



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXIV – The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton

The coming week's Adventure is not about a rough with a bludgeon. It's about a man who "...methodically and at his leisure tortures the soul and wrings the nerves in order to add to his already swollen money-bags." This is Charles Augustus Milverton, "the worst man in London," a pitiless blackmailer who threatens to cause the cancellation of the forthcoming wedding of the beautiful Lady Eva Blackwell to the Earl of Dovercourt.

As the Adventure opens, Holmes is put in the unsavory position of an intermediary trying to negotiate the price for which Milverton will surrender several "sprightly" letters which compromise Lady Eva. Despite his best efforts, no agreement is reached, and an effort to wrest the letters from Milverton by force is foiled when the blackmailer displays a large revolver and expresses his intent to use it should force be attempted.

Frustrated beyond measure, Holmes makes a crucial decision to become a felon in the eyes of the law by cracking Milverton's safe, in which the letters of Lady Eva are kept. The loyal Watson persuades Holmes to allow him to take part in the enterprise. As the burglary proceeds, an unexpected and bloody turn of events leaves Milverton dead and Holmes and Watson fleeing from the pursuit of Milverton's household servants.

Like the counterfeiter, the blackmailer is in a class by himself as a public danger. I suspect that few, if any of us, could find it in our hearts to pity Charles Augustus Milverton for his violent departure from this earth. Evidently, he was unmarried, and I have sometimes wondered what happened to the contents of his "swollen money-bags" after his demise.



Even though Watson says that Milverton's killer had died before this story was published in 1904, might it not have been possible to ascertain the identity of his murderess by discovering which widowed peeress(es)

had died recently, and going back five years to determine which of their husbands had died in 1899? Is this another case of Watson “telling all” when possible survivors in the family might be embarrassed?

Says Holmes, “Heaven help the man, and still more the woman, whose secret and reputation come into the power of Milverton.” Whyso a woman more than a man?

If Agatha locked the dog up so that “Escott” could have a “clear run” at meeting her clandestinely, wouldn’t she have been waiting up for her “fiancée” on the night of the burglary? Another thought: What if Agatha had connected her master’s murder with the sudden disappearance of the ardent “Escott” and had given the police a description of the man who showed inordinate interest in Milverton’s habits and the grounds surrounding Appledore Towers? Apparently, Holmes discounted this contingency, but was he justified in doing so?

When Watson discovered that the outer door to Milverton’s study was in fact unlocked, Holmes formed a contingency plan, whispered to Watson, that included hiding behind the drapes in Milverton’s study should anyone chance to interrupt before he had opened the safe. Was this a wise strategy?

We know that Milverton’s killer was a woman of high social position, but does “a high diamond tiara” and “Court dress” indicate some level of royalty?

Finally, from a purely literary standpoint, was it necessary for Watson to accompany Holmes on his excursion into burglary?

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