

The Return of Sherlock Holmes---The Adventure of the Dancing Men

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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 mysterious brew. A particularly unusual odor pervaded the room, and he looked from his point of view like a strange, lank bird, with dull grey plumage and a black top-knot.

"So, 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 steaming test-tube in his hand, and a gleam of amusement in his deep-set eyes.

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

"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 test-tube 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 inferences, 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 mysterious, effect. Now, perhaps you can appreciate also the value of the groove between your left forefinger and thumb, to feel sure that you did not propose to invest your small capital in the goldfields."

"I see no connection."
"Very likely not; but I can quickly show you a close connection. Here are the missing links of the very simple chain: 1. You had chalk between your left finger and thumb when you returned from the club last night. 2. You put chalk there when you play billiards to steady the cue. 3. You never play billiards except with Thurston. 4. You told me, four weeks ago, that Thurston had an option on some South African property which would expire in a month, and which he desired you to share with him. 5. Your check-book is locked in my drawer and you have not asked for the key. 6. You do not propose to invest your money in this manner."

"How absurdly simple!" I cried.
"Quite so," said he, a little nettled. "Every problem becomes very childish when once it is explained to you. Here is an unexplained one. See what you can make of that, friend Watson." He tossed a sheet of paper upon the table, and turned once more to his chemical analysis.

I looked with amazement at the absurd hieroglyphics upon the paper.
"Why, Holmes, it is a child's drawing," I cried.

"Oh, that's your idea?"
"That is what Mr. Hilton Cubitt of Riding Thorpe Manor, Norfolk, is very anxious to know. This little conundrum came by the first post, and he was to follow by the next train. There's a ring at the bell, Watson. I should not be very much surprised if this was he."

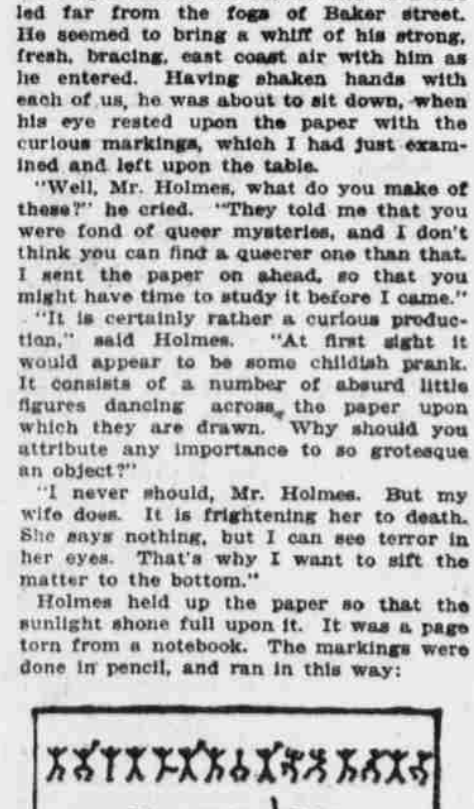
A heavy step was heard upon the stairs, and an instant later there entered a tall, ruddy, clean-shaven gentleman, whose clear eyes and florid cheeks told of a life led far from the fogs of Baker street. He seemed to bring a whiff of his strong, fresh, bracing air with him as he entered. Having shaken hands with each of us, he was about to sit down, when his eye rested upon the paper with the curious markings, which I had just examined and left upon the table.

"Well, Mr. Holmes, what do you make of these?" he cried. "They told me that you were fond of queer mysteries, and I don't think you can find a queerer one than that I sent the paper on ahead, so that you might have time to study it before I came."

"It is certainly rather a curious production," said Holmes. "At first sight it would appear to be some childish prank. It consists of a number of absurd little figures dancing across the paper upon which they are stamped, and you would attribute any importance to so grotesque an object?"

"I never should, Mr. Holmes. But my wife does. It is frightening her to death. She says nothing, but I can see terror in her eyes. This is what I want to refer to the matter to the bottom."

Holmes held up the paper so that the sunlight shone full upon it. It was a page torn from a notebook. The markings were done in pencil, and ran in this way:



Holmes examined it for some time, and then, folding it carefully up, he placed it in his pocketbook.

