

The Adventure of the Dying Detective

By Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Copyright 1913, by A. Conan Doyle

(CONCLUDED)

(Continued from last Sunday.)

"How is Mr. Holmes, sir?" he asked.

It was an old acquaintance, Inspector Morton, of Scotland Yard, dressed in unofficial tweeds.

"He is very ill," I answered.

He looked at me in a most singular fashion. Had it not been too tedious I could have imagined that the gleam of the flashlight showed exultation in his face.

"I heard some rumor of it," said he. "The cab had driven up and I left him. Lower Burke street proved to be a line of the houses lying in the vague borderland between Notting Hill and Kensington. The particular one at which my cabman pulled up had an air of snug and demure respectability in its old-fashioned iron railings, its massive folding door and its shining brass-work. All was in keeping with a solem-butler who appeared in the pink radiance of a tinted electric light behind him."

"Yes, Mr. Culverton Smith is in. Dr. Watson! Very good, sir. I will take up your card."

My humble name and title did not appear to impress Mr. Culverton Smith. Through the half-open door I heard a high, petulant, penetrating voice.

"Who is this person? What does he want? Dear me, Staples, how often have I said that I am not to be disturbed in my hours of study?"

There came a gentle flow of soothing explanation from the butler.

"Well, I won't see him, Staples. I can't have my work interrupted like this. I am not at home. Say so. Tell him to come in the morning if he really must see me."

Again the gentle murmur.

"Well, well, give him that message. He can come in the morning or he can stay away. My work must not be hindered."

I thought of Holmes tossing upon his bed of sickness, and counting the minutes, perhaps, until I should bring help to him. It was not a time to stand upon ceremony. His life depended upon my promptness. Before the apologetic butler had delivered his message I had pushed past him and was in the room.

With a shrill cry of anger a man rose from a reclining chair besides the fire. I saw a great yellow face, coarse-grained and greasy, with heavy double chin and two sullen, menacing gray eyes which glared at me from under tufted and sandy brows. A high bald head had a small velvet smoking cap polished coquettishly upon one side of its pink curve. The skull was of enormous capacity, and yet, as I looked down, I saw to my amazement that the figure of the man was small and frail, twisted in the shoulders and back like one who had suffered from rickets in his childhood.

"What's this?" he cried in a high, screaming voice. "What is the meaning of this intrusion? Didn't I send you word that I would see you tomorrow morning?"

"I am sorry," said I, "but the matter cannot be delayed. Mr. Sherlock Holmes—"

The mention of my friend's name had an extraordinary effect upon the little man. The look of anger passed in an instant from his face. His features became tense and alert.

"Have you come from Holmes?" he asked.

"I have just left him."

"What about Holmes? How is he?"

"He is desperately ill. That is why I have come."

The man motioned me to a chair and turned to resume his own. As he did I caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror over the mantelpiece. I could have sworn that it was set in a malicious and abominable smile. Yet I persuaded myself that it must have been some nervous contraction which I had surprised, for he turned to me in an instant later with genuine concern upon his features.

"I am sorry to hear this," said he. "I only know Mr. Holmes through some business dealings which we have had, but I have every respect for his talents and his character. He is an amateur of crime as I am of disease. For the villain of my dreams I could have any of my prisoners," he continued, pointing to a row of bottles and jars



"And yet, you see, I am here. Coals of fire, Holmes—coals of fire!"

"It is very good of you—very good of you. I appreciate your special knowledge."

"Our visitor anguished."

"You do. You are fortunately the

only man in London who does. Do you know what is the matter with you?"

"The same," said Holmes.

"Ah! You recognize the symptoms. Only too well."

"Well, I shouldn't be surprised if it were the same. A bad outlook for you if it is. Poor Victor was a dead man on the fourth day—a strong, hearty young fellow. It was certainly, as you said, very surprising that he should

have contracted an out-of-the-way Asiatic disease in the heart of London—a disease, too, of which I had made such a very special study, singular coincidence. Holmes. Very surprising to you to notice it, but rather uncharitable to suggest that it was cause and effect."

"I knew that you did it."

"Oh, you did, did you? Well, you couldn't prove it, anyhow. But what do you think of yourself spreading reports about me like that and then crawling to me for help the moment you are in trouble? What sort of a game is that—eh?"

I heard the rasping, labored breathing of the sick man. "Give me the water!" he gasped.

"You're precious near your end, my friend, but I don't want you to go. I'll give you a word with you. That's why I give you water. There, don't stop it about! That's right. Can you understand what I say?"

Holmes gasped.

"Do what you can for me. Let bygones be bygones," he whispered. "I'll put the words out of my head—I swear I will. Only cure me and I'll forget it."

