



## The Red Thumb Mark

*R. Austin Freeman*

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**The Red Thumb Mark** R. Austin Freeman

**The clever and thrilling debut of literature's first forensic detective**

In all of London, there are few who know more about science than Dr. John Thorndyke, and fewer still who know more about crime. A "medical jurispractitioner" equally at home in the lab or the courtroom, he has made his name confronting the deadliest criminals in England with irrefutable proof of their guilt. In the case of the red thumb mark, however, Thorndyke must set his singular mind to saving an innocent man.

A cache of diamonds has been stolen out of a shipping firm's safe, and the only evidence is a perfect thumbprint left in a pool of blood. The print is a match to Reuben Hornby, nephew of the firm's owner. Hornby insists that he had nothing to do with the theft, however, and asks Dr. Thorndyke to find the real culprit. With all the evidence pointing in one direction, only he is brilliant enough to look the other way.

This ebook features a new introduction by Otto Penzler and has been professionally proofread to ensure accuracy and readability on all devices.

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## The Red Thumb Mark Details

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## **From Reader Review The Red Thumb Mark for online ebook**

### **Laura says**

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### **Mmyoung says**

This story is not only surprisingly charming to the reader but also unexpectedly relevant to the contemporary fad for forensic procedurals. Thorndyke seems, in many ways, to have been designed to be an interesting not quite anti-Holmes. Thorndyke does not call into question the necessity for the careful checking of clues and scientific examination of all possible aspects of the crime. What he calls into question is what might be called the fetishization of particular forms of scientific findings without considering all the possibilities of how that "evidence" came to be found at the scene of the crime. In this case, Thorndyke, in defending Reuben Hornby, has to counter the automatic assumption of the police that "a finger-print as a kind of magical touchstone, a final proof, beyond which inquiry need not go." Indeed, Thorndyke argues that "this is an entire mistake. A finger-print is merely a fact, a very important and significant one, I admit, but still a fact, which, like any other fact, requires to be weighed and measured with reference to its evidential value."

Thorndyke does not debunk the science behind fingerprinting nor is he skeptical of the process of scientific investigation. What he does present is the difference between true scientific inquiry and the automatic assumption that having mastered a particular scientific technique one may fall back upon it as if it were written in stone. And indeed, he demonstrates that any technique of investigation will soon be countered by criminals who take it into account and counter it with new techniques of their own. It is particularly interesting to read this book today at a time when many treat DNA evidence with reverence but without real understandings of its strengths and weaknesses. Indeed one wonders what opinions Dr. Thorndyke would have as to the reliability of many of today's labs and many of today's experts.

For those who are interested in the details of forensic analysis Freeman devotes a good part of the book to that very aspect of forensics which is most overlooked in most television procedurals; how does one present evidence in a way that is understandable and convincing to juries. For those who are less interested in the scientific aspect of "ratiocination" Freeman includes a wonderful analysis of the Holmesian deductive method as Thorndyke explains not only why his supposition that a figure outside the window was a stationmaster was sound but also why it was, for all that soundness, a mere educated guess.

In conclusion: This is an enjoyably written book which avoids unneeded plot complications, does a good job of introducing the reader to Dr. Thorndyke and his methods and may do well to assuage that empty feeling the reader is left with after consuming the last of the Holmes stories.

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### **P. says**

What an excellent writer. This is the first of a mixed series of short stories and novels by Freeman that is pretty extensive and I'm pleased - no - thrilled to have found Freeman [not his real name] and his opus, opi,

or in the Latin plural, opera, of which I'm also fond. Many books are free, or nearly, collections abound - many of them criminally inexpensive. Red Thumb is a very good read, but it's the characters, and Freeman's ability to write them so they live that makes this book.

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### **Jayaprakash Satyamurthy says**

Ingenious, very much in the manner of the Holmes stories but with a more genial sleuth, and a somewhat melodramatic romantic subplot.

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### **Wyntroire says**

Not perfect--but I loved it.

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### **LJ says**

First Sentence: "Conflagratam An 1677."

A valuable cache has been stolen from the safe of a diamond business owned by John Hornby and newly joined by his two nephews. The safe appears untouched, except for a piece of paper in the bottom and two blood-smearred thumb prints which are identified as belonging to one of the nephews. It is up to Dr. John Thorndyke, and his new assistant Dr. Jervis to prove the young man's innocence before he's found guilty and hanged.

Gratefully, the story has no prologue. There is, however, an author's preface that is well worth reading. Not only is it fascinating in its own right, but it also accustoms one to the style of language used; a much more elegant style than is used today. It is interesting to see how our language has evolved. In Edwardian times, the word "intimately" does not mean nearly what it does today.