"This promise to be a most interesting and unusual thing to see in your letter, Mr. Hilton Cubitt, but I should be very much obliged if you would kindly go over it all again for the benefit of my friend, Dr. Watson."

"I'm not much of a story-teller," said our visitor, nervously clasping and unclasping his great, strong hands. "You'll just ask me anything that I don't make clear. I'll begin at the time of my marriage last year, but I want to say first of all that, though I'm not a rich man, my people have been at Riding Thorpe for a matter of five centuries, 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, where Parkers, the vicar of our parish, was staying in it. There was an American young woman there--Patrick was the name--Elsie Patrick. In some way she became friends with me, and I should say that I was 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 I'm very mad, 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 Elsie. I can't say that she shocked me, but I was ever so glad to get it over. I have had some very disagreeable associations in my life, and I wish to forget all about them. I would rather allude to the past, for it is very painful to me. If you take me, Hilton, you will take a woman who has nothing, but that she need be personally ashamed of, but you will have to be content with my word for it and allow me to be as silent as to all that passed up to the time when I became yours. If these 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 troubles 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 highly than I do. She knows it well, and she knew it well before she married me. She would never bring any stain upon it-of that I am sure."

"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 scrawled 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 them 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 sun dial 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 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. Cubitt," said he at last, "that your best plan would be to make a direct appeal to your wife and ask her to share her secret with you?"
Hilton Cubitt shook his massive head.

"A promise is a promise, Mr. Holmes. If Elsie wishes 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?"
"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."

"These hieroglyphics have evidently a meaning. If it is a purely arbitrary one, it may be impossible for us to solve it. If, on the other hand, it is systematic, I have no doubt that we shall get to the bottom of it. But this particular sample is so short that I can do nothing, and the facts which you have brought me are so

indefinite that we have no basis for an investigation. I would suggest that you return to Norfolk, that you keep a keen lookout, and that you take an exact copy of any fresh dancing men which may appear. It is a thousand pities that we have not a reproduction of those which were done in chalk upon the window sill. Make a discreet inquiry also as to any strangers in the neighborhood. When you have collected some fresh evidence, come to me again. That is the best advice which I can give you, Mr. Hilton Cubitt. If there is anything pressing fresh developments, I shall be always ready to run down and see you in your Norfolk home."

The interview left Sherlock Holmes very thoughtful, and several times in the next few days I saw him take his slip of paper from his notebook and look long and earnestly at the curious figures inscribed upon it. He made no allusion to the affair, however, until one afternoon a fortnight or so later. I was going out when he called me back.

"You had better stay here, Watson."
"Why?"
"Because I had a wire from Hilton Cubitt this morning. You remember Hilton Cubitt of the dancing men? He was to reach Liverpool about at 1:30. He may be here at any moment. I gather from his wire that there have been some new incidents of importance."

"We had not long to wait, for our Norfolk squire came straight from the station and looked as though he could bring him. He was looking a worried and depressed, with tired eyes and a lined forehead.
"It's getting on my nerves, this business, Mr. Holmes," said he as he sank like a weary man into an armchair. "It's bad enough to feel that you are surrounded by unseen, unknown folk, who have some kind of design upon you, but when, in addition to that, you know that it is just killing your wife by inches, then it becomes as much as flesh and blood can endure. She's wearing away under it--just wearing away before my eyes."

"Has she said anything yet?"
"No, Mr. Holmes, she has not. And yet there have been times when the poor girl has wanted to speak, and yet could not quite bring herself to take the plunge. I have tried to help her, but I dare say I did it clumsily, and scared her from it. She has spoken about my old family, and our reputation in the county, and our pride in our unsullied honor, and I always felt it was leading to the point, but somehow it turned off before we got there."

