

Return of Sherlock Holmes

No. IX. THE MYSTERY OF THE THREE STUDENTS

I was in the year '96 that a combination of events, into which I need not enter, caused Mr. Sherlock Holmes and myself to spend some weeks in one of our great university towns, and it was during this time that the small but instructive adventure which I am about to relate befell us. It will be obvious that any details which would help the reader exactly to identify the college or the criminal would be injudicious and offensive. So painful a scandal may well be allowed to die out. With due discretion the incident itself may, however, be described, since it serves to illustrate some of those qualities for which my friend was remarkable. I will endeavor, in my statement, to avoid such terms as would serve to limit the events to any particular place, or give a clue as to the people concerned.

We were residing at the time in furnished lodgings close to a library where Sherlock Holmes was pursuing some laborious researches in early English charters—researches which led to results so striking that they may be the subject of one of my future narratives. Here it was that one evening we received a visit from an acquaintance, Mr. Hilton Soames, tutor and lecturer at the College of St. Luke's. Mr. Soames was a tall, spare man, of a nervous and excitable temperamental. I had never known him to be restless in his manner, but on this particular occasion he was in such a state of uncontrollable agitation that it was clear something very unusual had occurred.

"I trust, Mr. Holmes, that you can spare me a few hours of your valuable time. We have had a case, and I am bent on St. Luke's, and really, but for the happy chance of your being in town, I should have been at a loss what to do. I am very busy just now, and I desire no distractions," my friend answered. "I should much prefer that you called in the aid of the police."

"No, no, my dear sir, such a course is utterly impossible. When once the law is evoked it cannot be stayed again, and this is just one of those cases where, for the credit of the college, it is most essential to avoid scandal. My discretion is as well known as your powers, and you are the one man in the world who can help me. I beg you, Mr. Holmes, to do what you can."

"My friend's temper had not improved since he had been deprived of the congenial surroundings of Baker street. Without his scrap-books, his chemicals, and his homely furniture, he was in an uncomfortable man. He shrugged his shoulders in ungracious acquiescence, while our visitor in hurried words and with much excited gesticulation poured forth his story.

"I must explain to you, Mr. Holmes, that tomorrow is the first day of the examination for the Fortescue Scholarship. I am one of the candidates, and I have a Greek, and the first of the papers consists of a large passage of Greek translation which the candidate has not seen. This passage is printed on the examination paper, and it would naturally be an immense advantage if the candidate could prepare it in advance. For this reason, great care is taken to keep the paper secret."

"Today, about 3 o'clock, the proofs of this paper arrived from the printers. The exercise consists of half a chapter of Thucydides, and I examined it very carefully as the text must be absolutely correct. At 4:30 my task was not yet completed. I had, however, promised to take tea in a friend's room, so I left the proof upon my desk. I was absent rather more than an hour.

"You are aware, Mr. Holmes, that our college doors are double—a green belt on the inside and a red one on the outside. As I approached my outer door, I was amazed to see a key in it. For an instant I imagined that I had left my own there, but on feeling of the door I found that it was all right. The only duplicate which existed, so far as I knew, was that which belonged to my servant, Bannister—a man who has looked after my room for ten years, and whose honesty is absolutely above suspicion. I found that the key was indeed his, that he had entered my room to know if I wanted any more of the very carefully left the key in the door when he came out. His visit to my room must have been within a very few minutes of my leaving it. His forgetfulness about the key would have mattered little upon any other occasion, but on this one day it has produced the most deplorable consequences."

"The moment I looked at my table, I was aware that someone had rummaged among my papers. The proof was in three long slips. I had left them all together. Now, I found that one of these was lying on the floor, one was on the side table near the window, and the third was where I had left it. Holmes stirred for the first time. "The first page of the proof was on the second in the window, the third where you left it," said he. "Exactly, Mr. Holmes. You amaze me. How could you possibly know that?" "Pray continue your very interesting statement."

"For an instant I imagined that Bannister had taken the unaccountable liberty of examining my papers. He denied it, however, with the utmost earnestness, and I am convinced that he was speaking the truth. The alternative was that someone passing had observed the key in the door, had known that I was out, and had entered to look at the papers. A large sum of money is at stake for the scholarship in a very valuable one, and an unscrupulous man might very well run a risk in order to gain an advantage over his fellows.



Mrs. McLaren.

to me that you were in the town, and I came straight round to put the matter into your hands. Do help me, Mr. Holmes. You see my dilemma. Either I must find the man or else the examination must be postponed until fresh papers are prepared, and since this cannot be done without explanation, there will ensue a hideous scandal, which will throw clouds not only on the college, but on the university. Above all things, I desire to settle the matter quietly and discreetly."

"I shall be happy to look into it and give you such advice as I can," said Holmes, rising and putting on his overcoat. "The case is not entirely devoid of interest. Had any one visited you in your room after the papers came to you?"

"Yes, young Daunt Rae, an Indian student, who lives on the same stair, came in to ask me some particulars about the examination."

