

degrees from the north and south line and turned the chart round to that extent. After closely scrutinizing the map and the chart and comparing the one with the other, he said :

“ By mere inspection it seems fairly easy to identify the thoroughfares that correspond to the lines of the chart. Take the part that is near your destination. At nine twenty-one you passed under a bridge, going westward. That would seem to be Glasshouse Street. Then you turned south, apparently along the Albert Embankment, where you heard the tug's whistle. Then you heard a passenger train start on your left ; that would be Vauxhall Station. Next you turned round due east and passed under a large railway bridge, which suggests the bridge that carries the Station over Upper Kennington Lane. If that is so, your house should be on the south side of Upper Kennington Lane, some three hundred yards from the bridge. But we may as well test our inferences by one or two measurements.”

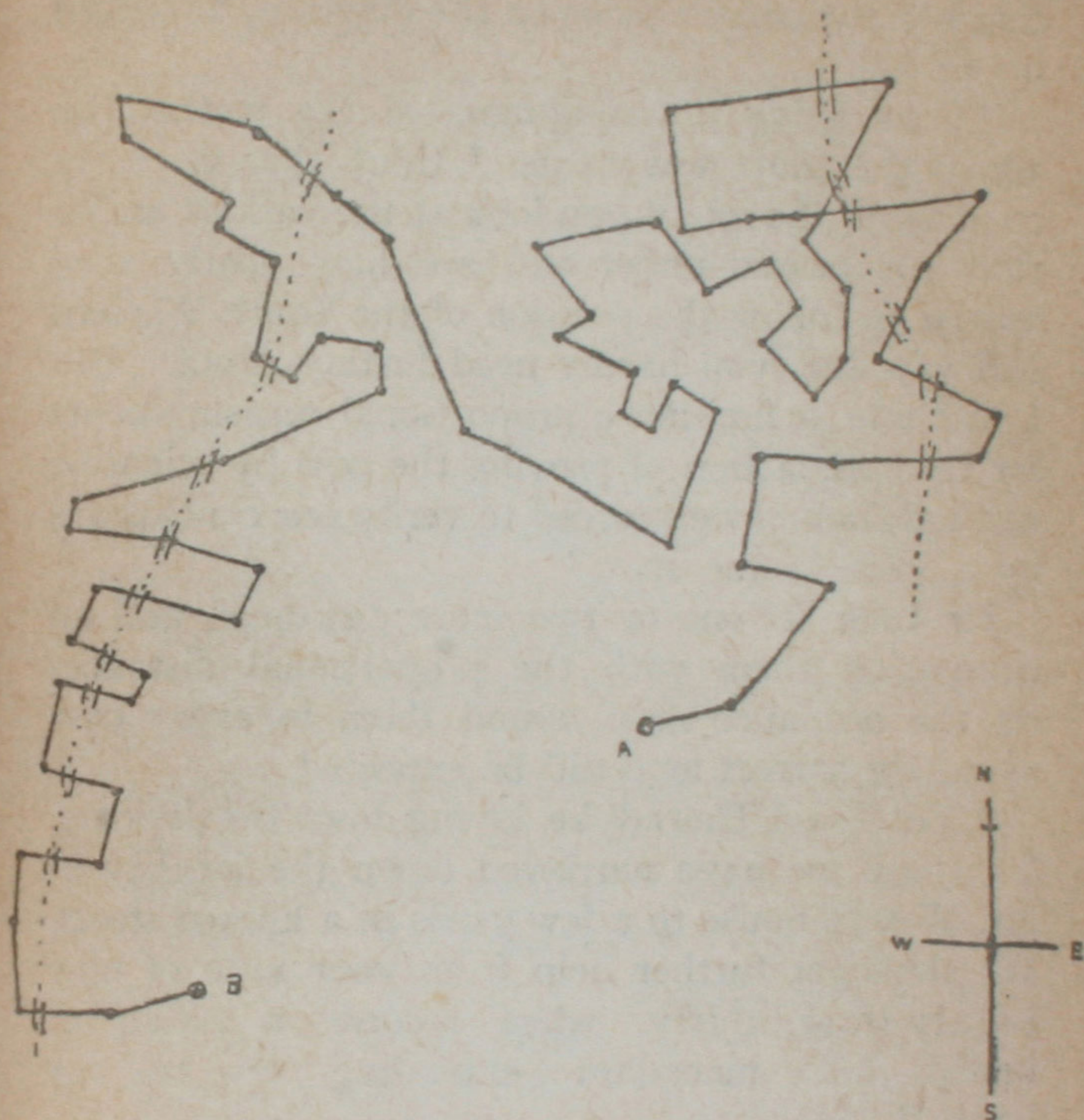
“ How can you do that if you don't know the exact scale of the chart ? ”

“ I will show you,” said Thorndyke. “ We shall establish the true scale and that will form part of the proof.”

He rapidly constructed on the upper blank part of the paper, a proportional diagram consisting of two intersecting lines with a single cross-line.

“ This long line,” he explained, “ is the distance from Stillbury's house to the Vauxhall railway bridge as it appears on the chart ; the shorter cross-

line is the same distance taken from the ordnance map. If our inference is correct and the chart is



The Track Chart, showing the route followed by Weiss's carriage.

A.—Starting-point in Lower Kennington Lane.

B.—Position of Mr. Weiss's house. The dotted lines connecting the bridges indicate probable railway lines.

reasonably accurate, all the other distances will show a similar proportion. Let us try some of them. Take the distance from Vauxhall bridge to the Glasshouse Street bridge."

He made the two measurements carefully, and, as the point of the dividers came down almost precisely in the correct place on the diagram, he looked up at me.

“Considering the roughness of the method by which the chart was made, I think that is pretty conclusive, though, if you look at the various arches that you passed under and see how nearly they appear to follow the position of the South-Western Railway line, you hardly need further proof. But I will take a few more proportional measurements for the satisfaction of proving the case by scientific methods before we proceed to verify our conclusions by a visit to the spot.”

He took off one or two more distances, and on comparing them with the proportional distances on the ordnance map, found them in every case as nearly correct as could be expected.

“Yes,” said Thorndyke, laying down the dividers, “I think we have narrowed down the locality of Mr. Weiss’s house to a few yards in a known street. We shall get further help from your note of nine twenty-three thirty, when records a patch of newly laid macadam extending up to the house.”

“That new macadam will be pretty well smoothed down by now,” I objected.

“Not so very completely,” answered Thorndyke. “It is only a little over a month ago, and there has been very little wet weather since. It may be smooth, but it will be easily distinguishable from the old.”

“ And do I understand that you propose to go and explore the neighbourhood ? ”

“ Undoubtedly I do. That is to say, I intend to convert the locality of this house into a definite address ; which, I think, will now be perfectly easy, unless we should have the bad luck to find more than one covered way. Even then, the difficulty would be trifling.”

“ And when you have ascertained where Mr. Weiss lives ? What then ? ”

“ That will depend on circumstances. I think we shall probably call at Scotland Yard and have a little talk with our friend Mr. Superintendent Miller ; unless, for any reason, it seems better to look into the case ourselves.”

“ When is this voyage of exploration to take place ? ”

Thorndyke considered this question, and, taking out his pocket-book, glanced through his engagements.

“ It seems to me,” he said, “ that to-morrow is a fairly free day. We could take the morning without neglecting other business. I suggest that we start immediately after breakfast. How will that suit my learned friend ? ”

“ My time is yours,” I replied ; “ and if you choose to waste it on matters that don't concern you, that's your affair.”

“ Then we will consider the arrangement to stand for to-morrow morning, or rather, for this morning, as I see that it is past twelve.”

With this Thorndyke gathered up the chart and instruments and we separated for the night.

HALF-PAST nine on the following morning found us spinning along the Albert Embankment in a hansom to the pleasant tinkle of the horse's bell. Thorndyke appeared to be in high spirits, though the full enjoyment of the matutinal pipe precluded fluent conversation. As a precaution, he had put my notebook in his pocket before starting, and once or twice he took it out and looked over its pages; but he made no reference to the object of our quest, and the few remarks that he uttered would have indicated that his thoughts were occupied with other matters.

Arrived at Vauxhall Station, we alighted and forthwith made our way to the bridge that spans Upper Kennington Lane near its junction with Harleyford Road.

"Here is our starting point," said Thorndyke. "From this place to the house is about three hundred yards—say four hundred and twenty paces—and at about two hundred paces we ought to reach our patch of new road-metal. Now, are you ready? If we keep step we shall average our stride."

We started together at a good pace, stepping out with military regularity and counting aloud as we went. As we told out the hundred and ninety-fourth pace I observed Thorndyke nod towards the roadway a little ahead, and, looking at it attentively as we approached, it was easy to see by the

regularity of surface and lighter colour, that it had recently been re-metalled.

Having counted out the four hundred and twenty paces, we halted, and Thorndyke turned to me with a smile of triumph.

“Not a bad estimate, Jervis,” said he. “That will be your house if I am not much mistaken. There is no other mews or private roadway in sight.”

He pointed to a narrow turning some dozen yards ahead, apparently the entrance to a mews or yard and closed by a pair of massive wooden gates.

“Yes,” I answered, “there can be no doubt that this is the place; but, by Jove!” I added, as we drew nearer, “the nest is empty! Do you see?”

I pointed to a bill that was stuck on the gate, bearing, as I could see at this distance, the inscription “To Let.”

“Here is a new and startling, if not altogether unexpected development,” said Thorndyke, as we stood gazing at the bill; which set forth that “these premises, including stabling and workshops,” were “to be let on lease or otherwise,” and referred inquiries to Messrs. Ryebody Brothers, house-agents and valuers, Upper Kennington Lane. “The question is, should we make a few inquiries of the agent, or should we get the keys and have a look at the inside of the house? I am inclined to do both, and the latter first, if Messrs Ryebody Brothers will trust us with the keys”

We proceeded up the lane to the address given, and, entering the office, Thorndyke made his request—somewhat to the surprise of the clerk; for Thorndyke was not quite the kind of person whom one naturally associates with stabling and workshops. However, there was no difficulty, but as the clerk sorted out the keys from a bunch hanging from a hook, he remarked:

“I expect you will find the place in a rather dirty and neglected condition. The house has not been cleaned yet; it is just as it was left when the brokers took away the furniture.”

“Was the last tenant sold up, then?” Thorndyke asked.

“Oh, no. He had to leave rather unexpectedly to take up some business in Germany.”

“I hope he paid his rent,” said Thorndyke.

“Oh, yes. Trust us for that. But I should say that Mr. Weiss—that was his name—was a man of some means. He seemed to have plenty of money, though he always paid in notes. I don't fancy he had a banking account in this country. He hadn't been here more than about six or seven months and I imagine he didn't know many people in England, as he paid us a cash deposit in lieu of references when he first came.”

“I think you said his name was Weiss. It wouldn't be H. Weiss by any chance?”

“I believe it was. But I can soon tell you.” He opened a drawer and consulted what looked like a book of receipt forms. “Yes; H. Weiss. Do you know him, sir?”

"I knew a Mr. H. Weiss some years ago. He came from Bremen, I remember."

"This Mr. Weiss has gone back to Hamburg," the clerk observed.

"Ah," said Thorndyke, "then it would seem not to be the same. My acquaintance was a fair man with a beard and a decidedly red nose and he wore spectacles."

"That's the man. You've described him exactly," said the clerk, who was apparently rather easily satisfied in the matter of description.

"Dear me," said Thorndyke; "what a small world it is. Do you happen to have a note of his address in Hamburg?"

"I haven't," the clerk replied. "You see we've done with him, having got the rent, though the house is not actually surrendered yet. Mr Weiss's housekeeper still has the front-door key. She doesn't start for Hamburg for a week or so, and meanwhile she keeps the key so that she can call every day and see if there are any letters."

"Indeed," said Thorndyke. "I wonder if he still has the same housekeeper."

"This lady is a German," replied the clerk, "with a regular jaw-twisting name. Sounded like Shally-bang."

