

Weird Tales

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THE THIRD THUMB-PRINT



by
Mortimer
Levitan

THE persistent ringing of the doorbell angered Professor Sanders; it brought to his lips words unscholarly and almost profane; it worried, disgusted, and sickened him. Still, he let the bell ring, ring, ring. . . . In his study, littered with papers of infinite variety and darkened by drawn blinds, he tramped to and fro. In a frenzied effort to defeat the clamoring bell, he held his hands tightly to his ears; but the odious sounds went around the hands, went through them, ignored them. The batteries were suffering, too; already the vehement clangor had degenerated into buzzes and tinkles. Soon, very soon, the benevolent laws of physics would disarm the batteries, and the bell would thenceforth be silent.

The ringing stopped. Professor Sanders fell into a chair, exhausted, desperately in need of calm reflection. The batteries, he meditated, would cost twenty-five cents apiece; two of them would cost fifty cents—quite a sum; an electrician would have to install them. The inconsiderate reporters should be compelled to pay for them. Three short feeble buzzes. . . . The professor arose automatically. He could not understand why his reflec-

tions had ended so abruptly. He fumbled around for a reason. Somehow or other, that weak convulsion of the bell reminded him of something—something he had promised, something he must do, some engagement he must fulfil. Unconsciously he strolled to the front door, opened it absent-mindedly, and admitted a dapper young man of twenty-two. Then he closed and locked the door.

"I'll appreciate this very much, Professor," said the visitor.

"There's something I ought to do," confided the professor, "but I can't think what it is. The cursed bell rang three times, and that reminded me of something, but I can't think what."

"You promised to let me in when I gave that signal."

"That's so!" The professor was ingeniously surprized. "I knew it was something. But you're in already! I opened the door without being aware of it. One of those barbaric reporters might have slipped in, and then—they're mischief-makers, they are; there ought to be a law against them."

The gray-haired, bespectacled, full-bearded man would have forgotten the presence of the other, would have declaimed long and bitterly, had not

Guy Steel interposed, in friendly though selfish fashion:

"You can't blame the reporters. You've made history by your great work. The people are interested; they want to know more about you, and the business of the reporter is to find out for them."

"I don't care to have my name and my work flung about in your yellow newspapers. I'm satisfied to have the scientific journals treat the matter; and besides, my manuscript has not yet been sent to the publishers."

THE professor led the way to the study. Not that Guy Steel had need for guidance, however, for he had been in the study many times during his undergraduate days. A sort of protégé of the queer old pedagogue who lived a solitary life in a cottage, Guy had established a close intimacy (it was not really friendship) which gave him frequent access to the study. He was a shy man, was Professor Sanders, and few people possessed his confidence or friendship.

"Why have you the curtains down?" inquired the younger man.

"So those pests of reporters will think no one is at home. But those reporters don't think; they merely bother. Let's see—you're not a reporter, are you?"

"I'm in business. You know, Professor, I've heard so much about your wonderful work that I thought I'd presume upon old friendship and come straight to headquarters to get the right dope. I explained in my note; don't you remember?"

"Too bad. You would have made a scientist."

"There must be business men as well as scientists. Besides, I shouldn't have the patience to work at a thing the way you do. How long did it take you to work out your system for the determination of criminals by thumb-prints?"

"Nineteen years—all the time I could spare from my teaching for nineteen years. I had to work for a living, my boy, or I'd have given my results to the world ten years ago."

"Nineteen years! So that's what you've been doing with your spare time! We used to think you were making a new translation of Homer, or something of that sort. And so you've been grinding away on the greatest book of the century without anyone knowing a thing about it!"

"Secrecy was essential. When a man begins work along channels that mark a radical departure from generally accepted notions, the scientific world laughs and scoffs. The derision of the public never touches a true scientist: it is the ridicule of fellow scientists that stings and discourages. Now you understand why I told no one—not even you—of my work."

"How did you ever get the idea in the first place?"

"Two men formed the foundation—Galton and Lombroso."

"Galton? Any relation to the eugenics man?"