"Forget what?"

"Well, about Victor Savage's death. You are good as admitted just now that you had done it. I'll forget it."

"You can forget it or remember it, just as you like. I don't see you in the witness box. Quite another shaped box, my good Holmes. I assure you, it matters not to me that you should know how my nephew died. It's not him we are talking about. It's you."

"Yes, yes."

"The fellow who came for me—I've forgotten his name—said that you contracted it down in the East End among the sailors."

"I could only account for it so."

"You are proud of your brains, Holmes, are you not? Think yourself smart, don't you? You came across some one who was smarter than this time. Now cast your mind back, Holmes. Can you think of no other way you could have got this thing?"

"I can't think. My mind is gone. For heaven's sake help me!"

"Yes, I will help you. I'll help you to understand just where you are and how you got there. I'd like you to know before you die."

"Give me something to ease my pain."

"Painful, is it? Yes, the coals used to do some squawking toward the end. Takes you as a cramp, I fancy."

"Yes, yes; it is a cramp."

"Well, you can hear what I say, anyhow. Listen now. Can you remember any unusual incident in your life just about the time your symptoms began?"

"No, no; nothing."

"I am too ill to think."

"Well, then, I'll help you. Did anything come by post?"

"By post?"

"A box by chance?"

"I'm fainting—I'm gone!"

"Listen, Holmes! There was a sound as if he was shaking the dying man, and it was all I could do to hold myself quiet in my hiding place. You must hear me. You shall hear me. Do you remember a box—an ivory box? It came on Wednesday. You opened it—do you remember?"

"Yes, yes. I opened it. There was a sharp spring inside it. Some joke."

"It was no joke, as you would find to your cost. You feel, you would have it as you have got it. Who asked you to cross my path? If you had left me alone I would not have hurt you."

"I remember," Holmes gasped. "The spring? It drew blood. This box—this on the table."

"The very one, by George! And it may as well leave the room in my heart goes with you last shred of evidence. But you have the truth now, Holmes, and you can die with the knowledge that I killed you. You knew too much of the fate of Victor Savage, so I have sent you to share it. I will sit here and I will watch you die."

Holmes' voice had sunk to an almost inaudible whisper.

"What is that?" said Smith. "Turn up the gas? Ah, the shadows begin to fall, do they? Yes, I will turn it up. I'll get it better. He crossed the room and the light suddenly brightened. "Is there any other little service that I can do you, my friend?"

"I nearly called out in my joy and amazement. He was speaking in his natural voice—a little weak, perhaps, but the very voice I knew. There was

THE LAW by Rodd A. Munnay.

SMITH calculated that it would take the messenger three minutes to walk from the broker's office to the bronze portals of the big International Bank. He not only calculated, but proved it. He never took a thing for granted. For six successive days he watched beside the broker's door, and when the messenger appeared followed him to the bank. He found that the time fluctuated between 2 minutes 30 seconds and 3 minutes 10 seconds.

Smith calculated and proved, too, that at a certain time each afternoon a slender, well-dressed man drove a big machine up to the curb before the bank, left it alone and returned in five minutes. This was to be the second link in the chain. Smith recognized the motor to be a silent-running, 60-horsepower Durrant. He spent a week at an up-town garage, where he represented himself as a possible purchaser, learning to drive that certain make. Not the least encouraging feature about this car was the fact that it did not need cranking. A pressure of a foot-lever started the engine the obdurate. Nothing could be better.

Smith took several days tracing out the most feasible route from the big bank, across the city and to the draw-bridge that spanned the river, three miles away. He argued that it was advisable to traverse the wider, more open streets. After weighing a number of courses he decided upon one of them.

From close observation he learned that a certain freight steamer left the foot of Courtly street punctually at 5:40 each day, passing through the draw at exactly 5:55. The bridge was closed to traffic two minutes before that time. Smith timed it every day

for a week, and the minutes did not perceptibly vary. That was the third link in the chain that he was waiting for. The last link but one. The last one he discovered, strangely enough—for Smith never relied upon chance—by accident.

One evening, returning from his observations at the bridge, he stumbled heavily over the projecting cover of a coal-chute. As his heel caught, the idea was born. For the first time in his career fate took a hand in his system.

There being still a bit of daylight left, Smith did not stop for an immediate inspection, but later he came back and assured himself that the metal cover was free from the chain. The house into whose basement the chute led was gloomily boarded over at the doors and windows. The familiar blue sign of a detective agency warned one to keep away. It gave Smith no concern. The last link of a chain was now complete.

Smith decided upon Friday as the day to begin his operations. It happened to be a cloudy, rain-threatening sort of day—streets not crowded and umbrellas in evidence.

