

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.



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The Adventure of the Dancing Men

No. 3 of the Series

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HOLMES had been seated for some hours in silence, with his long, thin, back curved over a chemical vessel in which he was brewing a particularly malarious product. His head was sunk upon his breast, and he looked from my point of view like a strange, hunched, and gray-plumaged bird with dull gray plumage and a black throat.

"Yes, Watson," said he suddenly, "you do not propose to invest in South African securities?"

I gave a start of astonishment. Accustomed as I was to Holmes' curious faculties, this sudden intrusion into my most intimate thoughts was utterly inexplicable.

"How on earth do you know that?" I asked.

He wheeled round upon his stool with a stammering tone in his hand and a gleam of amusement in his deep-set eyes.

"Now, Watson, confess yourself utterly taken aback," said he.

"I am."

"I ought to make you sign a paper to that effect."

"Why?"

"Because in five minutes you will say that it is all so absurdly simple."

"I am sure that I shall say nothing of the kind."

"You see, my dear Watson," he propped his feet in the rack and began to lecture with the air of a professor addressing his class—"it is not really difficult to construct a series of preferences, each dependent upon its predecessor and each simple in itself. If, after doing so, one simply knocks out all the central inferences and presents one's audience with the starting point and the conclusion, one may produce a startling though possibly a meretricious effect. Now, it was not really difficult by an inspection of the groove between your left forefinger and thumb to feel sure that you did not propose to invest your small capital in the gold fields."

"I see no connection."

"Very likely not, but I can quickly show you a close connection. How do the missing links of the very simple chain: First, you had chalk between your left finger and thumb when you returned from the club last night; second, you put chalk there when you



Copyright by Collier's Weekly.
"Well, Mr. Holmes, what do you make of that?"

ing Thorpe for a letter of five centimes, and there is no better known family in the county of Norfolk. Last year I came up to London for the jubilee, and I stopped at a boarding house in Russell square, because Parker, the vicar of our parish, was staying in it.

"These were an American young lady there—Patrick was the name—Elise Patrick. In some way we became friends, until before my month was up I was as much in love as man could be. We were quietly married at a registry office, and we returned to Norfolk a wedded couple. You'll think it very good Mr. Holmes, that a man of a good old family should marry a wife in this fashion, knowing nothing of her past or of her people, but if you saw her and knew her it would help you to understand."

"She was very straight about it, was Elise. I can't say that she did not give me every chance of getting out of it if I wished to do so. I have had some very disagreeable associations in my life," said she, "I wish to forget all about them. I would rather never allude to the past, for it is very painful to me. If you take me, Hilton, you will take a woman who has nothing that she need be personally ashamed of, but you will have to be content with my word for it and to allow me to be silent as to all that passed up to the time when I became yours. If those conditions are too hard, then go back to Norfolk and leave me to the lonely life in which you found me." It was only the day before our wedding that she said those very words to me. I told her that I was content to take her on her own terms, and I have been as good as my word."

"Well, we have been married now for a year, and very happy we have been. But about a month ago, at the end of June, I saw for the first time signs of trouble. One day my wife received a letter from America. I saw the American stamp. She turned deadly white, read the letter and threw it into the fire. She made no allusion to it afterward, and I made none. For a promise is a promise, but she has never known an easy hour from that moment. There is always a look of fear upon her face—a look as if she were waiting and expecting. She would do better to trust me. She would find that I was her best friend. But until she speaks I can say nothing. Mind you, she is a truthful woman, Mr. Holmes, and whatever trouble there may have been in her past life it has been no fault of hers. I am only a simple Norfolk squire, but there is not a man in England who ranks his family honor more lightly than I do. She knows it well, and she knows it well before she married me. She would never bring any stain upon it, or that I assure you."

"Well, now I come to the queer part of my story. About a week ago it was the Tuesday of last week I found on one of the window sills a number of absurd little dancing figures like those upon the paper. They were scratched with chalk. I thought that it was the stable boy who had drawn them, but the lad swore he knew nothing about it. Anyhow, they had come there during the night. I had then washed out, and I only mentioned the matter to my wife afterward. To my surprise she took it very seriously and begged me if any more came to let her see them. None did come for a week, and then yesterday morning I found this paper lying on the sundial in the garden. I showed it to Elsie, and down she dropped in a dead faint. Since then she has looked like a woman in a dream, half dazed and with terror always lurking in her eyes. It was then that I wrote and sent the paper to you, Mr. Holmes. It was not a thing that I could take to the police, for they would have laughed at me, but you will tell me what to do. I am not a rich man, but if there is any danger threatening my little woman I would spend my last copper to shield her."

He was a fine creature, this man of the old English soil—simple, straight and gentle, with his great, earnest blue eyes and broad, comely face. His love for his wife and his trust in her shone in his features. Holmes had listened to his story with the utmost attention, and now he sat for some time in silent thought.

"Don't you think, Mr. Custler," said

he at last, "that your best plan would be to make a direct appeal to your wife and to ask her to share her secret with you?"

Hilton Cubitt shook his massive head.

"A promise is a promise, Mr. Holmes. If Elsie wished to tell me she would. If not, it is not for me to force her confidence. But I am justified in taking my own line—and I will."

"Then I will help you with all my heart. In the first place, have you heard of any strangers being seen in your neighborhood?"

"No."

"I presume that it is a very quiet place. Any fresh face would cause comment?"

"In the immediate neighborhood, yes. But we have several small watering places not very far away. And the farmers take in lodgers."

(To be continued.)

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A man is called selfish not for pursuing his own good, but for neglecting his neighbor's. Whately.

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