

THE ADVENTURES OF SHERLOCK HOLMES

The Original Stories of the Great Detective Which Made Their Author, A. Conan Doyle, Famous.

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ADVENTURE XII.

The Reigate Puzzle

It was some time before the health of my friend, Sherlock Holmes, recovered from the strain caused by his immense exertions in the spring of '87. The whole question of the Netherlands-Sumatra company and of the colossal schemes of Baron Magnusson, and the recent inroads on the public, and are too intimately concerned with politics and finance to be fitting subjects for this series of sketches. They led, however, in an indirect fashion to a singular and complex problem which gave my friend an opportunity of demonstrating the value of a fresh weapon among the many with which he waged his lifelong battle against crime.

On referring to my notes I see that it was upon the 14th of April that I received a telegram from Lyons which informed me that Colonel Watson was lying in the Hotel Dulong. Within twenty-four hours I was in his sickroom and was relieved to find that there was nothing formidable in his symptoms. Even his iron constitution, however, broke down under the strain of an investigation which had extended over two months, during which period he had never worked less than fifteen hours a day, and had more than once, as he assured me, kept his task for five days at a stretch. Even the triumphant issue of his labors could not save him from reaction after so terrible an exertion, and he lay in bed for several days, his name and when his room was literally ankle-deep with congratulatory telegrams I found him a prey to the blackest depression. Ever since that my friend would be much the same, and he succeeded where the police of three countries had failed, and that he had outmaneuvered at every point the most accomplished swindlers in Europe.

Three days later we were back in Baker street together, but it was evident that my friend would be much the better for a change, and the thought of a week of spring time in the country was full of attractions to me also. My old friend, Colonel Hayter, who had come under my professional care in Afghanistan, had now taken a house near Reigate in Surrey, and had frequently asked me to come down to him upon a visit. On the last occasion he had renounced the idea, but now he would only come with me he would be glad to extend his hospitality to him also. A little diplomacy was needed, but when Holmes understood that the establishment was a bachelor one, and that he would be allowed the fullest freedom, he fell in with my plans and a week after our return from Lyons we were under the same roof. Hayter was a fine old soldier who had seen much of the world, and he soon found, as I had expected, that Holmes and he had much in common.

On the evening of our arrival we were sitting in the colonel's gunroom after dinner, Holmes stretched upon the sofa, while Hayter and I looked over his little array of eastern weapons. "I think you've had a scare in this part lately, Old Acton, who is one of our county magnates, had his house broken into last Monday. No great damage done, but the furniture is all lost."

"No clue?" asked Holmes, cocking his eye at the colonel.

"None as yet. But the affair is a petty one, one of our little country crimes, which must seem too small for your attention. It is a case of this great international affair."

Holmes waved away the compliment, his smile showed that it had pleased him.

"Was there any feature of interest?"

"I fancy you'd be a thief in this part of the library and get very little for your pains. The whole place was turned upside down, drawers burst open, and presses ransacked, with the result that an old volume of Pope's 'Homer,' two plated candlesticks, an ivory letter-weight, a small oak barometer, and a ball of twine are all that have vanished."

"What an extraordinary assortment!" I exclaimed.

"Oh, the fellows evidently grabbed everything they could get."

"I'm glad you've made a list of the things," said he, "why, it is very obvious that—"

"I held up a warning finger.

"You are here for a rainy day, dear fellow. For Heaven's sake don't get involved in a new problem when your nerves are all in shreds."

Holmes shrugged his shoulders with a look of complete resignation towards the colonel, and the talk drifted away into the dangerous channels.

"It was destined, however, that all my professional caution should be wasted. The next morning the problem obtruded itself upon me in such a way that it was possible to ignore it, and our country seat took a turn which neither of us could have anticipated. We were at breakfast when the colonel's butler ushered in with all his propriety shaken at him.

"Have you heard the news, sir?" he gasped. "At the Cunningham's, sir!"

"Burglary?" cried the colonel, with his coffee cup in mid-air.

"Murder!"

The colonel whistled. "By Jove!"

"Who's killed, then?"

"Neither, sir. It was William, the coachman. Shot through the heart, sir, and never spoke again."

"Who shot him, then?"

"The burglar, sir. He was off like a shot and got clean away. He'd just broke in at the pantry window when William came on him and met his end in saving his master's property."

"What time?"

"It was last night, sir, somewhere about 12."