"Schallibaum. That is the lady. A fair woman with hardly any eyebrows and a pronounced cast in the left eye."

"Now that's very curious, sir," said the clerk. "It's the same name, and this is a fair woman with remarkably thin eyebrows, I remember, now that

you mention it. But it can't be the same person. I have only seen her a few times and then only just for a minute or so; but I'm quite certain she had no cast in her eye. So, you see, sir, she can't be the same person. You can dye your hair or you can wear a wig or you can paint your face; but a squint is a squint. There's no faking a swivel eye."

Thorndyke laughed softly. "I suppose not; unless, perhaps, some one might invent an adjustable glass eye. Are these the keys?"

"Yes, sir. The large one belongs to the wicket in the front gate. The other is the latch-key belonging to the side door. Mrs. Shallybang has the key of the front door."

"Thank you," said Thorndyke. He took the keys, to which a wooden label was attached, and we made our way back towards the house of mystery, discussing the clerk's statements as we went.

"A very communicable young gentleman, that," Thorndyke remarked. "He seemed quite pleased to relieve the monotony of office work with a little conversation. And I am sure I was very delighted to indulge him."

"He hadn't much to tell, all the same," said I.

Thorndyke looked at me in surprise. "I don't know what you would have, Jervis, unless you expect casual strangers to present you with a ready-made body of evidence, fully classified, with all the inferences and implications stated. It seemed to me that he was a highly instructive young man."

“What did you learn from him?” I asked.

“Oh, come, Jervis,” he protested; “is that a fair question, under our present arrangement? However, I will mention a few points. We learn that about six or seven months ago, Mr. H. Weiss dropped from the clouds into Kennington Lane and that he has now ascended from Kennington Lane into the clouds. That is a useful piece of information. Then we learn that Mrs. Schallibaum has remained in England; which might be of little importance if it were not for a very interesting corollary that it suggests.”

“What is that?”

“I must leave you to consider the facts at your leisure; but you will have noticed the ostensible reason for her remaining behind. She is engaged in puttying up the one gaping joint in their armour. One of them has been indiscreet enough to give this address to some correspondent—probably a foreign correspondent. Now, as they obviously wish to leave no tracks, they cannot give their new address to the Post Office to have their letters forwarded, and, on the other hand, a letter left in the box might establish such a connection as would enable them to be traced. Moreover, the letter might be of a kind that they would not wish to fall into the wrong hands. They would not have given this address excepting under some peculiar circumstances.”

“No, I should think not, if they took this house for the express purpose of committing a crime in it.”

“Exactly. And then there is one other fact

that you may have gathered from our young friend's remarks."

"What is that?"

"That a controllable squint is a very valuable asset to a person who wishes to avoid identification."

"Yes, I did note that. The fellow seemed to think that it was absolutely conclusive."

"And so would most people; especially in the case of a squint of that kind. We can all squint towards our noses, but no normal person can turn his eyes away from one another. My impression is that the presence or absence, as the case might be, of a divergent squint would be accepted as absolute disproof of identity. But here we are."

He inserted the key into the wicket of the large gate, and, when we had stepped through into the covered way, he locked it from the inside.

"Why have you locked us in?" I asked, seeing that the wicket had a latch.

"Because," he replied, "if we now hear any one on the premises we shall know who it is. Only one person besides ourselves has a key."

His reply startled me somewhat. I stopped and looked at him.

"That is a quaint situation, Thorndyke. I hadn't thought of it. Why she may actually come to the house while we are here; in fact, she may be in the house at this moment."

"I hope not," said he. "We don't particularly want Mr. Weiss to be put on his guard, for I take it, he is a pretty wide-awake gentleman under any circumstances. If she does come, we had better

keep out of sight. I think we will look over the house first. That is of the most interest to us. If the lady does happen to come while we are here, she may stay to show us over the place and keep an eye on us. So we will leave the stables to the last."

We walked down the entry to the side door at which I had been admitted by Mrs. Schallibaum on the occasion of my previous visits. Thorndyke inserted the latch-key, and, as soon as we were inside, shut the door and walked quickly through into the hall, whither I followed him. He made straight for the front door, where, having slipped up the catch of the lock, he began very attentively to examine the letter-box. It was a somewhat massive wooden box, fitted with a lock of good quality and furnished with a wire grille through which one could inspect the interior.

"We are in luck, Jervis," Thorndyke remarked. "Our visit has been most happily timed. There is a letter in the box."

"Well," I said, "we can't get it out; and if we could, it would be hardly justifiable."

"I don't know," he replied, "that I am prepared to assent off-hand to either of those propositions; but I would rather not tamper with another person's letter, even if that person should happen to be a murderer. Perhaps we can get the information we want from the outside of the envelope."

He produced from his pocket a little electric lamp fitted with a bull's-eye, and, pressing the button, threw a beam of light in through the grille.

The letter was lying on the bottom of the box face upwards, so that the address could easily be read.

"Herrn Dr. H. Weiss," Thorndyke read aloud. "German stamp, postmark apparently Darmstadt. You notice that the 'Herrn Dr.' is printed and the rest written. What do you make of that?"

"I don't quite know. Do you think he is really a medical man?"

"Perhaps we had better finish our investigation, in case we are disturbed, and discuss the bearings of the facts afterwards. The name of the sender may be on the flap of the envelope. If it is not, I shall pick the lock and take out the letter. Have you got a probe about you?"

"Yes; by force of habit I am still carrying my pocket case."

I took the little case from my pocket and extracting from it a jointed probe of thickish silver wire, screwed the two halves together and handed the completed instrument to Thorndyke; who passed the slender rod through the grille and adroitly turned the letter over.

"Ha!" he exclaimed with deep satisfaction, as the light fell on the reverse of the envelope, "we are saved from the necessity of theft—or rather, unauthorized borrowing—'Johann Schnitzler, Darmstadt.' That is all that we actually want. The German police can do the rest if necessary."

He handed me back my probe, pocketed his lamp, released the catch of the lock on the door, and turned away along the dark, musty-smelling hall.

“Do you happen to know the name of Johann Schnitzler?” he asked.

I replied that I had no recollection of ever having heard the name before.

“Neither have I,” said he; “but I think we may form a pretty shrewd guess as to his avocation. As you saw, the words ‘Herrn Dr.’ were printed on the envelope, leaving the rest of the address to be written by hand. The plain inference is that he is a person who habitually addresses letters to medical men, and as the style of the envelope and the lettering—which is printed, not embossed—is commercial, we may assume that he is engaged in some sort of trade. Now, what is a likely trade?”

“He might be an instrument maker or a drug manufacturer; more probably the latter, as there is an extensive drug and chemical industry in Germany, and as Mr. Weiss seemed to have more use for drugs than instruments.”

“Yes, I think you are right; but we will look him up when we get home. And now we had better take a glance at the bedroom; that is, if you can remember which room it was.”

“It was on the first floor,” said I, “and the door by which I entered was just at the head of the stairs.”

We ascended the two flights, and, as we reached the landing, I halted.

“This was the door,” I said, and was about to turn the handle when Thorndyke caught me by the arm.

“One moment, Jervis,” said he. “What do you make of this?”

He pointed to a spot near the bottom of the door where, on close inspection, four good-sized screw-holes were distinguishable. They had been neatly stopped with putty and covered with knotting, and were so nearly the colour of the grained and varnished woodwork as to be hardly visible.

"Evidently," I answered, "there has been a bolt there, though it seems a queer place to fix one."

"Not at all," replied Thorndyke. "If you look up you will see that there was another at the top of the door, and, as the lock is in the middle, they must have been highly effective. But there are one or two other points that strike one. First, you will notice that the bolts have been fixed on quite recently, for the paint that they covered is of the same grimy tint as that on the rest of the door. Next, they have been taken off, which, seeing that they could hardly have been worth the trouble of removal, seems to suggest that the person who fixed them considered that their presence might appear remarkable, while the screw-holes, which have been so skilfully and carefully stopped, would be less conspicuous.

"Then, they are on the outside of the door—an unusual situation for bedroom bolts—and were of considerable size. They were long and thick."

"I can see, by the position of the screw-holes, that they were long; but how do you arrive at their thickness?"

"By the size of the counter-holes in the jamb of the door. These holes have been very carefully filled with wooden plugs covered with knotting;

but you can make out their diameter, which is that of the bolts, and which is decidedly out of proportion for an ordinary bedroom door. Let me show you a light."

He flashed his lamp into the dark corner, and I was able to see distinctly the portentously large holes into which the bolts had fitted, and also to note the remarkable neatness with which they had been plugged.

"There was a second door, I remember," said I. "Let us see if that was guarded in a similar manner."

We strode through the empty room, awakening dismal echoes as we trod the bare boards, and flung open the other door. At top and bottom, similar groups of screw-holes showed that this also had been made secure, and that these bolts had been of the same very substantial character as the others.

Thorndyke turned away from the door with a slight frown.

"If we had any doubts," said he, "as to what has been going on in this house, these traces of massive fastenings would be almost enough to settle them."

"They might have been there before Weiss came," I suggested. "He only came about seven months ago and there is no date on the screw-holes."

"That is quite true. But when, with their recent fixture, you couple the facts that they have been removed, that very careful measures have been taken to obliterate the traces of their presence, and that they would have been indispensable for

the commission of the crime that we are almost certain was being committed here, it looks like an excess of caution to seek other explanations."

"But," I objected, "if the man, Graves, was really imprisoned, could not he have smashed the window and called for help?"

"The window looks out on the yard, as you see; but I expect it was secured too."

He drew the massive, old-fashioned shutters out of their recess and closed them.

"Yes, here we are." He pointed to four groups of screw-holes at the corners of the shutters, and, once more producing his lamp, narrowly examined the insides of the recesses into which the shutters folded.

"The nature of the fastening is quite evident," said he. "An iron bar passed right across at the top and bottom and was secured by a staple and padlock. You can see the mark the bar made in the recess when the shutters were folded. When these bars were fixed and padlocked and the bolts were shot, this room was as secure, for a prisoner unprovided with tools, as a cell in Newgate."

We looked at one another for awhile without speaking; and I fancy that if Mr. H. Weiss could have seen our faces he might have thought it desirable to seek some retreat even more remote than Hamburg.

"It was a diabolical affair, Jervis," Thorndyke said at length, in an ominously quiet and even gentle tone. "A sordid, callous, cold-blooded crime of a type that is to me utterly unforgivable

and incapable of extenuation. Of course, it may have failed. Mr. Graves may even now be alive. I shall make it my very especial business to ascertain whether he is or not. And if he is not, I shall take it to myself as a sacred duty to lay my hand on the man who has compassed his death."

I looked at Thorndyke with something akin to awe. In the quiet unemotional tone of his voice, in his unruffled manner and the stony calm of his face, there was something much more impressive, more fateful, than there could have been in the fiercest threats or the most passionate denunciations. I felt that in those softly spoken words he had pronounced the doom of the fugitive villain.

He turned away from the window and glanced round the empty room. It seemed that our discovery of the fastenings had exhausted the information that it had to offer.

"It is a thousand pities," I remarked, "that we were unable to look round before they moved out the furniture. We might have found some clue to the scoundrel's identity."

"Yes," replied Thorndyke; "there isn't much information to be gathered here, I am afraid. I see they have swept up the small litter from the floor and poked it under the grate. We will turn that over, as there seems to be nothing else, and then look at the other rooms."

He raked out the little heap of rubbish with his stick and spread it out on the hearth. It certainly looked unpromising enough, being just such a rubbish heap as may be swept up in any untidy

room during a move. But Thorndyke went through it systematically, examining each item attentively, even to the local tradesmen's bills and empty paper bags, before laying them aside. Another rake of his stick scattered the bulky masses of crumpled paper and brought into view an object which he picked up with some eagerness. It was a portion of a pair of spectacles, which had apparently been trodden on, for the side-bar was twisted and bent and the glass was shattered into fragments.