"But you have found out something for yourself?"
"A good deal, Mr. Holmes. I have several fresh dancing men pictures for you to examine, and what is more important, I have seen the fellow."
"What, the man who draws them?"
"Yes, I saw him at his work. But I will tell you everything in order. When I first tried to get my wife to tell me, she refused. The first thing I saw next morning was a fresh crop of dancing men. They had been drawn in chalk upon the black wooden door of the tool house, which stands beside the lawn in full view of the front windows. I took an exact copy, and here it is." He unfolded a paper and laid it upon the table. Here is a copy of the hieroglyphics:

"Excellent!" said Holmes. "Excellent! Pray continue."
"When I had taken the copy, I rubbed out the marks, but two mornings later, a fresh inscription had appeared. I have a copy of it here:"

Holmes rubbed his hands and chuckled with delight.

"Our material is rapidly accumulating," said he.

"Three days later a message was left scrawled upon paper, and placed under a pebble upon the sun dial. Here it is. The characters are, as you see, exactly the same as the last one. After that I determined to lay in wait, so I got out my revolver and I sat up in my study, which overlooks the lawn and garden. About 2 in the morning I was wakened by the window, all being dark save for the moonlight outside, when I heard steps behind me, and there was my wife in her dressing gown. She implored me to come to bed. I told her frankly that I wished to see who it was who played such absurd tricks upon us. She answered that it was some senseless practical joke, and that I should not take any notice of it."

"If it really annoys you, Hilton, you might go and travel, you and I, and so avoid this nuisance."
"What, be driven out of your own house by a practical joke?" said I. "Why, we should have the whole county laughing at us."
"Well, come to bed," said she, "and we can discuss it in the morning."

"Suddenly, as she spoke, I saw her white face grow whiter yet in the moonlight, and her hand tightened upon my shoulder. Something was moving in the shadow of the tool house. I saw a dark, creeping figure which crawled round the corner and squatted in front of the door. Seizing my pistol, I was rushing out, when my wife threw her arms round me and held me with convulsive strength. I tried to throw her off, but she clung to me most desperately. At last I got clear, but by the time I had opened the door and reached the house the creature was gone. He had left a trace of his presence, however, for he was covered with a very fine and distinct arrangement of dancing men which had already twice appeared, and which I have copied on that paper. There were no other signs of the fellow anywhere, though I ran all over the grounds. And yet the amazing thing is that he must have been there all the time, for when I examined the door again in the morning he had scrawled some more of his pictures under the line which I had already seen."

"Have you that fresh drawing?"
"Yes, it is short, but I made a copy of it, and here it is."

Again he produced a paper. The new drawing was in this form--

"Tell me," said Holmes, and I could see by his eyes that he was much excited--"was this a mere addition to the first, or did it appear to be entirely separate?"
"Excellent! This is far the most important of all for our purpose. It fills me with hopes. Now, Mr. Hilton Cubitt, please continue your most interesting statements."

"I have nothing more to say, Mr. Holmes, except that I was angry with my wife that night for having held me back when I might have caught the skulking rascal. She said that she feared that I might come to harm. For an instant I had crossed my mind that perhaps what she really feared was that he might come to harm, for I could not doubt that she knew who this man was, and what he meant by these strange signals. But there is a tone in my wife's voice, Mr. Holmes, and a look in her eyes which forbid doubt, and I am sure that it was indeed my own safety that was in her mind. There's the whole case, and now I want your advice as to what I ought to do. My own inclination is to put half a dozen of my farm lads in the scrubbery, and when this fellow comes

again to give him such a hiding that he will leave us in peace for the future."

"I fear it is too deep a case for such simple remedies," said Holmes. "How long can you stay in London?"
"I must go back today. I would not leave my wife alone at night for anything. She is very nervous, and begged me to come back."

"I dare say you are right. But if you could have stopped I might possibly have been able to return with you in a day or two. Meanwhile you will leave me these papers, and I think that it is very likely that I shall be able to pay you a visit shortly and to throw some light upon your case. Sherlock Holmes preserved his calm professional manner until our visitor had left us, although it was easy for me, who knew him so well, to see that he was profoundly excited. The moment that Hilton Cubitt's broad back had disappeared through the door my comrade rushed to the table, laid out all the slips of paper containing dancing men in front of him, and threw himself into an intricate and elaborate calculation. For two hours I watched him as he covered sheet after sheet of paper with figures and letters, so completely absorbed in his task that he had evidently forgotten my presence. Sometimes he was making progress and whistled and sang at his work; sometimes he was puzzled, and he would sit for long spells with a furrowed brow and a vacant eye. Finally he sprang from his chair with a cry of satisfaction, and walked up and down the room rubbing his hands together. Then he wrote a long telegram upon a cable form. "If my answer to this is as I hope, you will have a very pretty case to add to your collection, Watson," said he. "I expect that we shall be able to go down to Norfolk tomorrow, and to take our friend, who has been very definite as to the secret of his annoyance."

