

The Return of SHERLOCK HOLMES

The Mystery of the Second Stain

I HAD intended "The Adventure of the Abbey Grange" to be the last of those exploits of my friend, 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 definite value to him, but since he has definitely retired from London and betaken himself to study and book-farming on the Sussex Downs, notoriety has become hateful to him, and he has preemptorily requested that his wishes in this matter 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 time came that I am constrained 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. If in telling the story I seem to be somewhat vague in certain details, the public will readily understand that this is an excellent reason for my reticence.

It was, then, in a year, and 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 comfortable room in Baker street. The one, austere, high-nosed, eagle-eyed, and dominant, was none other than the illustrious Lord Bellingham, twice Premier of Britain. The other, dark, clear-cut and elegant, hardly yet of middle-age, and endowed with every beauty of body and of mind, was the Right Honourable 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 fidgeted 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, who 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 easily—by its almost any probability—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 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 despatch-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 despatch-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?"

"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 eleven before we went to our room."

"Then for four hours the despatch-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 trustworthy servants, who 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 despatch-box."

"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?"

"I am convinced that in the case of a secret of this importance it would rise superior to the most intimate domestic ties."

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 anyone 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!"

His handsome face was distorted with a spasm of despair, and his hands tore at his hair. For a moment we caught a glimpse of the natural man, impulsive, ardent, keenly sensitive. The next, the aristocratic mask was replaced, and the gentle voice had returned.

"Besides the members of the Cabinet there are two, or possibly three, department 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," said Mr. Holmes, "that, interesting and indeed essential as these details are, my inquiries must go more to the root of things. What was the letter?"

"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. For a minute or more we all sat in silence. 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 letter—the 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."

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"Mr. Holmes," she said—and her white-gloved hands clasped and unclasped as she spoke—"I will speak frankly to you in the hopes that it may induce you to speak frankly in return. There is complete confidence between my husband and me on all matters save one. That one is politics. On this his lips are sealed. He tells me nothing. Now, I am aware that your course of action is an excellent one. Meanwhile, Hope, we cannot neglect all our other duties on account of this one misfortune. Should there be any fresh developments during the day we shall communicate with you, and you will, no doubt, let us know the results of your own inquiries."

The two statesmen bowed and walked gravely from the room.

When our illustrious visitors had departed, Holmes lit his pipe in silence, and sat for some time lost in the deepest thought. I had opened the morning paper and was immersed in a sensational crime which had occurred in London the night before, when my friend gave an exclamation, sprang to his feet, and laid his pipe down upon the mantelpiece.

"Yes," said he, "there is no better way of approaching it. The situation is desperate, but hopeless. Even now, if we could be sure which of them has taken it, it is just possible that it has not yet passed out of his hands. After all, it is a question of money, with these fellows, and I have the British treasury behind me. If it's on the market I'll buy it—it means another penny on the income-tax. 'Tis conceivable that the fellow might hold it back to see what bids come from this side before he tries his luck on the other. There are only those three capable of playing so bold a game—they are Oberstein, La Rothiere and Edouard Lucas. I will see each of them."

I glanced at my morning paper. It was "Is that Eduardo Lucas, of Godolphin street?"

"Yes."

"You will not see him."

"Why?"

"He was murdered in his house last night."

My friend has so often astonished me in the course of our adventures that it was with a sense of exultation that I realized how completely I had astonished him. He stared in amazement, and then snatched the paper from my hands. This was the paragraph which I had been engaged in reading when he rose from his chair.

MURDER IN WESTMINSTER.

A crime of mysterious character was committed last night at 16, Godolphin Street, one of the old-fashioned and secluded rows of 18th century houses which lie between the river and the Abbey, almost in the shadow of the great Tower of the Houses of Parliament. This small but select mansion had been inhabited for some years by Mr. Eduardo Lucas, well known in society circles both on account of his charming personality and because he has the well-deserved reputation of being one of the best amateur tennis players in the country. Mr. Lucas is an unmarried man, 34 years of age, and of the tall, dark, and athletic build of an athlete. He is a keen sportsman, and his house is a favorite resort for tennis players and athletes. The former retires early and sleeps at the top of the house. The valet was out for the evening. A friend of Mr. Lucas had been called upon to dine at his house. From 10 o'clock onward Mr. Lucas had the house to himself. What occurred during that time is not known, but it is believed that twelve Police Constables, Barrett, passing along Godolphin Street, observed a light in the front room, and, being alerted, knocked, but received no answer. Perceiving a light in the front room, he advanced to the door and again knocked, but without reply. He then opened the door and entered. The room was in a state of wild disorder, the furniture being all on one side of the room, and a man lay on the floor in the center. Beside this chair, and still grasping one of its legs, lay the unfortunate victim. He had been stabbed in the chest and the heart and must have died instantly. The knife with which the crime had been committed was found in a small room, and was a curved Indian dagger, plucked down from a trophy of Oriental arms which adorned one of the walls. It was a well-known fact that there had been no attempt to remove the valuable contents of the room. Mr. Eduardo Lucas was a well-known and popular man, his violent and mysterious fate will arouse painful interest and intense sympathy in a wide-spread circle of friends.

"Well, Watson, what do you make of this?" asked Holmes, after a long pause.

"It is an amazing coincidence."

"A coincidence! Here is one of the three men whom we had named as possible actors in this drama, and he meets a violent death during the very hours when we know that that drama was being enacted. The odds are enormous against its being coincidence. No friend could express them. No, my dear Watson, the two events are connected—must be connected. It is for us to find the connection."

But now the official police must know all.

"Not at all. They know all they see at Godolphin street. They know—and shall know—nothing of Whitehall Terrace. Only we know of both events, and can trace the relation between them. There is one obvious point which would, in any case, have turned my suspicions against Lucas. Godolphin street, Westminster, is only a few minutes' walk from Whitehall Terrace. The other secret agents whom we have named live in the extreme West End. It was easier, therefore, for Lucas than for the others to establish a connection or receive a message from the European Secretary's household—a message, and yet where events are compressed into a few hours it may prove essential. Hello! what have we here?"

Mrs. Hudson had appeared with a lady's card upon her salver. Holmes glanced at it, raised his eyebrows, and handed it over to me.

"Ask Lady Hilda Trelawney Hope, if she will be kind enough to step up," said he.

A moment later our modest apartment, already so distinguished that morning, was further honored by the entrance of the most lovely woman in London. I had often heard of the beauty of the youngest daughter of the Duke of Beismaster, but no description of it, and no contemplation of colorless photographs, had prepared me for the subtle, delicate charm and the beautiful coloring of this exquisite head. And yet, as we saw it that Autumn morning, it was not its beauty which would be the first thing to impress the observer. The cheek was lovely but it was pale with emotion, the eyes were bright, but it was the brightness of fever, the sensitive mouth was tight and drawn in an effort after self-command. Terror—not beauty—was what sprang first to the eye as our fair visitor stood framed for an instant in the open door.

"Has my husband been here, Mr. Holmes?"

"Yes, madam, he has been here."

"Mr. Holmes, I implore you not to tell him that I came here," said she, coldly, and motioned the lady to a chair.

"Your ladyship places me in a very delicate position. I beg that you will sit down and tell me what you desire, but I fear that I cannot make any unconditional promise."

"She swept across the room and seated herself with her back to the window. It was a quietly premeditated, graceful and intensely womanly."

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