



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXX -- The Adventure of the Dancing Men



First published in:

The Strand Magazine, Dec '03; Collier's Weekly, Dec. 5, 1903

Time frame of story (known/surmised):

Late July 1898 known, very likely on July 27.

Holmes & Watson living arrangements:

Sharing quarters at 221B.

Opening scene:

One evening, Holmes was performing a malodorous chemical analysis. He then deduced that Watson did not plan to invest in South African securities, by having, the night before, observed chalk on Watson's left thumb and forefinger. Holmes then showed Watson some childish-looking drawings of dancing stick-men he had received by post, along with an inquiry.



Client:

Mr. Hilton Cubitt, of Riding Thorpe Manor, Norfolk. He was a 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 strong, fresh, bracing, east-coast air with him. He was a man of the old English soil, with earnest blue eyes and a broad, comely face. Not only that, but he had great, strong hands, too.

Crime or concern:

Client sent Holmes the dancing stick-men drawings. They meant nothing to Cubitt, but when his wife Elsie saw them she was highly disturbed, but would not share her concerns with her husband. She had been a visiting American he had married precipitously. She made him promise not to probe her background, although she said she had nothing to be ashamed of. Elsie did say there had been disagreeable associations in her past she hoped to remain there. Cubitt agreed and kept his word. He loved her dearly.

Villain:

Abe Slaney, a Chicago crook. He was a tall, handsome, swarthy fellow, clad in a suit of gray flannel, with a Panama hat, a bristling black beard, and a great, aggressive hooked nose, and flourished a cane as he walked. He worked for old Patrick, Elsie's father, who was the leader of a gang. Old Patrick had devised the code. Slaney had planned to marry Elsie.

Motive:

Perverse love and jealousy. Elsie had rejected Slaney and the criminal gang and came to England. Slaney heard where she was and came across, planning to win her back. After rejections, he turned to threats, which in turn led to a deadly incident in which Cubitt shot at him but missed. Slaney then shot and killed Cubitt, and then Elsie shot herself in the head, but recovered.

Logic used to solve:

Holmes recognized the dancing men as coded messages. It was a simple substitution code and after collecting a few short messages he cracked the code. But he was too late returning to Norfolk. Holmes summoned Slaney back to the scene of the crime using the code, as Slaney thought Elsie was the only person who could read it. He came and was arrested.

Policemen:

Inspector Martin, a dapper little man, with a quick, alert manner and a waxed moustache, of the Norfolk Constabulary. Martin was impressed by Holmes' presence and deferred to him.

Holmes' fees:

No mention, but since his client was killed he may have been skunked on this case.

Transport:

On his initial visit to Holmes, the Norfolk squire came straight from the station as fast as a hansom could bring him. He returned that evening. The next morning, Holmes & Watson went out to North Walsham on the first train.

It was a seven-mile carriage ride from the station to Riding Thorpe Manor.

After wrapping up the case, Holmes & Watson took the three-forty train back to London, to be back in Baker Street for dinner.

Food: Holmes & Watson broke fast early before their trip to North Walsham.

Drink, Vices, and other cases:

No mention

Notable Quotables:

If one simply knocks out all central inferences and presents one's audience with the starting-point and the conclusion, one may produce a startling, though possibly a meretricious, effect. – Holmes

Other interestings:

Holmes' knowledge of the crooks of Chicago made him realize Slaney might very rapidly put his words into action. So Holmes hurried back to Riding Thorpe Manor, but did not telegraph the police, a grave oversight.

Holmes tells Watson he is fairly familiar with all forms of secret writings, and is the author of a trifling monograph upon the subject, in which he analyzes one hundred and sixty separate ciphers. He notes that the object of the Dancing Men code was to conceal that these characters convey a message, and to give the idea that they were the mere random sketches of children.

When all was said and done:

Slaney was condemned to death at the winter assizes at Norwich, but his penalty was changed to penal servitude in consideration of mitigating circumstances, and the certainty that Hilton Cubitt had fired the first shot. Elsie recovered entirely and remained a widow, devoting her whole life to the care of the poor and the administration of her husband's estate.

McMurdo's Camp