I confess that I was filled with curiosity, but I was aware that Holmes liked to make his disclosures at his own time and in his own way, so I waited until it should suit him to take me into his confidence. He did not do so until two days after our departure, during which Holmes picked up his ears at every ring of the bell. On the evening of the second there came a letter from Hilton Cubitt. All was quiet with him, save that a long inscription had appeared that morning upon the pedestal of the sun dial. He inclosed a copy of it, which is here reproduced:

Holmes bent over this grotesque frieze for some minutes and then suddenly sprang to his feet with an exclamation of surprise and dismay. His face was haggard with anxiety.

"We have let this affair go far enough," said he. "Is there a train to North Walsham tonight?"
I turned up the timetable. The last had just gone.

"Then we shall breakfast early and take the very first in the morning," said Holmes. "Our presence is most urgently needed. Ah! here is our expected cablegram. One moment, Mr. Hudson, there may be an answer. No, that is quite as I expected. This message makes it even more essential that we should not lose an hour in letting Hilton Cubitt know how matters stand, for it is a singular and a dangerous web in which our simple Norfolk squire is entangled."

So, indeed, it proved, and as I come to the dark conclusion of a story which had seemed to me to be only childish and bizarre, I experience once again the dismay and horror with which I was filled. Would

that I had some brighter ending to communicate to my readers, but these are the chronicles of fact, and I must follow to which for some days now Riding Thorpe Manor and household word through the length and breadth of England.

"We had hardly alighted at North Walsham and mentioned the name of our destination, when the station master hurried to meet us. "I suppose that you are the detectives from London?" said he.

"A lot of annoyance passed over Holmes' face."
"What makes you think such a thing?"
"Because Inspector Martin from Norwich has just passed through. But maybe you are the surgeons. She's not dead--or wasn't by last accounts. You may be in time to save her yet--though it be for the gallows."

"Holmes' brow was dark with anxiety."
"We are going to Riding Thorpe Manor," said he, "but we have heard nothing of what has passed there."

"It's a terrible business," said the station master. "They are shot, both Mr. Hilton Cubitt and his wife. She shot him and then herself--so the doctor says. Her husband and her life is despaired of. Dear, dear, one of the oldest families in the county of Norfolk, and one of the most honored."

Without a word Holmes hurried to a carriage and during the long drive he never opened his mouth. Seldom have I seen him so utterly despondent. He had been uneasy during all our journey from town, and I had observed that he had turned over the morning papers with anxious attention, but now this sudden realization of his worst fears left him in a blank melancholy. He leaned back in his seat, lost in gloomy speculation. Yet there was much around to interest us, for we were passing through an singular country-side as any in England, and where a few scattered cottages represented the whole population of today, while on every hand enormous square-towered churches bristled up from the flat, green landscape and told of the glory and prosperity of the old East Angles. At last the violet rim of the German ocean appeared over the green edge of the Norfolk coast and the driver pointed with his whip to two old brick and timber gables which projected from a grove of trees. "That's Riding Thorpe Manor," said he.

As we drove up to the porticoed front door I observed in front of it, beside the tennis lawn, the black tool house and the pedastalled sun dial with which we had such strange associations. A dapper little man with a quick alert manner and a waxed mustache, had just descended from a high dog cart. He introduced himself as Inspector Martin of the Norfolk constabulary and he was considerably astonished when he heard the names of his companions.

"Why, Mr. Holmes, the crime was only committed at 3 this morning. How could you hear of it in London and get to the spot as soon as I?"
"I anticipated it. I came in the hope of preventing it."