"The same man. His really great work consisted in systematizing the old observation that no two persons have the same thumb-mark. Now, Lombroso, the great Italian anthropologist, showed the scientific world that external marks frequently determine criminality. The shape of a head will often show a murderer. But Lombroso didn't go far enough: he didn't produce a working system. All I did was to combine Galton and Lombroso. My work consisted in showing that the lines on the thumbs, which differ in each person, mean something, just as much as the shape of the skull.

It took nineteen years, but I've succeeded. I've reduced Lombroso to a workable system on Galton lines. My system enables you to tell whether a man is a criminal merely by measuring and classifying his thumb-print. Moreover, you can determine what

particular course the criminality will take. There is an infinite distinction between the print of a robber and murderer; you can easily detect the difference between a man who would commit arson and one who would commit rape. You can tell the degree of cruelty to be used in the crime; whether the crime is to be committed with passion, cold blood, stealth, cunning."

Neither spoke for a time. Each watched the other through eyes accustomed to the dim light of the study. The professor, who had given his account with rare enthusiasm, waited for questions: he expected no one to listen to the simplest lecture without asking questions—a habit acquired in the classroom.

"Aren't the thumbs the same in a kid as when he grows up?"

"The designs on the thumbs never change."

"Then you can tell whether a newborn baby is going to be a murderer?"

"As surely as you can tell its sex."

"Gosh, I'm not going to let you see any of my thumb-prints."

The professor removed his spectacles and toyed with them before answering.

"You'll find some of our best friends are murderers. Some haven't killed anyone as yet, to be sure, but they will in time, just as surely as an object thrown into the air will fall to ground at a certain rate of speed. Psychological laws are as fixed as physical laws."

"But there must be a chance for exceptions or mistakes."

"None at all. A science that permits of exceptions or mistakes is no science."

The professor stopped to emphasize the statement.

"I have succeeded in formulating a new science. I've studied the thumb-prints of ten thousand criminals, and only one apparent exception did I

find. He was an old man serving a life term for murder of the most brutal type; yet his thumb-print was that of an innocent man. I obtained all the records of his trial and found that the evidence against him was purely circumstantial. That man was innocent; and if it hadn't been for the dread of revealing my system prematurely, I would have taken the matter up with the governor. I might have freed the man, but it would have imperilled the system. My system is infallible."

Steel smiled as he said, "Of course, Professor Sanders, I believe every word you say, but it's rather hard to swallow. If you've really accomplished what you say, you've done the greatest work of the century. Why, it won't be possible for a guilty person to escape."

"They might cut their thumbs off, but the absence of thumbs would be considered conclusive evidence of guilt after my system has supplanted the antiquated notions of criminal procedure now in vogue."

STEEL AROSE, walked over to the desk, and nervously played with various articles scattered about, as he talked.

"Professor," he began from his newly assumed position, "would you make a test for me? Suppose I bring you five or six thumb-prints, will you tell me whether their owners are criminals or not?"

"You demand final proof? Well, I scarcely can object, even though it hurts my vanity. You bring me the prints, and I'll convince even you."

The doorbell rang, not clamorously as an hour ago, but persistently.

"There they go again," lamented Sanders.

"Why don't you disconnect the bell, if the ringing annoys you?"

"That is a good suggestion. How does one accomplish that result?"

"I'll do it for you," volunteered Steel, starting for the tiny kitchen

where the disconsolate bell was fastened to the wall.

"I'll show you where—"

Sanders stopped short and fumbled around his desk. He ran his hands through all his pockets and then searched blindly over the surface of the desk.

"I can't find them," he murmured to himself.

"What's the trouble?" asked Steel, when he returned from the kitchen.

"It's no use: I can't find them. I put them some place. . . ."

"Your glasses?"

"I know I had them a few seconds ago."

"Shall I pull up the blinds?"

"No, no! Those reporters would probably grin through the windows like a pack of wolves at a lamb. I can see them licking their reportorial chops now, ready to pounce upon me and tear me asunder."

"They won't see the light if I turn it on."

"Don't turn on the light! I can't see a foot away without my glasses, but I'd rather be blind than have those reporters get me."

"I'll look, but I can't see much here."

Steel searched the room—on the desk, under the desk, on chairs, under books—but the glasses remained un-found.

