



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XX -- The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

The "Musgrave Ritual" is a cryptic catechism of questions and answers which has been in the family for many generations — so many that the original meaning has been lost -- all male Musgraves must learn it as a rite of passage into manhood.

Musgrave finds Brunton poring over the ritual and related family documents late at night. He fires Brunton on the spot, but after much pleading on Brunton's part, allows him to remain for one week. Two days later, Brunton vanishes late at night.

Two days after Brunton's disappearance, Rachael (who has been distraught since her break-up with Brunton) also disappears. Her tracks lead into the mere. The mere is dragged and although no body is found, a linen parcel containing a number of blackened metal plates and pebbles is found.

Musgrave knew Holmes at school and asks him for his advice.

Holmes deduces that the ritual is a guide to a treasure buried on the estate long ago by noble ancestors and that this treasure is the contents of the linen parcel. He finds Brunton's body in a small subterranean vault, bent over an ancient chest. The chest is empty.

He proves that Rachael was taken into Brunton's confidence so she could help him raise the large, heavy flagstone "lid" which served as an entrance to the secret vault.



Whether she closed the lid intentionally to get revenge on her former lover or whether it closed accidentally, and she was unable to reopen it remains unresolved as she was never found.

We also never learn why the treasure was not returned to Charles I after he regained the throne.

SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

Holmes tells Watson one of his first investigations : a school friend, Reginald Musgrave, explains the problems he has with his butler, Brunton. Reginald caught him digging through the private papers of the family and with the ancestral ritual of the Musgraves in his hands, considered however worthless by the Musgraves.

A few days after this incident, Brunton disappeared, as well as Rachel Howells, a maid. The lake of the property was dredged, but only a bag containing disparate objects was found. Holmes discovers that the ritual is a code to designate a specific place. It was here that he found Brunton's corpse, in a hole closed by a huge slab of the cellar.

Brunton had deciphered the ritual and discovered the hidden treasure in the hole. But his accomplice, the maid, dropped the heavy slab above him once she got the recovered treasure. She threw the bag in the lake and fled the estate.

She had done so in revenge for Brunton who had promised him marriage and had subsequently broken up for another woman. The treasure proved to be the former crown of England, entrusted to the Musgrave after the execution of Charles I.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

In the story, Holmes recounts to Watson the events arising after a visit from a university acquaintance, Reginald Musgrave. Musgrave visits Holmes after the disappearance of two of his domestic staff, Rachel Howells, a maid, and Richard Brunton, the longtime butler. The pair vanished after Musgrave had dismissed Brunton for secretly reading a family document, the Musgrave Ritual. The Ritual, which dates from the 17th century, is a riddle set in question/response form. It reads:

Brunton studying the ritual, 1893 illustration by W. H. Hyde in Harper's Weekly

'Whose was it?'

'His who is gone.'

'Who shall have it?'

'He who will come.'

('What was the month?')

'The sixth from the first.')

'Where was the sun?'

'Over the oak.'

'Where was the shadow?'

'Under the elm.'

'How was it stepped?'

'North by ten and by ten, east by five and by five, south by two and by two, west by one and by one, and so under.'

'What shall we give for it?'

'All that is ours.'

'Why should we give it?'

'For the sake of the trust.'

Musgrave caught Brunton in the library at two o'clock one morning. Not only had he unlocked a cabinet and taken out the document in question, but he also had what looked like a chart or map, which he promptly stuffed into a pocket upon seeing his employer watching him. Brunton besought Musgrave not to dishonour him by dismissing him, and asked for a month's time to invent some reason for leaving, making it seem as though he was leaving of his own accord. Musgrave granted him a week. The story later reveals that Brunton wanted the time for something else.

A few days later, Brunton disappeared, leaving behind most of his belongings. His bed had not been slept in. No sign could be found of him. The maid, Rachel Howells, who had been Brunton's former lover until he had broken their engagement for another woman, had a hysterical fit when asked about Brunton's whereabouts, repeating over and over that he was gone. She was in such a state that another servant was posted to sit up with her at night. Eventually, however, the guarding servant nodded off one night, and the hysterical Rachel Howells escaped through a window. Her footprints led to the edge of the mere, and ended there. Musgrave had the mere dredged, but only a sack containing some rusty, mangled bits of metal, and some coloured stones or glass were found. Rachel Howells was never heard from again.

Holmes looked upon the case not as three mysteries, but as one. He considered the riddle of the ritual. It was a meaningless, absurd tradition to Musgrave, and apparently to all his ancestors going back more than two centuries, but Holmes – and Brunton, too, Holmes suspected – saw it as something very different. He quickly realized that it was a set of instructions for finding something. Ascertaining the height of the oak, which was still standing, and the position of the elm, which was now gone, Holmes performed a few calculations and paced out the route to whatever awaited him, with Musgrave now eagerly following him.

It was quite instructive to Holmes that Brunton had recently asked about the old elm tree's height as well, and that he was apparently quite intelligent.

The two men found themselves inside a doorway, momentarily disappointed, until they realized that there was the last instruction, "and so under". There was a cellar under where they were standing, as old as the house. Finding their way into it, they saw that the floor had been cleared to expose a stone slab with an iron ring on it with Brunton's muffler tied to it. Holmes thought it wise to bring the police in at this point. He and a burly Sussex policeman managed to lift the slab off the little hole that it was covering, and inside, they found an empty, rotten chest, and Brunton, who had been dead for several days. There were no marks on him. He had likely suffocated.

Holmes then put everything together for his rather shocked client. Brunton had deduced the ritual's meaning, at least insofar as it led to something valuable. He had determined the elm tree's height by asking his master, had paced out the instructions – and Holmes had later even found a peg hole in the lawn made by Brunton – had found the hiding place in the old cellar, but then had found it impossible to lift the stone slab himself. So, he had been forced to draw someone else into his treasure hunt. He had unwisely chosen Rachel Howells, who had good reason to hate him. The two of them could have lifted the slab up, but they would have needed to support it while Brunton climbed down to fetch the treasure. Based on Rachel's sudden flight and disappearance, Holmes wondered if she had deliberately kicked the supports away and left Brunton to die, or if the slab had fallen back into place by itself and caused her to panic.

As to the relics found in the bag retrieved from the mere, Holmes examined them and found that the metal parts were gold and the stones were gems. He believed that it was no less than King Charles I's ("His who is gone") medieval crown of St. Edward, being kept for his eventual successor – his son, Charles II ("He who will come"), who would not be crowned until 11 years after the execution of Charles I. The ritual had been a guide to retrieving this important symbol, and Reginald confirms that one of his ancestors, Sir Ralph Musgrave, was a king's man. Holmes theorized that the original holder of the ritual had died before teaching his son about its significance. It had thus become nothing more than a quaint custom for more than 200 years. One final plot twist is that the Musgraves are allowed to keep the crown fragments, although the ritual makes it clear that they were only to keep the relic "in trust" as it was in fact Crown property.