

The Adventure of the Second Stain

No. 13 of the Series

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HAD intended "The Adventure of the Abbey Grange" to be the last of those exploits of my friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes, which I should ever communicate to the public. This resolution of mine was not due to any lack of material, since I have notes of many hundreds of cases to which I have never alluded, nor was it caused by any waning interest on the part of my readers in the singular personality and unique methods of this remarkable man. The real reason lay in the reluctance which Mr. Holmes has shown to the continued publication of his experiences. So long as he was in actual professional practice the records of his successes were of some practical value to him, but since he has definitely retired from London and betaken himself to study and bee farming on the Sussex downs, notoriety has become hateful to him, and he has peremptorily requested that his wishes in this matter should be strictly observed. It was only upon my representing to him that I had given a promise that "The Adventure of the Second Stain" should be published when the times were ripe and pointing out to him that it is only appropriate that this long series of episodes should culminate in the most important international case which he has ever been called upon to handle that I at last succeeded in obtaining his consent that a carefully guarded account of the incident should at last be laid before the public.

It was, then, in a year, even in a decade that shall be nameless, that upon one Tuesday morning in autumn we found two visitors of European fame within the walls of our humble room in Baker street. The one, austere, high nosed, eagle eyed and dominant, was none other than the illustrious Lord Bellinger, twice premier of Britain. The other, dark, clean cut and elegant, hardly yet of middle age and endowed with every beauty of body and of mind, was the Right Hon. Trelawney Hope, secretary for European affairs and the most rising statesman in the country. They sat side by side upon our paper littered settee, and it was easy to see from their worn and anxious faces that it was business of the most pressing importance which had brought them. The premier's thin, blue veined hands were clasped tightly over the ivory head of his umbrella, and his gaunt, ascetic face looked gloomily from Holmes to me. The European secretary pulled nervously at his mustache and adged with the seals of his watch chain.

"When I discovered my loss, Mr. Holmes, which was at 8 o'clock this morning, I at once informed the prime minister. It was at his suggestion that we have both come to you."

"Have you informed the police?"
"No, sir," said the prime minister, with the quick, decisive manner for which he was famous. "We have not done so, nor is it possible that we should do so. To inform the police must, in the long run, mean to inform the public. This is what we particularly desire to avoid."

"And why, sir?"
"Because the document in question is of such immense importance that its publication might very easily—lead to European complications of the utmost moment. It is not too much to say that peace or war may hang upon the issue. Unless its recovery can be attended with the utmost secrecy then it may as well not be recovered at all, for all that is aimed at by those who have taken it is that its contents should be generally known."

"I understand. Now, Mr. Trelawney Hope, I should be much obliged if you would tell me exactly the circumstances under which this document disappeared."

"That can be done in a very few words, Mr. Holmes. The letter—for it was a letter from a foreign potentate—was received six days ago. It was of such importance that I have never left it in my safe, but I have taken it across each evening to my house in Whitehall terrace and kept it in my bedroom in a locked dispatch box. It was there last night. Of that I am certain. I actually opened the box while I was dressing for dinner and saw the document inside. This morning it was gone. The dispatch box had stood beside the glass upon my dressing table all night. I am a light sleeper, and so is my wife. We are both prepared to swear that no one could have entered the room during the night, and yet I repeat that the paper is gone."

"What time did you dine?"
"Half past 7."

"How long was it before you went to bed?"

"My wife had gone to the theater. I waited up for her. It was half past 11 before we went to our room."

"Then for four hours the dispatch box had lain unguarded?"

"No one is ever permitted to enter that room save the housemaid in the morning and my valet or my wife's maid during the rest of the day. They are both trusty servants and have been with us for some time. Besides, neither of them could possibly have known that there was anything more valuable than the ordinary departmental papers in my dispatch box."

"Who did know of the existence of that letter?"

"No one in the house."

"Surely your wife knew?"

"No, sir. I had said nothing to my wife until I missed the paper this morning."

The premier nodded approvingly. "I have long known, sir, how high is your sense of public duty," said he. The European secretary bowed.

"You do me no more than justice, sir. Until this morning I have never breathed one word to my wife upon this matter."

"Could she have guessed?"

"No, Mr. Holmes, she could not have guessed, nor could any one have guessed."

"Have you lost any documents before?"

"No, sir."

"Who is there in England who did know of the existence of this letter?"

"Each member of the cabinet was informed of it yesterday, but the pledge of secrecy which attends every cabinet meeting was increased by the solemn warning which was given by the prime minister. Good heavens, to think that within a few hours I should myself have lost it! Besides the members of the cabinet there are two or possibly three departmental officials who know of the letter. No one else in England, Mr. Holmes, I assure you."

"But abroad?"

"I believe that no one abroad has seen it save the man who wrote it. I am well convinced that his ministers—that the usual official channels have not been employed."

Holmes considered for some little time.

"Now, sir, I must ask you more particularly what this document is, and why its disappearance should have such momentous consequences?"

The two statesmen exchanged a quick glance, and the premier's shaggy eyebrows gathered in a frown.