"Ah, then, we'll step over afterwards," said the colonel, coolly settling down to his breakfast again. "It's a bad business," he added when the butler had gone; "he's our leading man about here, is old Cunningham, and a very decent fellow too. He'll be out over this, for the man has been in his service for years and was a good servant. It's evidently the same villain who broke into Acton's."

"And stole that very singular collection," said Holmes, thoughtfully.

"Precisely."

"Hum! It may prove the simplest matter in the world, but all the same it is not a gang of burglars acting in the country might be expected to carry out their operations, and not to crack two eribs in the same district within a few days. When you spoke last night of taking precautions I remember that it passed thru my mind that this was probably the last parish in England to which the thief or thieves would be likely to turn their attention—which shows that I have

still much to learn."

"I fancy it's some local practitioner," said the colonel. "In that case, of course, Acton's and Cunningham's are just the places he would go for, since they are far the largest about here."

"And the richest?"

"Well, they ought to be, but they've had a lawsuit for some years which has sucked the blood out of both of them. I fancy Old Acton has some claim on half Cunningham's estate, and the lawyers have been at it with both hands."

"If it's a local villain in running him down," said Holmes with a yawn.

"All right, Watson, I don't intend to meddle."

"Inspector Forrester, sir," said the butler, throwing open the door.

The official, a smart, keen-faced young fellow, stepped into the room.

"Good morning, colonel," said he, "I hope I don't intrude, but we hear that Mr. Cunningham is not in here."

The colonel waved his hand toward my friend, and the inspector bowed.

"We have a few papers you would care to step across, Mr. Holmes."

"The papers are against you, Watson," said he, laughing. "We were chatting about the matter when you came in, inspector. Perhaps you'd care to see the details." As he leaped back in his chair in the familiar attitude I knew that the case was hopeless.

We had no clue in the Acton affair. But here we have plenty to go on, and there's no doubt it is the same party in each case. The man was seen."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir. But he was off like a deer after the shot that killed poor William Kirwan was fired. Mr. Cunningham saw him from the bedroom window, and Mr. Alec Cunningham saw him in the dressing-room. It was quarter to twelve when the alarm broke out. Mr. Cunningham had just got into bed, and Mr. Alec was smoking a pipe in his dressing-room. He heard William the coachman calling for help, and Mr. Alec ran down to see what was the matter. The back door was open, and as he came to the foot of the stairs he saw two men wrestling together outside. One of them fired a shot, the other dropped and the murderer rushed across the garden and over the hedge. Mr. Cunningham, looking out of his bedroom, saw the fellow as he gained the road, but lost sight of him at once. Mr. Alec stopped to see if he could help the dying man, but he was too late. He saw a middle-sized man and dressed in some dark stuff, we have no personal clue; but he is a stranger we shall soon find him out."

"What was this William doing there? Did he say anything before he died?"

"No, sir. He lives at the lodge with his mother, and as he was a very faithful fellow, we imagine that he walked up to the house with the intention of seeing that all was right here. Of course, the fellow must have put every one on their guard. The robber must have just burst open the door—the lock had been forced—when William came upon him. He was shot in the back before he could get to his mother before going out."

"Did William say anything to his mother before going out?"

"She is very old and deaf and we can get no information from her. The shoe has made her half-witted, but I understand that she was never very bright. There is one very important circumstance, however. Look at this!"

Holmes picked up a small piece of paper from a notebook and spread it out upon his knee.

"This was found between the finger and thumb of the dead man. It appears to be a fragment torn from a larger sheet. You will observe that the hour mentioned upon it is the very time at which the poor fellow met his fate. You see that his murderer might have been the man who shot him, or he might have taken this fragment from the murderer. It reads almost as tho it were an appointment."

Holmes took up the scrap of paper, a facsimile of which is here reproduced.



"THERE CANNOT BE THE LEAST DOUBT IN THE WORLD THAT IT HAS BEEN WRITTEN BY TWO PERSONS."

been behaving very queerly, and he is very much excited."

"I don't think you need alarm yourself," said I, "but we have usually found that there was method in his madness."

"Some folk might say there was madness in his method," muttered the inspector. "But he's all on fire to start, let us see what he has best got out if you are ready."

We found Holmes pacing up and down in the field, his chin sunk upon his breast, and his hands thrust into his trousers pockets.

"The matter grows in interest," said he. "Watson, your country trip has been a distinct success. I have had a charming morning."

