

# The Exploits of Sherlock Holmes

might not fall upon the page, he begged me to read aloud to him. I read for about ten minutes, beginning in the heart of a chapter, and then suddenly, in the middle of a sentence, he ordered me to cease and to change my dress.

"You can easily imagine, Mr. Holmes, how curious I became as to what the meaning of this extraordinary performance could possibly be. They were always very careful, I observed, to turn my face away from the window, so that I became conversant with the desire to see what was going on behind my back. At first it seemed to be impossible, but I soon discovered a means. My hand mirror had been broken, so a happy thought seized me, and I concealed a piece of the glass in my handkerchief. On the next occasion, in the midst of my laughter, I put the handkerchief up to my eyes and was able with a little management to see all that there was behind me. I confess that I was disappointed; there was nothing at least that was my first impression. At the second glance, however, I perceived that there was a man standing in the Southampton road, a small, bearded man, in a gray suit, who seemed to be looking in my direction. The road is an important highway and there are usually people there. This man, however, was leaning against the railings which bordered the field and was looking earnestly up. I lowered my handkerchief and glanced at Mrs. Rucastle, to find her eyes fixed upon me with a most searching gaze. She said nothing, but I am convinced that she had divined that I had a mirror in my hand and had seen what was behind me. She rose at once.

"Jephro," said she, "there is an imperfection upon the road there who stares up at Miss Hunter."

"No friend of yours, Miss Hunter?" he asked.

"No! I know no one in these parts."

"Dear me! How very important. Kindly turn round and motion to him to go away."

"Surely, it would be better to take no notice."

"No, no, we should have him loitering here always. Kindly turn round and wave him away, like that."

"I did as I was told, and at the same instant Mrs. Rucastle drew down the blind. That was a week ago, and from that time I have not sat again in the window, nor have I worn the blue dress, nor seen the man in the road."

"Pray continue," said Holmes.

"Your narrative promises to be a most interesting one."

"You will find it rather disconnected, I fear, and there may prove to be little relation between the different incidents of which I speak. On the very first day that I was at the Copper Beeches Mr. Rucastle took me to a small outhouse which stands near the kitchen door. As we approached I heard the sharp rattling of a chain, and the sound as of a large animal moving about."

"Look in here," said Mr. Rucastle, showing me a slit between two planks. "Is he not a beauty?"

"I looked through and was conscious of two glowing eyes, and of a vague figure huddled up in the darkness."

"Don't be frightened," said my employer, laughing at the start which I had given. "It's only Carlo, my mastiff. I call him mine, but really old Toller, my groom, is the only man who can do anything with him. We feed him once a day, and not too much, so that he is always as keen as mustard. Toller lets him loose every night, and God help the trespasser whom he lays his fangs upon. For goodness' sake, don't you ever on any pretext set your foot over the threshold at night, for it is as much as your life is worth."

"The warning was no idle one, for two nights later I happened to look out of my bedroom window about 2 o'clock in the morning. It was a beautiful moonlight night, and the lawn in front of the house was silvery over and almost as bright as day. I was standing, wrapped in the peaceful beauty of the scene, when I was aware that something was moving under the shadow of the copper beeches. As it emerged into the moonshine I saw what it was. It was a giant dog, as large as a calf, tawny-tinted, wing hanging jowl, black muzzle and huge projecting bones. It walked slowly across the lawn and vanished in the shadow of the other side. The dreadful silent sentinel sent a chill to my heart which I do not think that any burglar could have done."

"And now I have a very strange experience to tell you. I had, as you know, cut off my hair in London, and I had placed it in a great coil at the bottom of my trunk. One evening, after the child was in bed, I began to amuse myself by examining the furniture of my room and by rearranging my own little things. There was an old chest of drawers in the room, the two upper ones empty and open, the lower one locked. I had filled the first two with my linen, and as I had still time to pack away, I was naturally annoyed at not having the use of the third drawer. It struck me that it might have been fastened by a mere oversight so I took out my trunk, its keys and tried to open it. The very first key fitted to perfection, and I drew the drawer open. There was only one thing in it, but I am sure that you would never guess what it was. It was my coil of hair. I took it up and examined it. It was of the same scullar tint, and the same thickness. But then the impossibility of the thing obtruded itself upon me. How could my hair have been locked in the drawer? With trembling hands I undid my trunk, turned out the contents, and drew from the bottom my own hair. I laid the two tresses together, and I assure you that they were identical. Was it not

extraordinary? Puzle as I would, I could make nothing at all of what it meant. I returned the strange hair to the drawer, and I said nothing of the matter to the Rucastles, as I felt that I had put myself in the wrong by opening a drawer which they had locked.