"Then you must have important evidence, of which we are ignorant, for they were said to be a most united couple."
"I have only the evidence of the dancing men," said Holmes. "I will explain the matter to you later. Meanwhile, since it is too late to prevent this tragedy, and very anxious that I should use the knowledge which I possess in order to insure that justice be done. Will you associate me in your investigation, or will you prefer that I should act independently?"

"I should be proud to feel that we were acting together, Mr. Holmes," said the inspector, earnestly.

"In that case I should be glad to hear the evidence and to examine the premises without an instant of unnecessary delay."
Inspector Martin had the good sense to allow my friend to do things in his own fashion and contented himself with carefully noting the results. The local surgeon, an old, white-haired man, had just come down from Mrs. Hilton Cubitt's room, and he reported that her injuries were serious, but not necessarily fatal. The bullet had passed through the front of her brain and it would probably be some time before she could regain consciousness. On the question of whether she had been shot or had shot herself he would not venture to express any decided opinion. The bullet had been discharged at very close quarters. There was only the one pistol found in the room, two barrels of which had been emptied. Mr. Hilton Cubitt had been shot through the heart. It was equally certain that Mrs. Cubitt had shot herself, or that she had been the criminal for the revolver lay upon the floor midway between them.

"Has he moved?" asked Holmes.
"We have moved nothing except the woman. We could not leave her lying wounded upon the floor."
"How long have you been here, doctor?"
"Since a few days ago."
"One else?"
"Yes; the constable here."
"And you have touched nothing?"
"Nothing."
"You have acted with great discretion. Who sent for you?"
"The housemaid, Saunders."
"Was it she who gave the alarm?"
"She and Mr. King, the cook."
"Where are they now?"
"In the kitchen, I believe."
"Then I think we had better hear their story at once."

"The old hall, oak-paneled and high-windowed, had been turned into a court of investigation. Holmes sat in a great, old-fashioned chair, his inexorable eyes gleaming out of his haggard face. I could read in them a set purpose to devote his life to the quest until the client whom he had failed to save should be avenged. The trim Inspector Martin, the old, grey-headed country doctor, myself, and a stout village policeman made up the rest of that strange company.

The two women told their story clearly enough. They had been aroused from their sleep by the sound of an explosion, which had been followed a minute later by a second one. They slept in adjoining rooms, and Mrs. King had rushed in to Saunders. Together they had descended the stairs. The door of the study was open, and a candle was burning upon the table. Their master lay upon his face in the center of the room. He was quite dead. Near the window his wife was crouching, her head leaning against the wall. She was horribly wounded, and the side of her face was red with blood. She breathed heavily, but was incapable of saying anything. The passage, as well as the room, was full of smoke and a faint odor of powder. The window was certainly shut and fastened upon the inside. Both women were positive upon these points. They had at once sent for the doctor and for the constable. Then, with the aid of the groom and the stableboy, they had conveyed their injured mistress to her chamber. Both she and her husband had been cupped the bed. She was clad in her night-gown, and she was lying on her back, her head resting on her right arm. Nothing had been moved in the house so far as they knew, there had never been any quarrel between husband and wife. They had always looked upon them as a very united couple.

These were the main points of the servants' evidence. In answer to Inspector Martin, they were clear that every door was fastened upon the inside and that no one could have escaped from the house. In answer to Holmes, they both remembered that they were conscious of the smell of dark conclusion of a story which had seemed to me to be only childish and bizarre, I experience once again the dismay and horror with which I was filled. Would

"I am sure I couldn't say, sir."
"I believe that it was undoubtedly so. I rather think, Inspector Martin, that we have now exhausted all that this room can teach us. If you will kindly step round with me, we shall see what fresh evidence the garden has to offer."

"A flower-bed extended up to the study window, and we all broke into an exclamation as we approached it. The flowers were dead, and the soil was imprinted all over with footmarks. Large, masculine feet were there, with peculiarly long, sharp toes. Holmes hunted about among the grass and leaves as a retriever would after a wounded bird. Then, with a cry of satisfaction, he bent forward and picked up a little brass cylinder.