"For which he was entered?"

"And the papers were on your table?"

"To the best of my belief, they were rolled up."

"But might be recognized as proofs?"

"Possibly."

you that he had been there. You were not aware of any hurrying feet on the stair as you entered the outer door?"

"No, I can't say I was."

"Well, he wrote so furiously that he broke his pencil and had, as you observe, to sharpen it again. This is of interest, Watson. The pencil was not an ordinary one. It was above the usual size, with a soft lead, the outer casing was blue, the maker's name was printed in silver lettering, and the piece remaining is only about an inch and a half long. Look for such a pencil, Mr. Soames, and you have got your man. When he possesses a large and very blunt knife, you have an additional aid."

"Mr. Soames was somewhat overwhelmed by this flood of information. "I can follow the other points," said he, "but really, in this matter of the length—"

Holmes held out a small chip with letters NN and a space of clear wood after them.

"You see?"

"No, I fear that even now—"

"Watson, I have always done you an injustice. There are others. What could this NN be? It is at the end of a word. You are aware that Johann Faber is the most common maker's name. Is it not clear that there is just as much of the pencil left as usually follows the Johann?" He held the small table sideways to the electric light. "I was hoping that if the paper on which he wrote was white, some trace of it might show through on this polished surface. No, I see nothing. I don't think there is anything more to be learned here. Now for the central table. This small pellet is, I presume, the black doughy mass you spoke of. Roughly pyramidal in shape and polished out, I perceive. As you say, there appear to be grains of sawdust in it. Dear me, this is very interesting. And the outer positive tear, I see. It began with a thin scratch and ended in a jagged hole. I am much indebted to you for directing my attention to this case, Mr. Soames. Where does that door lead to?"

"To my bedroom."

"Have you been in it since your adventure?"

"No, I came straight away for you."

"Did you look at these papers on the table?"

"No, sir—certainly not."

"How came you to leave the key in the door?"

"I had the tea tray in my hand. I thought I would come back for the key. Then I forgot."

"Has the outer door a spring lock?"

"No, sir."

"Then it was open all the time?"

"Yes, sir."

"Any one in the room could get out?"

"No, sir."

"When Mr. Soames returned and called for you, you were very much disturbed?"

"Yes, sir. Such a thing has never happened during the many years that I have been here. I nearly fainted, sir."

"So I understand. Where were you when you began to feel bad?"

"Where was I, sir? Why, here, near the door."

"That is singular, because you sat down in that chair over yonder near the corner. Why did you pass these other chairs?"

"I don't know, sir, it didn't matter to me where I sat."

"I really don't think he knew much about it, Mr. Holmes. He was looking very bad—quite ghastly."

"You stayed here when your master left?"

"Only for a minute or so. Then I locked the door and went to my room."

"Whom do you suspect?"

"Oh, I would not venture to say, sir. I don't believe there is any gentleman in this university who is capable of profiting by such an action. No, sir, I'll not believe it."

"Thank you, that will do," said Holmes. "Oh, one more word. You have not mentioned to any of the three gentlemen whom you attend that anything is amiss?"

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It was the Indian, whose dark silhouette appeared suddenly upon his blind. He was pacing swiftly up and down his room.

"I should like to have a peep at each of them," said Holmes. "Is it possible?"

"No difficulty in the world," Soames answered. "This set of rooms is quite the oldest in the college, and it is not unusual for visitors to go over them. Come along, and I will personally conduct you."

"No names, please!" said Holmes, as we knocked at Gilchrist's door. A tall, fax-haired, slim young fellow opened it, and made us welcome when he understood our errand. There were some really curious pieces of mediæval domestic architecture within. Holmes was so charmed with one of them that he insisted on drawing it in his notebook, but his pencil had to borrow one from our host, and finally borrowed a knife to sharpen his own. The same curious accident happened to him in the rooms of the Indian—a silent, little, bookish fellow, who eyed us askance, and was obviously glad when Holmes architectural studies had come to an end. I could not see that in either case Holmes had come upon the clew for which he was searching. Only at this did our visit prove abortive. The outer door would not open to our knock, and nothing more substantial than a torrent of bad language came from behind it. "I don't care who you are. You can go to blazes!" roared the angry voice. "Tomorrow's the exam, and I won't be drawn by anyone."

"A rude fellow," said our guide, flushing with anger as we withdrew down the stairs. "Of course, he did not realize that it was I who was knocking, but none the less his conduct was very unbecoming, and indeed, under the circumstances, rather suspicious."

Holmes' response was a curious one. "Can you tell me his exact height?" he asked.

"Really, Mr. Holmes, I cannot undertake to say. He is taller than the Indian, not so tall as Gilchrist. I suppose five foot six would be about it."

"And now, Mr. Soames, I wish you good-night."

"Our guide, cried aloud in his astonishment and dismay."

"Good good, Mr. Holmes, your are surely not going to leave me in this abrupt fashion! You don't seem to realize the position. Tomorrow is the examination. I must take some definite action to-night. I cannot allow the examination to be held if one of the papers has been tampered with. The situation must be faced."