"Never mind," sighed Sanders. "If I don't find them myself, Mrs. Jones will find them in the morning. She always finds everything."

"As you say. Well, I'll have to be going now. I'll come back tomorrow with the prints. Thanks very much for this interview."

"The back door! For the sake of things scientific, take the back door!" shouted the professor, when he heard Steel advancing toward the front door.

Holding to the young man's arm, the professor shuffled into the kitchen, blindly felt for the key, opened the door and fairly shoved the visitor out of the house, such was his haste to regain the safety of locked doors. He feared lest some one of the enemy, more skilled and adventurous than the rest, might cross the threshold with a single foot and thus effect an entrance. Luckily no such calamity occurred. He groped his way back into the study and there renewed his search for the delinquent spectacles. It was a long search, exasperating, futile. Touch, with the questionable aid of extremely near-sighted eyes, revealed no clue. The bewildered professor paced aimlessly about the room until he was thrown prostrate upon the floor by a chair. He made no attempt to rise; but every now and then he would vaguely make the rounds of all his pockets. Wretched with despair, rendered helpless and useless by ineffective vision, he reconciled himself to the separation from his spectacles until morning, when Mrs. Jones, who put his house in order each day, would assuredly find them. Until then, however, he must suffer; he must refrain from work; he must simply think.

EIGHT o'clock the next morning there came three loud knocks on the door. Professor Sanders painfully picked himself up, stumbled toward the front door and opened it.

"Guy, is that you?"

"Good morning, Professor," was the cordial reply. "Have you found your glasses?"

"Found them? No. The house-keeper will doubtless find them when she gets here."

"Well, that's too bad," sympathized Guy Steel, as he locked the door behind him. "Have you looked all over?"

"I've felt all over."

They moved toward the study, Steel holding to Sanders' arm and gently pushing him along.

"Let's give one good last search," suggested Guy, as he energetically started to peep into all possible and impossible corners.

"It won't do any good," was the pessimistic rejoinder. "I ought to have an extra pair of spectacles, but I never could afford them."

"Now you'll soon be able to afford several hundred pairs."

The young man was feeling along the floor between the desk and the wall. Triumphantly he announced, "But you won't need any extra. Here they are!"

Tears were in the old man's eyes as he wiped the lenses with his handkerchief. He put on the spectacles and gazed at the youth before him.

"Thanks, my boy. It's like coming back to life to get these glasses. You can never know how nearly dead I feel when I can't read, can't write, can't see. I really am partially dead. I'm glad you came; I'm glad you came."

"I'm glad I came, too. Now that we've found your glasses, you can make the tests you promised me."

"Tests I promised you?"

"Don't you remember? You said you'd tell me the character of the owners of five or six thumb-prints; and I've got five of them here."

"Where are they? I'll do them immediately."

Sanders sat down at his desk, turned on the light, and laid out a variety of instruments before him.

"Don't you think I'd better pull up the shades?" inquired Steel, as he placed a strip of rough paper containing the reproductions of five thumb-prints on the desk.

"No! No! Those reporters may still be hovering about."

Sanders looked at the paper before him. He was puzzled.

"These aren't on smoked paper. Smoke the paper, press your thumb on it, and run it through shellac—you know how."

"These were made that way, but I had plates made. It'll work just the same."

PROFESSOR SANDERS was doubtful as to the adequacy of the prints, but he was willing to try them. He set to work measuring. Angles, curves, relations, lengths—all had to be determined and recorded. For two solid hours he kept his attention riveted on the prints; and during these hours not a word was spoken. Mrs. Jones, bent on straightening the study, was shooed away by Steel, who spent the time tiptoeing about the room or gazing over Sanders' shoulders. Finally the measurements were completed.

Referring to a mass of unbound sheets that rested to one side of the desk, the professor explained, "Here is the manuscript of my book, *The Determination of Criminals*. By referring to the charts I have prepared, everything becomes clear. It is merely a matter of classification from now on. Let's take No. 1 first."

He turned to several charts and trailed the particular combination of measurements to its class.

"No. 1 is an innocent man. He will never commit any crimes of violence. He will commit only those acts of petty thievery to which all mankind is addicted. No. 2."