"I thought so," said he; "the revolver has an ejector, and here is the third cartridge. I really think, Inspector Martin, that our case is almost complete."

"The country inspector's face had shown his intense amazement at Holmes' rapid and masterful progress of Holmes' investigation. At first he had shown some disposition to assert his own position, but now he was overcome with admiration and ready to follow without question wherever Holmes led.

"Whom do you suspect?" he asked.
"I'll go into that matter. There are several points in the problem which I have not been able to explain yet. Now that I have got so far, I had better proceed along my own lines, and then clear the whole matter up once for all."

"Just as you wish, Mr. Holmes, so long as we get on."
"I have no desire to make mysteries, but it is impossible at the moment of action to enter into long and complex explanations. I have the threads of this affair all in my hand. Even if this lady should never recover consciousness, we can still reconstruct the events of last night and insure that justice be done. First of all, I wish to know whether there is any man in this neighborhood known as 'Erling'?"

"The servants were cross-questioned, but none of them had heard of such a place. The stable boy threw a light upon the matter by remembering that a farmer of that name lived some miles off, in the direction of East Ruston."

"Is it a lonely farm?"
"Very lonely, sir."
"Perhaps they have not heard yet of all that happened here during the night?"
"Maybe not, sir."

Holmes thought for a little, and then a curious smile played over his face.

"Saddle a horse, my lad," said he. "I shall wish you to take a note to Erling's farm."

He took from his pocket the various slips of the dancing men. With these in front of him, he worked for some time at the study table. Finally he handed a note to the boy, with directions to put it into the hands of the person to whom it was addressed, and especially to answer no questions of any sort which might be put to him. I saw the outside of the note,

colleague. "And now I think that we are in a position to undertake a thorough examination of the room."
The study proved to be a small chamber, lined on three sides with books, and with a writing table facing an ordinary window, which looked out upon the garden. Our first attention was given to the body of the unfortunate squire, whose huge frame lay stretched across the room. His disordered dress showed that he had been hastily aroused from sleep. The bullet had been fired at him from the front, and had remained in his body after penetrating the heart. His death had certainly been instantaneous and painless. There was no powder marking either upon his dressing gown or on his hands. According to the country surgeon, the lady had aimed upon her face, but none upon her hand.

"The absence of the latter means nothing, though its presence may mean everything," said Holmes. "Unless the powder from a badly fitting cartridge happens to spurt backwards, one may fire many shots without leaving a sign. It would suggest that Mr. Cubitt's body may now be removed. I suppose, doctor, you have not recovered the bullet which wounded the lady?"

"A serious operation will be necessary before that can be done. But there are still four cartridges in the revolver. Two have been fired and two wounds inflicted, so that each bullet can be accounted for."

"So it would seem," said Holmes. "Perhaps you can account also for the bullet which has so obviously struck the edge of the window?"
He had turned suddenly, and his long, thin finger was pointing to a hole which had been drilled right through the lower window sash, about an inch above the bottom.

"By George!" cried the inspector. "How ever did you see that?"
"Because I looked for it."
"Wonderful!" said the country doctor. "You are certainly right, sir. There a third shot has been fired, and therefore a third person must have been present. But who could that have been, and how could he have got away?"
"That is the problem which we are now about to solve," said Sherlock Holmes. "You remember, Inspector Martin, when the servants said that on leaving their room they were at once conscious of a smell of powder, I remarked that the point was an extremely important one?"
"Yes, sir, but I confess I did not quite follow you."
"I suggested that at the time of the firing, the window as well as the door of the room had been open. Otherwise the fumes of powder could not have been blown so rapidly through the house. A draught in the room was necessary for that. Both door and window were only open for a very short time, however."
"How do you prove that?"
"Because the candle was not guttered."
"Capital!" cried the inspector. "Capital!"
"Fascinating!" said the country doctor. "You are certainly right, sir. The window had been open at the time of the tragedy, I conceived that there might have been a third person in the affair, who stood outside this opening and fired through it. Any shot directed at this person might hit the sash. I looked, and there, sure enough, was the bullet mark!"
"But how came the window to be shut and fastened?"
"The woman's first instinct would be to shut and fasten the window. But, halloo! what is this?"
It was a woman's handbag which stood upon the study table--a trim little hand-bag of crocodile-skin and silver. Holmes opened it and turned the contents out. There were twenty £50 notes of the Bank of England, held together by an indurubber band--nothing else.