From a casual meeting, we are introduced to Thorndyke, an M.D. and D.Sc. who had hoped to become a corner but became a lecturer on medical jurisprudence, as well as Polton, Thorndykes' manservant and scientific assistant. Our narrator is Jervis, a young general practice physician without a practice. Mrs. John Hornsby, with her flightiness, and Juliet Gibson, long-time companion to Mrs. Hornsby, with her strength of spirit, and her mother, with her flightiness, add an important element to the story.

There is a sense and influence of Sherlock Holmes, including interesting observations on the way people from different professions move. However, what is nice about Thorndyke and Jervis is that their relationship is more equal, but also one of master and apprentice, and certainly, of employer and employee. Thorndyke appreciates and compliments Jervis' contributions, rather than just views him as a chronicler.

One thing that is particularly nice is that Freeman really explains how Thorndyke reaches the conclusions he does. The information on the various scientific experiments and analyses is fascinating. Although there is one major coincidence, it is acknowledged by the characters as being such. And who doesn't appreciate a good courtroom scene that ends with a good plot twist

“The Red Thumb Mark” is a very good mystery, pre-dating the “Golden Age,” with a very satisfactory ending. If Freeman is an author unknown to you, it’s well worth becoming acquainted with his books.

THE RED THUMB MARK (Hist Mys-Dr. John Thorndyke-England-Early 1900s/Edwardian) – VG  
Freeman, Richard Austin – 1st in series  
Amazon Digital Services, LLC – May 2012

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### **Lora says**

A fair reading: good mystery and red herrings, but some sentences were painfully ponderous even for the writing of the time. Then there were the long detailed technical descriptions, discussions, and demonstrations about fingerprints and other technical matters that I am not drawn to in a book. Not usually. But pretty well written, good courtroom drama- I love me a court room drama, gotta read more of them- and all the technical detail was necessary to the plot. Clean, a bit too predictable, but enjoyable enough that I stayed with it.

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### **Leslie says**

3.5\*

While the 'who' in this case seemed quite obvious to me, the 'how' baffled me. I got the strong feeling that Freeman's mysteries will mostly focus on the method of the crime (which is okay with me!).

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### **Ron says**

Sherlock Holmes meets Perry mason meets SCI. Interesting rip off of the Sherlock Holmes genre. Since Freeman wrote the Thorndyke mysteries while Doyle still churned out Holmes mysteries, the derivative nature of his stories would have been that much more obvious to readers.

Unlike Holmes, Thorndyke is presented as a medical doctor and scientific mind, but many of the trappings of the tale parallel Holmes stories including the dense biographer. This particular volume is additionally burdened with a soporific court scene.

That said, the scientific background for this 1907 story, including its critique of the uncorroborated use of figure prints, will entertain modern readers.

An interesting read.

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## Nancy Oakes says

I just recently reread this classic of British crime fiction, in exploring the subgenre of "scientific detectives" in the history of crime fiction.

*The Red Thumb Mark* is the first of twenty one full-length novels to feature Dr. John Thorndyke; there are also a number of short story collections in which he does his scientific magic. Freeman noted in the introduction to his 1909 *Dr. Thorndyke's Cases* that his stories have, "for the most part, a medico-legal motive," and that the methodology used in solving them is similar to what is "employed in actual practice by medical jurists." According to Mike Grost, whose *A Guide to Classic Mystery and Detection* is one of my go-to places online and visited quite often when I am looking for books to read, Freeman was the "founder" of the "school of detectival realism." In that same introduction to *Dr. Thorndyke's Cases*, Freeman goes on to say that "the experiments described have in all cases been performed by me," so obviously this is a man whose feet were firmly on the ground sciencewise; he was someone who knew what he was talking about.

The case of *The Red Thumb Mark* centers around the theft of a parcel of diamonds ("stones of exceptional size and value" from the safe belonging to a Mr. John Hornby. Whoever stole them seems to have either cut or scratched his thumb in the process, leaving "two drops of blood" at the bottom of the safe. Along with a couple of "bloody smears" left on a paper, there was also a "remarkably clear imprint" of a bloody thumb mark. Hornby's nephew Reuben has been blamed for the crime. Unfortunately for him, he'd earlier provided his aunt with a thumbprint for her Thumbograph (sort of like an autograph book using thumbprints) which matched the print from the safe. Fortunately, while his lawyer advises him to "plead guilty and throw himself on the mercy of the court..." since there was no possible way for a defense case to stand up against the evidence, Reuben swears that he is innocent, and Dr. Thorndyke agrees to take the case.

