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# THE RETURN OF SHERLOCK HOLMES...

BY A. CONAN DOYLE

"I am the wife of Sir Eustace Brackenstall. I have been married about a year. I suppose there is no use of my attempting to conceal that our marriage has not been a happy one. I fear that all our neighbors would tell you that, even if I were to attempt to deny it. Perhaps the fault may be partly mine. I was brought up in the free, less conventional atmosphere of South Australia, and this English life, with its proprieties and its prudences, is not congenial to me. But the main reason lies in the one fact which is notorious to every one, and that is that Sir Eustace was a confirmed drunkard. To be with such a man for an hour is to be a pleasure. Can you imagine what it means for a sensitive and high-spirited woman to be tied to him for day and night? It is a sacrifice, a crime, a blinding. I say that those monstrous laws of yours will bring a curse upon the land. God will not let such wickedness endure!" For an instant she sat up, her cheeks flushed and her eyes blazing from under the terrible mask upon her brow. Then the strong, soothing hand of the austere maid drew her head down. To the cynic, and the wild merriment died away into a passionate sobbing. At last she continued:

"I will tell you about last night. You are aware, perhaps, that in this house all the servants sleep in the modern wing. This central block is made up of the dwelling rooms, with the kitchen behind and our bedroom above. My maid, Theresa, sleeps alone in the room. There is no one else, and no sound could alarm those who are in the farther wing. This must have been well known to the robbers, for they would not have acted as they did."

"Sir Eustace retired about half past ten. The servants had already gone to their quarters. Only my maid was up, and she had remained in her room at the top of the house until I needed her services. I sat until after 11 in this room, absorbed in a book; then I walked round to see that all was right before I went upstairs. I went upstairs, I explained, Sir Eustace was not always to be trusted. I went into the kitchen, the butler's pantry, the gun room, the billiard room, the drawing room, and finally the dining room. As I approached the window, which is covered with thick curtains, I suddenly felt the wind blow upon my face and realized that it was open. I flung the curtains aside and found myself face to face with a broad-shouldered, elderly man, who had just stepped into the room. The window is a long French one, which really forms a door leading to the lawn. I held my bedroom candle lit in my hand, and by its light behind the first man I saw two others, who were in the act of entering. I stopped back, but the fellow was on me in an instant. He caught me first by the wrist and then by the throat. I opened my mouth to scream, but he struck me a savage blow with his fist over the eye and felled me to the ground. I must have been unconscious for a few minutes, for when I came to myself I found that they had torn down the bell rope and had secured me tightly to the oaken chair which stands at the head of the dining table. I was so firmly bound that I could not move, and a banked fire of the grate behind me prevented me from uttering a sound. It was at this instant that my unfortunate husband entered the room. He had evidently heard some suspicious sounds, and he came prepared for such a scene as he found. He was dressed in his shirt and trousers, with his favorite blackthorn cudgel in his hand. He rushed at the burglars, but another—it was an elderly man—stopped, picked the poker out of the grate and struck him a horrible blow as he passed. He fell, with a groan, and never moved again."

"I fainted once more, but again it could only have been for a very few minutes during which I was insensible. When I opened my eyes I found that they had collected the silver from the sideboard, and they had drawn a bottle of wine which stood there. Each of them had a glass in his hand. I have already told you, have I not, that one was elderly, with a beard, and the others young, hairless lads? They might have been a father with his two sons. They talked together in whispers. Then they came over and made sure that I was securely bound. Finally they withdrew, closing the window after them. It was quite a quarter of an hour before I got my mouth open. When I did so my screams brought the maid to my assistance. The other servants were soon alarmed, and we sent for the local police, who instantly communicated with London. That is really all that I can tell you, gentlemen, and I trust that it will not be necessary for me to go over so painful a story again."

"Any questions, Mr. Holmes?" asked Hopkins.

"I will not impose any further tax upon Lady Brackenstall's patience and time," said Holmes. "Before I go into the dining room I should like to hear your experience." He looked at the maid.

