

THE ADVENTURE OF THE BLUE WINGS

BY CHARLES AUGUSTUS MILVERTON.

BY SIR A. CONAN DOYLE.

It is years since the incidents of which I speak took place, and yet it is with diffidence that I allude to them. For a long time, even with the utmost discretion and reticence, it would have been impossible to make the facts public, but now the principal person concerned is beyond the reach of human law, and with due suppression of mystery may be told in such fashion as to injure no one. It records an absolutely unique experience in the career both of Sherlock Holmes and of myself. The reader will excuse me if I conceal the date or any other fact by which he might trace the actual occurrence.

We had been out for one of our evening rambles, Holmes and I, and had returned about 8 o'clock on a cold, frosty, winter's evening. As Holmes turned up the lamp he lit upon a card on the table. He glanced at it and then, with an ejaculation of surprise, threw it on the floor. I picked it up and read:

"Charles Augustus Milverton, Appleton Tower, Hampstead, Agent."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"The worst man in London," Holmes answered, as he sat down and stretched his legs before the fire. "Is anything on the back of the card?"

"I turned it over."

"Will call at 6:30—C. A. M.," I read.

"Hum! He's about due. Do you feel a creeping, shivering sensation, Watson, when you stand before the serpents in the zoo, and see the slithering, gliding, venomous creatures, with their deadly eyes and poisonous fangs?"

"Well, that's how Milverton impresses me. I've had to do with 50 murderers in my career, but the worst of them never gave me the repulsion which I have for this fellow. And yet I can't get out of doing business with him—indeed, he is here at my invitation."

"But who is he?"

"I'll tell you, Watson. He is the king of all the blackmailers. Heaven help the man, and still more the woman, whose secret and reputation come into the power of Milverton! With a smiling face and a heart of marble, he will squeeze and squeeze until he has drained them dry. The fellow is a genius in his way, and would have made his mark in some more savory trade. His method is as follows: He allows it to be known that he is prepared to pay very high sums for letters which compromise people of wealth and position. He receives these wares not only from treacherous valets or maids, but frequently from genteel ruffians, who have gained the confidence and affection of trusting women. He deals with no niggard hand. I happen to remember that he paid 700 pounds to a footman for a note two lines in length, and that the ruin of a noble family was the result. Everything which is in the market goes to Milverton, and there are hundreds in this great city who turn white at his name. No one knows where his grip may fall, for he is far too rich and far too cunning to work from hand to mouth. He will hold a card back for years in order to play it at the moment when the stake is worth winning. I have said that he is the worst man in London, and I would ask you how could one compare the ruffian, who has not blood on his hands, with this man, who methodically and at his leisure tortures the souls and wrings the nerves in order to add to his already swollen money bags?"

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"And why is he here?"

"Because an impudently client has placed her pitiful case in my hands. It is Lady Eva Blackwell, the most beautiful debutante of last season. She is to be married to a young man of the Earl of Dovercourt. This friend has several imprudent letters—imprudent, Watson, nothing worse—which were written to an acquaintance in the country. They would suffice to break off the match. Milverton will send the letters to the Earl unless a large sum of money is paid him. He has been commissioned to meet him and to make the best terms I can."

"At that instant there was a clatter and a rattle in the street below. Looking down I saw a stately carriage and pair, the brilliant lamps gleaming on the glossy harnesses of the noble chestnuts. A footman opened the door, and a small, dark man in a shaggy astrakhan overcoat descended. A minute later he was in the room."

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"Dr. Watson is my friend and partner."

"Very good, Mr. Holmes. It is only in your client's interests that I protested. The matter is so very delicate."

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"Then we can proceed to business. You say that you are acting for Lady Eva. Has she empowered you to accept my terms?"

"What are your terms?"

"Seven thousand pounds."

"And the alternative?"

"My dear sir, it is painful for me to discuss it, but if the money is not paid on the 14th, there certainly will be no marriage on the 18th." His insufferable smile was more complacent than ever.

Holmes thought for a little.

"You appear to me," he said, at last, "to be taking matters too much for granted. I am, of course, familiar with the contents of these letters. My client will certainly do what I may advise. I shall counsel her to tell her future husband the whole story, and to trust to his generosity."

Milverton chuckled.

"You evidently do not know the Earl," said he.

From the baffled look upon Holmes' face, I could see clearly that he did.

"What harm is there in the letters?" he asked.

"They are sprightly—very sprightly," Milverton answered. "The lady was a charming correspondent. But I can assure you that the Earl of Dovercourt would fall to appreciate them. However, since you think otherwise, we will let it rest at that. It is purely a matter of business. If you think that it is in the best interests of your client that these letters should be placed in the hands of the Earl, then you would indeed be foolish to pay so large a sum of money to regain them."

He rose and seized his astrakhan coat. Holmes was grey with anger and mortification.

"Wait a little," he said. "You go too fast. We should certainly make every effort to avoid scandal in so delicate a matter."

Milverton relaxed into his chair.

"I was sure that you would see it in that light," he purred.

