested, so we used to visit the museums and galleries together and get a great deal of pleasure from comparing our views and impressions of what we saw.

"About six months ago, Walter took me aside one day and, with a very serious face, asked me if there was any kind of understanding between Reuben and me. I thought it rather impertinent of him, but nevertheless, I told him the truth, that Reuben and I were just friends and nothing more.

"If that is the case," said he, looking mighty grave, 'I would advise you not to be seen about with him quite so much.'

"And why not?" I asked very naturally.

"Why, the fact is," said Walter, 'that Reuben is a confounded fool. He has been chattering to the men at the club and seems to have given them the impression that a young lady of means and position has been setting her cap at him very hard, but that he, being a high-souled philosopher above the temptations that beset ordinary mortals, is superior both to her blandishments and her pecuniary attractions. I give you the hint for your own guidance,' he continued, 'and I expect this to go no farther. You mustn't be annoyed with Reuben. The best of young men will often behave like prigs and donkeys, and I have no doubt the fellows have grossly exaggerated what he said; but I thought it right to put you on your guard.'

"Now this report, as you may suppose, made me excessively angry, and I wanted to have it out with Reuben then and there. But Walter refused to sanction this—'there was no use in making a scene' he said—and he insisted that the caution was given to me in strict confidence; so what was I to do? I tried to ignore it and treat Reuben as I always had done, but this I found impossible; my womanly pride was much too deeply hurt. And yet I felt it the lowest depth of meanness to harbour such thoughts of him without giving him the opportunity to defend himself. And although it was most unlike Reuben in some respects, it was very like him in others; for he has always expressed the utmost contempt for men who marry for a livelihood. So I have remained on the horns of a dilemma and am there still. What do you think I ought to have done?"

I rubbed my chin in some embarrassment at this question. Needless to say, I was most disagreeably impressed by Walter Hornby's conduct, and not a little disposed to blame my fair companion for giving an ear to his secret disparagement of his cousin; but I was obviously not in a position to pronounce, offhand, upon the merits of the case.

"The position appears to be this," I said, after a pause, "either Reuben has spoken most unworthily and untruthfully of you, or Walter has lied deliberately about him."

"Yes," she agreed, "that is the position; but which of the two alternatives appears to you the more probable?"

"That is very difficult to say," I answered. "There is a certain kind of cad who is much given to boastful rhodomontade concerning his conquests. We all know him and can generally spot him at first sight, but I must say that Reuben Hornby did not strike me as that kind of man at all. Then it is clear that the proper course for Walter to have adopted, if he had really heard such rumours, was to have had the matter out with Reuben, instead of coming secretly to you with whispered reports. That is my feeling, Miss Gibson, but, of course, I may be quite wrong. I gather that our two young friends are not inseparable companions?"

"Oh, they are very good friends, but you see, their interests and views of life are quite different. Reuben, although an excellent worker in business hours, is a student, or perhaps rather what one would call a scholar, whereas Walter is more a practical man of affairs—decidedly long-headed and shrewd. He is undoubtedly very clever, as Mrs. Hornby said."

"He takes photographs, for instance," I suggested.

"Yes. But not ordinary amateur photographs; his work is more technical and quite excellent of its kind. For example, he did a most beautiful series of micro-photographs of sections of metalliferous rocks which he reproduced for publication by the collotype process, and even printed off the plates himself."

"I see. He must be a very capable fellow."

"He is, very," she assented, "and very keen on making a position; but I am afraid he is rather too fond of money for its own sake, which is not a pleasant feature in a young man's character, is it?"

I agreed that it was not.

"Excessive keenness in money affairs," proceeded Miss Gibson oracularly, "is apt to lead a young man into bad ways—oh, you need not smile, Dr. Jervis, at my wise saws; it is perfectly true, and you know it. The fact is, I sometimes have an uneasy feeling that Walter's desire to be rich inclines him to try what looks like a quick and easy method of making money. He had a friend—a Mr. Horton—who is a dealer on the Stock Exchange and who 'operates' rather largely—'operate' I believe is the expression used, although it seems to be nothing more than common gambling—and I have more than once suspected Walter of being concerned in what Mr. Horton calls 'a little flutter.'"