"You must leave it as it is. I shall drop round early tomorrow morning, and chat the matter over. It is possible that I may be in a position then to indicate some course of action. Meanwhile, you change nothing—noting at all."

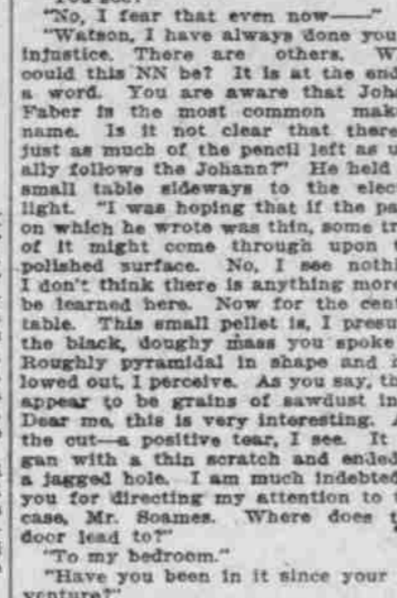


Miles McLaren.

smiled in a singular way as he glanced at our companion. "Well, if there is nothing to be learned here, we had best go inside."

The lecturer unlocked the outer door and ushered us into his room. We stood at the entrance while Holmes made an examination of the carpet.

"I am afraid there are no signs here," said he. "One could hardly hope for any upon so dry a day. Your servant seems to have quite recovered. You left him in a chair, you say. Which chair?"



Daunt Rae.

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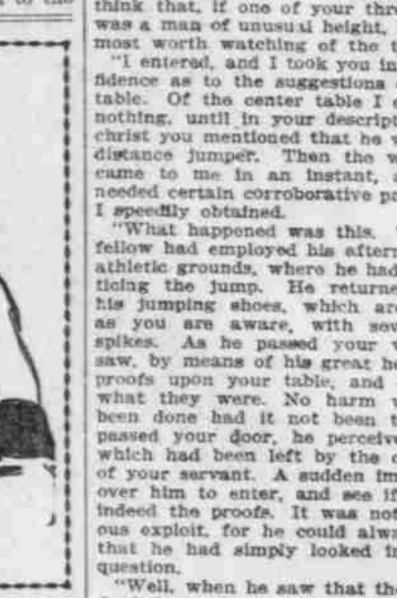
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BANNISTER EXPLAINS.

For a moment, Gilchrist, with upraised hand, tried to control his writhing face.

matter that day, though he sat lost in thought for a long time after our belated dinner. At 8 in the morning, he came into my room just as I finished my toilet.

"Well, Watson," said he, "it is time we went down to St. Luke's. Can you do without breakfast?"

"Soames will be in a dreadful fidget until we are able to tell him something positive."

"Have you anything positive to tell him?"

"I think so."

"You have formed a conclusion?"

"Yes, my dear Watson, I have solved the mystery."

"But what fresh evidence could you have got?"

"Ah! It is not for nothing that I have turned myself out of bed at the unwholesome hour of 6. I have put in two miles' hard work and covered at least five miles' with something to show for it. Look at that!"

He held out his hand. On the palm were three little pyramids, of black, doughy clay.

"Why, Holmes, you had only two yesterday!"

"And one more this morning. It is a fair argument that wherever No. 3 came from is also the source of No. 1 and 2. Eh, Watson? Well, come along and put friend Soames out of his pain."

The unfortunate tutor was certainly in a state of pitiable agitation when we found him in his chambers. In a few hours the examination would commence, and he was still in the dilemma between making the facts public and allowing the culprit to compete for the valuable scholarship. He could hardly stand still, so great was his mental agitation, and he ran toward Holmes with two eager hands outstretched.

"Thank Heaven that you have come! I feel that you had given it up in despair. What am I to do? Shall the examination proceed?"

"Yes, let it proceed, by all means."

"There is the man who set me in the right path," said he.

"Come now, Bannister," said Holmes. "It will be clear to you, from what I have said, that only you could have left the key in your door, since you were left in the room, and must have locked the door when you went out. As to his escaping by that window, it was incredible. Can you not clear up the last point in this mystery, and tell us the reasons for your action?"

"It was simple enough, sir, if you only had known, but with all our cleverness, it was impossible that you could know. It was you, sir, when I was butler to old Sir James Gilchrist, this young gentleman's father. When he was ruined I came to the college as servant, but I never forgot my old employer because he was down in the world. I watched his son all I could for the sake of the old days. Well, sir, when he came into his room one day, when the alarm was given, he was the first thing I saw was Mr. Gilchrist's tan gloves lying in that chair. I knew those gloves well, and understood their meaning. It was impossible that you could know. It was you, sir, when I was butler to old Sir James Gilchrist, this young gentleman's father. When he was ruined I came to the college as servant, but I never forgot my old employer because he was down in the world. I watched his son all I could for the sake of the old days. 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