Again he went through the routine of classification.

"No. 2—the same as No. 1. Now we'll take no. 3. . . . No. 3 is a murderer—a cold-blooded murderer who will kill for logical reasons."

Steel, who had jotted down the verdicts in the first two cases, recorded nothing for No. 3. He asked, "You're sure this is No. 3 you're talking about?"

"That is the one."

"You probably got them mixed."

"Don't dare to say that a man of my age and experience could get mixed in such a simple operation! Now, I don't mean that this man has already committed murder; I merely mean that he either has or will."

"But it can't be."

"Why can't it be?" demanded Sanders. "Everything can be. You know the man?"

"Yes."

"And you think his reputation such that he can't ever become a murderer?"

"I know he's as innocent and peaceful a man as ever lived."

"Still, he has killed a human being in cold blood, or will in the future."

"But he—why, Professor Sanders, it's absolutely silly! This man is—why—"

He ended in a laugh.

"I'm sorry if I've exposed one of your friends. That is the penalty we pay for scientific certainty."

"Well, if there's any certainty in this world, it's absolutely certain that No. 3 is not a criminal and never will be."

"Who, then, is the man in whose outward appearance you place more faith than in scientific truth?"

"You."

Professor Sanders looked at Guy Steel for a moment; he had heard the single word but had not grasped its significance.

"I?" he questioned, calmly, with tragic simplicity.

"Oh, Professor, it's all foolishness!"

"That was my thumb-print?"

"Yes; but—"

"There may have been some mistake, but I think not. It has never occurred to me to try my methods on myself. To be certain, let us try again. I'll take the print on smoked paper to be sure."

The professor walked over to the table that stretched along an entire wall, upon which divers instruments

of the psychology laboratory rested, attached a strip of prepared paper to the drum, lit the three gas jets that sent blackening flames upon the paper, revolved the drum, and soon had the proper coating of soot. He detached the paper and pressed his thumb on a corner. He did not put the print into shellac to make it permanent, nor did he wash the smutch from his thumb, but set to work immediately with the measurements.

While Sanders worked serenely on, Steel stood behind him, apparently fixed to the spot. The necessary data were collected. The professor turned to his ponderous manuscript. Both men breathed in long-separated gasps while Sanders classified the print.

And then the professor took a deep breath, placed the manuscript to one side, and quietly announced, "There was no mistake."

"Oh, well, every system has some exceptions."

"My system is infallible. There are no exceptions."

"I'm in sort of bad," confided Steel. "You see, I had those five thumb-prints published in last evening's paper; and we announced that you would give the readings."

"Published? Why?"

"Well, Professor, I might as well confess that I'm a reporter and published the entire interview."

"You said you were in business."

"I knew you wouldn't give me the interview if I told you the truth."

"I don't understand why you did that."

The professor meditated for a few minutes before continuing.

"You say you promised to print the results in your yellow sheet?"

"I'll fake reading for you and Nos. 4 and 5."

"That's true. I haven't finished the last two."

He referred to his charts again, performed the necessary classification,

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The Third Thumb-Print

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and announced: "No. 5 is a thief—cunning, deliberate, daring. No. 6 is a half-witted murderer—kills for no reason at all."

"Thanks ever so much," said Steel, as he put his notebook and pencil away.

"You published the names under the prints?"

"Yes; the names were published last evening. There's something to your system, for the last two men have just been convicted of the crimes you charge them with, and the first two are prominent business men. I'll fake a reading for you, Professor, unless you give me a more truthful one."

Instantly the old man arose, his voice and temper raised to the highest pitch.

"Fake a reading!" he exclaimed. "You publish the results as I gave them to you."

"I couldn't do that. It would make you out either a murderer or a faker."

"You've told the public I'd report on five thumb-prints. Young man, it is your plain duty to give the public my reports as I gave them to you."

"But don't you see what that would mean to you?"

"I understand; but personalities cannot stand in the way of duties. Now, Mr. Steel, farewell. I must think."

GUY STEEL slowly went out of the room, out into the open. No click of the lock followed his departure.

