

The Return of Sherlock Holmes

XII.—THE MYSTERY OF THE MUSGRAVE RITUAL.

BY A. CONAN DOYLE.

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AN anomaly which often struck me in the character of my friend, Sherlock Holmes, was that, although in his methods of thought he was the nearest and most methodical of mankind, and although also he affected a certain quiet, primness of dress, he was none the less in his personal habits one of the most untidy men that ever drove a fellow-lodger to distraction. Not that I am in the least conventional in that respect myself. The rough-and-tumble work in Afghanistan, coming on the top of a natural aversion to dirt, had made me rather more lax than befits a medical man. But with me there is a limit, and when I find a man who keeps his cigars in the coal-scuttle, his tobacco in the toe-end of a Persian slipper, and his unanswered correspondence transcribed by a jack-knife into the center of his wood-en mantelpiece, then I begin to wonder myself virtuous. I have always held, too, that pistol practice should be distinctly an open-air pastime; and when Holmes, in one of his queer humors, would sit in an armchair with his hair-trigger and a hundred Boxer cartridges, and proceed to adorn the opposite wall with a patriotic V. R. done in bullet-pocks, I felt strongly that neither the atmosphere nor the appearance of our room was improved by it.

Our chambers were always full of chemicals and of criminal relics which had a way of wandering into unlikely positions, and of turning up in the butter-dish or in even less desirable places. But his papers were my great crux. He had a horror of destroying documents, especially those which were connected with his past cases, and yet it was only once in every year or two that he would muster energy to docket and arrange them; for, as I have mentioned somewhere in these incoherent memoirs, the outbursts of passionate energy when he performed the remarkable feats with which his name is associated were followed by reactions of lethargy during which he would lie about with his violin and his books, hardly moving save from the sofa to the table. Thus month after month his papers accumulated, until every corner of the room was stacked with bundles of manuscript which were on no account to be burned, and which could not be put away save by their owner. One winter's night, as we sat together by the fire, I ventured to suggest to him that, as he had finished pasting extracts into his common-place book, he might employ the next two hours in making our room a little more habitable. He could not deny the justice of my request, and with a rather rueful face he went off to his bedroom, from which he returned presently pulling a large tin box behind him. This he placed in the middle of the floor, and, squatting down upon a stool in front of it, he threw back the lid. I could see that it was already a third full of bundles of papers tied up with red tape into separate packages.

"There are cases enough here, Watson," said he, looking at me with mischievous eyes. "I think that if you knew all that I had in this box you would ask me to pull some out instead of putting others in."

"These are the records of your early work, then?" I asked. "I have often wished that I had notes of those cases."

"Yes, my boy, these were all done prematurely before my biographer had come to glorify me." He lifted a bundle after bundle in a tender, caressing sort of way. "They are not all successes, Watson," said he. "But there are some pretty little problems among them. Here's the record of the Thornton murders, and the case of Vanheer, the wine merchant, and the adventure of the old Russian woman, and the singular affair of the aluminum crucifix, as well as a full account of Riplestree, the clubfoot, and his abominable wife. And here—ah, now, this really is something a little recherche."

He dived his arm down to the bottom of the chest, and brought up a small wooden box with a sliding lid, such as children's toys are kept in. From within he produced a crumpled piece of paper, an old-fashioned brass key, a peg of wood with a ball of string attached to it, and three rusty old disks of metal.

"Well, my boy, what do you make of this lot?" he asked, smiling at my expression.

"It is a curious collection."

"Very curious, and the story that hangs round it will strike you as being more curious still."

"These relics have a history, then?"

"So much so that they are history."

"What do you mean by that?"

Sherlock Holmes picked them up one by one, and laid them along the edge of the table. Then he resumed his position in his chair and looked them over with a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes.

"These," said he, "are all that I have left to remind me of the adventure of the Musgrave Ritual."

I had heard him mention the case more than once, though I had never been able to gather the details. "I should give me an account of it," he should give me an account of it," he cried, mischievously. "Your tidiness won't bear much strain after all, Watson."

"For four years I had seen nothing of him until one morning he walked into my room in Montague street. He had changed little, was dressed like a young man of fashion—he was always a bit of a dandy—and preserved the

large-eyed with languid and yet courtly manners. He was indeed a scion of one of the very oldest families in the kingdom, though his branch was a cadet one which had separated from the northern Musgraves some time in the sixteenth century, and had established itself in Western Sussex, where the Manor House of Hurlstone is perhaps the oldest inhabited house in the country. Something of his birthplace seemed to cling to the man, and I never looked at his pale, keen face or the poise of his head without associating him with gray archways and mulioned windows and all the venerable wreckage of a feudal keep. Once or twice we drifted into talk, and I remember that more than once he expressed a keen interest in my methods of observation and inference.

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site me, and lit the cigarette which I pushed towards him.

"You must know," said he, "that though I am a bachelor, I have to keep up a considerable staff of servants at Hurlstone, for it is a rambling old place, and takes a good deal of looking after. I preserve too, and in the pheasant months I generally have a house party, so that it would not do to be short-handed. There are altogether eight maids, the cook, the butler in the garden, and a boy who works in the garden, and the stables of course has a separate staff."

"Of these servants the one who had been longest in our service was Bruton the butler. He was a young first taken up by my father, but he was a man of great energy and character, and he soon became quite invaluable in the household. He was a well-grown, handsome man, with a splendid forehead, and though he has been with us for twenty years he cannot be more than forty now. With his



THE LANTERN WAS LOWERED INTO THE CAVITY.

son, But I should be glad that you should add this to your annals, for quite unique in the criminal records of this, or I believe, of any other country, this collection of my trifling achievements would certainly be incomplete without an account of this very singular business.

