

The Best of the Sherlock Holmes Stories

The Adventure of the Beryl Coronet.

by A. CONAN DOYLE



This is the third of a series of stories by A. Conan Doyle, dealing with the adventures of the famous detective Sherlock Holmes up to the time of his memorable struggle for life upon the Switzerland mountain path with the redoubtable Moriarty. These are the original Sherlock Holmes stories, and the ones which made Dr. Doyle's fame. They are entirely apart from the series which recently appeared in the Sunday Call entitled "The Return of Sherlock Holmes."

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"HOLMES," said I, as I stood one morning in our bow-window, looking down the street, "here is a madman coming along. It seems rather sad that his relatives should allow him to come out alone."

My friend rose lazily from his arm-chair and stood with his hands in the pockets of his dressing gown, looking over my shoulder. It was a bright, crisp February morning, and the snow of the day before still lay deep upon the ground, shimmering brightly in the wintry sun. Down the center of Baker street it had been ploughed into a brown, crumbly band by the traffic, but at either side and on the heaped-up edges of the footpaths the still lay as white as when it fell. The gray pavement had been cleaned and scraped, but was still dangerously slippery, so that there were few passengers other than usual. Indeed, from the direction of the Metropolitan station no one was coming save the single gentleman whose eccentric conduct had drawn my attention.

He was a man of about fifty, tall, portly and imposing, with a massive, strongly marked face and a commanding figure. He was dressed in a somber yet rich style in black frock coat, shining hat, neat brown gaiters and well-cut pearl-gray trousers. Yet his actions were in absurd contrast to the dignity of his dress and features, for he was running hard, with occasional little springs, such as a weary man gives who is little accustomed to set any tax upon his legs. As he ran he jerked his hands up and down, wagged his head and writhed his face into the most extraordinary contortions.

"What on earth can be the matter with him?" I asked. "He is looking up at the numbers of the houses."

"I believe that he is coming here," said Holmes, rubbing his hands.

"Here?"

"Yes; I rather think he is coming to consult me professionally. I think that I recognize the symptoms. Ha! Did I not tell you?" As he spoke the man, puffing and blowing, rushed at our door and pulled at our bell until the whole house resounded with the clanging.

A few moments later he was in our room, still puffing, still gesticulating, but with so fixed a look of grief and despair in his eyes that our smiles were turned in an instant to horror and pity. For a while he could not get his words out, but swayed his body and plucked at his hair like one who has been driven to the extreme limits of his reason. Then, suddenly springing to his feet, he beat his head against the wall with such force that we both rushed upon him and tore him away to the center of the room. Sherlock Holmes pushed him down into an easy chair, and, sitting beside him, patted his hand and chatted with him in the easy, soothing tones which he knew so well how to employ.

"You have come to tell me your story, have you not?" said he. "You are fatigued with your haste. Pray wait until you have recovered yourself, and then I shall be most happy to look into any little problem which you may submit to me."

The man sat for a minute or more with a heaving chest, fighting against his emotion. Then he passed his handkerchief over his brow, set his lips tight and turned his face toward us.

"No doubt you think me mad?" said he.

"I see that you have had some great trouble," responded Holmes.

"God knows I have!—a trouble which is enough to unseat my reason, so sudden and so terrible is it. Public disgrace I might have faced, although I am a man whose character has never yet borne a stain. Private affliction also is the lot of every man, but the two coming together and in so frightful a form have been enough to shake my very soul. Besides, it is not I alone. The very noblest in the land may suffer unless some way be found out of this horrible affair."

"Pray compose yourself, sir," said Holmes, "and let me have a clear account of who you are and what it is that has befallen you."

"My name," answered our visitor, "is Alexander Holder of the banking firm of Holder & Stevenson of Threadneedle street."

The name was indeed well known to us as belonging to the senior partner in the second largest private banking concern in the city of London. What could have happened, then, to bring one of the foremost citizens of London to this most pitiable pass? We waited, all curiosity, until, with another effort, he braced himself to tell his story.

