



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

The Return of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXXIV -- The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

Holmes has been retained by Eva to make the best terms he can with Milverton to purchase some “imprudent” letters she wrote to a country squire some time ago. The sum is far too high for the lady to raise and she is threatened with exposure. Holmes disguises himself as Escott, a plumber, and becomes engaged to Milverton’s maid. He explains to Watson that he has a rival who will relieve Agatha’s heartache after he (Holmes) disappears.

Armed with knowledge of the premises provided by Agatha, Holmes and Watson break into Milverton’s house and have just cracked his safe when they hear someone coming. They hide behind the drapes and witness Milverton’s murder by an anonymous noble woman; she shoots him repeatedly with a small caliber revolver. She makes a speedy escape. Holmes dumps the contents of Milverton's safe into the fire and he and Watson escape over the wall and across the heath.

The next day, Lestrade visits Holmes and asks him to help solve Milverton's murder, but Holmes says he thinks Milverton got what he deserved and refuses.

Holmes shows Watson a picture of the noblewoman and her late husband in a photographer’s window and Watson is amazed to discover the high position she holds.



SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

Charles-Augustus Milverton is a professional blackmailer whose methodology is to buy letters which compromise people of wealth or position and then press them for large sums of money. He has achieved a fortune this way. Holmes, although he's repelled by this man, has been hired by Lady Brackwell, who is shortly to be married, to negotiate with Milverton in order to get back compromising letters she had written to a young man years ago.

Unfortunately, Holmes's attempt at negotiation fails, so he decides to infiltrate Milverton's house. Disguised as a plumber, he spends several days there and even gets engaged to the housemaid in order to get information and access. Finally, one night, thinking the way is clear, he decides to burgle Milverton's home, Appledore Towers, accompanied by Watson. The letters are locked in a safe in Milverton's study, next to the room where he's supposed to be sleeping. But Milverton arrives in his study, and the two burglars have just time enough to hide behind the curtains. Milverton has a late appointment with a woman who pretends she has letters to sell, but reveals herself to be a former victim of his. She shoots the blackmailer dead and leaves.

Immediately Holmes and Watson rush to open the safe and throw all the letters into the fireplace while the household staff attempts to break into the room, and they only just manage to escape before being caught.

The next day, Lestrade comes and asks Holmes to help him in the Milverton's murder case; giving the description of the men the servants witnessed fleeing. Holmes ironically retorts that one of them corresponds to a description of Watson and refuses. Later, Holmes will recognize the murderer as a high-ranking woman, but vows to keep silent forever.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

Holmes is hired by the *débutante* Lady Eva Blackwell to retrieve compromising letters from a blackmailer: Milverton, who causes Holmes more revulsion than any of the 50-odd murderers in his career. Milverton is "the king of blackmailers". He demands £7,000 (equivalent to £838,304 in 2021^{[4][5]}) for the letters, which if given to third parties would cause a scandal that would end Lady Eva's marriage engagement. Holmes offers £2,000, all Lady Eva can pay, but Milverton insists on £7,000. It is worth £7,000 to him, he explains, to make an example of Lady Eva; it is in his long-term interest to ensure that his future blackmail victims would be more "open to reason" and pay him what he wants, knowing he will destroy them if they do not. Holmes resolves to recover the letters by whatever means necessary, as Milverton has placed himself outside the bounds of morality.

Holmes visits Milverton's Hampstead house, disguised as a plumber, in order to learn the plan of the house and Milverton's daily routine. He cultivates the acquaintance of Milverton's housemaid and even becomes engaged to marry her. This rather shocks Watson, but Holmes assures him that he has a hated rival who will step in when the plumber disappears. Holmes has learned where Milverton keeps his blackmail papers (a safe in his study), and plans to burgle Milverton's house that night. Watson comes along.

They break into the study, but just as Holmes opens the safe, Milverton enters the study, even though he should be in bed asleep. Holmes and Watson hide behind a curtain, while Milverton has a midnight meeting with a supposed maidservant offering to sell letters that would compromise her mistress.

The woman is actually one of Milverton's former victims, whose broken-hearted husband died when she wouldn't pay Milverton and he revealed her secret. Now she avenges her husband by shooting Milverton to death, then stamps on his face.

Watson instinctively begins to rush out and stop the shooting, but Holmes restrains him. Holmes understands, and Watson instantly realises, "that it was no affair of ours; that justice had overtaken a villain..." The woman runs away, and Milverton's household is roused by the shots. During his final confrontation, Milverton's entire cache of blackmail papers had been in a safe with its door slightly ajar. Holmes now feeds this mass of compromising material into Milverton's burning fireplace, despite the risk of being discovered and caught.

Then Holmes and Watson escape through the garden and over the wall. Watson has to kick himself free from a pursuer who has grabbed his leg.

The next morning, Inspector Lestrade calls at Baker Street to ask for Holmes' help in investigating Milverton's murder, which he ascribes to the two burglars seen escaping over the garden wall. He has a description of one of them: "a middle-aged, strongly built man-square jaw, thick neck, moustache..." Holmes calls that vague. "Why, it might be a description of Watson!" he says, which amuses Lestrade. But Holmes refuses Lestrade's request: "My sympathies are with the criminals, and I will not handle the case."

Later, Holmes recognises the face of the woman who killed Milverton. He shows Watson her photograph displayed in a shop-window among those of other celebrities. Watson recognises the name of her famous husband, but Holmes signals silence with a finger to his lips. Watson assures his readers that the killer in question is beyond the reach of the law [i.e. deceased] and that certain details have been disguised to hurt no one.