"I am naturally observant, as you may have remarked, Mr. Holmes, and I soon had a pretty good plan of the whole house in my head. There was one wing, however, which appeared not to be inhabited at all. A door which faced that which led into the quarters of the Tollers opened into this suite, but it was invariably locked. One day, however, as I ascended the stairs, I met Mr. Rucastle coming out through this door, his keys in his hand, and a look on his face which made him a very different person to the round, jovial man to whom I was accustomed. His cheeks were red, his brow was all crinkled with anger, and the veins stood out at his temples with passion. He looked at the door and hurried past me without a word or a look.

"This aroused my curiosity; so when I went out for a walk in the grounds with my charge I strolled round to the side from which I could see the windows of this part of the house. There were four of them in a row, three of which were simply dirty, while the fourth was shattered up. They were evidently all deserted. As I strolled up and down, glancing at them occasionally, Mr. Rucastle came out to me, looking as merry and jovial as ever.

"'All' said he, 'you must not think me rude if I passed you without a word, my dear young lady. I was preoccupied with business matters.'

"'I assured him that I was not offended. 'By the way,' said I, 'you seem to have quite a suite of spare rooms up there, and one of them has the shutters up.'

"'He looked surprised, and, as it seemed to me, a little startled at my remark.

"'Photography is one of my hobbies,' said he. 'I have made my dark room up there. But, dear me! what an observant young lady you have come upon. Who would have believed it? Who would ever have believed it? He spoke in a jesting tone, but there was no jest in his eyes as he looked at me. I read suspicion there and annoyance, but no jest.

"'Well, Mr. Holmes, from the moment that I understood that there was something about that suite of rooms which I was not to know, I was all on fire to go over them. It was not mere curiosity, though I have my share of that. It was more a feeling of duty—a feeling that some good might come from my examining that place. They talk of woman's instinct, perhaps it was woman's instinct which gave me that feeling. At any rate, it was there, and I was keenly on the lookout for any chance to pass the forbidden door.

"'It was only yesterday that the chance came. I may tell you that, besides Mr. Rucastle, both Toller and his wife find something to do in these deserted rooms, and I once saw him carrying a large black linen bag with him through the door. Recently he has been drinking hard, and yesterday evening he was very drunk; and when I came upstairs, there was the key in the door. I have no doubt at all that he had left it there. Mr. and Mrs. Rucastle were both downstairs, and the child was with them, so that I had an admirable opportunity. I turned the key gently in the lock, opened the door and slipped through. There was a little passage in front of me, unpapered and uncarpeted, which turned at a right angle at the farther end. Round this corner were three doors in a line, the first and third of which were open. They each led into an empty room, dusty and cheerless, with two windows in the one and one in the other, so thick with dirt that the evening light glimmered dimly through them. The center door was closed and across the outside of it had been fastened one of the broad bars of an iron bed, padlocked at one end to a ring in the wall and fastened at the other with stout cord. The door itself was locked as well and the key was not there. This barred door corresponded clearly with the shattered window outside, and yet I could see by the glimmer from beneath it that the room was not in darkness. Evidently there was a skylight which let in light from above. As I stood in the passage gazing at the sinister door and wondering what secret it might veil I suddenly heard the sound of steps within the room and saw a shadow pass backward and forward against the little slit of dim light which shone out from under the door. A mad, unreasoning terror rose up in me at the sight, Mr. Holmes. My overstrung nerves failed me suddenly and I turned and ran—as though some dreadful hands were behind me clutching at the skirt of my dress. I rushed down the passage, through the door and straight into the arms of Mr. Rucastle, who was waiting outside.

"'So,' said he, smiling, 'it was you, then. I thought that it must be when I saw the door open.'

"'Oh, I am so frightened,' I panted.

"'My dear young lady! My dear young lady!—you cannot think how careless and soothing his manner was—and what has frightened you, my dear young lady?'

"'But his voice was just a little too coaxing. He overtook me. I was keenly on my guard against him.

"'I was foolish enough to go into the empty wing,' I answered. 'But it is so lonely and eerie in this dim light that I was frightened and ran out again. Oh, it is so dreadfully still in there.'

"'Only that?' said he, looking at me keenly.

"'Why, what did you think?' I asked.

"'Why do you think that I lock this door?'

"'I am sure that I do not know.'

"'It is to keep out people who have no

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