"This ought to give us a hint," said he. "It will probably have belonged either to Weiss or Graves, as Mrs. Schallibaum apparently did not wear glasses. Let us see if we can find the remainder."

We both groped carefully with our sticks amongst the rubbish, spreading it out on the hearth and removing the numerous pieces of crumpled paper. Our search was rewarded by the discovery of the second eye-piece of the spectacles, of which the glass was badly cracked but less shattered than the other. I also picked up two tiny sticks at which Thorndyke looked with deep interest before laying them on the mantelshelf.

"We will consider them presently," said he. "Let us finish with the spectacles first. You see that the left eye-glass is a concave cylindrical lens of some sort. We can make out that much from the fragments that remain, and we can measure the curvature when we get them home, although that will be easier if we can collect some more fragments and stick them together. The right eye is plain

glass; that is quite evident. Then these will have belonged to your patient, Jervis. You said that the tremulous iris was in the right eye, I think?"

"Yes," I replied. "These will be his spectacles, without doubt."

"They are peculiar frames," he continued. "If they were made in this country, we might be able to discover the maker. But we must collect as many fragments of glass as we can."

Once more we searched amongst the rubbish and succeeded, eventually, in recovering some seven or eight small fragments of the broken spectacle-glasses, which Thorndyke laid on the mantelshelf beside the little sticks.

"By the way, Thorndyke," I said, taking up the latter to examine them afresh, "what are these things? Can you make anything of them?"

He looked at them thoughtfully for a few moments and then replied:

"I don't think I will tell you what they are. You should find that out for yourself, and it will be well worth your while to do so. They are rather suggestive objects under the circumstances. But notice their peculiarities carefully. Both are portions of some smooth, stout reed. There is a long, thin stick—about six inches long—and a thicker piece only three inches in length. The longer piece has a little scrap of red paper stuck on at the end; apparently a portion of a label of some kind with an ornamental border. The other end of the stick has been broken off. The shorter,

stouter stick has had its central cavity artificially enlarged so that it fits over the other to form a cap or sheath. Make a careful note of those facts and try to think what they probably mean ; what would be the most likely use for an object of this kind. When you have ascertained that, you will have learned something new about this case. And now, to resume our investigations. Here is a very suggestive thing." He picked up a small, wide-mouthed bottle and, holding it up for my inspection, continued : " Observe the fly sticking to the inside, and the name on the label, ' Fox, Russell Street, Covent Garden.' "

" I don't know Mr. Fox."

" Then I will inform you that he is a dealer in the materials for ' make-up,' theatrical or otherwise, and will leave you to consider the bearing of this bottle on our present investigation. There doesn't seem to be anything else of interest in this El Dorado excepting that screw, which you notice is about the size of those with which the bolts were fastened on the doors. I don't think it is worth while to unstop any of the holes to try it ; we should learn nothing fresh."

He rose, and, having kicked the discarded rubbish back under the grate, gathered up his gleanings from the mantelpiece, carefully bestowing the spectacles and the fragments of glass in the tin box that he appeared always to carry in his pocket, and wrapping the larger objects in his handkerchief.

" A poor collection," was his comment, as he returned the box and handkerchief to his pocket,

“and yet not so poor as I had feared. Perhaps, if we question them closely enough, these unconsidered trifles may be made to tell us something worth learning after all. Shall we go into the other room?”

We passed out on to the landing and into the front room, where, guided by experience, we made straight for the fire-place. But the little heap of rubbish there contained nothing that even Thorn-dyke's inquisitive eye could view with interest. We wandered disconsolately round the room, peering into the empty cupboards and scanning the floor and the corners by the skirting, without discovering a single object or relic of the late occupants. In the course of my perambulations I halted by the window and was looking down into the street when Thorndyke called to me sharply :

“Come away from the window, Jervis! Have you forgotten that Mrs. Schallibaum may be in the neighbourhood at this moment?”

As a matter of fact I had entirely forgotten the matter, nor did it now strike me as anything but the remotest of possibilities. I replied to that effect.

“I don't agree with you,” Thorndyke rejoined “We have heard that she comes here to look for letters. Probably she comes every day, or even oftener. There is a good deal at stake, remember, and they cannot feel quite as secure as they would wish. Weiss must have seen what view you took of the case and must have had some uneasy moments thinking of what you might do. In fact, we may

take it that the fear of you drove them out of the neighbourhood, and that they are mighty anxious to get that letter and cut the last link that binds them to this house."

"I suppose that is so," I agreed; "and if the lady should happen to pass this way and should see me at the window and recognize me, she would certainly smell a rat."

"A rat!" exclaimed Thorndyke. "She would smell a whole pack of foxes, and Mr. H. Weiss would be more on his guard than ever. Let us have a look at the other rooms; there is nothing here."

We went up to the next floor and found traces of recent occupation in one room only. The garrets had evidently been unused, and the kitchen and ground-floor rooms offered nothing that appeared to Thorndyke worth noting. Then we went out by the side door and down the covered way into the yard at the back. The workshops were fastened with rusty padlocks that looked as if they had not been disturbed for months. The stables were empty and had been tentatively cleaned out, the coach-house was vacant, and presented no traces of recent use excepting a half-bald spoke-brush. We returned up the covered way and I was about to close the side door, which Thorndyke had left ajar, when he stopped me.

"We'll have another look at the hall before we go," said he; and, walking softly before me, he made his way to the front door, where, producing his lamp, he threw a beam of light into the letter-box.

"Any more letters?" I asked.

“Any more!” he repeated. “Look for yourself.”

I stooped and peered through the grille into the lighted interior; and then I uttered an exclamation.

The box was empty.

Thorndyke regarded me with a grim smile. “We have been caught on the hop, Jervis, I suspect,” said he.

“It is queer,” I replied. “I didn’t hear any sound of the opening or closing of the door; did you?”

“No; I didn’t hear any sound; which makes me suspect that she did. She would have heard our voices and she is probably keeping a sharp look-out at this very moment. I wonder if she saw you at the window. But whether she did or not, we must go very warily. Neither of us must return to the Temple direct, and we had better separate when we have returned the keys and I will watch you out of sight and see if anyone is following you. What are you going to do?”

“If you don’t want me, I shall run over to Kensington and drop in to lunch at the Hornbys’. I said I would call as soon as I had an hour or so free.”

“Very well. Do so; and keep a look-out in case you are followed. I have to go down to Guildford this afternoon. Under the circumstances, I shall not go back home, but send Polton a telegram and take a train at Vauxhall and change at some small station where I can watch the platform. Be as careful as you can. Remember that what you

have to avoid is being followed to any place where you are known, and, above all, revealing your connection with number Five A, King's Bench Walk."

Having thus considered our immediate movements, we emerged together from the wicket, and locking it behind us, walked quickly to the house-agents', where an opportune office-boy received the keys without remark. As we came out of the office, I halted irresolutely and we both looked up and down the lane.

"There is no suspicious looking person in sight at present," Thorndyke said, and then asked: "Which way do you think of going?"

"It seems to me," I replied, "that my best plan would be to take a cab or an omnibus so as to get out of the neighbourhood as quickly as possible. If I go through Ravensden Street into Kennington Park Road, I can pick up an omnibus that will take me to the Mansion House, where I can change for Kensington. I shall go on the top so that I can keep a look-out for any other omnibus or cab that may be following."

"Yes," said Thorndyke, "that seems a good plan. I will walk with you and see that you get a fair start."

We walked briskly along the lane and through Ravensden Street to the Kennington Park Road. An omnibus was approaching from the south at a steady jog-trot and we halted at the corner to wait for it. Several people passed us in different directions, but none seemed to take any particular notice of us, though we observed them rather

narrowly, especially the women. Then the omnibus crawled up. I sprang on the foot-board and ascended to the roof, where I seated myself and surveyed the prospect to the rear. No one else got on the omnibus—which had not stopped—and no cab or other passenger vehicle was in sight. I continued to watch Thorndyke as he stood sentinel at the corner, and noted that no one appeared to be making any effort to overtake the omnibus. Presently my colleague waved his hand to me and turned back towards Vauxhall, and I, having satisfied myself once more that no pursuing cab or hurrying foot-passenger was in sight, decided that our precautions had been unnecessary and settled myself in a rather more comfortable position.

*Chapter X**The Hunter Hunted*

THE omnibus of those days was a leisurely vehicle. Its ordinary pace was a rather sluggish trot, and in a thickly populated thoroughfare its speed was further reduced by frequent stoppages. Bearing these facts in mind, I gave an occasional backward glance as we jogged northward, though my attention soon began to wander from the rather remote possibility of pursuit to the incidents of our late exploration.

It had not been difficult to see that Thorndyke was very well pleased with the results of our search, but excepting the letter—which undoubtedly opened up a channel for further inquiry and possible identi-

fication—I could not perceive that any of the traces that we had found justified his satisfaction. There were the spectacles, for instance. They were almost certainly the pair worn by Mr. Graves. But what then? It was exceedingly improbable that we should be able to discover the maker of them, and if we were, it was still more improbable that he would be able to give us any information that would help us. Spectacle-makers are not usually on confidential terms with their customers.

As to the other objects, I could make nothing of them. The little sticks of reed evidently had some use that was known to Thorndyke and furnished, by inference, some kind of information about Weiss, Graves, or Mrs. Schallibaum. But I had never seen anything like them before and they conveyed nothing whatever to me. Then the bottle that had seemed so significant to Thorndyke was to me quite uninforming. It did, indeed, suggest that some member of the household might be connected with the stage, but it gave no hint as to which one. Certainly that person was not Mr. Weiss, whose appearance was as remote from that of an actor as could well be imagined. At any rate, the bottle and its label gave me no more useful hint than it might be worth while to call on Mr. Fox and make inquiries; and something told me very emphatically that this was not what it had conveyed to Thorndyke.

These reflections occupied me until the omnibus, having rumbled over London Bridge and up King William Street, joined the converging streams of traffic at the Mansion House. Here I got down and

changed to an omnibus bound for Kensington ; on which I travelled westward pleasantly enough, looking down into the teeming streets and whiling away the time by meditating upon the very agreeable afternoon that I promised myself, and considering how far my new arrangement with Thorndyke would justify me in entering into certain domestic engagements of a highly interesting kind.

What might have happened under other circumstances it is impossible to tell and useless to speculate ; the fact is that my journey ended in a disappointment. I arrived, all agog, at the familiar house in Endsley Gardens only to be told by a sympathetic housemaid that the family was out ; that Mrs. Hornby had gone into the country and would not be home until night, and—which mattered a good deal more to me—that her niece, Miss Juliet Gibson, had accompanied her.

Now a man who drops into lunch without announcing his intention or previously ascertaining those of his friends has no right to quarrel with fate if he finds an empty house. Thus philosophically I reflected as I turned away from the house in profound discontent, demanding of the universe in general why Mrs. Hornby need have perversely chosen my first free day to go gadding into the country, and above all, why she must needs spirit away the fair Juliet. This was the crowning misfortune (for I could have endured the absence of the elder lady with commendable fortitude), and since I could not immediately return to the Temple it left me a mere waif and stray for the time being.

Instinct—of the kind that manifests itself especially about one o'clock in the afternoon—impelled me in the direction of Brompton Road, and finally landed me at a table in a large restaurant apparently adjusted to the needs of ladies who had come from a distance to engage in the feminine sport of shopping. Here, while waiting for my lunch, I sat idly scanning the morning paper and wondering what I should do with the rest of the day; and presently it chanced that my eye caught the announcement of a *matinée* at the theatre in Sloane Square. It was quite a long time since I had been at a theatre, and, as the play—a light comedy—seemed likely to satisfy my not very critical taste, I decided to devote the afternoon to reviving my acquaintance with the drama. Accordingly as soon as my lunch was finished, I walked down the Brompton Road, stepped on to an omnibus, and was duly deposited at the door of the theatre. A couple of minutes later I found myself occupying an excellent seat in the second row of the pit, oblivious alike of my recent disappointment and of Thorn-dyke's words of warning.