"You were forced to the scene of the crime, I understand," said the colonel.

"Yes; the inspector and I have made quite a little reconnaissance together."

"Any success?"

"Well, we have seen some very interesting things. I'll tell you what we did as we walk. First of all, we saw the body of the murdered man lying on the ground. It was a middle-sized man and dressed in some dark stuff, we have no personal clue; but he is a stranger we shall soon find him out."

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ing opened the drawing-room and several bedrooms, including those of Mr. Cunningham and his son. Holmes walked slowly, taking a note of the architecture of the house. I could tell from his expression that he was on a hot scent, and yet I could not in the least imagine in what direction his instincts were leading him.

"My good sir," said Mr. Cunningham, with some impatience, "this is surely very unnecessary. That is my room, and I am sure that you are not the son's is the one beyond it. I leave it to your judgment whether it was possible for the thief to have come up here without disturbing us."

"You must try round and get on a fresh scent, I fancy," said the son, with a rather malicious smile.

"Still, I must ask you to humor me a little further. I should like, for example, to see how far the windows of the bedrooms command the front of the house. I understand, in your son's room, that he pushed open the door—and that, I presume, is the dressing-room in which the body of the murdered man was found. Where does the window of that room look out to?"

"He stepped across the bedroom, pushed open the door, and glanced out at the other chamber."

"I hope that you are satisfied now?"

"Thank you, I think I have seen all that I wished."

"It is really necessary we can go into my room."

"If it is not too much trouble."

The J. P. shrugged his shoulders, and led the way into his own chamber, which was a plainly furnished and comfortable room. As we moved across it in the direction of the window, Holmes fell back until he and I were the last of the group. Near the foot of the bed stood a dish of oranges and a carafe of water. As we passed it, Holmes, to my unutterable astonishment, leaned over in front of me and deliberately knocked the whole thing over. The glass smashed into a thousand pieces and the fruit rolled about into every corner of the room.

"You've done it now, Watson," said he coolly, "but I pray you never make a mistake of the carpet."

I stooped in some confusion and began to pick up the fruit, understanding for some reason my companion desired me to take the blame upon myself. The others did the same, and set the table on its legs again.

"Hullo!" cried the inspector, "where's the girl?"

Holmes had disappeared.

"Wait here an instant," said young Alec Cunningham. "That fellow is off his head, and in my opinion. Come with me to my father, and see where he has got to!"

They rushed out of the room, leaving the inspector, the colonel and me staring at each other.

"Of my word, I am inclined to agree with Master Alec," said the official. "It may be the effect of this illness, but it seems to me that—"

"His words were cut short by a sudden knock. The door was opened by a maid, and she brought in a note for the inspector. With a thrill I recognized the voice as that of my friend. I rushed madly from the room on to the landing. "Arrest that man!" I cried, and in a hoarse, inarticulate shouting came from the room which we had first visited. I dashed in, and on into the dressing-room beyond. The two Cunninghams were bending over the prostrate body of Sherlock Holmes, the younger clutching his throat with both hands, while the elder seemed to be twisting one of his wrists. In an instant the three of us had torn them away from him, and Holmes staggered to his feet very pale and evidently greatly exhausted.

"Arrest these men, inspector," he gasped.

"On what charge?"

"That of murdering their coachman, William Kirwan."

The inspector stared at him in bewilderment. "Oh, my dear sir, Mr. Holmes," he said at last, "I'm sure you don't really mean to—"

"Tut, man, look at their faces!" cried Holmes, curtly.

Never certainly have I seen a plainer confession of guilt upon human countenances. The older man seemed numb and dazed, with a heavy, sullen expression upon his strongly-marked face. The son, on the other hand, had dropped all that jaunty, dashing style which had characterized him, and the ferocity of a dangerous wild beast gazed in his dark eyes. The inspector said nothing, but stepping to the door, he blew his whistle, and two of his constables came at the call.

"I have no alternative, Mr. Cunningham," said he. "I trust that this may all prove to be an absurd mistake, but you can see that—"

"Drop it!" he struck out with his hand, and a revolver which the younger man was in the act of cocking clattered down upon the floor.

"Keep that," said Holmes, quietly putting his foot upon it; "you will find it useful at the trial. But this is what we really wanted." He held up a little crumpled piece of paper.

"The remainder of the sheet!" cried the inspector.

"Precisely."