"That doesn't strike me as a very long-headed proceeding," I remarked, with the impartial wisdom of the impecunious, and therefore untempted.

"No," she agreed, "it isn't. But your gambler always thinks he is going to win—though you mustn't let me give you the impression that Walter is a gambler. But here is my destination. Thank you for escorting me so far, and I hope you are beginning to feel less like a stranger to the Hornby family. We shall make our appearance to-night at eight punctually."

She gave me her hand with a frank smile and tripped up the steps leading to the street door; and when I glanced back, after crossing the road, she gave me a little friendly nod as she turned to enter the house.

CHAPTER V

THE 'THUMBOGRAPH'

"So your net has been sweeping the quiet and pleasant waters of feminine conversation," remarked Thorndyke when we met at the dinner table and I gave him an outline of my afternoon's adventures.

"Yes," I answered, "and here is the catch cleaned and ready for the consumer."

I laid on the table two of my notebooks in which I had entered such facts as I had been able to extract from my talk with Miss Gibson.

"You made your entries as soon as possible after your return, I suppose?" said Thorndyke—"while the matter was still fresh?"

"I wrote down my notes as I sat on a seat in Kensington Gardens within five minutes after leaving Miss Gibson."

"Good!" said Thorndyke. "And now let us see what you have collected."

He glanced quickly through the entries in the two books, referring back once or twice, and stood for a few moments silent and abstracted. Then he laid the little books down on the table with a satisfied nod.

"Our information, then," he said, "amounts to this: Reuben is an industrious worker at his business and, in his leisure, a student of ancient and medieval art; possibly a babbling fool and a cad or, on the other hand, a maligned and much-abused man.

"Walter Hornby is obviously a sneak and possibly a liar; a keen man of business, perhaps a flutterer round the financial candle that burns in Throgmorton Street; an expert photographer and a competent worker of the collotype process. You have done a very excellent day's work, Jervis. I wonder if you see the bearing of the facts that you have collected."

"I think I see the bearing of some of them," I answered; "at least, I have formed certain opinions."

"Then keep them to yourself, *mon ami*, so that I need not feel as if I ought to unbosom myself of my own views."

"I should be very much surprised if you did, Thorndyke," I replied, "and should have none the better opinion of you. I realise fully that your opinions and theories are the property of your client and not to be used for the entertainment of your friends."

Thorndyke patted me on the back playfully, but he looked uncommonly pleased, and said, with evident sincerity, "I am really grateful to you for saying that, for I have felt a little awkward in being so reticent with you who know so much of this case. But you are quite right, and I am delighted to find you so discerning and sympathetic. The least I can do under the circumstances is to uncork a bottle of Pommard, and drink the health of so loyal and helpful a colleague. Ah! Praise the gods! here is Polton, like a sacrificial priest accompanied by a sweet savour of roasted flesh. Rump steak I ween," he added, sniffing, "food meet for the mighty Shamash (that pun was fortuitous, I need not say) or a ravenous medical jurist. Can you explain to me, Polton, how it is that your rump steak is better than any other steak? Is it that you have command of a special brand of ox?"

The little man's dry countenance wrinkled with pleasure until it was as full of lines as a ground-plan of Clapham Junction.

"Perhaps it is the special treatment it gets, sir," he replied. "I usually bruise it in the mortar before cooking, without breaking up the fibre too much, and then I heat up the little cupel furnace to about 600 C, and put the steak in on a tripod."

Thorndyke laughed outright. "The cupel furnace, too," he exclaimed. "Well, well, 'to what base uses'—but I don't know that it is a base use after all. Anyhow, Polton, open a bottle of Pommard

and put a couple of ten by eight 'process' plates in your dark slides. I am expecting two ladies here this evening with a document."

"Shall you bring them upstairs, sir?" inquired Polton, with an alarmed expression.

"I expect I shall have to," answered Thorndyke.