At a quarter to five Smith stationed himself before the broker's office. Most offices closed long before that time, but this—owing, perhaps, to some special connection with business interests in the Far West—was an exception. At the right time the messenger came out and started briskly up the street, Smith followed.

At the side door entrance to the bank the big, panting Durrant swung up and halted. The slender man leaped out and disappeared.

When the messenger reached the

precise spot mentally decided upon by Smith, the latter leaned over and tapped the fellow's arm. Instinctively the messenger whirled, clapping a quick hand to his breast pocket. This move was what Smith had been waiting for. He caught the other's arm, twisted it sharply, and then, with a lightning-like motion, dipped his fingers into the messenger's pocket. The eager fingers found and gripped the wallet. At the same time Smith's foot shot out, and the messenger, yelling loudly, toppled to the walk. Luckily the street was nearly deserted. As the struggling man, somewhat dazed, reached for his gun, Smith leaped across and into the big machine. The moment his foot touched the right lever the engine throbbled into life. Smith geared for another lever, and the gears meshed. His fingers settled about the steering wheel and the powerful car swung out upon its course.

A shot rang out, echoing hollowly in the narrow street, and a red furrow plowed itself across Smith's wrist. It was nothing more than a scratch. It startled him for the moment; then he was around the first corner. Above the messenger's screaming he heard the shrill, wavering police whistle.

He kept far ahead of all pursuit, his steady eyes now on the road before him, now on the indicator at his feet. Comparing it with the clock beside the speeding dial, he knew exactly how fast he must go in order to make the bridge at 5:55.

The wide street ascended slightly to the bridge approach, and even as he swung into it the warning wailed. A bell rang and the gates closed together across the street. Beyond them, in the dim twilight, hung steel bands that spanned the water parted and



leaped ahead, as if propelled by some gigantic but invisible boot. At the same moment Smith dropped to the asphalt and darted behind the low parapet.

There came a shout from the watchman, then a snapping of gates. Peering cautiously over the low cement wall, favored by the deep shadows, Smith watched the lurching Durrant splinter the gates as if they were reeds, and as he fell out into space. For an instant the big car appeared to hang motionless; then it turned over and over, grotesquely, and struck the water. The sound of the splash was distinct even from where he crouched.

A mad gallop of hoofs came along the street, and two mounted policemen were up. There was an exchange of frantic exclamations between them and the shouting watchman. Somewhere, from below, a tug was screaming.

Mentally Smith checked off this third move, and proceeded to steal warily around the low parapet. He gained the lower part and hurried down the walk. Here the street lights shone faintly, and it was almost as dark as night.

When the nails of his heel hit upon the chute cover in front of the unoccupied house he stopped, flashed a quick glance up and down the street, and then lifted the iron plate to one side. It took an effort to wriggle through the hole and to work the cover back into place again; but he accomplished it. Previous experiences had served to ease the task not a little, and in five minutes he had hurried along the chute, feet first, and dropped into the bin to which it led.

Everything had happened precisely as he had planned. The car was in the river. The watchman, who had seen it pass, would swear that it was occupied. Systematic Smith, in his haste to elude pursuit, had made for the draw-bridge. Upon arriving there, he found it open. In his consequent perturbation the car became unmanageable, crashed through the gates and went headlong into the river. Death had been the final reward for his hare-brained venture.

Smith extracted from his pocket a stub of a candle, lighted it, and placed it upon a projecting beam. Then he removed the long, yellow wallet from his coat and opened it with a calmness that resulted from being certain of its contents. He drew out the thick package of notes and ruffled them through his fingers. He returned the wallet to his pocket and buttoned his coat.

He put out his hand to extinguish the candle. He did not accomplish this purpose. The muscles of his arm suddenly became rigid; his pulse beat in his ears, like so many minute drums. A familiar face looked upon him from the dim circle of yellow light—Murphy's. "Hello, Smith!" the plain dealer man spoke quietly. "Thought maybe I'd find you here. Saw you stumble over that chute-cover the other day and then come back to it later on."

Smith breathed deep. His stumbling upon the iron cover had been purely accidental—the first time in his career that chance had ever played a hand in his method. What a fool he had been to wild it into his carefully constructed system. That one walk along with me, had jammed the cogs. The machine was useless.

"Anything important on for the next hour or so?" Murphy resumed quietly.

"Nothing at all," Smith answered, from force of habit, knowing that it was useless to attempt resistance.

"Suppose you walk along with me to the station-house? Won't take you long—just the regular monthly clean-up. Don't object to the usual search, do you?"

(Copyright by the Frank A. Munnay Co.)