"And where was it?"

"Where I was sure it must be. I'll make the whole matter clear to you presently. I think, colonel, that you and Watson might return now, and I will be with you again in an hour at the furthest. The inspector and I must have a word with the prisoners, but you will certainly see me back at luncheon time."

Sherlock Holmes was as good as his

word, for about 1 o'clock he rejoined us in the colonel's smoking room. He was accompanied by a little elderly gentleman, who was introduced to me as the Mr. Acton whose house had been the scene of the original burglary.

"I wished Mr. Acton to be present while I demonstrated this small matter to you," said Holmes, "for it is natural that Watson should take a keener interest in the details. I am afraid, my dear colonel, that you must regret the hour that you took in such a stormy petrel as I am."

"On the contrary," answered the colonel, warmly, "I consider it the greatest privilege to have been permitted to study your methods of working. I confess that they were of the greatest interest to me. I am utterly unable to account for your result. I have not yet seen the vestige of a clue."

"I am afraid that my explanation may disillusion you, but it has always been my habit to hide none of my methods, either from my friend Watson or from any one who might take an intelligent interest in them. But, first, as I am rather shaken by the knocking about which I had in the dressing room, I think that I shall help myself to a dash of your brandy, colonel. My horse has been rather late lately."

"I trust you had no more of those nervous attacks."

"Sherlock Holmes" laughed heartily. "We will come to that if it turns out. I will lay an account of the case before you in its due order, leaving you the opportunity of which guide me in my details. Pray interrupt me if you see any inference which is not perfectly clear to you."

"It is of the highest importance in the art of detection to be able to recognize out of a number of facts, which are incidental and which vital. Otherwise your energy and attention must be dissipated instead of being concentrated. Now, in this case, I have not the slightest doubt in my mind from the first that the key of the whole matter must be looked for in the scrap of paper in the pocket of the murdered man."

"Before going into this, I would draw your attention to the fact that, if Alec Cunningham's narrative was correct, and if the assailant, after shooting William Kirwan, had instantly fled, then it obviously could not be he who tore the paper from the dead man's hand. But if it was not he, it must have been Alec Cunningham himself, for by the time that the old man had descended, several servants were upon the scene. The point is a simple one, because the inspector had overlooked the fact that these county magnates had had nothing to do with the matter. Now, I make a point of never having any of my friends suspecting me, and so, in the very first stage of the investigation, I found myself looking for the assistance at the part which had been played by Mr. Alec Cunningham."

"And now I made a very careful examination of the corner of a paper which the murderer had submitted to me. It was at once clear to me that it formed part of a very remarkable document. Here it is. Do you not now observe something very suggestive about it?"

"It has a very irregular look," said the colonel.

"My dear sir," cried Holmes, "there cannot be the least doubt in the world that it has been written by two persons doing alternate words. When I draw your attention to the strong 't's' and 'o's,' and ask you to compare them with the weak ones of the murderer, you will instantly recognize the fact. A very brief analysis of these four words would enable you to say with the utmost confidence that the 'learn' and 'drop' were written in a stronger hand, and the 'what' in the weaker."

"By Jove, it's as clear as day!" cried the colonel. "Why on earth should two men write a letter in such a fashion?"

"Obviously the business was a bad one, and one of the men who distrusted the other was determined that, whatever was done, each should have an equal share in the blame. The fact is clear that the one who wrote the 'at' and 'to' was the ringleader."

"How do you get at that?"

"We might deduce from the mere character of the one hand as compared with the other. But we have more powerful reasons than that for supposing it. If you examine this scrap with attention, you will find that the conclusion that the man with the stronger hand wrote all his words first, leaving blanks for the other to fill up. These blanks were already written. The man who wrote all his words first is undoubtedly the man who planned the murder."

"Excellent!" cried Mr. Acton.

"But very superficial," said Holmes. "We come now, however, to a point which is of importance. You may not be aware that the deduction of a man's name from his handwriting is a very delicate and the other advanced in years without being positively decrepit."

"Excellent!" cried Mr. Acton again.

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"Having got so far, my next step was, of course, to examine the details of the crime, and to see how far they would help us. I went up to the house with the inspector, and saw all that was to be seen. The wound upon the dead man was, as I was able to determine with absolute confidence, fired from a revolver at the distance of something over four yards. There was no powder on the clothes. Evidently, therefore, Alec Cunningham had lied when he said that the two men were struggling when the shot was fired. Again, both father and son agreed into the road. At that point, however, as it happens, there is a bad man's ditch, and at the bottom of it were no indications of foot-marks about this ditch. I was absolutely sure not only that the Cunninghams had again lied, but that there had never been any unknown man upon the scene at all."