"Then I shall just smarten the laboratory up a bit," said Polton, who evidently appreciated the difference between the masculine and feminine view as to the proper appearance of working premises.

"And so Miss Gibson wanted to know our private views on the case?" said Thorndyke, when his voracity had become somewhat appeased.

"Yes," I answered; and then I repeated our conversation as nearly as I could remember it.

"Your answer was very discreet and diplomatic," Thorndyke remarked, "and it was very necessary that it should be, for it is essential that we show the backs of our cards to Scotland Yard; and if to Scotland Yard, then to the whole world. We know what their trump card is and can arrange our play accordingly, so long as we do not show our hand."

"You speak of the police as your antagonists; I noticed that at the 'Yard' this morning, and was surprised to find that they accepted the position. But surely their business is to discover the actual offender, not to fix the crime on some particular person."

"That would seem to be so," replied Thorndyke, "but in practice it is otherwise. When the police have made an arrest they work for a conviction. If the man is innocent, that is his business, not theirs; it is for him to prove it. The system is a pernicious one—especially since the efficiency of a police officer is, in consequence, apt to be estimated by the number of convictions he has secured, and an inducement is thus held out to him to obtain a conviction, if possible; but it is of a piece with legislative procedure in general. Lawyers are not engaged in academic discussions or in the pursuit of truth, but each is trying, by hook or by crook, to make out a particular case without regard to its actual truth or even to the lawyer's own belief on the subject. That is what produces so much friction between lawyers and scientific witnesses; neither can understand the point of view of the other. But we must not sit over the table chattering like this; it has gone half-past seven, and Polton will be wanting to make this room presentable."

"I notice you don't use your office much," I remarked.

"Hardly at all, excepting as a repository for documents and stationery. It is very cheerless to talk in an office, and nearly all my business is transacted with solicitors and counsel who are known to me, so there is no need for such formalities. All right, Polton; we shall be ready for you in five minutes."

The Temple bell was striking eight as, at Thorndyke's request, I threw open the iron-bound "oak"; and even as I did so the sound of footsteps came up from the stairs below. I waited on the landing for our two visitors, and led them into the room.

"I am so glad to make your acquaintance," said Mrs. Hornby, when I had done the honours of introduction; "I have heard so much about you from Juliet—"

"Really, my dear aunt," protested Miss Gibson, as she caught my eye with a look of comical alarm, "you will give Dr. Thorndyke a most erroneous impression. I merely mentioned that I had intruded on him without notice and had been received with undeserved indulgence and consideration."

"You didn't put it quite in that way, my dear," said Mrs. Hornby, "but I suppose it doesn't matter."

"We are highly gratified by Miss Gibson's favourable report of us, whatever may have been the actual form of expression," said Thorndyke, with a momentary glance at the younger lady which covered her with smiling confusion, "and we are deeply indebted to you for taking so much trouble to help us."

"It is no trouble at all, but a great pleasure," replied Mrs. Hornby; and she proceeded to enlarge on the matter until her remarks threatened, like the rippling circles produced by a falling stone, to spread out into infinity. In the midst of this discourse Thorndyke placed chairs for the two ladies,

and, leaning against the mantelpiece, fixed a stony gaze upon the small handbag that hung from Mrs. Hornby's wrist.

"Is the 'Thumbograph' in your bag?" interrupted Miss Gibson, in response to this mute appeal.

"Of course it is, my dear Juliet," replied the elder lady. "You saw me put it in yourself. What an odd girl you are. Did you think I should have taken it out and put it somewhere else? Not that these handbags are really very secure, you know, although I daresay they are safer than pockets, especially now that it is the fashion to have the pocket at the back. Still, I have often thought how easy it would be for a thief or a pickpocket or some other dreadful creature of that kind, don't you know, to make a snatch and—in fact, the thing has actually happened. Why, I knew a lady—Mrs. Moggridge, you know, Juliet—no, it wasn't Mrs. Moggridge, that was another affair, it was Mrs.—Mrs.—dear me, how silly of me!—now, what was her name? Can't you help me, Juliet? You must surely remember the woman. She used to visit a good deal at the Hawley-Johnsons'—I think it was the Hawley-Johnsons', or else it was those people, you know—"

"Hadn't you better give Dr. Thorndyke the 'Thumbograph'?" interrupted Miss Gibson.

