

The Return of Sherlock Holmes.

VII.—The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton.

BY A. CONAN DOYLE.

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It is years since the incident of which I speak took place, and yet it is with some confidence 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 in the case has died, and the story may be told in such fashion as to injure no one. It records an absolutely unique experience in the career of both Mr. 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 6 o'clock on a cold, frosty winter's evening. As Holmes turned up the lamp the light fell upon a card on the table. He glanced at it, and then, with an ejaculation of disgust, threw it on the floor. I picked it up and read:

CHARLES AUGUSTUS MILVERTON,

Applere Towers, 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 wicked, fanged mouths?"

Well, that's how Milverton impresses me. I've had to do with fifty murderers in my career, but the worst of them never gave me such a feeling of repulsion as 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. He will 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 glib-tongued ruffians, who have gained the confidence and affection of trusting women. He deals with no nigger's hand. I happen to know that he paid seven hundred 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 pale 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 man back for years in order to play it at the moment when the stake is best worth winning. I have said that he is the worst man in London, and you would ask you how could one compare the ruffian, who in hot blood bludgeoned his mate, with this man, who methodically and at his leisure tortures the soul and wrings the nerves in order to add to his already swollen money bags?"

I had seldom heard my friend speak with such intensity of feeling.

"But surely," said I, "the fellow must be within the grasp of the law."

"Technically, no doubt, but practically not. What would it profit a woman, for example, to get him a few months' imprisonment, if her own ruin must immediately follow? His victims dare not hit back. If ever he blackmails an innocent person, then indeed we should have him, but he is as cunning as the evil one. No, no, we must find other ways to fight him."

"And why is he here?"

"Because an illustrious client has placed her piteous case in my hands. It is the Lady Eva Blackwell, the most beautiful debutante of last season. She is to be married in a fortnight to the Earl of Dovercourt. This fiend has several imprudent letters—indeed, several imprudent letters—which were written to an impecunious young squire 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. I have 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 haunches of the noble chestnuts. A footman opened the door, and a small, stout man in a shaggy astrakhan coat descended. A minute later he was in the room.

Charles Augustus Milverton was a man of fifty, with a large, intellectual head, a round, plump, bat-like 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 incisive lines of the fixed smile and by the hard glitter of those restless and penetrating eyes. His voice was as smooth and suave as his countenance, as he

A Million Dollars Squandered

It is estimated this sum was wasted last year by people trying to find a cure for catarrh. Foolish for sufferers to experiment when it's so well known that "Catarrh" is the only remedy that cures permanently. Other treatments only relieve, but Catarrh cures and prevents the disease from ever returning. I had catarrh in its worst form," writes G. F. Fadden, of Waton, Que., "I was so bad that ordinary medicine didn't even relieve; but Catarrh cured perfectly." No chance of disappointment with Ca-

advanced with a plump little hand extended, murmuring his regret for having missed us at his first visit. Holmes regarded the outstretched hand and looked at him with a face of granite. Milverton's smile broadened, he shrugged his shoulders, removed his overcoat, asked, with great deliberation, over the back of a chair, and then took a seat.

"This gentleman," said he, with a wave in my direction. "Is it discreet?"

"Dr. Watson is my friend and partner in my business."

"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 15th." His insufferable smile was more companionable than ever.

Holmes thought for a little.

"You appear to me," he said, at last, "to be taking matters too much to your own hands. 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 husband the whole story, and to trust to his generosity."

Milverton chuckled.

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

From the baffled look upon Holmes' face, I could clearly see 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 find to appreciate them. However, since you think overruled, I 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 she should reveal the letters in the hands of the Earl, then you would indeed be foolish to pay so large a sum of money to regain them."

Holmes was gray with anger and mortification.

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

Milverton relapsed into his chair.

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

"At the same time," Holmes continued, "Lady Eva is not a wealthy woman. I assure you that two thousand pounds would be a drain upon her resources, and that the sum you name is utterly beyond her power. I beg, therefore, that you will moderate your demands, and that you will return the letters at the price I indicate, which is, I assure you, the highest that you can get."

Milverton's smile broadened and his eyes twinkled humorously.

"I am aware that what you say is true about the lady's resources," he said. "At the same time, you must admit that the occasion of a lady's marriage is a very suitable time for her friends and relatives to make some little effort on her behalf. They may hesitate as to an acceptable wedding present. Let me assure them that this little bundle of letters would give more than that all, but Holmes shook his head, and I laid it down again. With a bow, a smile and a twinkle, Milverton turned and left 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.

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"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 notebook here in a notebook is entirely mistaken. I would do nothing so foolish. And now, gentlemen, I have a long drive to Hampstead."

He stepped forward, took up his coat, laid his hand on his revolver and turned to the door. I picked up a chair, but Holmes shook his head, and I laid it down again. With a bow, a smile and a twinkle, Milverton turned and left 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 trousers' pockets, his chin sunk upon his breast, his eyes fixed upon a glowing emerald. For half an hour he was silent and still. Then, with the gesture of a man who has taken a 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, came descending into the street. "I'll be back sometime, Watson," said he, and vanished into the night.