

Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

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

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

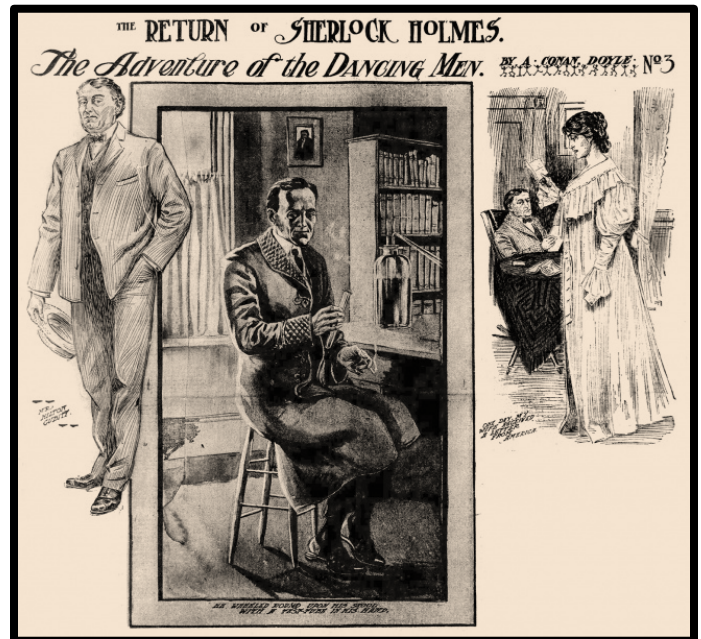
Abe Slaney and Elsie Patrick were raised together in Chicago. They intended to be married, but Elsie realized that Abe was a crook and she refused. He hounded her so much that she sneaked away to England, where she met, fell in love with and Married Hilton -- all within a month. Elsie told Hilton that she had done nothing wrong, but that he should not ask her anything about her past. He promised he would not.

All went well with the Cubitts for about a year, at which time messages written in a cipher consisting of stickmen in various positions began to appear in the yard.

Hilton consulted Holmes who told him to go home and await developments.

Abe had followed Elsie to England and tracked her down. It was he who was leaving the cypher messages. Elsie refused to forsake Hilton for Abe but promised to talk with him. In the middle of the night, Elsie was talking with Abe through the open drawing-room window. Hilton came upon them and Abe shot and killed Hilton. Almost simultaneously, Hilton shot at Abe too, but his aim was poor and the bullet struck the sash. Elsie, realizing that Hilton was dead, locked the window and shot herself in the head.

Holmes figured it all out and settled things. Abe got life imprisonment. Elsie recovered completely and devoted the remainder of her life to helping the poor and managing Ridingthorpe manor.



SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

Mr Hilton Cubbit, from Ridling Thorpe Manor, in Norfolk, had married Elsie a year ago. Elsie, a young American woman, had warned her husband that her past held dark secrets which she could not share with him. Lately, he had been finding a series of apparently meaningless signs showing little dancing men drawn with a chalk or on a paper about their property.

When he showed them to his wife, she was so terror-stricken that she fainted. Not able to involve the police without breaking his promise to his wife not to inquire about her past, Cubbit contacts Holmes to solve this mystery. The detective accepts and asks Cubbit to send him every sample of dancing men he gets. When Holmes succeeds in deciphering the code, he decides to rush to Norfolk with Watson but, once they arrive, they learn that Cubbit has been shot dead and his wife has been injured.

As it happened when they were alone in a closed room, Elsie is considered guilty of a murder-suicide. With Inspector Martin in attendance, Holmes spots an unaccounted for bullet hole and deduces that someone else was there at the time of the murder.

He then sends a stable boy to a place named Elridge's to deliver a note consisting of a series of dancing men to a certain Abe Slaney. He also explains to Watson and Martin how he deciphered the code and was able to identify Slaney as a dangerous criminal from Chicago.

When Slaney arrives, he's arrested but falls apart when he learns Elsie is injured. He confesses she is actually the daughter of the leader of the American criminal gang who created the code and used to be engaged to Slaney.

She ran away to London, but Slaney found and threatened her with the coded messages. She finally summoned him to her house to beg him to leave her alone. As they were arguing, Cubbit saw them and shot, but Slaney returned fire and killed him. Elsie, upset, tried to kill herself but failed.



SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

The story begins when Hilton Cubitt of Ridling Thorpe Manor in Norfolk visits Sherlock Holmes and gives him a piece of paper with the following mysterious sequence of stick figures.

Cubitt explains to Holmes and Dr. Watson that he has recently married an American woman named Elsie Patrick. Before the wedding, she had asked her husband-to-be never to ask about her past, as she had had some "very disagreeable associations" in her life, although she said that there was nothing that she was personally ashamed of.

Their marriage had been a happy one until the messages began to arrive, first mailed from the United States and then appearing in the garden.




















The messages had made Elsie very afraid but she did not explain the reasons for her fear, and Cubitt insisted on honoring his promise not to ask about Elsie's life in the United States. Holmes examines all of the occurrences of the dancing figures, and they provide him with an important clue—he realizes that they form a substitution cipher and cracks the code by frequency analysis. The last of the messages causes Holmes to fear that the Cubitts are in immediate danger.

Holmes rushes to Ridling Thorpe Manor and finds Cubitt dead of a bullet to the heart and his wife gravely wounded from a gunshot to the head. Inspector Martin of the Norfolk Constabulary believes that it is a murder-suicide attempt; Elsie is the prime suspect. But Holmes, after noting some inconsistencies in that theory, proves that there is a third person involved.

Holmes writes a message—in dancing figure characters—and has it delivered to a lodger at a nearby farm. While waiting for the result of this message, Holmes explains to Watson and Inspector Martin how he cracked the code of the dancing figures. The last message, which caused Holmes and Watson to rush to Norfolk, read "ELSIE PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD".

The lodger, Abe Slaney, another American, unaware that Elsie is gravely wounded, arrives at Ridling Thorpe Manor and is seized as he comes through the door. Holmes had sent for Slaney using the dancing men, knowing that Slaney would believe the message is from Elsie. Slaney reveals that he had been engaged to Elsie, the daughter of the Chicago crime boss whom Slaney works for, and that she had fled to escape her old life. Slaney had come to England to get her back. When Slaney and Elsie were speaking through a window, Cubitt had appeared and shots were exchanged; Cubitt was killed and Slaney had fled. Apparently, Elsie then shot herself. Slaney is arrested and sentenced to hang, but his sentence is reduced to penal servitude because Cubitt had fired the first shot. Elsie recovers from her injuries, and spends her life helping the poor and administering her late husband's estate.

From the symbols used in the story:

A=		B=		C=		D=		E=	
F=		G=		H=		I=		J=	
K=		L=		M=		N=		O=	
P=		Q=		R=		S=		T=	
U=		V=		W		X		Y=	
Z									