



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXIX -- The Adventure of The Abbey Grange

The opening of “The Adventure of the Abbey Grange” is surely one of our most treasured images of Sherlock Holmes. “The candle in his hand shone upon his eager, stooping face, and told me at a glance that something was amiss. ‘Come, Watson, come!’ he cried. ‘The game is afoot.’” And sure enough, this opening heralds a story that has everything: murder, romance, brilliant deductions, a confused Stanley Hopkins, and even a trial by jury. Please join with the Hounds as we pursue Canonical justice for those who would mistreat spouses and dogs within the once-noble walls of “The Abbey Grange.”



“Not guilty, my lord.” We often speak of Holmes’s criteria for granting mercy to those who have committed crimes. In this case, Holmes suggested that the law would probably agree with him that Crocker acted in self defense, and “under the most extreme provocation to which any man could be subjected.” On one level, Holmes was certainly referring to the fact that Sir Eustace came at Crocker with a cudgel, but is it possible that Holmes was also thinking that Crocker had been little more than a pawn in the hands of a more scheming mind than his own – possibly the maid Theresa, or even Lady Brackenstall herself?

Prior to telling the tale of her husband’s death, Mary Fraser, Lady Brackenstall, launched into quite a denunciation of the English divorce laws of the time. The Doyleans among us will be aware of the depth of feeling behind those lines, but within the context of the story, the words have the ring of an oft-repeated lament. We may imagine how often and to whom this complaint was voiced: if not to Jack Crocker, then certainly her Ladyship’s maid, Theresa Wright. And Theresa seems a clever woman as well as a devoted one. Did Theresa foresee the violent possibilities if she managed to bring the hot-tempered Crocker into the picture? Did she arrange the confrontation on the fatal night? Did she make sure that Sir Eustace would wake up in time to catch his wife with her friend Crocker?

Holmes almost had the solution to the case when he pointed out that the scene at the Abbey Grange suggested the complicity of the servants. And he even knew which one. “All things being equal, one would suspect the one at whose head the master threw a decanter.” Did he recall this later on when weighing the culpability of Captain Crocker?

I believe that you are a wizard: Holmes reproached himself for not solving the case more quickly. “If I had examined everything with care which I should have shown had we approached the case de novo and had no cut-and-dried story to warp my mind, should I not then have found something more definite to go upon? Of course I should.” And yet it seems typical of Holmes’s methods to listen to the eye-witness accounts before viewing the crime scene, and his investigation of the physical clues serve to confirm or refute the stories he heard. His mind never seemed “warped” before. Was he truly so distracted by Lady Brackenstall’s beauty and charm? Was she a dangerous woman?

Holmes gave several hints to Stanley Hopkins that might have led him to the solution of the crime, and it seems that even to the last moment, Holmes gave his pupil the opportunity to be in on the finish of the case. What might have happened had Hopkins accepted Holmes’s invitation to dinner? Did Holmes let Crocker’s fate hang on the issue of whether or not Hopkins decided to be present that evening?

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