I am not an enthusiastic play-goer. To dramatic performances I am disposed to assign nothing further than the modest function of furnishing entertainment. I do not go to a theatre to be instructed or to have my moral outlook elevated. But, by way of compensation, I am not difficult to please. To a simple play, adjusted to my primitive taste, I can bring a certain bucolic appreciation that enables me to extract from the performance the maximum of enjoyment; and when, on this occasion, the final

curtain fell and the audience rose, I rescued my hat from its insecure resting-place and turned to go with the feeling that I had spent a highly agreeable afternoon.

Emerging from the theatre, borne on the outgoing stream, I presently found myself opposite the door of a tea-shop. Instinct—the five o'clock instinct this time—guided me in; for we are creatures of habit, especially of the tea habit. The unoccupied table to which I drifted was in a shady corner not very far from the pay-desk; and here I had been seated less than a minute when a lady passed me on her way to the farther table. The glimpse that I caught of her as she approached—it was but a glimpse, since she passed behind me—showed that she was dressed in black, that she wore a beaded veil and hat, and in addition to the glass of milk and the bun that she carried, she was encumbered by an umbrella and a small basket, apparently containing some kind of needlework. I must confess that I gave her very little attention at the time, being occupied in anxious speculation as to how long it would be before the fact of my presence would impinge on the consciousness of the waitress.

The exact time by the clock on the wall was three minutes and a quarter, at the expiration of which an anæmic young woman sauntered up to the table and bestowed on me a glance of sullen interrogation, as if mutely demanding what the devil I wanted. I humbly requested that I might be provided with a pot of tea; whereupon she turned on her heel (which was a good deal worn down on the offside) and

reported my conduct to a lady behind a marble-topped counter.

It seemed that the counter lady took a lenient view of the case, for in less than four minutes the waitress returned and gloomily deposited on the table before me a tea-pot, a milk-jug, a cup and saucer, a jug of hot water, and a small pool of milk. Then she once more departed in dudgeon.

I had just given the tea in the pot a preliminary stir and was about to pour out the first cup when I felt some one bump lightly against my chair and heard something rattle on the floor. I turned quickly and perceived the lady, whom I had seen enter, stooping just behind my chair. It seemed that having finished her frugal meal she was on her way out when she had dropped the little basket that I had noticed hanging from her wrist; which basket had promptly disgorged its entire contents on the floor.

Now every one must have noticed the demon of agility that seems to enter into an inanimate object when it is dropped, and the apparently intelligent malice with which it discovers, and rolls into, the most inaccessible places. Here was a case in point. This particular basket had contained materials for Oriental bead-work; and no sooner had it reached the floor than each item of its contents appeared to become possessed of a separate and particular devil impelling it to travel at headlong speed to some remote and unapproachable corner as distant as possible from its fellows.

As the only man—and almost the only person—

near, the duty of salvage-agent manifestly devolved upon me; and down I went, accordingly, on my hands and knees, regardless of a nearly new pair of trousers, to grope under tables, chairs and settles in reach of the scattered treasure. A ball of the thick thread or twine I recovered from a dark and dirty corner after a brief interview with the sharp corner of a settle, and a multitude of the large beads with which this infernal industry is carried on I gathered from all parts of the compass, coming forth at length (quadrupedally) with a double handful of the treasure-trove and a very lively appreciation of the resistant qualities of a cast-iron table-stand when applied to the human cranium.

The owner of the lost and found property was greatly distressed by the accident and the trouble it had caused me; in fact she was quite needlessly agitated about it. The hand which held the basket into which I poured the rescued trash trembled visibly, and the brief glance that I bestowed on her as she murmured her thanks and apologies—with a very slight foreign accent—showed me that she was excessively pale. That much I could see plainly in spite of the rather dim light in this part of the shop and the beaded veil that covered her face; and I could also see that she was a rather remarkable looking woman, with a great mass of harsh, black hair and very broad black eyebrows that nearly met above her nose and contrasted strikingly with the dead white of her skin. But, of course, I did not look at her intently. Having returned her property and re-

ceived her acknowledgments, I resumed my seat and left her to go on her way.

I had once more grasped the handle of the tea-pot when I made a rather curious discovery. At the bottom of the tea-cup lay a single lump of sugar. To the majority of persons it would have meant nothing. They would have assumed that they had dropped it in and forgotten it and would have proceeded to pour out the tea. But it happened that, at this time, I did not take sugar in my tea; whence it followed that the lump had not been put in by me. Assuming, therefore, that it had been carelessly dropped in by the waitress, I turned it out on the table, filled the cup, added the milk, and took a tentative draught to test the temperature.

The cup was yet at my lips when I chanced to look into the mirror that faced my table. Of course it reflected the part of the shop that was behind me, including the cashier's desk; at which the owner of the basket now stood paying for her refreshment. Between her and me was a gas chandelier which cast its light on my back but full on her face; and her veil notwithstanding, I could see that she was looking at me steadily; was, in fact, watching me intently and with a very curious expression—an expression of expectancy mingled with alarm. But this was not all. As I returned her intent look—which I could do unobserved, since my face, reflected in the mirror, was in deep shadow—I suddenly perceived that that steady gaze engaged her right eye only; the other eye was looking sharply towards her left shoulder. In short, she had a divergent squint of the left eye.

I put down my cup with a thrill of amazement and a sudden surging up of suspicion and alarm. An instant's reflection reminded me that when she had spoken to me a few moments before, both her eyes had looked into mine without the slightest trace of a squint. My thoughts flew back to the lump of sugar, to the unguarded milk-jug and the draught of tea that I had already swallowed; and, hardly knowing what I intended, I started to my feet and turned to confront her. But as I rose, she snatched up her change and darted from the shop. Through the glass door, I saw her spring on to the foot-board of a passing hansom and give the driver some direction. I saw the man whip up his horse, and, by the time I reached the door, the cab was moving off swiftly towards Sloane Street.

I stood irresolute. I had not paid and could not run out of the shop without making a fuss, and my hat and stick were still on the rail opposite my seat. The woman ought to be followed, but I had no fancy for the task. If the tea that I had swallowed was innocuous, no harm was done and I was rid of my pursuer. So far as I was concerned, the incident was closed. I went back to my seat, and picking up the lump of sugar which still lay on the table where I had dropped it, put it carefully in my pocket. But my appetite for tea was satisfied for the present. Moreover it was hardly advisable to stay in the shop lest some fresh spy should come to see how I fared. Accordingly I obtained my check, handed it in at the cashier's desk and took my departure.

All this time, it will be observed, I had been taking

it for granted that the lady in black had followed me from Kensington to this shop; that, in fact, she was none other than Mrs. Schallibaum. And, indeed, the circumstances had rendered the conclusion inevitable. In the very instant when I had perceived the displacement of the left eye, complete recognition had come upon me. When I had stood facing the woman, the brief glance at her face had conveyed to me something dimly reminiscent of which I had been but half conscious and had instantly forgotten. But the sight of that characteristic squint had at once revived and explained it. That the woman was Mrs. Schallibaum I now felt no doubt whatever.

Nevertheless, the whole affair was profoundly mysterious. As to the change in the woman's appearance, there was little in that. The coarse, black hair might be her own, dyed, or it might be a wig. The eyebrows were made-up; it was a simple enough proceeding and made still more simple by the beaded veil. But how did she come to be there at all? How did she happen to be made-up in this fashion at this particular time? And, above all, how came she to be provided with a lump of what I had little doubt was poisoned sugar?

I turned over the events of the day, and the more I considered them the less comprehensible they appeared. No one had followed the omnibus either on foot or in a vehicle, as far as I could see; and I had kept a careful look-out, not only at starting but for some considerable time after. Yet, all the

time, Mrs. Schallibaum must have been following. But how? If she had known that I was intending to travel by the omnibus she might have gone to meet it and entered before I did. But she could not have known: and moreover she did not meet the omnibus, for we watched its approach from some considerable distance. I considered whether she might not have been concealed in the house and overheard me mention my destination to Thorndyke. But this failed to explain the mystery, since I had mentioned no address beyond "Kensington." I had, indeed, mentioned the name of Mrs. Hornby, but the supposition that my friends might be known by name to Mrs. Schallibaum, or even that she might have looked the name up in the directory, presented a probability too remote to be worth entertaining.

But, if I reached no satisfactory conclusion, my cogitations had one useful effect; they occupied my mind to the exclusion of that unfortunate draught of tea. Not that I had been seriously uneasy after the first shock. The quantity that I had swallowed was not large—the tea being hotter than I cared for—and I remembered that, when I had thrown out the lump of sugar, I had turned the cup upside down on the table; so there could have been nothing solid left in it. And the lump of sugar was in itself reassuring, for it certainly would not have been used in conjunction with any less conspicuous but more incriminating form of poison. That lump of sugar was now in my pocket, reserved for careful examination at my leisure; and I reflected with a faint grin that it would be a little

disconcerting if it should turn out to contain nothing but sugar after all.

On leaving the tea-shop, I walked up Sloane Street with the intention of doing what I ought to have done earlier in the day. I was going to make perfectly sure that no spy was dogging my footsteps. But for my ridiculous confidence I could have done so quite easily before going to Endsley Gardens ; and now, made wiser by a startling experience, I proceeded with systematic care. It was still broad daylight—for the lamps in the tea-shop had been rendered necessary only by the faulty construction of the premises and the dullness of the afternoon—and in an open space I could see far enough for complete safety. Arriving at the top of Sloane Street, I crossed Knightsbridge, and, entering Hyde Park, struck out towards the Serpentine. Passing along the eastern shore, I entered one of the long paths that lead towards the Marble Arch and strode along it at such a pace as would make it necessary for any pursuer to hurry in order to keep me in sight. Half-way across the great stretch of turf, I halted for a few moments and noted the few people who were coming in my direction. Then I turned sharply to the left and headed straight for the Victoria Gate, but again, half-way, I turned off among a clump of trees, and, standing behind the trunk of one of them, took a fresh survey of the people who were moving along the paths. All were at a considerable distance and none appeared to be coming my way.

I now moved cautiously from one tree to another

and passed through the wooded region to the south, crossed the Serpentine bridge at a rapid walk and hurrying along the south shore left the Park by Apsley House. From hence I walked at the same rapid pace along Piccadilly, insinuating myself among the crowd with the skill born of long acquaintance with the London streets, crossed amidst the seething traffic at the Circus, darted up Windmill Street and began to zigzag amongst the narrow streets and courts of Soho. Crossing the Seven Dials and Drury Lane I passed through the multitudinous back-streets and alleys that then filled the area south of Lincoln's Inn, came out by Newcastle Street, Holywell Street and Half-Moon Alley into the Strand, which I crossed immediately, ultimately entering the Temple by Devereux Court.

Even then I did not relax my precautions. From one court to another I passed quickly, loitering in those dark entries and unexpected passages that are known to so few but the regular Templars, and coming out into the open only at the last where the wide passage of King's Bench Walk admits of no evasion. Half-way up the stairs, I stood for some time in the shadow, watching the approaches from the staircase window; and when, at length, I felt satisfied that I had taken every precaution that was possible, I inserted my key and let myself into our chambers.

Thorndyke had already arrived, and, as I entered, he rose to greet me with an expression of evident relief.

"I am glad to see you, Jervis," he said. "I have been rather anxious about you."

“ Why ? ” I asked.

“ For several reasons. One is that you are the sole danger that threatens these people—as far as they know. Another is that we made a most ridiculous mistake. We overlooked a fact that ought to have struck us instantly. But how have you fared ? ”

“ Better than I deserved. That good lady stuck to me like a burr—at least I believe she did.”

“ I have no doubt she did. We have been caught napping finely, Jervis.”

“ How ? ”

“ We’ll go into that presently. Let us hear about your adventures first.”

I gave him a full account of my movements from the time when we parted to that of my arrival home, omitting no incident that I was able to remember and, as far as I could, reconstituting my exceedingly devious homeward route.