"I saw the men before ever they came into the house," said she. "As I sat by my bedroom window I saw three men in the moonlight going to the lodge gate yonder, but I thought nothing of it at the time. It was more than an hour after that I heard my mistress scream, and down I ran to find her, poor lamb, just as she says, and him on the floor, with his blood and brains over the room. It was enough to drive a woman out of her wits, did there and her very dress spotted with him; but she never wanted courage, did Miss Mary Fraser of Adelaide, and Lady Brackenstall of Abbey Grange haven't learned new ways. You've questioned her long enough, you gentlemen, and now she is coming to her own room just with her old Theresa to get the rest that she badly needs."

With a motherly tenderness the gaunt woman put her arm round her mistress and led her from the room. "She has been with her all her life," said Hopkins. "Nursed her as a baby and came with her to England when they first left Australia eighteen months ago. Theresa Wright is her name, and the kind of maid you don't pick up nowadays. This way, Mr. Holmes, if you please."

The keen interest had passed out of Holmes' expressive face, and I knew that with the mystery all the charm of the case had departed. There still remained an arrest to be effected, but what were these commonplace rogues that he should shed his hands upon them? An abstruse and learned specialist who finds that he has been called in for a case of measles would experience something of the annoyance which I read in my friend's eyes. Yet the scene in the dining room of the Abbey Grange was sufficiently strange to arrest his attention and to recall his waning interest.

It was a very large and high chamber, with carved oak ceiling, oaken paneling and a fine array of deer's heads and ancient weapons around the walls. At the farther end from the door was a large French window, which we had heard. Three smaller windows on the right hand side filled the apartment with cold winter sunshine. On the left was a large, deep fireplace, with a massive, overhanging oak mantelpiece. Beside the fireplace was a heavy oaken chair with arms

and crossbars at the bottom. In and out through the open woodwork was woven a crimson cord, which was secured at each side to the crosspiece below. In releasing the lady the cord had been slipped off her, but the knots with which it had been secured still remained. These details only struck our attention afterward, for our thoughts were entirely absorbed by the terrible object which lay upon the tiger skin hearth rug in front of the fire.

It was the body of a tall, well-made man about forty years of age. He lay upon his back, his face upturned, with his white teeth grinning through his short black beard. His two clenched hands were raised above his head, and a heavy blackthorn stick lay across them. His dark, handsome, aquiline features were convulsed into a spasm of vindictive hatred, which had set his dead face in a terribly fiendish expression. He had evidently been in his bed when the alarm had broken out, for he wore a foppish, embroidered nightshirt, and his bare feet projected from his trousers. His head was horribly injured, and the whole room bore witness to the savage ferocity of the blow which had struck him down. Beside him lay the heavy poker, bent into a curve by the concussion. Holmes examined both it and the insupportable wreck which it had wrought.

"He must be a powerful man, this elder Randall," he remarked.

"Yes," said Hopkins. "I have some recollection of the fellow, and he is a rough customer."

"You should have no difficulty in getting him," I said.

"Not the slightest. We have been on the lookout for him, and there was some idea that he had got away to America. Now that we know that the gang are here I don't see how they can escape. We have the news at every seaport already, and a reward will be offered before evening. What beats me is how they could have done so much a thing knowing that the lady could describe them and that we could not fail to recognize the description."

"Exactly. One would have expected that they would have silenced Lady Brackenstall as well."

"They may not have realized," I suggested, "that she had recovered from her faint."

"That is likely enough. If she seemed to be senseless they would not take her life. What about this poor fellow, Hopkins? I seem to have heard some queer stories about him."

"Not a good-hearted man when he was sober, but a perfect fiend when he was drunk, or rather when he was half drunk, for he seldom really went the whole way. The devil seemed to be in him at such times, and he was capable of anything. From what I hear, in spite of all his wealth and his title he was very nearly come our way once or twice. There was a scandal about his drenching a dog with petroleum and setting it on fire—her ladyship's dog, to make the matter worse—and that was only hushed up with difficulty. Then, he threw a deceiver at that maid, Theresa Wright; there was trouble about that. On the whole, and between ourselves, it will be a brighter house without him. What are you looking at now?"

Holmes was down on his knees examining with great attention the knots upon the red cord with which the lady had been secured. Then he carefully scrutinized the broken and frayed end where it had snapped off when the burglar had dragged it down.

