



Arthur Conan Doyle Encyclopedia

The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes Adventure XXI -- The Adventure of the Reigate Squire

SUMMARY (Diogenes Club)

Holmes has just completed a case in Europe and is physically and emotionally exhausted. He and Watson visit Col. Hayter at his country estate for a rest. Just prior to their visit, the home of Acton has been burglarized of a hodge-podge of items.

Shortly after Holmes' arrival, the coachman of another of Hayter's neighbors, the Cunninghams, is murdered. Forrester calls upon Hayter and asks for Holmes' help in solving same.

A fragment of a note was found clutched in Kirwin's hand.

With this small fragment of paper as a basis, Holmes solves the case. The note is reproduced below. The fragment upon which Holmes based his deductions is the outlined upper right corner.

Acton had a valid claim against a large portion of Cunningham's estate. The Cunninghams burglarized his house looking for the claim but did not find it. They took a bunch of junk to hide the real motive for the burglary. Kirwin saw them do it and was blackmailing them so they killed him, hoping to blame his murder on the "burglars" who were terrorizing the countryside.

The fate of the Cunninghams is unknown but they are apprehended and Holmes is fully rested and returns to his active life in London.



SUMMARY (ACD Encyclopedia)

Sherlock Holmes had earned a few days vacation after the arrest of Europe's greatest scoundrel. Watson suggested that he spend a week at the home of a quiet, single friend, Colonel Hayter at Reigate. When they arrived in Surrey they learn that a gang of burglars are raging in the area.

Poor old Mr. Acton has already suffered the effects, but fortunately the thieves have not taken anything of value. Holmes' convalescence doesn't last long because William Kirwan, the Cunninghams' coachman, was found murdered. The Cunninghams testify that they saw the murderer flee and that he must be one of the local burglars.

However, the evidence that Holmes is gathering shows another story. The burglars of the old Acton were the Cunninghams, who tried to grab an important piece of paper concerning a dispute between the two families. Kirwan had seen everything and wanted to blackmail his masters.

Not a good idea because the Cunninghams arranged for him never to speak again. They betrayed each other by trying to strangle Holmes, who had laid his hands on a crucial clue incriminating them, and were arrested by Inspector Forrester.

SUMMARY (Wikipedia)

Watson takes Holmes to a friend's estate near Reigate in Surrey to rest after a rather strenuous case in France. Their host is Colonel Hayter. There has recently been a burglary at the nearby Acton estate in which the thieves stole a motley assortment of things, even a ball of twine, but nothing terribly valuable. Then one morning, the Colonel's butler tells news of a murder at another nearby estate, the Cunninghams'. The victim is William Kirwan, the coachman. Inspector Forrester has taken charge of the investigation, and there is one physical clue: a torn piece of paper found in William's hand with a few words written on it, including "quarter to twelve", which was approximately the time of William's murder. Holmes takes an instant interest in the note.

One of the first facts to emerge is that there is a longstanding legal dispute between the Actons and the Cunninghams involving ownership of about half of the estate currently in the Cunninghams' hands. Holmes interviews the two Cunningham men, young Alec and his ageing father. Alec tells Holmes that he saw the burglar struggling with William when a shot went off and William fell dead, and that the burglar ran off through a hedge to the road. The elder Cunningham claims that he was in his room smoking at the time, and Alec says that he had also still been up.

Holmes knows that it would be useful to get hold of the rest of that note found in William's hand. He believes that the murderer snatched it away from William and thrust it into his pocket, never realizing that a

scrap of it was still in the murdered coachman's hand. Unfortunately, neither the police nor Holmes can get any information from William's mother, for she is quite old, deaf, and somewhat simple-minded.

Holmes, apparently still recovering from his previous strenuous case, seems to have a fit just as Forrester is about to mention the torn piece of paper to the Cunninghams. Afterward, Holmes remarks that it is extraordinary that a burglar would break into the Cunninghams' house when the Cunninghams were both still awake and had lamps lit. Holmes then apparently makes a mistake writing an advertisement that the elder Cunningham corrects.

Holmes insists on searching the Cunninghams' rooms despite their protests that the burglar could not have gone there. He sees Alec's room and then his father's, where he deliberately knocks a small table over, sending some oranges and a water carafe to the floor. The others were not looking his way at the time, and Holmes implies that the cause is Watson's clumsiness. Watson plays along and starts gathering up scattered oranges.

Everyone then notices that Holmes has left the room. Moments later, there are cries of "murder" and "help". Watson recognizes his friend's voice. He and Forrester rush to Alec's room where they find Alec trying to throttle Holmes and his father apparently twisting Holmes's wrist. The Cunninghams are quickly restrained, and Holmes tells Forrester to arrest the two for murdering William Kirwan. At first, Forrester thinks Holmes must be mad, but Holmes draws his attention to the looks on their faces – very guilty. After a revolver is knocked out of Alec's hand, the two are arrested. The gun is the one that was used to murder William, and it is seized.

Holmes has found the rest of the note, still in Alec's dressing gown pocket. It runs thus (the words in boldface are the ones on the original scrap):

"If you will only come round at quarter to twelve
to the east gate you will learn what
will very much surprise you and maybe [sic]
be of the greatest service to you and also
to Annie Morrison. But say nothing to anyone
upon the matter."

Holmes, an expert at studying handwriting, reveals that he had realized earlier from the torn piece of paper that the note was written by two men, each writing alternate words. He had perceived that one man was young, the other rather older, and that they were related, which led Holmes to conclude that the Cunninghams wrote the letter. Holmes saw that the Cunninghams' story was false since William's body has no powder burns on it, so he was not shot at point-blank range as the Cunninghams claim. The escape route also

does not bear their story out: there is a boggy ditch next to the road that the fleeing murderer would have had to cross, yet there are no signs of any footprints in it. Holmes had faked his fit to prevent the Cunninghams from being reminded about and destroying the missing part of the note, and made a mistake in the advertisement on purpose to get the elder Cunningham to write the word "twelve" by hand, to compare it with the note fragment.

The elder Cunningham's confidence is broken after his arrest and he tells all. It seems that William followed his two employers the night they broke into the Acton estate (Holmes has already deduced that it was they, in pursuit of documents supporting Mr. Acton's legal claim, which they did not find). William then proceeded to blackmail his employers – not realizing that it was dangerous to do such a thing to Alec – and they thought to use the recent burglary scare as a plausible way of getting rid of him. With a bit more attention paid to detail, they might very well have evaded all suspicion.