“ Your retreat was masterly,” he remarked with a broad smile. “ I should think that it would have utterly defeated any pursuer ; and the only pity is that it was probably wasted on the desert air. Your pursuer had by that time become a fugitive. But you were wise to take these precautions, for, of course, Weiss might have followed you.”

“ But I thought he was in Hamburg ? ”

“ Did you ? You are a very confiding young gentleman, for a budding medical jurist. Of course we don’t know that he is not ; but the fact that he has given Hamburg as his present whereabouts establishes a strong presumption that he is some-

where else. I only hope that he has not located you, and, from what you tell me of your later methods, I fancy that you would have shaken him off even if he had started to follow you from the tea-shop."

"I hope so too. But how did that woman manage to stick to me in that way? What was the mistake we made?"

Thorndyke laughed grimly. "It was a perfectly asinine mistake, Jervis. You started up Kennington Park Road on a leisurely, jog-trotting omnibus, and neither you nor I remembered what there is underneath Kennington Park Road."

"Underneath!" I exclaimed, completely puzzled for the moment. Then, suddenly realizing what he meant, "Of course!" I exclaimed. "Idiot that I am! You mean the electric railway?"

"Yes. That explains everything. Mrs. Schallibaum must have watched us from some shop and quietly followed us up the lane. There were a good many women about and several were walking in our direction. There was nothing to distinguish her from the others unless you had recognized her, which you would hardly have been able to do if she had worn a veil and kept at a fair distance. At least I think not."

"No," I agreed, "I certainly should not. I had only seen her in a half-dark room. In outdoor clothes and with a veil, I should never have been able to identify her without very close inspection. Besides there was the disguise or make-up."

"Not at that time. She would hardly come

disguised to her own house, for it might have led to her being challenged and asked who she was. I think we may take it that there was no actual disguise, although she would probably wear a shady hat and a veil ; which would have prevented either of us from picking her out from the other women in the street."

"And what do you think happened next ?"

"I think that she simply walked past us—probably on the other side of the road—as we stood waiting for the omnibus, and turned up Kennington Park Road. She probably guessed that we were waiting for the omnibus and walked up the road in the direction in which it was going. Presently the omnibus would pass her, and there were you in full view on top keeping a vigilant look-out in the wrong direction. Then she would quicken her pace a little and in a minute or two would arrive at the Kennington Station of the South London Railway. In a minute or two more she would be in one of the electric trains whirling along under the street on which your omnibus was crawling. She would get out at the Borough Station, or she might take a more risky chance and go on to the Monument ; but in any case she would wait for your omnibus, hail it and get inside. I suppose you took up some passengers on the way ?"

"Oh dear, yes. We were stopping every two or three minutes to take up or set down passengers ; and most of them were women."

"Very well ; then we may take it that when you arrived at the Mansion House, Mrs. Schallibaum

was one of your inside passengers. It was a rather quaint situation, I think."

"Yes, confound her! What a couple of noodles she must have thought us!"

"No doubt. And that is the one consoling feature in the case. She will have taken us for a pair of absolute greenhorns. But to continue. Of course she travelled in your omnibus to Kensington—you ought to have gone inside on both occasions, so that you could see every one who entered and examine the inside passengers; she will have followed you to Endsley Gardens and probably noted the house you went to. Thence she will have followed you to the restaurant and may even have lunched there."

"It is quite possible," said I. "There were two rooms and they were filled principally with women."

"Then she will have followed you to Sloane Street, and, as you persisted in riding outside, she could easily take an inside place in your omnibus. As to the theatre, she must have taken it as a veritable gift of the gods; an arrangement made by you for her special convenience."

"Why?"

"My dear fellow! consider. She had only to follow you in and see you safely into your seat and there you were, left till called for. She could then go home, make up for her part; draw out a plan of action, with the help, perhaps, of Mr. Weiss, provide herself with the necessary means and appliances and, at the appointed time, call and collect you."

“That is assuming a good deal,” I objected. “It is assuming, for instance, that she lives within a moderate distance of Sloane Square. Otherwise it would have been impossible.”

“Exactly. That is why I assume it. You don’t suppose that she goes about habitually with lumps of prepared sugar in her pocket. And if not, then she must have got that lump from somewhere. Then the beads suggest a carefully prepared plan, and, as I said just now, she can hardly have been made-up when she met us in Kennington Lane. From all of which it seems likely that her present abode is not very far from Sloane Square.”

“At any rate,” said I, “it was taking a considerable risk. I might have left the theatre before she came back.”

“Yes,” Thorndyke agreed. “But it is like a woman to take chances. A man would probably have stuck to you when once he had got you off your guard. But she was ready to take chances. She chanced the railway, and it came off; she chanced your remaining in the theatre, and that came off too. She calculated on the probability of your getting tea when you came out, and she hit it off again. And then she took one chance too many; she assumed that you probably took sugar in your tea, and she was wrong.”

“We are taking it for granted that the sugar was prepared,” I remarked.

“Yes. Our explanation is entirely hypothetical and may be entirely wrong. But it all hangs together, and if we find any poisonous matter in

the sugar, it will be reasonable to assume that we are right. The sugar is the *Experimentum Crucis*. If you will hand it over to me, we will go up to the laboratory and make a preliminary test or two."

I took the lump of sugar from my pocket and gave it to him, and he carried it to the gas-burner, by the light of which he examined it with a lens.

"I don't see any foreign crystals on the surface," said he; "but we had better make a solution and go to work systematically. If it contains any poison we may assume that it will be some alkaloid, though I will test for arsenic too. But a man of Weiss's type would almost certainly use an alkaloid, on account of its smaller bulk and more ready solubility. You ought not to have carried this loose in your pocket. For legal purposes that would seriously interfere with its value as evidence. Bodies that are suspected of containing poison should be carefully isolated and preserved from contact with anything that might lead to doubt in the analysis. It doesn't matter much to us, as this analysis is only for our own information and we can satisfy ourselves as to the state of your pocket. But bear the rule in mind another time."

We now ascended to the laboratory, where Thorn-dyke proceeded at once to dissolve the lump of sugar in a measured quantity of distilled water by the aid of gentle heat.

"Before we add any acid," said he, "or introduce any fresh matter, we will adopt the simple preliminary measure of tasting the solution. The sugar is a disturbing factor, but some of the alkaloids and most

mineral poisons excepting arsenic have a very characteristic taste."

He dipped a glass rod in the warm solution and applied it gingerly to his tongue.

"Ha!" he exclaimed, as he carefully wiped his mouth with his handkerchief, "simple methods are often very valuable. There isn't much doubt as to what is in that sugar. Let me recommend my learned brother to try the flavour. But be careful. A little of this will go a long way."

He took a fresh rod from the rack, and, dipping it in the solution, handed it to me. I cautiously applied it to the tip of my tongue and was immediately aware of a peculiar tingling sensation accompanied by a feeling of numbness.

"Well," said Thorndyke; "what is it?"

"Aconite," I replied without hesitation.

"Yes," he agreed; "aconite it is, or more probably aconitine. And that, I think, gives us all the information we want. We need not trouble now to make a complete analysis, though I shall have a quantitative examination made later. You note the intensity of the taste and you see what the strength of the solution is. Evidently that lump of sugar contained a very large dose of the poison. If the sugar had been dissolved in your tea, the quantity that you drank would have contained enough aconitine to lay you out within a few minutes; which would account for Mrs. Schallibaum's anxiety to get clear of the premises. She saw you drink from the cup, but I imagine she had not seen you turn the sugar out."

“No, I should say not, to judge by her expression. She looked terrified. She is not as hardened as her rascally companion.”

“Which is fortunate for you, Jervis. If she had not been in such a fluster, she would have waited until you had poured out your tea, which was what she probably meant to do, or have dropped the sugar into the milk-jug. In either case you would have got a poisonous dose before you noticed anything amiss.”

“They are a pretty pair, Thorndyke,” I exclaimed. “A human life seems to be no more to them than the life of a fly or a beetle.”

“No; that is so. They are typical poisoners of the worst kind; of the intelligent, cautious, resourceful kind. They are a standing menace to society. As long as they are at large, human lives are in danger, and it is our business to see that they do not remain at large a moment longer than is unavoidable. And that brings us to another point. You had better keep indoors for the next few days.”

“Oh, nonsense,” I protested. “I can take care of myself.”

“I won't dispute that,” said Thorndyke, “although I might. But the matter is of vital importance and we can't be too careful. Yours is the only evidence that could convict these people. They know that and will stick at nothing to get rid of you—for by this time they will almost certainly have ascertained that the tea-shop plan has failed. Now your life is of some value to you and to another person whom I could mention; but apart from that,

you are the indispensable instrument for ridding society of these dangerous vermin. Moreover, if you were seen abroad and connected with these chambers, they would get the information that their case was really being investigated in a businesslike manner. If Weiss has not already left the country he would do so immediately, and if he has, Mrs. Schallibaum would join him at once, and we might never be able to lay hands on them. You must stay indoors, out of sight, and you had better write to Miss Gibson and ask her to warn the servants to give no information about you to anyone."

"And how long," I asked, "am I to be held on parole?"

"Not long, I think. We have a very promising start. If I have any luck, I shall be able to collect all the evidence I want in about a week. But there is an element of chance in some of it which prevents me from giving a date. And it is just possible that I may have started on a false track. But that I shall be able to tell you better in a day or two."

"And I suppose," I said gloomily, "I shall be out of the hunt altogether?"

"Not at all," he replied. "You have got the Blackmore case to attend to. I shall hand you over all the documents and get you to make an orderly digest of the evidence. You will then have all the facts and can work out the case for yourself. Also I shall ask you to help Polton in some little operations which are designed to throw light into dark places and which you will find both entertaining and instructive."

“Supposing Mrs. Hornby should propose to call and take tea with us in the gardens?” I suggested.

“And bring Miss Gibson with her?” Thorndyke added dryly. “No, Jervis, it would never do. You must make that quite clear to her. It is more probable than not that Mrs. Schallibaum made a careful note of the house in Endsley Gardens, and as that would be the one place actually known to her, she and Weiss—if he is in England—would almost certainly keep a watch on it. If they should succeed in connecting that house with these chambers, a few inquiries would show them the exact state of the case. No; we must keep them in the dark if we possibly can. We have shown too much of our hand already. It is hard on you, but it cannot be helped.”

“Oh, don’t think I am complaining,” I exclaimed. “If it is a matter of business, I am as keen as you are. I thought at first that you were merely considering the safety of my vile body. When shall I start on my job?”

“To-morrow morning. I shall give you my notes on the Blackmore case and the copies of the will and the depositions, from which you had better draw up a digest of the evidence with remarks as to the conclusions that it suggests. Then there are our gleanings from New Inn to be looked over and considered; and with regard to this case, we have the fragments of a pair of spectacles which had better be put together into a rather more intelligible form in case we have to produce them in evidence. That will keep you occupied for a day or two,

together with some work appertaining to other cases. And now let us dismiss professional topics. You have not dined and neither have I, but I dare say Polton has made arrangements for some sort of meal. We will go down and see."

We descended to the lower floor, where Thorn-dyke's anticipations were justified by a neatly laid table to which Polton was giving the finishing touches.

Chapter XI The Blackmore Case Reviewed

ONE of the conditions of medical practice is the capability of transferring one's attention at a moment's notice from one set of circumstances to another equally important but entirely unrelated. At each visit on his round, the practitioner finds himself concerned with a particular, self-contained group of phenomena which he must consider at the moment with the utmost concentration, but which he must instantly dismiss from his mind as he moves on to the next case. It is a difficult habit to acquire; for an important, distressing or obscure case is apt to take possession of the consciousness and hinder the exercise of attention that succeeding cases demand; but experience shows the faculty to be indispensable, and the practitioner learns in time to forget everything but the patient with whose condition he is occupied at the moment.

My first morning's work on the Blackmore case showed me that the same faculty is demanded in

legal practice; and it also showed me that I had yet to acquire it. For, as I looked over the depositions and the copy of the will, memories of the mysterious house in Kennington Lane continually intruded into my reflections, and the figure of Mrs. Schallibaum, white-faced, terrified, expectant, haunted me continually.