"You may remember how the affair of the Gloria Scott and my conversation with the unhappy man whose fate I told you of, first turned my attention in the direction of the profession which has become my life's work. You see me now when my name has become known far and wide, and when I am generally recognized both by the public and by the official force as being a final court of appeal in doubtful cases. Even when you knew me first, at the time of the affair which you have commemorated in 'A Study in Scarlet,' I had already established a considerable, though not a very lucrative, connection. You can hardly realize, then, how difficult I found it at first, and how long I had to wait before I succeeded in making any headway."

"When I first came up to London I had rooms in Montague street, just round the corner from the British Museum, and there I waited, filling in my too abundant leisure time by studying all those branches of science which might make me more efficient. Reginald Musgrave had been in the same college as myself, and I had some slight acquaintance with him. He was not generally popular with the undergrads, though I always seemed to me that what was set down as pride was really an attempt to cover extreme natural diffidence. In appearance he was a man of an exceedingly aristocratic type, thin, high-nosed and

same quiet, suave manner which had formerly distinguished him.

"How has all gone with you, Musgrave?" I asked, after we had cordially shaken hands.

"You probably heard of my poor father's death," said he; "he was cut down by about two years ago. Since stone estates of course had the Hurlstone house for my district as well, my life has been a busy one. But I understand that that you are turning to practical ends those powers with which you used to amaze us."

"Yes," said I, "I have taken to living by my wits."

"I am delighted to hear it, for your advice at present would be exceedingly valuable to me. We have had some very strange things at Hurlstone, and the police have been unable to throw any light on the matter. It is really the most extraordinary and inexplicable business."

"You can imagine with what eagerness I listened to him, Watson, for the very chance for which I had been panting during all these months of inaction seemed to have come within my reach. In my inmost heart I believed that I could succeed where others failed, and now I had the opportunity to test myself."

"Pray, let me have the details, I cried."

"Reginald Musgrave sat down opposite me, and he properly looked after, to save them trouble, and he did not like the use of their toothbrush if they have

personal advantages and his extraordinary gifts—for he can speak several languages and play nearly every musical instrument—it is wonderful that he should have been satisfied so long to be comfortable, and lacked energy to make any change. The butler of Hurlstone is always a thing that is remembered by all who visit us. He is a bit of Don Juan, and you can imagine that for a man like him it

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is not a very difficult part to play in a quiet country district. When he was married it was all right, but since he has been a widower we have had no end of trouble with him. A few months ago we were in hopes that he was about to settle down again, for he became engaged to Rachel Howells, our second housemaid; but he has thrown her over since then and taken up with Janet Tregellis, the daughter of the head game-keeper. Rachel—who is a very good girl, but of an exorbitant Welsh temperament—had a sharp touch of brain fever, and goss about the house now or did until yesterday—like a helpless shadow of her former self. This was our first drama at Hurlstone, but a second one came to drive it from our minds, and it was prefaced to the disgrace and dismissal of Bruton.

"This was how it came about. I have said that the man was intelligent, and this very intelligence has caused him to be more exacting than his insolent curiosity about things which did not in the least concern him. I had no idea of the lengths to which this would carry him, until the merest accident opened by eyes to it.

"I have said that the house is a rambling one. One day last week—on Thursday night, to be more exact—I found that I could not sleep, having foolishly taken a cup of strong coffee not after my dinner. After struggling against it until two in the morning, I felt that it was quite hopeless, so I rose and lit the candle with the intention of continuing a novel which I was reading. The book, however, had been left in the billiard-room, so I pulled on my dressing gown and started off to get it.

"In order to reach the billiard-room I had to descend a flight of stairs and then to cross the head of a passage which led to the library and the sunroom. You can imagine my surprise when, as I seemed to have come to a dead end, I saw a glimmer of light coming from the open door of the library. I had myself extinguished the lamp and closed the door before coming to bed. Naturally my first thought was of burglars. The corridors at Hurlstone have their walls largely decorated with trophies of old weapons. From one of these I picked a battle-axe, and then, leaving my candle behind me, I crept on tiptoe down the passage and peeped in at the open door.

"Bruton, the butler, was in the library. He was sitting, fully dressed, in an easy chair, with his back to me, and his forehead sunk forward upon his knees. He was looking at a map upon his knee, and his hand in his pocket. I stood dumb with astonishment, watching him from the darkness. A small taper on the edge of the table shed a feeble light which sufficed to show me that he was fully dressed. Suddenly, I looked over to a bureau at the side, he unlocked it and drew out one of the drawers. From this he took a paper,

and returning to his seat he flattened the paper on the edge of the table, and began to study it with minute attention. My indignation at this calm examination of our family documents overcame me so far that I took a step forward, and Bruton, looking up, saw me standing in the doorway. He sprang to his feet, his face turned livid with fear and a thrust into his breast the chartlike parchment which he had been originally studying.

"So!" said I. "This is how you repay the trust which we have reposed in you. You will leave my service tomorrow."

"He bowed with the look of a man who is utterly crushed, and slunk out of the room.

"I was still on the table, and by its light I glanced at what the paper was. It was a list of names, and I was at once reminded of the fact that I had been told that I was to be the first time in many thousands of similar tests that my remedy had failed. But it WILL NOT fail.

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