

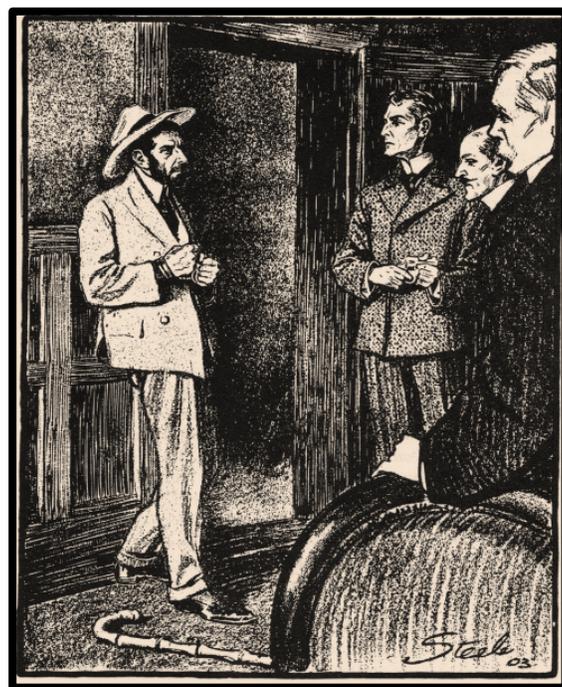


The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXX -- The Adventure of the Dancing Men

Is there a sadder story in the entire Canon than this one of Hilton Cubitt and his wife Elsie? And to think that Holmes had his hand on the key to it all, but still could not prevent the tragedy from happening! Despite the disastrous outcome, this remains one of Holmes's great cases, made perhaps the more memorable because of our thoughts of how it might have turned out so much for the better. But since discussing "what might have been" is something the Hounds do particularly well, I hope you will join the pack again this week as we dog the footsteps of those strange figures known as "The Dancing Men."

"We have let this affair go far enough." We should never forget that Abe Slaney is the real villain here, regardless of any mistakes made by the good people involved in the story. However, it's impossible to discuss "The Dancing Men" without dealing with the question of how much blame we should ascribe to Holmes for the death of Hilton Cubitt. Should Holmes have acted more quickly? Was he distracted by the challenge of the cipher, or was he simply waiting for more information, so that he would not take the wrong kind of action? Was he thinking of Norbury, and therefore hesitant to draw his conclusions too rapidly? Was he merely following the wishes of Hilton Cubitt himself, not to betray Elsie's trust or create a public scandal?



The dating of this story is interesting. Queen Victoria had Jubilees in both 1887 and 1897, and though the later year (placing the story in 1898) has more support among chronologists, the evidence is by no means conclusive. Leaving aside the more tangible evidence each way, does this case seem more like early Holmes or Post-Hiatus Holmes? Assuming Holmes was at least somewhat at fault in this case, did he fail because of youthful arrogance, or were his powers deteriorating with age?

Because I looked for it: Holmes's investigation of the crime scene is one of his masterpieces, and I find it particularly remarkable that he chose to interview the cook and housemaid before looking at the scene itself. Did Holmes always work this way: listen first and then look? What might have made him want to hear about this crime first, before seeing the evidence for himself?

Watson wrote, "As we drove up to the porticoed front door, I observed in front of it, beside the tennis lawn, the black tool-house and the pedestalled sundial." Isn't this a strange layout for a country house: to have a tool shed and a sundial in the front of the house? Were sundials commonly used as places to leave and pick up messages, or is this only a custom of people with problems of the kind that would interest Sherlock Holmes? Wouldn't a sundial in the front of the house be a particularly bad place to leave a message?

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