"How did the burglar know no one in the kitchen must have rung loudly," he remarked.

"No one could hear it. The kitchen stands right at the back of the house."

"How did the burglar know no one would hear it? How dared he pull at a bell rope in that reckless fashion?"

"Exactly, Mr. Holmes, exactly. You put the very question which I have asked myself again and again. There can be no doubt that this fellow must have known the house and its habits. He must have perfectly understood that the servants would all be in bed at that comparatively early hour and that no one could possibly hear a bell ring in the kitchen. Therefore he must have been in close league with one of the servants. Surely that is evident. But there are eight servants, and all of good character."

"Other things being equal," said Holmes, "one would suspect the one at whose head the master threw a decenter. And yet that would involve truckery toward the mistress to whom this woman seems devoted. Well, well, the point is a minor one, and when you have Randall you will probably find no difficulty in securing the accomplice. The lady's story certainly seems to be corroborated, if it needed corroboration, by every detail which we see before us."

He walked to the French window and threw it open. "There are no signs here, but the ground is iron hard, and one would not expect them. I see that these candles in the mantelpiece have been lighted."

"Yes, it was by their light and that of the lady's bedroom candle that the burglars saw their way about."

"And what did they take?"

"Well, they did not take much—only half a dozen articles of plate off the sideboard. Lady Brackenstall thinks that they were themselves so disturbed by the death of Sir Eustace that they did not ransack the house, as they would otherwise have done."

"No doubt that is true, and yet they drank some wine, I understand."

"To steady their nerves."

"Exactly. These three glasses upon the sideboard have been untouched, I suppose."

"Yes, and the bottle stands as they left it."

"Let us look at it. Hello, hello! What is this?"

The three glasses were grouped together, all of them tinged with wine and one of them containing some drops of beeswing. The bottle stood near them, two-thirds full, and beside it lay a long, deeply stained cork. Its appearance and the dust upon the bottle showed that there was no common vintage which the murderers had enjoyed.

A change had come over Holmes' manner. He had lost his listless expression, and again I saw an alert light of interest in his keen, deep-set eyes. He raised the cork and examined it minutely.

"How did they draw it?" he asked.

Hopkins nodded to a half-opened drawer. In it lay some table linen and a large corkscrew.

"Did Lady Brackenstall say that screw was used?"

"Not, you remember, that she was senseless at the moment when the bottle was opened."

"Quite so. As a matter of fact, the screw was not used. This bottle was opened by a pocket screw, probably contained in a knife and not more than an inch and a half long. If you will examine the top of the cork, you will observe that the screw was driven in three times before the cork was extracted. It has never been transfixed. This screw would have transfixed it and drawn it up with a single pull. When you catch this fellow you will find that he has one of these multiplex knives in his possession."

"Excellent!" said Hopkins.

"But these glasses do puzzle me, I confess. Lady Brackenstall actually saw the three men drinking, did she not?"

"Yes; she was clear about that."

"Then there is an end of it. What more is to be said? And yet you must admit that the three glasses are very remarkable. Hopkins, Well, well, let it pass. Perhaps when a man has special knowledge and special powers like my own it rather encourages him to seek a complex explanation when a simpler one is at hand. Of course it must be a mere chance about the glasses. Well, good morning, Hopkins. I don't see that I can be of any use to you, and you appear to have your case very clear. You will let me know when Randall is arrested and any further developments which may occur. I trust that I shall soon have to congratulate you upon a successful conclusion. Come, Watson; if fancy that we may employ ourselves more profitably at home."

To be continued

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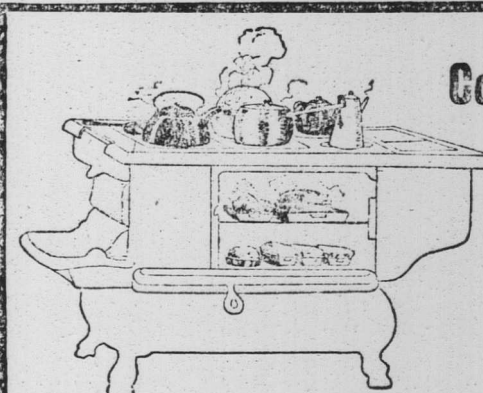
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