

The Return of Sherlock Holmes.

By A. Conan Doyle.

Author of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes," "The Hound of the Baskervilles," "The Sign of the Four," "A Study in Scarlet," Etc.

(Illustrated by E. D. Steele.)

Have you anything more to tell us about the case?

"Nothing, Mr. Holmes. I think that you know as much as I do now—probably more. We have had inquiries made as to any stranger seen on the country roads or at the railway station. We have heard of none. What seems to be the utter want of all object in the crime. Not a ghost of a motive can any one suggest."

"Ah, there I am not in a position to help you! But I suppose you want us to come out tomorrow."

"If it is not asking too much, Mr. Holmes. There's a train from Charing Cross to Chatham at 6 in the morning, and we should be at Yoxley Old Place between 8 and 9."

"Then we shall take it. Your case has certainly some features of great interest, and I shall be delighted to look into it. Well, it's nearly 11, and we had best get a few hours' sleep. I dare say you can manage all right on the sofa in front of the fire. I'll light my spirit lamp and give you a cup of coffee before we start."

The gate had blown itself out next day, but it was a bitter morning when we started upon our journey. We saw the cold winter sun rise over the dreary marshes of the Thames and the long, silent reaches of the river, which I shall ever associate with our pursuit of the Andaman Islander in the earlier days of our career. After a long and weary journey we alighted at a small station some miles from Chatham. While a horse was being put into a trap at the local inn we snatched a hurried breakfast, and so we were all ready for business when we at last arrived at Yoxley Old Place. A constable met us at the garden gate.

"Well, Wilson, any news?"

"No, sir—nothing."

"No reports of any stranger seen?"

"No, sir. Down at the station they are certain that no stranger either came or went yesterday."

"Have you had inquiries made at inns and lodgings?"

"Yes, sir. There is no one that we cannot account for."

"Well, it's only a reasonable walk to Chatham. Any one might stay there or take a train without being observed. This is the garden path of which I spoke, Mr. Holmes. I'll pledge my word there was no mark on it yesterday."

"On which side were the marks on the grass?"

"This side, sir—this narrow margin of grass between the path and the flower bed. I can't see the traces now, but they were clear to me then."

"Yes, yes; some one has passed along," said Holmes, stooping over the grass border. "Our lady must have picked her steps carefully, must she not, since on the one side she would leave a track on the path and on the other an even clearer one on the soft bed?"

"Yes, sir; she must have been a cool hand."

"I saw an intent look pass over Holmes' face."

"You say that she must have come back this way?"

"Yes, sir; there is no other."

"On this strip of grass?"

"Certainly, Mr. Holmes."

"Hum! It was a very remarkable performance—very remarkable. Well, I think we have exhausted the path. Let us go farther. This garden door is usually kept open, I suppose. Then this visitor had nothing to do but to walk in. The idea of murder was not in her mind or she would have provided herself with some sort of weapon instead of having to pick this knife off the writing table. She advanced along this corridor, leaving no traces upon the coconut matting. Then she found herself in this study. How long was she there? We have no means of judging."

"Not more than a few minutes, sir. I forgot to tell you that Mrs. Marker, the housekeeper, had been in there tidying up very long before—about a quarter of an hour, she says."

"Well, that gives us a limit. Our lady enters this room, and what does she do? She goes over to the writing table. What for? Not for anything in the drawers. If there had been anything worth her taking it would surely have been locked up. No, it was for something in that wooden bureau. Hello! What is that scratch upon the face of it? Just hold a match, Watson. Why did you not tell me of this, Hopkins?"

The mark which he was examining began upon the brasswork on the right hand side of the keyhole and extended for about four inches, where it had scratched the varnish from the surface.

"I noticed it, Mr. Holmes, but you'll always find scratches round a keyhole."

"This is recent, quite recent. See how the brass shines where it is cut. An old scratch would be the same color as the surface. Look at it through my lens. There's the varnish, too, like to be seen on each side of a furrow. Is Mrs. Marker there?"

"I faced elderly woman came in to the room."

"Did you dust this bureau yesterday morning?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you notice this scratch?"

"No, sir. I did not."

"Can you tell me, for a dusting would have swept away these shreds of varnish. Who has the key of this bureau?"

"The professor keeps it on his watch chain."

"Is it a simple key?"

"No, sir; it is a 'clubby' key."

"Very good. Mrs. Marker, you can go. Now we are making a little progress. Our lady enters the room, advances to the bureau and either opens it or tries to do so. While she is thus engaged young Willoughby Smith enters the room. In her hurry to withdraw the key she catches this scratch upon the door. He sees it, and she, snatching up the nearest object, which happens to be this knife, strikes at him. The blow is a fatal one. He falls, and she escapes, either with or without the object for which she has come. Is Susan, the maid, there? Could any one have got away through that door after the time that you heard the cry, Susan?"