"And now I have to consider the motive of this singular crime. To get at this, I endeavored first of all to solve the reason of the original burglary at Mr. Acton's. I understood, from something the colonel told us, that a lawsuit had been going on between the two men, rather than the Cunninghams. Of course, it instantly occurred to me that they had broken into your library with the intention of finding some document which might be of importance in the case."

"Precisely so," said Mr. Acton. "There can be no possible doubt as to their intentions in the case. I can claim upon half of the real estate, and if they could have found a single paper—which, fortunately, was in the strong-box of my solicitors—they would have certainly have crippled our case."

"There you are," said the colonel. "It was a dangerous, reckless attempt, in which I seem to trace the influence of young Alec. Having found nothing, they tried to divert suspicion by making it appear to be a single burglary, to which end they carried off whatever they could lay their hands upon. That is all clear enough, but there was much more to be done. What I wanted above all was to get the missing part of that note. I was certain that Alec had torn it out of the dead man's hand, and almost certain that he must have thrust it into his pocket of his dressing-room. Where else could he have put it? The only question was whether it was still there. It was worth an effort to find out, and for that object we all went up to the house."

The Cunninghams joined us, as you doubtless remember, beside the kitchen door. It was, of course, the very first importance that they should not be reminded of the existence of this paper, otherwise they would naturally destroy it. The fact was, however, or was about to tell them the importance which we attached to it when, by the luckiest chance in the world, I stumbled upon the fragment of fit and so changed the conversation, of fit and so

"Good heavens!" cried the colonel, laughing, "do you mean to say all our little work was wasted and your fit an imposture?"

"Speaking professionally, it was admirably done," cried I, looking in amazement at this man who was formerly only known to me with some new phase of his astuteness.

"It is an art which is often useful," said he. "When I recovered I managed, by a device which had perhaps a little of the merit of ingenuity, to get old Cunningham to write the word 'twelve,' so that I might compare it with the 'twelve' upon the paper." I exclaimed.

"I could see that you were commiserating me over my weakness," said Holmes, laughing. "I was sorry to see you so little of the merit of ingenuity. I know that you felt. We then went upstairs together, and having entered the room and seen the dressing-room hanging by the door, I, contrived, by upsetting a table, to engage their attention for the moment, and slipped back to examine the pockets. I had hardly got the paper, however, when I was seized by the two Cunninghams, who were on me, and would, I verily believe, have murdered me then and there but for your prompt and friendly aid. As it is, I feel that young man's grip on my throat now, and the father has twisted my wrist round in the effort to get the paper out of my hand. They will certainly follow the lead which you see, and the sudden change from absolute security to complete despair made them perfectly desperate."

"I had a little talk with old Cunningham afterwards as to the motive of the crime. He was tractable enough, though his son was a perfect demon, ready to blow out his own or anybody else's brains if he could have got his hands on the paper. He was sure that the case against him was so strong he lost all heart and made a clean breast of everything. It seems that William had expected to follow the note and get on the night when they made their raid upon Mr. Acton's, and having thus got them into his power, proceeded, under threats of exposure, to play blackmail upon them. It is, however, a very dangerous man to play games of that sort with. It was a stroke of positive genius on his part to see in the burglary an opportunity of getting rid of the country side an opportunity of plausibly getting rid of the man whom he feared. William was deceived up and shot, and had thereby only got the whole of the note and paid a little more attention to detail in their accessories, it is very possible that suspicion might never have been aroused."

"And the note?" I asked.

Sherlock Holmes placed the subpoenaed paper before us.

If you will only come over to the east gate, you will will very much surprise you and be of the greatest service to you and also to Anne Morrison. But say nothing to anyone upon the matter

between these hands. They belong to men who are blood relatives. It may be most obvious to you in the Great Britain, but to me there are many points which indicate the same thing. I have no doubt at all that a family manerism can be traced in these two specimens of writing. I am only, of course, giving you the leading results now of my examination of the paper. There were twenty-three other deductions which would be of more interest to experts than to you. They all tend to deepen the impression upon my mind that the Cunninghams, father and son, had written this letter.