Professor Sanders sat at his desk and thought. He ate no breakfast, no lunch; indeed, he was unconscious of the coming and passing of the mid-day hours. He thought of the nineteen years of constant labor on a single idea, of the endless days and nights spent in collecting, classifying,

and analyzing material for his one great work. He had gained little of that seductive publicity that the world confuses with success, but he cared not for the fame of life: he wanted the fame that lasts through all eternity. He sought for the imperishable glory that belongs to him who adds to the store of human knowledge.

Nineteen years—and then, success! He had nursed a chance idea into a marvelous science. He had reduced the investigations of nearly two decades into the bounds of a single volume. Although the book had not been sent to the publishers (it would be sent in a few days), the scientific men all over the world were attacking it, defending it, discussing it. Scholar and layman alike awaited the appearance of the book—the general expectation was the immediate result of a simple announcement Sanders had made to one of his fellow teachers. The newspapers had somehow learned of the startling discoveries, had informed the public, and then sought to satisfy with imaginative interviews the curiosity they had aroused. Fame had burst upon Professor Sanders. Already life promised to be easier for him. The collage had raised his salary; the royalties from his book would doubtless be of dignified dimensions; magazines would offer astonishing sums for authentic articles on the new science. In some slight measure, he would be recompensed for the meager years just ended. Instead of being the withered hermit, he would be the fêted scholar. Fame, pleasant and satisfying, would be his while yet alive; and unending fame would be his after death.

His mind wandered back to the incident of the morning. He, Professor Sanders, the originator of the system

of determining criminality from thumb-prints, was a murderer. . . . That might be; after all, an individual is not master of his fate. If the world would consider him a murderer, Sanders would be satisfied; but the world would not consider him a criminal; it would say, with sneers and laughter, "Ah, a wonderful system! The only trouble is that it fails when applied to its originator." This would bring the entire system into disrepute, would cause hilarity at the expense of the pedagogue who had foolishly wasted his life erecting the framework of a science that tumbled down when subjected to a final test. The scientific world would smile a knowing smile and then pass its learned attention to other matters. Professor Sanders would be forgotten by everyone except the humorists. He winced at the thought; it was more than he could bear. He had wanted eternal fame and had been only too glad to sacrifice all in life to gain it. And now—well, now that he seemed on the point of success, when all his fondest hopes and dreams were almost realized, utter failure blackened all the future.

"How are you this afternoon, Professor?"

The words startled: they shattered a train of thoughts like a stroke of lightning.

"I thought you had gone home, Guy."

"I just came back. You didn't answer the door, so I walked right in. I came back to apologize for the dirty trick I played on you."

"Never mind. As long as I did not know you were a reporter, I did not mind talking to you."

"But I mean for taking your glasses."

"You found my glasses; you did not take them."

"I'm ashamed, but I took them. It occurred to me in an unfortunate

moment that it would be a good joke to try your system on yourself. You were playing with your glasses, and I just took a long chance that your thumb-mark would be on them. I managed to pick them up from your desk and get away with them. The lines of your thumb were there all right, and I had them copied; and this morning I made believe that I found your glasses on the floor."

He looked downward, repentant, thoroughly sorry for his misdeed.

"I know you won't forgive me, but—"

Professor Sanders did not answer at once. He looked at the young man before him—the youth he had taken a liking to as an undergraduate, the man whose visit he had enjoyed the day before. A smile—the vaguest trace of a smile—lit up his face, as he languidly spoke:

"When you took my spectacles yesterday, you cast me among the dead for many hours during the brief period of fame. My partial death served your purpose; your complete death will serve mine."

He took a revolver from a lower drawer, an old-fashioned weapon that belonged to past generations, and pointed it at Steel. Guy stood speechless, strengthless, thoughtless.

"The system demands as a final proof that I be a murderer. Forces beyond my control require that I kill someone. You, my lad, have caused me more misery than anyone else. It is only logical, therefore, that I should kill you."

"God!" screamed Guy Steel, finally regaining the use of his voice; but he said nothing more.

The bullet hit him in the heart, and he fell over without even a moan. Professor Sanders took one look at the dead man, walked to the front door, opened it, and shouted to all the world:

"Murder!"