"No, sir; it is impossible. Before I got down the stair I'd have seen any one in the passage. Besides, the door never opened or I would have heard it."

"That settles this exit. Then no doubt the lady went out the way she came. I understand that this other passage leads only to the professor's room. There is no exit that way?"

"No, sir."

"We shall go down it and make the acquaintance of the professor. Hello, Hopkins, this is very important—very important indeed! The professor's corridor is also lined with coconut matting."

"Well, sir, what of that?"

"Don't you see any bearing upon the case? Well, well, I don't insist upon it. No doubt I am wrong. And yet it seems to me to be suggestive. Come with me and introduce me."

We passed down the passage, which was of the same length as that which led to the garden. At the end was a short flight of steps ending in a door. Our guide knocked and then ushered us into the professor's bedroom.

It was a very large chamber lined with innumerable volumes, which had overflowed from the shelves and lay in piles in the corners or were stacked all round at the base of the cases. The bed was in the center of the room, and in it, propped up with pillows, was the owner of the house. I have seldom seen a more remarkable looking person. It was a gaunt, aquiline face which was turned toward us, with piercing dark eyes which looked in deep hollows under overhanging and tufted brows. His hair and beard were white save the latter was curiously stained with yellow around his mouth. A cigarette glowed amid the tangle of white hair, and the air of the room was fetid with stale tobacco smoke. As he held out his hand to Holmes I perceived that it was also stained with yellow nicotine.

"A smoker, Mr. Holmes?" said he, speaking in well chosen English, with a curious little musing accent. "Pray take a cigarette. And you, sir? I can recommend them, for I have them especially prepared by Ionides of Alexandria. He sends me a thousand at a time, and I grieve to say that I have to arrange for a fresh supply every fortnight. Bad, sir, very bad, but an old man has few pleasures. Tobacco and my work—that is all that is left to me."

Holmes had lit a cigarette and was shooting little darting glances all over the room.

"Tobacco and my work, but now only tobacco," the old man exclaimed. "Alas, what a fatal interruption! Who could have foreseen such a terrible catastrophe? So estimable a young man! I assure you that after a few months' training he was an admirable assistant. What do you think of the matter, Mr. Holmes?"

"I have not yet made up my mind."

"I shall indeed be indebted to you if you can throw a light where all is so dark to us. To a poor bookworm and invalid like myself such a blow is paralyzing. I seem to have lost the faculty of thought. But you are a man of action—you are a man of affairs. It is part of the everyday routine of your life. You can preserve your balance in every emergency. We are fortunate indeed in having you at our side."

Holmes was pacing up and down one side of the room while the old professor was talking. I observed that he was smoking with extraordinary rapidity. It was evident that he shared our host's liking for the fresh Alexandrian cigarettes.

"Yes, sir, it is a crushing blow," said the old man. "That is my magnum opus—the pile of papers on the table yonder. It is my analysis of the documents found in the Coptic monasteries of Syria and Egypt, a work which will cut deep at the very foundation of revealed religion. With my enfeebled health I do not know whether I shall ever be able to complete it, now that my assistant has been taken from me. Dear me, Mr. Holmes, why, you are even a quicker smoker than I am myself."

Holmes smiled.

"Have you had the time for your work?"

"I have not had time for anything but my work."

"I am a connoisseur," said he, taking another cigarette from the box, his fourth, and lighting it from the stub of that which he had finished. "I will not trouble you with any lengthy cross examination, Professor Coram, since I gather that you were in bed at the time of the crime and could know nothing about it. I would only ask this: What do you imagine that this poor fellow meant by his last words, 'The professor—it was she'?"

The professor shook his head.

"Susan is a country girl," said he, "and you know the incredible stupidity of that class. I fancy that the poor fellow murmured some incoherent, delirious words and that she twisted them into this meaningless message."

"I see. You have no explanation yourself of the tragedy?"

"Possibly an accident, possibly—I only breathe it among ourselves—a suicide. Young men have their hidden troubles—some affair of the heart, perhaps, which we have never known. It is a more probable supposition than murder."

"But the cigarette?"

"Ah, I am only a student, a man of dreams. I cannot explain the practical things of life. But still we are aware, my friend, that love rages may take strange shapes. By all means take another cigarette. It is a pleasure to see any one appreciate them so. A fan, a glove, a glass—what knows what article may be carried as a token or treasured when a man puts an end to a walk yesterday morning and that he had only returned half an hour before the tragedy occurred. I could not myself see the bearing of this incident, but I clearly perceived that Holmes was weaving it into the general scheme which he had formed in his brain. Suddenly he sprang from his chair and glanced at his watch. "Two o'clock, gentlemen," said he. "We must go up and have it out with our friend the professor."