"At the same time," Holmes continued, "I should like to see the letters."

"I have them here," Milverton said, and he produced a small portfolio from his pocket. "I have been expecting you to do something original. This has been done so often, and what good has ever come from it? I assure you that I am armed to the teeth, and I am perfectly prepared to use my weapons, knowing that the law will support me. Besides, your supposition that I would bring the letters here in a notebook is entirely mistaken. I would do nothing so foolish. And now, gentlemen, I have one or two little interviews this evening, and it is a long drive to Hampstead. He stepped forward, took up his coat, laid his hand on his revolver, and turned to the door. He picked up a chair, but Holmes shook his head, and I laid it down again. With a bow, a smile, and a twinkle, Milverton was out of the room, and a few moments after we heard the slam of the carriage door and the rattle of the wheels as he drove away.

Holmes sat motionless by the fire, his hands buried deep in his trouser pockets, his chin sunk upon his breast. His eyes fixed upon the glowing embers. For half an hour he was silent and still. Then, with the gesture of a man who has taken his decision, he sprang to his feet and passed into his bedroom. A little later a rakish young workman, with a goatee beard and a swagger, lit his clay pipe at the lamp before descending into the street. "I'll be back some time, Watson," said he, and vanished into the night. I understood that he had opened his campaign against Charles Augustus Milverton, but I little dreamed the strange shape which that campaign was destined to take.

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"Because an impudently client has placed her pitiful case in my hands. It is Lady Eva Blackwell, the most beautiful debutante of last season. She is to be married to a young man of the Earl of Dovercourt. This friend has several imprudent letters—imprudent, Watson, nothing worse—which were written to an acquaintance in the country. They would suffice to break off the match. Milverton will send the letters to the Earl unless a large sum of money is paid him. He has been commissioned to meet him and to make the best terms I can."

"At that instant there was a clatter and a rattle in the street below. Looking down I saw a stately carriage and pair, the brilliant lamps gleaming on the glossy harnesses of the noble chestnuts. A footman opened the door, and a small, dark man in a shaggy astrakhan overcoat descended. A minute later he was in the room."

Charles Augustus Milverton was a man of 50, with a large, intellectual head, a round, plump, hairless face, a perpetual frozen smile, and two keen gray eyes, which gleamed brightly from behind broad, gold-rimmed spectacles. There was something of Mr. Pickwick's benevolence in his appearance, marred only by the insincerity of the fixed smile and the hard glitter of those restless and penetrating eyes. His voice was as smooth and suave as his countenance, as he advanced with a plump little hand extended, murmuring his regret for having missed us at his first visit. Holmes disregarded the outstretched hand and looked at him with a face of granite. Milverton's smile broadened, he shrugged his shoulders, removed his overcoat, folded it with great deliberation over the back of a chair and then took a wave in my direction. "Is it discreet?"

"Dr. Watson is my friend and partner."

"Very good, Mr. Holmes. It is only in your client's interests that I protested. The matter is so very delicate."

"Dr. Watson has already heard of it."

"Then we can proceed to business. You say that you are acting for Lady Eva. Has she empowered you to accept my terms?"

"What are your terms?"

"Seven thousand pounds."

"And the alternative?"

"My dear sir, it is painful for me to discuss it, but if the money is not paid on the 14th, there certainly will be no marriage on the 18th." His insufferable smile was more complacent than ever.

Holmes thought for a little.

"You appear to me," he said, at last, "to be taking matters too much for granted. I am, of course, familiar with the contents of these letters. My client will certainly do what I may advise. I shall counsel her to tell her future husband the whole story, and to trust to his generosity."

Milverton chuckled.

"You evidently do not know the Earl," said he.

From the baffled look upon Holmes' face, I could see clearly that he did.

"What harm is there in the letters?" he asked.

"They are sprightly—very sprightly," Milverton answered. "The lady was a charming correspondent. But I can assure you that the Earl of Dovercourt would fall to appreciate them. However, since you think otherwise, we will let it rest at that. It is purely a matter of business. If you think that it is in the best interests of your client that these letters should be placed in the hands of the Earl, then you would indeed be foolish to pay so large a sum of money to regain them."

He rose and seized his astrakhan coat. Holmes was grey with anger and mortification.

"Wait a little," he said. "You go too fast. We should certainly make every effort to avoid scandal in so delicate a matter."

Milverton relaxed into his chair.

"I was sure that you would see it in that light," he purred.

"At the same time," Holmes continued, "I should like to see the letters."

"I have them here," Milverton said, and he produced a small portfolio from his pocket. "I have been expecting you to do something original. This has been done so often, and what good has ever come from it? I assure you that I am armed to the teeth, and I am perfectly prepared to use my weapons, knowing that the law will support me. Besides, your supposition that I would bring the letters here in a notebook is entirely mistaken. I would do nothing so foolish. And now, gentlemen, I have one or two little interviews this evening, and it is a long drive to Hampstead. He stepped forward, took up his coat, laid his hand on his revolver, and turned to the door. He picked up a chair, but Holmes shook his head, and I laid