"I feel that time is of value," said he; "that is why I hastened here when the police inspector suggested that I should secure your co-operation. I came to Baker street by the Underground, and hurried from there on foot, for the cabs go slowly through the snow. That is why I was so out of breath, for I am a man who takes very little exercise. I feel better now and I will put the facts before you as shortly and yet as clearly as I can."

"It is, of course, well known to you that



"AND WAS DOWN AGAIN IN A FEW MINUTES DRESSED AS A COMMON LOAFER."



"AND WITH A SWEET, FELL DOWN SENSELESS ON THE FLOOR."

in a successful banking business as much depends upon our being able to find remunerative investments for our funds as upon increasing our connections and the number of our depositors. One of the most lucrative means of laying out money is in the shape of loans where the security is unimpeachable. We have done a good deal in this direction during the last few years, and there are many noble families to whom we have advanced large sums upon the security of their pictures, libraries or plate.

"Yesterday morning I was seated in my office at the bank when a card was brought to me by one of the clerks. I started when I saw the name, for it was that of none other than—well, perhaps even to you I had better say no more than that it was a name which is a household word all over the earth—one of the highest, noblest, most exalted names in England. I was overwhelmed by the honor, and attempted when he entered to say so, but he plunged at once into business with the air of a man who wishes to hurry quickly through a disagreeable task.

"Mr. Holder," said he, "I have been informed that you are in the habit of advancing money."

"The firm does so when the security is good," I answered.

"It is absolutely essential to me," said he, "that I should have £50,000 at once. I could, of course, borrow so trifling a sum ten times over from my friends, but I much prefer to make it a matter of business and to carry out that business myself. In my position you can readily understand that it is unwise to place one's self under obligations."

"For how long, may I ask, do you want this sum?" I asked.

"Next Monday I have a large sum due to me, and I shall then most certainly repay what you advance, with whatever interest you think it right to charge. But it is very essential to me that the money should be paid at once."

"I should be happy to advance it without further parley from my own private purse," said I, "were it not that the strain would be rather more than it could bear. If, on the other hand, I am to do it in the name of the firm, then, in justice to my partner, I must insist that, even in your case, every business-like precaution should be taken."

"I should much prefer to have it so," said he, raising up a square black morocco case which he had laid beside his chair. "You have doubtless heard of the Beryl Coronet?"

"One of the most precious public possessions of the empire," said I.

"Precisely." He opened the case, and there, imbedded in soft, flesh-colored velvet, lay the magnificent piece

of jewelry which he had named. "There are thirty-nine enormous beryls," said he, "and the price of the gold casing is incalculable. The lowest estimate would put the worth of the coronet at double the sum which I have asked. I am prepared to leave it with you as my security."

"I took the precious case into my hands and looked in some perplexity from it to my illustrious client.

"You doubt its value?" he asked.

"Not at all. I only doubt—"

"The propriety of my leaving it. You may set your mind at rest about that. I should not dream of doing so were it not absolutely certain that I should be able in four days to reclaim it. It is a pure matter of form. Is the security sufficient?"

"Ample."

"You understand, Mr. Holder, that I am giving you a strong proof of the confidence which I have in you, founded upon all that I have heard of you. I rely upon you not only to be discreet and to refrain from all gossip upon the matter, but, above all, to preserve this coronet with every possible precaution, because I need not say that a great public scandal would be caused if any harm were to befall it. Any injury to it would be almost as serious as its complete loss, for there are no beryls in the world to match these, and it would be impossible to replace them. I leave it with you, however, with every confidence, and I shall call for it in person on Monday morning."

"Seeing that my client was anxious to leave I said no more, but calling for my cashier I ordered him to pay over fifty £1000 notes. When I was alone once

more, however, with the precious case lying on the table in front of me, I could not but think with some misgivings of the immense responsibility which it entailed upon me. There could be no doubt that, as it was a national possession, a horrible scandal would ensue if any misfortune should occur to it. I already regretted having ever consented to take charge of it. However, it was too late to alter the matter now, so I locked it up in my private safe and turned once more to my work.