The old man had just finished his lunch, and certainly his empty dish bore evidence to the good appetite with which his housekeeper had credited him. He was indeed a weird figure as he turned his white mane and his glowing eyes toward us. The eternal cigarette smoldered in his mouth. He had been dressed and was seated in an armchair by the fire.

"Well, Mr. Holmes, have you solved this mystery yet?" He showed the large tin of cigarettes which stood on a table beside him toward my companion. Holmes stretched out his hand at the same moment, and between them they tipped the box over the edge. For a minute or two we were all on our knees retrieving stray cigarettes from impossible places. When we rose again I observed Holmes' eyes were shining and his cheeks tinged with color. Only at a crisis have I seen those battle signals flying.

"Yes," said he. "I have solved it."

Stanley Hopkins and I stared in amazement. Something like a sneer quivered over the gaunt features of the old professor.

"Indeed! In the garden?"

"No, here."

"Here! When?"

"This instant."

"You are surely joking, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. You compel me to tell you that this is too serious a matter to be treated in such a fashion."

"I have feared and tested every link of my chain, Professor Coram, and I am sure that it is sound. What your motives are or what exact part you play in this strange business I am not yet able to say. In a few minutes I shall probably hear it from your own lips. Meanwhile I will reconstruct what Holmes had, when he liked, a peculiarly ingratiating way with women and that he very readily established terms of confidence with them. In half the time which he had named he had captured the housekeeper's good will and was chatting with her as if he had known her for years."

"Yes, Mr. Holmes, it is as you say, sir. He does smoke something terrible. All day and sometimes all night, sir. I've seen that room of a morning—well, you'd have thought it was a London fog. Poor young Mr. Smith, he was a smoker also, but not as bad as the professor. His health—well, I don't know that it's better nor worse for the smoking."

"Ah," said Holmes, "but it kills the appetite."

"Well, I don't know about that, sir."

"I suppose the professor eats hardly anything?"

"Well, he is variable. I'll say that for him."

"I'll wager he took no breakfast this morning and left his lunch after all the cigarettes I saw him consume."

"Well, you're out there, sir, as it happens, for he ate a remarkably big breakfast this morning. I don't know when I've known him make a better one, and he's ordered a good dish of cutlets for his lunch. I'm surprised myself, for since I came into that room yesterday and saw young Mr. Smith lying there on the floor I couldn't bear to look at food. Well, it takes all sorts to make a world, and the professor can't let it take his appetite away."

We lotted the morning away in the garden. Stanley Hopkins had gone down to the village to look into some rumors of a strange woman who had been seen by some children on the Chatham road the previous morning. As to my friend, all his usual energy seemed to have deserted him. I had never known him handle a case in such a half-hearted fashion. Even the news brought back by Hopkins that he had found the children and that they had undoubtedly seen a woman correspondingly with Holmes' description and wearing either spectacles or eyeglasses failed to rouse any sign of keen interest. He was more attentive when Susan, who walked down at

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his life? This gentleman speaks of footsteps in the grass; but, after all, it is easy to be mistaken on such a point. As to the knife, it might well be thrown far from the unfortunate man as he fell. It is possible that I speak as a child, but to me it seems that Willoughby Smith has met his fate by his own hand."

Holmes seemed struck by the theory thus put forward, and he continued to walk up and down for some time, lost in thought and consuming cigarette after cigarette.

"Tell me, Professor Coram," he said at last, "what is in that cupboard in the bureau?"

"Nothing that would help a thief—family papers, letters from my poor wife, diplomas of universities which have done me honor. Here is the key. You can look for yourself."

Holmes picked up the key and looked at it for an instant; then he handed it back.

"No; I hardly think that it would help me," said he. "I should prefer to go quietly down to your garden and turn the whole matter over in my head. There is something to be said for the theory of suicide which you have put forward. We must apologize for having intruded upon you, Professor Coram, and I promise that we won't disturb you until after lunch. At 2 o'clock we will come again and repeat to you anything which may have happened in the interval."

Holmes was curiously distrustful, and we walked up and down the garden path for some time in silence.

"Have you a clew?" I asked at last.

"It depends upon those cigarettes that I smoked," said he. "It is possible that I am utterly mistaken. The cigarettes will show me."

"My dear Holmes," I exclaimed, "how on earth?"

"Well, well, you may see for yourself. If not, there's no harm done. Of course we always have the optician clew to fall back upon, but I take a short cut when I can get it. Ah, here is the good Mrs. Marker! Let us enjoy five minutes of instructive conversation with her."

I may have remarked before that I am past for your benefit, so that you may know the information which I still require.

"A lady yesterday entered your study. She came with the intention of possessing herself of certain documents which were in your bureau. She had a key of her own. I have had an opportunity of examining yours, and I do not find that slight discoloration which the scratch made upon the varnish would have produced. You were not an accessory, therefore, and she came, so far as I can read the evidence, without your knowledge to rob you."

To be continued

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