"Mr. Holmes, the envelope is a long, thin one of pale blue color. There is a seal of red wax stamped with a crouching lion. It is addressed in large, bold handwriting to—"

"I fear, sir," said Holmes, "that interesting and, indeed, essential as these details are, my inquiries must go more to the root of things. What was the letter?"

letter—this letter which may well mean the expenditure of a thousand millions and the lives of a hundred thousand men—which has become lost in this unaccountable fashion."

"Have you informed the sender?"

"Yes, sir; a cipher telegram has been dispatched."

"Perhaps he desires the publication of the letter?"

"No, sir; we have strong reason to believe that he already understands that he has acted in an indiscreet and hot headed manner. It would be a greater blow to him and to his country than to us if this letter were to come out."

"If this is so, whose interest is it that the letter should come out? Why should any one desire to steal it or to publish it?"

"There, Mr. Holmes, you take me into regions of high international politics. But if you consider the European situation you will have no difficulty in perceiving the motive. The whole of Europe is an armed camp. There is a double league which makes a fair balance of military power. Great Britain holds the scales. If Britain were driven into war with one confederacy it would assure the supremacy of the other confederacy, whether they joined in the war or not. Do you follow?"

"Very clearly. It is then the interest of the enemies of this potentate to secure and publish this letter, so as to make a breach between his country and ours?"

"Yes, sir."

"And to whom would this document be sent if it fell into the hands of an enemy?"

"To any of the great chancelleries of Europe. It is probably speeding on its way thither at the present instant as fast as steam can take it. Now, Mr. Holmes, you are in full possession of the facts. What course do you recommend?"

Holmes shook his head mournfully.

"You think, sir, that unless this doc-



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SHE SEATED HERSELF WITH HER BACK TO THE WINDOW.

"That is a state secret of the utmost importance, and I fear that I cannot tell you, nor do I see that it is necessary. If by the aid of the powers which you are said to possess you can find such an envelope as I describe, with its inclosure, you will have deserved well of your country and earned any reward which it lies in our power to bestow."

Sherlock Holmes rose with a smile.

"You are two of the most busy men in the country," said he, "and in my own small way I have also a good many calls upon me. I regret exceedingly that I cannot help you in this matter, and any continuation of this interview would be a waste of time."

The premier sprang to his feet with that quick, fierce gleam of his deep set eyes before which a cabinet has cowered. "I am not accustomed, sir"—he began, but mastered his anger and resumed his seat. Then the old statesman shrugged his shoulders.

"We must accept your terms, Mr. Holmes. No doubt you are right, and it is unreasonable for us to expect you to act unless we give you our entire confidence."

"I agree with you," said the younger statesman.

"Then I will tell you, relying entirely upon your honor and that of your colleague, Dr. Watson. I may appeal to your patriotism also, for I could not imagine a greater misfortune for the country than that this affair should come out."

"You may safely trust us."

"The letter, then, is from a certain foreign potentate who has been ruffled by some recent colonial developments of this country. It has been written hurriedly and upon his own responsibility entirely. Inquiries have shown that his ministers know nothing of the matter. At the same time it is couched in so unfortunate a manner and certain phrases in it are of so provocative a character that its publication would undoubtedly lead to a most dangerous state of feeling in this country. There would be such a ferment, sir, that I do not hesitate to say that within a week of the publication of that letter this country would be involved in a great war."

Holmes wrote a name upon a slip of paper and handed it to the premier.

"Exactly. It was he. And it is this

ument is recovered there will be war?"

"I think it is very probable."

"Then, sir, prepare for war."

"That is a hard saying, Mr. Holmes."

"Consider the facts, sir. It is inconceivable that it was taken after 11:30 at night, since I understand that Mr. Hope and his wife were both in the room from that hour until the loss was found out. It was taken, then, yesterday evening between 7:30 and 11:30, probably near the earlier hour, since whoever took it evidently knew that it was there, and would naturally secure it as early as possible. Now, sir, if a document of this importance were taken at that hour, where can it be now? No one has any reason to retain it. It has been passed rapidly on to those who need it. What chance have we now to overtake or even to trace it? It is beyond our reach."

"What you say is perfectly logical, Mr. Holmes. I feel that the matter is indeed out of our hands."

"Let us presume, for argument's sake, that the document was taken by the maid or by the valet."

"They are both old and tried servants."

"I understand you to say that your room is on the second floor, that there is no entrance from without and that from within no one could go up unobserved. It must, then, be somebody in the house who has taken it. To whom would the thief take it? To one of several international spies and secret agents whose names are tolerably familiar to me. There are three who may be said to be the heads of their profession. I will begin my research by going round and finding if each of them is at his post. If one is missing—especially if he has disappeared since last night—we will have some indication as to where the document has gone."

"Why should he be missing?" asked the European secretary. "He would take the letter to an embassy in London, as likely as not."

"I fancy not. These agents work independently, and their relations with the embassies are often strained."

The prime minister nodded his acquiescence.

"I believe you are right, Mr. Holmes. He would take so valuable a prize to headquarters with his own hands. I think that your course of action is an excellent one. Meanwhile, Hope, we

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