In truth, my interest in the Blackmore case was little more than academic, whereas in the Kennington case I was one of the parties and was personally concerned. To me, John Blackmore was but a name, Jeffrey but a shadowy figure to which I could assign no definite personality, and Stephen himself but a casual stranger. Mr. Graves, on the other hand, was a real person. I had seen him amidst the tragic circumstances that had probably heralded his death, and had brought away with me, not only a lively recollection of him, but a feeling of profound pity and concern as to his fate. The villain Weiss, too, and the terrible woman who aided, abetted and, perhaps, even directed him, lived in my memory as vivid and dreadful realities. Although I had uttered no hint to Thorndyke, I lamented inwardly that I had not been given some work—if there was any to do—connected with this case, in which I was so deeply interested, rather than with the dry, purely legal and utterly bewildering case of Jeffrey Blackmore's will.

Nevertheless, I stuck loyally to my task. I read through the depositions and the will—without getting a single glimmer of fresh light on the case—and I made a careful digest of all the facts. I

compared my digest with Thorndyke's notes—of which I also made a copy—and found that, brief as they were, they contained several matters that I had overlooked. I also drew up a brief account of our visit to New Inn, with a list of the objects that we had observed or collected. And then I addressed myself to the second part of my task, the statement of my conclusions from the facts set forth.

It was only when I came to make the attempt that I realized how completely I was at sea. In spite of Thorndyke's recommendation to study Marchmont's statement as it was summarized in those notes which I had copied, and of his hint that I should find in that statement something highly significant, I was borne irresistibly to one conclusion, and one only—and the wrong one at that, as I suspected: that Jeffrey Blackmore's will was a perfectly regular, sound and valid document.

I tried to attack the validity of the will from various directions, and failed every time. As to its genuineness, that was obviously not in question. There seemed to me only two conceivable respects in which any objection could be raised, viz. the competency of Jeffrey to execute a will and the possibility of undue influence having been brought to bear on him.

With reference to the first, there was the undoubted fact that Jeffrey was addicted to the opium habit, and this might, under some circumstances, interfere with a testator's competency to make a will. But had any such circumstances existed in this case? Had the drug habit produced

such mental changes in the deceased as would destroy or weaken his judgment? There was not a particle of evidence in favour of any such belief. Up to the very end he had managed his own affairs, and, if his habits of life had undergone a change, they were still the habits of a perfectly sane and responsible man.

The question of undue influence was more difficult. If it applied to any person in particular, that person could be none other than John Blackmore. Now it was an undoubted fact that, of all Jeffrey's acquaintance, his brother John was the only one who knew that he was in residence at New Inn. Moreover John had visited him there more than once. It was therefore possible that influence might have been brought to bear on the deceased. But there was no evidence that it had. The fact that the deceased man's only brother should be the one person who knew where he was living was not a remarkable one, and it had been satisfactorily explained by the necessity of Jeffrey's finding a reference on applying for the chambers. And against the theory of undue influence was the fact that the testator had voluntarily brought his will to the lodge and executed it in the presence of entirely disinterested witnesses.

In the end I had to give up the problem in despair, and, abandoning the documents, turned my attention to the facts elicited by our visit to New Inn.

What had we learned from our exploration? It was clear that Thorndyke had picked up some facts that had appeared to him important. But important in what respect? The only possible

issue that could be raised was the validity or otherwise of Jeffrey Blackmore's will; and since the validity of that will was supported by positive evidence of the most incontestable kind, it seemed that nothing that we had observed could have any real bearing on the case at all.

But this, of course, could not be. Thorndyke was no dreamer nor was he addicted to wild speculation. If the facts observed by us seemed to him to be relevant to the case, I was prepared to assume that they were relevant, although I could not see their connection with it. And, on this assumption, I proceeded to examine them afresh.

Now, whatever Thorndyke might have observed on his own account, I had brought away from the dead man's chambers only a single fact; and a very extraordinary fact it was. The cuneiform inscription was upside down. That was the sum of the evidence that I had collected; and the question was, What did it prove? To Thorndyke it conveyed some deep significance. What could that significance be?

The inverted position was not a mere temporary accident, as it might have been if the frame had been stood on a shelf or support. It was hung on the wall, and the plates screwed on the frame showed that its position was permanent and that it had never hung in any other. That it could have been hung up by Jeffrey himself was clearly inconceivable. But allowing that it had been fixed in its present position by some workman when the new tenant moved in, the fact remained that there it had hung, presumably for months, and that Jeffrey

Blackmore, with his expert knowledge of the cuneiform character, had never noticed that it was upside down ; or, if he had noticed it, that he had never taken the trouble to have it altered.

What could this mean ? If he had noticed the error but had not troubled to correct it, that would point to a very singular state of mind, an inertness and indifference remarkable even in an opium-smoker. But assuming such a state of mind, I could not see that it had any bearing on the will, excepting that it was rather inconsistent with the tendency to make fussy and needless alterations which the testator had actually shown. On the other hand, if he had not noticed the inverted position of the photograph he must have been nearly blind or quite idiotic ; for the photograph was over two feet long and the characters large enough to be read easily by a person of ordinary eyesight at a distance of forty or fifty feet. Now he obviously was not in a state of dementia, whereas his eyesight was admittedly bad ; and it seemed to me that the only conclusion deducible from the photograph was that it furnished a measure of the badness of the deceased man's vision—that it proved him to have been verging on total blindness.

But there was nothing startling new in this. He had, himself, declared that he was fast losing his sight. And again, what was the bearing of his partial blindness on the will ? A totally blind man cannot draw up his will at all. But if he has eyesight sufficient to enable him to write out and sign a will, mere defective vision will not lead him to muddle

the provisions. Yet something of this kind seemed to be in Thorndyke's mind, for now I recalled the question that he had put to the porter: "When you read the will over in Mr. Blackmore's presence, did you read it aloud?" That question could have but one significance. It implied a doubt as to whether the testator was fully aware of the exact nature of the document that he was signing. Yet, if he was able to write and sign it, surely he was able also to read it through, to say nothing of the fact that, unless he was demented, he must have remembered what he had written.

Thus, once more, my reasoning only led me into a blind alley at the end of which was the will, regular and valid and fulfilling all the requirements that the law imposed. Once again I had to confess myself beaten and in full agreement with Mr. Marchmont that "there was no case"; that "there was nothing in dispute." Nevertheless, I carefully fixed in the pocket file that Thorndyke had given me the copy that I had made of his notes, together with the notes on our visit to New Inn, and the few and unsatisfactory conclusions at which I had arrived; and this brought me to the end of my first morning in my new capacity.

"And how," Thorndyke asked as we sat at lunch, "has my learned friend progressed? Does he propose that we advise Mr. Marchmont to enter a caveat?"

"I've read all the documents and boiled all the evidence down to a stiff jelly; and I am in a worse fog than ever."

“ There seems to be a slight mixture of metaphors in my learned friend’s remarks. But never mind the fog, Jervis. There is a certain virtue in fog. It serves, like a picture frame, to surround the essential with a neutral zone that separates it from the irrelevant.”

“ That is a very profound observation, Thorn-dyke,” I remarked ironically.

“ I was just thinking so myself,” he rejoined.

“ And if you could contrive to explain what it means——”

“ Oh, but that is unreasonable. When one throws off a subtly philosophic obiter dictum one looks to the discerning critic to supply the meaning. By the way, I am going to introduce you to the gentle art of photography this afternoon. I am getting the loan of all the cheques that were drawn by Jeffrey Blackmore during his residence at New Inn—there are only twenty-three of them, all told—and I am going to photograph them.”

“ I shouldn’t have thought the bank people would have let them go out of their possession.”

“ They are not going to. One of the partners, a Mr. Britton, is bringing them here himself and will be present while the photographs are being taken ; so they will not go out of his custody. But, all the same, it is a great concession, and I should not have obtained it but for the fact that I have done a good deal of work for the bank and that Mr. Britton is more or less a personal friend.”

“ By the way, how comes it that the cheques are at the bank ? Why were they not returned to Jeffrey with the pass-book in the usual way ? ”

"I understand from Britton," replied Thorndyke, "that all Jeffrey's cheques were retained by the bank at his request. When he was travelling he used to leave his investment securities and other valuable documents in his bankers' custody, and, as he has never applied to have them returned, the bankers still have them and are retaining them until the will is proved, when they will, of course, hand over everything to the executors."

"What is the object of photographing these cheques?" I asked.

"There are several objects. First, since a good photograph is practically as good as the original, when we have the photographs we practically have the cheques for reference. Then, since a photograph can be duplicated indefinitely, it is possible to perform experiments on it which involve its destruction; which would, of course, be impossible in the case of original cheques."

"But the ultimate object, I mean. What are you going to prove?"

"You are incorrigible, Jervis," he exclaimed. "How should I know what I am going to prove? This is an investigation. If I knew the result beforehand, I shouldn't want to perform the experiment."

He looked at his watch, and, as we rose from the table, he said:

"If we have finished, we had better go up to the laboratory and see that the apparatus is ready. Mr. Britton is a busy man, and, as he is doing us a great service, we mustn't keep him waiting when he comes."

We ascended to the laboratory, where Polton was already busy inspecting the massively built copying camera which—with the long, steel guides on which the easel or copy-holder travelled—took up the whole length of the room on the side opposite to that occupied by the chemical bench. As I was to be inducted into the photographic art, I looked at it with more attention than I had ever done before.

“We’ve made some improvements since you were here last, sir,” said Polton, who was delicately lubricating the steel guides. “We’ve fitted these steel runners instead of the blackleaded wooden ones that we used to have. And we’ve made two scales instead of one. Hallo! That’s the downstairs bell. Shall I go sir?”

“Perhaps you’d better,” said Thorndyke. “It may not be Mr. Britton, and I don’t want to be caught and delayed just now.”

However, it was Mr. Britton; a breezy alert-looking middle-aged man, who came in escorted by Polton and shook our hands cordially, having been previously warned of my presence. He carried a small but solid hand-bag, to which he clung tenaciously up to the very moment when its contents were required for use.

“So that is the camera,” said he, running an inquisitive eye over the instrument. “Very fine one, too; I am a bit of a photographer myself. What is that graduation on the side-bar?”

“Those are the scales,” replied Thorndyke, “that shows the degree of magnification or reduction. The pointer is fixed to the easel and travels with it, of

course, showing the exact size of the photograph. When the pointer is opposite o the photograph will be identical in size with the object photographed; when it points to, say, $\times 6$, the photograph will be six times as long as the object, or magnified thirty-six times superficially, whereas if the pointer is at $\div 6$, the photograph will be a sixth of the length of the object, or one thirty-sixth superficial."

"Why are there two scales?" Mr. Britton asked.

"There is a separate scale for each of the two lenses that we principally use. For great magnification or reduction a lens of comparatively short focus must be used, but, as a long-focus lens gives a more perfect image, we use one of very long focus—thirty-six inches—for copying the same size or for slight magnification or reduction."

"Are you going to magnify these cheques?" Mr. Britton asked.

"Not in the first place," replied Thorndyke. "For convenience and speed I am going to photograph them half-size, so that six cheques will go on one whole plate. Afterwards we can enlarge from the negatives as much as we like. But we should probably enlarge only the signatures in any case."

The precious bag was now opened and the twenty-three cheques brought out and laid on the bench in a consecutive series in the order of their dates. They were then fixed by tapes—to avoid making pin-holes in them—in batches of six to small drawing boards, each batch being so arranged that the signatures were towards the middle. The first board was clamped to the easel, the latter was slid along

its guides until the pointer stood at $\div 2$ on the long-focus scale and Thorndyke proceeded to focus the camera with the aid of a little microscope that Polton had made for the purpose. When Mr. Britton and I had inspected the exquisitely sharp image on the focusing-screen through the microscope, Polton introduced the plate and made the first exposure, carrying the dark-slide off to develop the plate while the next batch of cheques was being fixed in position.