"When evening came I felt that it would be an imprudence to leave so precious a thing in the office behind me. Bankers' safes had been forced before now, and why should not mine be? It so, how terrible would be the position in which I should find myself! I determined therefore that for the next few days I would always carry the case backward and forward with me so that it might never be really out of my reach. With this intention I called a cab and drove out to my house at Streatham, carrying the jewel with me. I did not breathe freely until I had taken it upstairs and locked it in the bureau of my dressing-room.

"And now a word as to my household, Mr. Holmes, for I wish you to thoroughly understand the situation. My groom and my page sleep out of the house and may be set aside altogether. I have three maid servants who have been with me a number of years and whose absolute reliability is quite above suspicion. Another, Lucy Parr, the second waiting maid, has only been in my service a few months. She came with an excellent character, however, and has always given me satisfaction. She is a very pretty girl and has attracted admirers who have occasionally hung about the place. That is the only drawback which we have found to her, but we believe her to be a thoroughly good girl in every way.

"So much for the servants. My family itself is so small that it will not take me long to describe it. I am a widower and have an only son Arthur. He has been a disappointment to me, Mr. Holmes—a grievous disappointment. I have no doubt that I am myself to blame. People tell me that I have spoiled him. Very likely I have. When my dear wife died I felt that he was all I had to love. I could not bear to see the smile fade even for a moment from his face. I have never denied him a wish. Perhaps it would have been better for both of us had I been sterner, but I meant it for the best.

"It was naturally my intention that he should succeed me in my business, but he was not of a business turn. He was wild, wayward, and, to speak the truth, I could not trust him in the handling of large sums of money. When he was young he became a member of an aristocratic club, and there, having charming manners, he was soon the intimate of a number of men with long purses and expensive habits. He learned to play heavily at cards and to squander money on the turf, until he had again and again to come to me and implore me to give him an advance upon his allowance, that he might settle his debts of honor. He tried more than once to break away from the dangerous company which he was keeping, but each time the influence of his friend, Sir George Burnwell, was enough to draw him back again.

"And, indeed, I could not wonder that such a man as Sir George Burnwell should gain an influence over him, for he has frequently brought him to my house, and I have found myself that I could hardly resist the fascination of his manner. He is older than Arthur, a man of the world to his finger-tips, one who has been everywhere, seen everything, a brilliant talker, and a man of great personal beauty. Yet when I think of him in cold blood, far away from the glamor of his presence, I am convinced from his cynical speech, and the look which I have caught in his eyes, that he is one who should be deeply distrusted. So I think, and so, too, thinks my little Mary, who has a woman's quick insight into character.

"And now there is only she to be described. She is my niece; but when my brother died five years ago and left her alone in the world, I adopted her, and have looked upon her ever since as my daughter. She is a sunbeam in my house—sweet, loving, beautiful, a wonderful manager and housekeeper, yet as tender and quiet and gentle as a woman could be. She is my right hand. I do not know what I would do without her. In only one matter has she ever gone against my wishes. Twice my boy has asked her to marry him, for he loves her devotedly, but each time she has refused him. I think that if any one could have drawn him into the right path it would have been she, and that his marriage might have changed his whole life; but now, alas! it is too late—for ever too late!

"Now, Mr. Holmes, you know the people who live under my roof, and I shall continue with my miserable story."

"When we were taking coffee in the drawing-room that night after dinner I told Arthur and Mary my experience and of the precious treasure which we had under our roof, suppressing only the name of my client. Lucy Parr, who had brought in the coffee, had, I am sure, left the room; but I cannot swear that the door was closed. Mary and Arthur were much interested and wished to see the famous coronet, but I thought it better not to disturb it.

"Where have you put it?" asked Arthur.

"In my own bureau."

"Well, I hope to goodness the house won't be burgled during the night," said he.

"It is locked up," I answered.

"Oh, any old key will fit that bureau. When I was a youngster I have opened it myself with the key of the boxroom cupboard."

"He often had a wild way of talking, so that I thought little of what he said. He followed me to my room, however, that night with a very grave face.

"Look here, dad," said he, with his eyes cast down, "can you let me have £200?"

"No, I cannot," I answered sharply. "I have been far too generous with you in money matters."

"You have been very kind," said he;