



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXIV -- The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton

What a great story this is! It has a wonderful, hissable villain and some exciting surprises in the climactic moments. Its moral ambiguities are thicker than a London fog. Everything seems the wrong way round: the detective becomes a criminal, the criminal becomes a victim, and the victim becomes an avenger. How far should Holmes go to protect his client's (and his own) reputation? Should he break the law? Should he break a heart? Should he, and we, condone a killing? Please join the pack as we discuss this week's fascinating tale, "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton."

Such intensity of feeling: After relating Sherlock Holmes's description of Milverton's blackmail operation, Watson commented, "I had seldom heard my friend speak with such intensity of feeling." And neither have we! Holmes obviously had a special hatred for the crime of blackmail. Remembering back to his statement from "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," "There but for the grace of God goes Sherlock Holmes," one has to wonder if Holmes or someone very close to him might once have been the victim of a blackmailer. If so, is it possible that the blackmailer was Milverton himself?

It is suggestive that this story does not begin with a typical "beautiful client in distress calls upon Sherlock Holmes" scene. We hear of Lady Eva's plight, but we do not see her. And there is an interesting exchange between Holmes and Milverton over the contents of Lady Eva's letters. Holmes had told Watson that they were "imprudent, nothing worse," though of course Holmes could not have seen the actual letters, and had to take Lady Eva's word in the matter. When Milverton described the letters as "very sprightly," did Holmes go "gray with anger and mortification" because he suddenly realized that Lady Eva had lied to him? Supposing for a moment that Lady Eva's connection with that "impecunious young squire in the country" was a good deal more than a mild flirtation, could one take the point of view that she had no business trying to



represent herself to the Earl of Dovercourt as marriageable material? Yes, Milverton was a villain to blackmail her about her earlier love life, but according to the standards of her day, was it possible that she did not “deserve” to marry the Earl? But whatever Lady Eva’s past history or true character, does anyone else share my reservations about the unspoken assumption in the story that nothing must ever be allowed to stand in the way of a pretty debutante’s marital and social ambitions?

So dangerous a course: I never read this story without thinking of the line from “My Fair Lady,” where Eliza says something to this effect: “The difference between a lady and a flower girl isn’t in how she behaves but in how she’s treated.” What do you think about Holmes’s “engagement” to the housemaid? Did Holmes use Agatha, or was he swept up into a situation that he was not able to control? Did Watson suspect the latter, and was that why he was so insistent on accompanying Holmes to Appledore Towers?

Did Holmes consider other alternatives before making his decision to burgle Milverton’s house? For instance, couldn’t he have tried to raise the money to pay for the recovery of Lady Eva’s letters, if only as a means to buy time for a more carefully considered plan to bring Milverton’s blackmailing career to an end? What else might he have tried?

Do you think that Inspector Lestrade suspected Holmes of Milverton’s murder?

Rosemary Michaud