"This must be preserved, for it will figure in the trial," said Holmes, as he handed the bag with its contents to the inspector.

"It is now necessary that we should try to throw some light upon the third bullet, which has clearly, from the splintering of the wood, been fired from inside the room. I should like to see Mrs. King, the cook, again. You said, Mr. King, that you were awakened by a loud explosion. When you saw that, did you mean that it seemed to you to be louder than the second one?"

"Well, sir, it wakened me from my sleep, and so it is hard to judge. But it did seem very loud."

"You don't think that it might have been two shots fired almost at the same instant?"
"I am sure I couldn't say, sir."

"I believe that it was undoubtedly so. I rather think, Inspector Martin, that we have now exhausted all that this room can teach us. If you will kindly step round with me, we shall see what fresh evidence the garden has to offer."

"A flower-bed extended up to the study window, and we all broke into an exclamation as we approached it. The flowers were dead, and the soil was imprinted all over with footmarks. Large, masculine feet were there, with peculiarly long, sharp toes. Holmes hunted about among the grass and leaves as a retriever would after a wounded bird. Then, with a cry of satisfaction, he bent forward and picked up a little brass cylinder.

"I thought so," said he; "the revolver has an ejector, and here is the third cartridge. I really think, Inspector Martin, that our case is almost complete."

"The country inspector's face had shown his intense amazement at Holmes' rapid and masterful progress of Holmes' investigation. At first he had shown some disposition to assert his own position, but now he was overcome with admiration and ready to follow without question wherever Holmes led.

"Whom do you suspect?" he asked.
"I'll go into that matter. There are several points in the problem which I have not been able to explain yet. Now that I have got so far, I had better proceed along my own lines, and then clear the whole matter up once for all."

"Just as you wish, Mr. Holmes, so long as we get on."
"I have no desire to make mysteries, but it is impossible at the moment of action to enter into long and complex explanations. I have the threads of this affair all in my hand. Even if this lady should never recover consciousness, we can still reconstruct the events of last night and insure that justice be done. First of all, I wish to know whether there is any man in this neighborhood known as 'Erling'?"

"The servants were cross-questioned, but none of them had heard of such a place. The stable boy threw a light upon the matter by remembering that a farmer of that name lived some miles off, in the direction of East Ruston."

"Is it a lonely farm?"
"Very lonely, sir."
"Perhaps they have not heard yet of all that happened here during the night?"
"Maybe not, sir."

Holmes thought for a little, and then a curious smile played over his face.

"Saddle a horse, my lad," said he. "I shall wish you to take a note to Erling's farm."

He took from his pocket the various slips of the dancing men. With these in front of him, he worked for some time at the study table. Finally he handed a note to the boy, with directions to put it into the hands of the person to whom it was addressed, and especially to answer no questions of any sort which might be put to him. I saw the outside of the note,

colleague. "And now I think that we are in a position to undertake a thorough examination of the room."
The study proved to be a small chamber, lined on three sides with books, and with a writing table facing an ordinary window, which looked out upon the garden. Our first attention was given to the body of the unfortunate squire, whose huge frame lay stretched across the room. His disordered dress showed that he had been hastily aroused from sleep. The bullet had been fired at him from the front, and had remained in his body after penetrating the heart. His death had certainly been instantaneous and painless. There was no powder marking either upon his dressing gown or on his hands. According to the country surgeon, the lady had aimed upon her face, but none upon her hand.

"The absence of the latter means nothing, though its presence may mean everything," said Holmes. "Unless the powder from a badly fitting cartridge happens to spurt backwards, one may fire many shots without leaving a sign. It would suggest that Mr. Cubitt's body may now be removed. I suppose, doctor, you have not recovered the bullet which wounded the lady?"