In his photographic technique, as in everything else, Polton followed as closely as he could the methods of his principal and instructor; methods characterized by that unhurried precision that leads to perfect accomplishment. When the first negative was brought forth, dripping, from the dark-room, it was without spot or stain, scratch or pin-hole; uniform in colour and of exactly the required density. The six cheques shown on it—ridiculously small in appearance, though only reduced to half-length—looked as clear and sharp as fine etchings; though, to be sure, my opportunity for examining them was rather limited, for Polton was uncommonly careful to keep the wet plate out of reach and so safe from injury.

“Well,” said Mr. Britton, when, at the end of the séance, he returned his treasures to the bag, “you have now got twenty-three of our cheques, to all intents and purposes. I hope you are not going to make any unlawful use of them—must tell our cashiers to keep a bright look-out; and”—here he lowered his voice impressively and addressed

himself to me and Polton—"you understand that this is a private matter between Dr. Thorndyke and me. Of course, as Mr. Blackmore is dead, there is no reason why his cheques should not be photographed for legal purposes; but we don't want it talked about; nor, I think, does Dr. Thorndyke."

"Certainly not," Thorndyke agreed emphatically; "but you need not be uneasy, Mr. Britton. We are very uncommunicative people in this establishment."

As my colleague and I escorted our visitor down the stairs, he returned to the subject of the cheques.

"I don't understand what you want them for," he remarked. "There is no question turning on signatures in the case of Blackmore deceased, is there?"

"I should say not," Thorndyke replied rather evasively.

"I should say very decidedly not," said Mr. Britton, "if I understood Marchmont aright. And, even if there were, let me tell you, these signatures that you have got wouldn't help you. I have looked them over very closely—and I have seen a few signatures in my time, you know. Marchmont asked me to glance over them as a matter of form, but I don't believe in matters of form; I examined them very carefully. There is an appreciable amount of variation; a very appreciable amount. *But* under the variation one can trace the personal character (which is what matters); the subtle, indescribable quality that makes it recognizable to the expert eye as Jeffrey Blackmore's writing. You understand me.

There is such a quality, which remains when the coarser characteristics vary; just as a man may grow old, or fat, or bald, or may take to drink, and become quite changed; and yet, through it all, he preserves a certain something which makes him recognizable as a member of a particular family. Well, I find that quality in all those signatures, and so will you, if you have had enough experience of handwriting. I thought it best to mention it in case you might be giving yourself unnecessary trouble."

"It is very good of you," said Thorndyke, "and I need not say that the information is of great value, coming from such a highly expert source. As a matter of fact, your hint will be of great value to me."

He shook hands with Mr. Britton, and, as the latter disappeared down the stairs, he turned into the sitting-room and remarked:

"There is a very weighty and significant observation, Jervis. I advise you to consider it attentively in all its bearings."

"You mean the fact that these signatures are undoubtedly genuine?"

"I meant, rather, the very interesting general truth that is contained in Britton's statement; that physiognomy is not a mere matter of facial character. A man carries his personal trademark, not in his face only, but in his nervous system and muscles—giving rise to characteristic movements and gait; in his larynx—producing an individual voice; and even in his mouth, as shown by individual peculiarities of

speech and accent. And the individual nervous system, by means of these characteristic movements, transfers its peculiarities to inanimate objects that are the products of such movements; as we see in pictures, in carving, in musical execution and in handwriting. No one has ever painted quite like Reynolds or Romney; no one has ever played exactly like Liszt or Paganini; the pictures or the sounds produced by them, were, so to speak, an extension of the physiognomy of the artist. And so with handwriting. A particular specimen is the product of a particular set of motor centres in an individual brain."

"These are very interesting considerations, Thorn-dyke," I remarked; "but I don't quite see their present application. Do you mean them to bear in any special way on the Blackmore case?"

"I think they do bear on it very directly. I thought so while Mr. Britton was making his very illuminating remarks."

"I don't see how. In fact I cannot see why you are going into the question of the signatures at all. The signature on the will is admittedly genuine, and that seems to me to dispose of the whole affair."

"My dear Jervis," said he, "you and Marchmont are allowing yourselves to be obsessed by a particular fact—a very striking and weighty fact, I will admit, but still, only an isolated fact. Jeffrey Blackmore executed his will in a regular manner, complying with all the necessary formalities and conditions. In the face of that single circumstance you and Marchmont would 'chuck up the sponge,'

as the old pugilists expressed it. Now that is a great mistake. You should never allow yourself to be bullied and browbeaten by a single fact."

"But, my dear Thorndyke!" I protested, "this fact seems to be final. It covers all possibilities—unless you can suggest any other that would cancel it."

"I could suggest a dozen," he replied. "Let us take an instance. Supposing Jeffrey executed this will for a wager; that he immediately revoked it and made a fresh will; that he placed the latter in the custody of some person and that that person has suppressed it."

"Surely you do not make this suggestion seriously!" I exclaimed.

"Certainly I do not," he replied with a smile. "I merely give it as an instance to show that your final and absolute fact is really only conditional on there being no other fact that cancels it."

"Do you think he might have made a third will?"

"It is obviously possible. A man who makes two wills may make three or more; but I may say that I see no present reason for assuming the existence of another will. What I want to impress on you is the necessity of considering all the facts instead of bumping heavily against the most conspicuous one and forgetting all the rest. By the way, here is a little problem for you. What was the object of which these are the parts?"

He pushed across the table a little cardboard box, having first removed the lid. In it were a number

of very small pieces of broken glass, some of which had been cemented together by their edges.

"These, I suppose," said I, looking with considerable curiosity at the little collection, "are the pieces of glass that we picked up in poor Blackmore's bedroom?"

"Yes. You see that Polton has been endeavouring to reconstitute the object, whatever it was; but he has not been very successful, for the fragments were too small and irregular and the collection too incomplete. However, here is a specimen, built up of six small pieces, which exhibits the general character of the object fairly well."

He picked out the little irregularly shaped object and handed it to me; and I could not but admire the neatness with which Polton had joined the tiny fragments together.

I took the little "restoration," and, holding it up before my eyes, moved it to and fro as I looked through it at the window.

"It was not a lens," I pronounced eventually.

"No," Thorndyke agreed, "it was not a lens."

"And so cannot have been a spectacle-glass. But the surface was curved—one side convex and the other concave—and the little piece that remains of the original edge seems to have been ground to fit a bezel or frame. I should say that these are portions of a watch-glass."

"That is Polton's opinion," said Thorndyke, "and I think you are both wrong."

"What do you say to the glass of a miniature or locket?"

“That is rather more probable, but it is not my view.”

“What do you think it is?” I asked. But Thorndyke was not to be drawn.

“I am submitting the problem for solution by my learned friend,” he replied with an exasperating smile, and then added: “I don’t say that you and Polton are wrong; only that I don’t agree with you. Perhaps you had better make a note of the properties of this object, and consider it at your leisure when you are ruminating on the other data referring to the Blackmore case.”

“My ruminations,” I said, “always lead me back to the same point.”

“But you mustn’t let them,” he replied. “Shuffle your data about. Invent hypotheses. Never mind if they seem rather wild. Don’t put them aside on that account. Take the first hypothesis that you can invent and test it thoroughly with your facts. You will probably have to reject it, but you will be certain to have learned something new. Then try again with a fresh one. You remember what I told you of my methods when I began this branch of practice and had plenty of time on my hands?”

“I am not sure that I do.”

“Well, I used to occupy my leisure in constructing imaginary cases, mostly criminal, for the purpose of study and for the acquirement of experience. For instance, I would devise an ingenious fraud and would plan it in detail, taking every precaution that I could think of against failure or detection, considering, and elaborately providing for, every imagin-

able contingency. For the time being, my entire attention was concentrated on it, making it as perfect and secure and undetectable as I could with the knowledge and ingenuity at my command. I behaved exactly as if I were proposing actually to carry it out, and my life or liberty depended on its success—excepting that I made full notes of every detail of the scheme. Then when my plans were as complete as I could make them, and I could think of no way in which to improve them, I changed sides and considered the case from the standpoint of detection. I analysed the case, I picked out its inherent and unavoidable weaknesses, and, especially, I noted the respects in which a fraudulent proceeding of a particular kind differed from the *bona fide* proceeding that it simulated. The exercise was invaluable to me. I acquired as much experience from those imaginary cases as I should from real ones, and in addition, I learned a method which is the one that I practise to this day.”

“Do you mean that you still invent imaginary cases as mental exercises?”

“No; I mean that, when I have a problem of any intricacy, I invent a case which fits the facts and the assumed motives of one of the parties. Then I work at that case until I find whether it leads to elucidation or to some fundamental disagreement. In the latter case I reject it and begin the process over again.”

“Doesn't that method sometimes involve a good deal of wasted time and energy?” I asked.

“No; because each time that you fail to establish

a given case, you exclude a particular explanation of the facts and narrow down the field of inquiry. By repeating the process, you are bound, in the end, to arrive at an imaginary case which fits all the facts. Then your imaginary case is the real case and the problem is solved. Let me recommend you to give the method a trial."

I promised to do so, though with no very lively expectations as to the result, and with this, the subject was allowed, for the present, to drop.

*Chapter XII**The Portrait*

THE state of mind which Thorndyke had advised me to cultivate was one that did not come easily. However much I endeavoured to shuffle the facts of the Blackmore case, there was one which inevitably turned up on the top of the pack. The circumstances surrounding the execution of Jeffrey Blackmore's will intruded into all my cogitations on the subject with hopeless persistency. That scene in the porter's lodge was to me what King Charles's head was to poor Mr. Dick. In the midst of my praiseworthy efforts to construct some intelligible scheme of the case, it would make its appearance and reduce my mind to instant chaos.

For the next few days, Thorndyke was very much occupied with one or two civil cases, which kept him in court during the whole of the sitting; and when he came home, he seemed indisposed to talk on professional topics. Meanwhile, Polton worked

steadily at the photographs of the signatures, and, with a view to gaining experience, I assisted him and watched his methods.

In the present case, the signatures were enlarged from their original dimensions—rather less than an inch and a half in length—to a length of four and a half inches; which rendered all the little peculiarities of the handwriting surprisingly distinct and conspicuous. Each signature was eventually mounted on a slip of card bearing a number and the date of the cheque from which it was taken, so that it was possible to place any two signatures together for comparison. I looked over the whole series and very carefully compared those which showed any differences, but without discovering anything more than might have been expected in view of Mr. Britton's statement. There were some trifling variations, but they were all very much alike, and no one could doubt, on looking at them, that they were all written by the same hand.

As this, however, was apparently not in dispute, it furnished no new information. Thorndyke's object—for I felt certain that he had something definite in his mind—must be to test something apart from the genuineness of the signatures. But what could that something be? I dared not ask him, for questions of that kind were anathema, so there was nothing for it but to lie low and see what he would do with the photographs.

The whole series was finished on the fourth morning after my adventure at Sloane Square, and the pack of cards was duly delivered by Polton when

he brought in the breakfast tray. Thorndyke took up the pack somewhat with the air of a whist player, and, as he ran through them, I noticed that the number had increased from twenty-three to twenty-four.

“The additional one,” Thorndyke explained, “is the signature to the first will, which was in Marchmont’s possession. I have added it to the collection as it carries us back to an earlier date. The signature of the second will presumably resembles those of the cheques drawn about the same date. But that is not material, or, if it should become so, we could claim to examine the second will.”

He laid the cards out on the table in the order of their dates and slowly ran his eye down the series. I watched him closely and ventured presently to ask :

“Do you agree with Mr. Britton as to the general identity of character in the whole set of signatures ? ”

“Yes,” he replied. “I should certainly have put them down as being all the signatures of one person. The variations are very slight. The later signatures are a little stiffer, a little more shaky and indistinct, and the B’s and k’s are both appreciably different from those in the earlier ones. But there is another fact which emerges when the whole series is seen together, and it is so striking and significant a fact, that I am astonished at its not having been remarked on by Mr. Britton.”