I wish I had a lot of time to reflect on what's in this book aside from the mystery at hand and Thorndyke's scientific work. I'll just buzz through a few things here -- Thorndyke's views on the presumption of an accused man's innocence, the problem of "hooligans" on the streets of London, and criticism of the Edwardian judicial system. Reader beware: the solution is easy to figure out, but that's okay -- there's plenty of other things going on this book that completely make it a worthwhile read.

for the whole scientific detective sampler, you can click here:  
<http://www.crimesegments.com/2018/07/...>

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## Mary Ronan Drew says

Fingerprints. A single print, being unique - not even identical twins have the same fingerprints - that single print found in the right place at the right time is sufficient to disclose the perpetrator of a crime.

Actually, there are those who claim that identifying and matching fingerprints is not sufficiently scientific and so the fingerprint doesn't carry the weight in court that it did only a decade ago. DNA is now the sexy evidence.

In *The Red Thumbmark* by R Austin Freeman, published in 1907, a single fingerprint is found at the scene of a crime. When the police are able to identify that fingerprint, the case seems closed.

But Dr Thorndyke, the detective/barrister/medical doctor who takes on defense of this suspect, thinks he can disprove the prosecution's case, based on that same fingerprint.

It does not take Dr Thorndyke to figure out who the criminal is. The mystery in this wonderful detective tale is who the lovely heroine is in love with. The answer may surprise you.

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### **Abbey says**

This is the first Dr. Thorndyke novel, from 1907, one of the earliest forensics-based mysteries. A valuable shipment of diamonds goes missing from a safe, and a nice young man is put in the dock for it. As evidence mounts, a renowned forensics expert is called in to help with the defense. The plot twists are easily guessed, the characters speak in a mildly stilted manner that reflects their class(es) and origins, and the forensics seem extremely basic to us now, but this was one of the earliest and still holds up. The writing is smooth, the obligatory love story not intrusive, the forensics solid and well-presented, and the characters of Dr. Thorndyke and Dr. Jervis are likable and seem real.

You can see the debt Freeman owed Doyle, and the one owed to him by Sayers and numerous others. Thorndyke has a "man" named Poulton who is, at the least, Bunter's very useful Uncle, and Jervis is pretty nearly "son-of-Watson", including the love story. Thorndyke is extremely Holmesian, withholding almost all information until the denouement, rationalized as being legal discretion, but still used for good effect at the end. The courtroom scene is wonderful.

The net result is an enjoyable reminder of how life - and mysteries - used to be.

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### **MrsER says**

Definitely not my favorite Thorndyke. The detailed account about blood + fingerprints was fascinating, but some of the courtroom events were a bit too long, repetitive and slow. Of course, this is not an action thriller, nevertheless it dragged a bit at times. (And, yes, the culprit was obvious since the beginning, but the "how" is what makes it all so interesting.--and Thorndyke and Jarvis are always charming and interesting.) Do not read this as an introduction to the doctor, although it is the one that introduced him to the public. I would suggest starting with the short stories. Nevertheless, this was still a great read, and the cherry on the top was Jarvis infatuation for Juliet, with all the lovely Victorian man honorable feelings, etc, etc, etc. The ending was a delight! (Sounds silly, but if you read it and enjoy old-fashioned "feelings" you will understand my take.) Freeman was a very gifted writer, which makes reading even a 3-star book a delight. And if you are ever intrigued by Thorndyke's man servant, Polton, read Mr. Polton Explains: the first half of the book is his personal odyssey.

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### **Jane says**

Very clever, maybe a little longwinded but that could be the time it was written. Very clearly explained science and Thorndyke and Jervis are very likeable characters. Will read more from this author.

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## **Gerry says**

Dr John Evelyn Thorndyke's first case; he is a doctor turned lawyer who specialises in forensic evidence and he brings all his experience to bear in this case involving Mr John Hornby and his firm of jewellers.

He has two other family members with him in the firm, Reuben and Walter Hornby, and when precious stones go missing from the safe, to which only these three people and one other have keys, the two younger Hornbys are obvious suspects.

After some investigation, Reuben is so much under suspicion that he is arrested and imprisoned. The police are convinced that he is guilty, Thorndyke, along with his assistant Dr Jervis, is not as convinced and begins to uncover evidence that he hopes will prove Reuben's innocence.

Miss Juliet Gibson, who lives with the elder Hornbys and is attracted to Reuben, is concerned about her friend and she involves herself with Thorndyke in providing background evidence to assist in the case. And one of the artefacts that is used to assist is something called a Thumbograph, in which thumb prints of various people, particularly of the Hornby family, are recorded.

This Thumbograph turns out to be a crucial piece of evidence and Thorndyke attempts to convince the judge and jury that his explanation of thumb prints within the book and on a piece of paper that had been found in the safe is the right one.

Despite vehement arguments to the contrary he is persuasive enough so that Reuben is released, to continue his relationship with Miss Gibson and Thorndyke goes away happy. Reuben, having been declared innocent, it remains for the perpetrator of the crime to be identified ... he is not but there is a suggestion that it might have been ... well, read it and see who that is!

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