"Why, of course, Juliet, dear. What else did we come here for?" With a slightly injured expression, Mrs. Hornby opened the little bag and commenced, with the utmost deliberation, to turn out its contents on to the table. These included a laced handkerchief, a purse, a card-case, a visiting list, a packet of *papier poudré*, and when she had laid the last-mentioned article on the table, she paused abruptly and gazed into Miss Gibson's face with the air of one who has made a startling discovery.

"I remember the woman's name," she said in an impressive voice. "It was Gudge—Mrs. Gudge, the sister-in-law of—"

Here Miss Gibson made an unceremonious dive into the open bag and fished out a tiny parcel wrapped in notepaper and secured with a silk thread.

"Thank you," said Thorndyke, taking it from her hand just as Mrs. Hornby was reaching out to intercept it. He cut the thread and drew from its wrappings a little book bound in red cloth, with the word "Thumbograph" stamped upon the cover, and was beginning to inspect it when Mrs. Hornby rose and stood beside him.

"That," said she, as she opened the book at the first page, "is the thumb-mark of a Miss Colley. She is no connection of ours. You see it is a little smeared—she said Reuben jogged her elbow, but I don't think he did; at any rate he assured me he did not, and, you know—"

"Ah! Here is one we are looking for," interrupted Thorndyke, who had been turning the leaves of the book regardless of Mrs. Hornby's rambling comments; "a very good impression, too, considering the rather rough method of producing it."

He reached out for the reading lens that hung from its nail above the mantelpiece, and I could tell by the eagerness with which he peered through it at the thumb-print that he was looking for something. A moment later I felt sure that he had found that something which he had sought, for, though he replaced the lens upon its nail with a quiet and composed air and made no remark, there was a sparkle of the eye and a scarcely perceptible flush of suppressed excitement and triumph which I had begun to recognise beneath the impassive mask that he presented to the world.

"I shall ask you to leave this little book with me, Mrs. Hornby," he said, breaking in upon that lady's inconsequent babblings, "and, as I may possibly put it in evidence, it would be a wise precaution for you and Miss Gibson to sign your names—as small as possible—on the page which bears Mr. Reuben's thumb-mark. That will anticipate any suggestion that the book has been tampered with after leaving your hands."

"It would be a great impertinence for anyone to make any such suggestion," Mrs. Hornby began; but on Thorndyke's placing his fountain pen in her hand, she wrote her signature in the place indicated and handed the pen to Miss Gibson, who signed underneath.

"And now," said Thorndyke, "we will take an enlarged photograph of this page with the thumb-mark; not that it is necessary that it should be done now, as you are leaving the book in my possession; but the photograph will be wanted, and as my man is expecting us and has the apparatus ready, we may as well despatch the business at once."

To this both the ladies readily agreed (being, in fact, devoured by curiosity with regard to my colleague's premises), and we accordingly proceeded to invade the set of rooms on the floor above, over which the ingenious Polton was accustomed to reign in solitary grandeur.

It was my first visit to these mysterious regions, and I looked about me with as much curiosity as did the two ladies. The first room that we entered was apparently the workshop, for it contained a small woodworker's bench, a lathe, a bench for metal work and a number of mechanical appliances which I was not then able to examine; but I noticed that the entire place presented to the eye a most unworkmanlike neatness, a circumstance that did not escape Thorndyke's observation, for his face relaxed into a grim smile as his eye travelled over the bare benches and the clean-swept floor.

From this room we entered the laboratory, a large apartment, one side of which was given up to chemical research, as was shown by the shelves of reagents that covered the wall, and the flasks, retorts and other apparatus that were arranged on the bench, like ornaments on a drawing-room mantelpiece. On the opposite side of the room was a large, massively-constructed copying camera, the front of which, carrying the lens, was fixed, and an easel or copyholder travelled on parallel guides towards, or away, from it, on a long stand.

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