“Indeed ! ” said I, stooping to examine the photographs with fresh interest ; “ what is that ? ”

“It is a very simple fact and very obvious, but yet, as I have said, very significant. Look carefully at number one, which is the signature of the first will, dated three years ago, and compare it with number three, dated the eighteenth of September last year.”

“They look to me identical,” said I, after a careful comparison.

“So they do to me,” said Thorndyke. “Neither of them shows the change that occurred later. But if you look at number two, dated the sixteenth of September, you will see that it is in the later style. So is number four, dated the twenty-third of September; but numbers five and six, both at the beginning of October, are in the earlier style, like the signature of the will. Thereafter all the signatures are in the new style; but, if you compare number two, dated the sixteenth of September with number twenty-four, dated the fourteenth of March of this year—the day of Jeffrey’s death—you see that they exhibit no difference. Both are in the ‘later style,’ but the last shows no greater change than the first. Don’t you consider these facts very striking and significant?”

I reflected a few moments, trying to make out the deep significance to which Thorndyke was directing my attention—and not succeeding very triumphantly.

“You mean,” I said, “that the occasional reversions to the earlier form convey some material suggestion?”

“Yes; but more than that. What we learn from

an inspection of this series is this : that there was a change in the character of the signature ; a very slight change, but quite recognizable. Now that change was not gradual or insidious nor was it progressive. It occurred at a certain definite time. At first there were one or two reversions to the earlier form, but after number six the new style continued to the end ; and you notice that it continued without any increase in the change and without any variation. There are no intermediate forms. Some of the signatures are in the ' old style ' and some in the ' new,' but there are none that are half and half. So that, to repeat : We have here two types of signature, very much alike, but distinguishable. They alternate, but do not merge into one another to produce intermediate forms. The change occurs abruptly, but shows no tendency to increase as time goes on ; it is not a progressive change. What do you make of that, Jervis ? ”

“ It is very remarkable,” I said, poring over the cards to verify Thorndyke’s statements. “ I don’t quite know what to make of it. If the circumstances admitted of the idea of forgery, one would suspect the genuineness of some of the signatures. But they don’t—at any rate, in the case of the later will, to say nothing of Mr. Britton’s opinion on the signatures.”

“ Still,” said Thorndyke, “ there must be some explanation of the change in the character of the signatures, and that explanation cannot be the failing eyesight of the writer ; for that is a gradually progressive and continuous condition, whereas the

change in the writing is abrupt and intermittent."

I considered Thorndyke's remark for a few moments ; and then a light—though not a very brilliant one—seemed to break on me.

" I think I see what you are driving at," said I. " You mean that the change in the writing must be associated with some new condition affecting the writer, and that that condition existed intermittently ? "

Thorndyke nodded approvingly, and I continued :

" The only intermittent condition that we know of is the effect of opium. So that we might consider the clearer signatures to have been made when Jeffrey was in his normal state, and the less distinct ones after a bout of opium-smoking."

" That is perfectly sound reasoning," said Thorndyke. " What further conclusion does it lead to ? "

" It suggests that the opium habit had been only recently acquired, since the change was noticed only about the time he went to live at New Inn ; and, since the change in the writing is at first intermittent and then continuous, we may infer that the opium-smoking was at first occasional and later became a confirmed habit."

" Quite a reasonable conclusion and very clearly stated," said Thorndyke. " I don't say that I entirely agree with you, or that you have exhausted the information that these signatures offer. But you have started in the right direction."

" I may be on the right road," I said gloomily ; " but I am stuck fast in one place and I see no chance of getting any farther."

“But you have a quantity of data,” said Thorn-
dyke. “You have all the facts that I had to start
with, from which I constructed the hypothesis that
I am now busily engaged in verifying. I have a
few more data now, for ‘as money makes money’
so knowledge begets knowledge, and I put my
original capital out to interest. Shall we tabulate
the facts that are in our joint possession and see
what they suggest?”

I grasped eagerly at the offer, though I had
conned over my notes again and again.

Thorndyke produced a slip of paper from a drawer,
and, uncapping his fountain-pen, proceeded to write
down the leading facts, reading each aloud as soon
as it was written.

“1. The second will was unnecessary since it con-
tained no new matter, expressed no new intentions
and met no new conditions, and the first will was
quite clear and efficient.

“2. The evident intention of the testator was
to leave the bulk of his property to Stephen Black-
more.

“3. The second will did not, under existing
circumstances, give effect to this intention, whereas
the first will did.

“4. The signature of the second will differs
slightly from that of the first, and also from what
had hitherto been the testator’s ordinary sig-
nature.

“And now we come to a very curious group of
dates, which I will advise you to consider with great
attention.

" 5. Mrs. Wilson made her will at the beginning of September last year, without acquainting Jeffrey Blackmore, who seems to have been unaware of the existence of this will.

" 6. His own second will was dated the twelfth of November of last year.

" 7. Mrs. Wilson died of cancer on the twelfth of March this present year.

" 8. Jeffrey Blackmore was last seen alive on the fourteenth of March.

" 9. His body was discovered on the fifteenth of March.

" 10. The change in the character of his signature began about September last year and became permanent after the middle of October.

" You will find that collection of facts repay careful study, Jervis, especially when considered in relation to the further data :

" 11. That we found in Blackmore's chambers a framed inscription of large size, hung upside down, together with what appeared to be the remains of a watch-glass and a box of stearine candles and some other objects."

He passed the paper to me and I pored over it intently, focusing my attention on the various items with all the power of my will. But, struggle as I would, no general conclusion could be made to emerge from the mass of apparently disconnected facts.

" Well ? " Thorndyke said presently, after watching with grave interest my unavailing efforts ;
" what do you make of it ? "

“Nothing!” I exclaimed desperately, slapping the paper down on the table. “Of course, I can see that there are some queer coincidences. But how do they bear on the case? I understand that you want to upset this will; which we know to have been signed without compulsion or even suggestion in the presence of two respectable men, who have sworn to the identity of the document. That is your object, I believe?”

“Certainly it is.”

“Then I am hanged if I see how you are going to do it. Not, I should say, by offering a group of vague coincidences that would muddle any brain but your own.”

Thorndyke chuckled softly but pursued the subject no farther.

“Put that paper in your file with your other notes,” he said, “and think it over at your leisure. And now I want a little help from you. Have you a good memory for faces?”

“Fairly good, I think. Why?”

“Because I have a photograph of a man whom I think you may have met. Just look at it and tell me if you remember the face.”

He drew a cabinet size photograph from an envelope that had come by the morning's post and handed it to me.

“I have certainly seen this face somewhere,” said I, taking the portrait over to the window to examine it more thoroughly, “but I can't, at the moment, remember where.”

“Try,” said Thorndyke. “If you have seen the

face before, you should be able to recall the person."

I looked intently at the photograph, and the more I looked, the more familiar did the face appear. Suddenly the identity of the man flashed into my mind and I exclaimed in astonishment:

"It can't be that poor creature at Kennington, Mr. Graves?"

"I think it can," replied Thorndyke, "and I think it is. But could you swear to the identity in a court of law?"

"It is my firm conviction that the photograph is that of Mr. Graves. I would swear to that."

"No man ought to swear to more," said Thorndyke. "Identification is always a matter of opinion or belief. The man who will swear unconditionally to identity from memory only is a man whose evidence should be discredited. I think your sworn testimony would be sufficient."

It is needless to say that the production of this photograph filled me with amazement and curiosity as to how Thorndyke had obtained it. But, as he replaced it impassively in its envelope without volunteering any explanation, I felt that I could not question him directly. Nevertheless, I ventured to approach the subject in an indirect manner.

"Did you get any information from those Darmstadt people?" I asked.

"Schnitzler? Yes. I learned, through the medium of an official acquaintance, that Dr. H. Weiss was a stranger to them; that they knew nothing about him excepting that he had ordered

from them, and been supplied with, a hundred grammes of pure hydrochlorate of morphine."

"All at once?"

"No. In separate parcels of twenty-five grammes each."

"Is that all you know about Weiss?"

"It is all that I actually know; but it is not all that I suspect—on very substantial grounds. By the way, what did you think of the coachman?"

"I don't know that I thought very much about him. Why?"

"You never suspected that he and Weiss were one and the same person?"

"No. How could they be? They weren't in the least alike. And one was a Scotchman and the other a German. But perhaps you know that they were the same?"

"I only know what you have told me. But considering that you never saw them together, that the coachman was never available for messages or assistance when Weiss was with you; that Weiss always made his appearance some time after you arrived, and disappeared some time before you left; it has seemed to me that they might have been the same person."

"I should say it was impossible. They were so very different in appearance. But supposing that they were the same; would the fact be of any importance?"

"It would mean that we could save ourselves the trouble of looking for the coachman. And it would suggest some inferences, which will occur

to you if you think the matter over. But being only a speculative opinion, at present, it would not be safe to infer very much from it."

"You have rather taken me by surprise," I remarked. "It seems that you have been working at this Kennington case, and working pretty actively I imagine, whereas I supposed that your entire attention was taken up by the Blackmore affair."

"It doesn't do," he replied, "to allow one's entire attention to be taken up by any one case. I have half a dozen others—minor cases, mostly—to which I am attending at this moment. Did you think I was proposing to keep you under lock and key indefinitely?"

"Well, no. But I thought the Kennington case would have to wait its turn. And I had no idea that you were in possession of enough facts to enable you to get any farther with it."

"But you knew all the very striking facts of the case, and you saw the further evidence that we extracted from the empty house."

"Do you mean those things that we picked out from the rubbish under the grate?"

"Yes. You saw those curious little pieces of reed and the pair of spectacles. They are lying in the top drawer of that cabinet at this moment, and I should recommend you to have another look at them. To me they are most instructive. The pieces of reed offered an extremely valuable suggestion, and the spectacles enabled me to test that suggestion and turn it into actual information."

“Unfortunately,” said I, “the pieces of reed convey nothing to me. I don’t know what they are or of what they have formed a part.”

“I think,” he replied, “that if you examine them with due consideration, you will find their use pretty obvious. Have a good look at them and the spectacles too. Think over all that you know of that mysterious group of people who lived in that house, and see if you cannot form some coherent theory of their actions. Think, also, if we have not some information in our possession by which we might be able to identify some of them, and infer the identity of the others. You will have a quiet day, as I shall not be home until the evening; set yourself this task. I assure you that you have the material for identifying—or rather for testing the identity of—at least one of those persons. Go over your material systematically, and let me know in the evening what further investigations you would propose.”

“Very well,” said I. “It shall be done according to your word. I will addle my brain afresh with the affair of Mr. Weiss and his patient, and let the Blackmore case rip.”

“There is no need to do that. You have a whole day before you. An hour’s really close consideration of the Kennington case ought to show you what your next move should be, and then you could devote yourself to the consideration of Jeffrey Blackmore’s will.”

With this final piece of advice, Thorndyke collected the papers for his day’s work, and, having

deposited them in his brief bag, took his departure, leaving me to my meditations.

Chapter XIII The Statement of Samuel Wilkins

AS soon as I was alone, I commenced my investigations with a rather desperate hope of eliciting some startling and unsuspected facts. I opened the drawer and taking from it the two pieces of reed and the shattered remains of the spectacles, laid them on the table. The repairs that Thorn-
dyke had contemplated in the case of the spectacles, had not been made. Apparently they had not been necessary. The battered wreck that lay before me, just as we had found it, had evidently furnished the necessary information ; for, since Thorndyke was in possession of a portrait of Mr. Graves, it was clear that he had succeeded in identifying him so far as to get into communication with some one who had known him intimately.

The circumstance should have been encouraging. But somehow it was not. What was possible to Thorndyke was, theoretically, possible to me—or to anyone else. But the possibility did not realize itself in practice. There was the personal equation. Thorndyke's brain was not an ordinary brain. Facts of which his mind instantly perceived the relation remained to other people unconnected and without meaning. His powers of observation and rapid inference were almost incredible, as I had noticed again and again, and always with undiminished