



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXIV -- The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton

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Time frame of story (known/surmised):

Unknown. Watson used due suppression and deliberately concealed the date and other facts by which the actual occurrence might be traced.

Holmes & Watson living arrangements:

Sharing quarters at 221B.

Opening scene:

Holmes & Watson returned from one of their evening rambles about six o'clock on a cold, frosty winter's evening, to find the calling card of Charles Augustus Milverton, with whom Holmes had made the appointment. Holmes described Milverton to Watson as the king of all blackmailers, as having a smiling face and a heart of marble, would will squeeze and squeeze until he drained his victims dry, a genius in his way, one who could have made his mark in some more savoury trade.



Client:

Another illustrious client, who placed her piteous case in the hands of Holmes. It was the Lady Eva Blackwell, the most beautiful débutante of the previous season. She planned to be married in a fortnight to the Earl of Dovercourt, and hired Holmes to deal with Milverton on her behalf.

Crime or concern:

Blackmail.

Villain:

Charles Augustus Milverton, the worst man in London, as cunning as the Evil One.

Motive:

Milverton was in the blackmail business. His method: He allowed it to be known that he was prepared to pay very high sums for letters which compromised people of wealth and position. He received those wares not only from treacherous valets or maids, but frequently from genteel ruffians, who had gained the confidence and affection of trusting women. He dealt with no niggardly hand. He once paid seven hundred pounds to a footman for a note two lines in length, and the ruin of a noble family was the result. Everything which was in the market went to Milverton, and there were hundreds in London who turned white at his name. He would hold a card back for years in order to play it at the moment when the stake was best worth winning.

Holmes method:

Bargaining did not work. Milverton boldly told Holmes that if the client's purse could not cover the price, he would simply go ahead and expose his victim. As he explained, "An exposure would profit me indirectly to a considerable extent. I have eight or ten similar cases maturing. If it was circulated among them that I had made a severe example of the Lady Eva, I should find all of them much more open to reason."

Since Milverton would not cut a deal, Holmes decided to burgle his house, and retrieve the indiscreet letters. He spent some days disguised as a workman in the vicinity of Milverton's house, and became engaged to the housemaid. He portrayed a plumber with a rising business, Escott, by name, and walked out with her each evening. He got all (the information) he wanted, and knew Milverton's house as he knew the palm of his hand.

Policemen:

Inspector Lestrade.

Holmes' fees:

Not stated, but it was known that £2000 would have been a drain upon Lady Eva's resources, and that Milverton's price was utterly beyond her power. Presumably, Holmes was more reasonable.

Transport:

Milverton arrived at 221B in a stately carriage pulled by a pair of noble chestnuts with glossy haunches.

Holmes & Watson in Oxford Street picked up a hansom and drove to an address in Hampstead.

Food:

Holmes & Watson had some cold supper at 9:30 before starting on their illegal mission. On the following day Holmes & Watson had breakfasted and were smoking their morning pipe when Lestrade came to see them.

Drink:

No mention

Vices:

Disguised as Escott the young workman, with a goatee beard and a swagger, Holmes lit his clay pipe at the lamp before descending into the street.

During the burglary, Holmes & Watson entered a room in which a cigar had been smoked not long before. The next room too, was heavy with tobacco smoke. Then when Milverton almost walked in on them, Holmes & Watson discerned the pungent reek of a strong cigar. Milverton was blowing smoke rings.

Other cases mentioned:

None

Notable Quotables:

"Dr. Watson is my friend and partner." – Holmes

Watson wanted to help with the burglary: “I give you my word of honour — and I never broke it in my life — that I will take a cab straight to the police-station and give you away, unless you let me share this adventure with you.” – Watson to Holmes

Watson, on the thrill of committing the burglary: “My first feeling of fear had passed away, and I thrilled now with a keener zest than I had ever enjoyed when we were the defenders of the law instead of its defiers. The high object of our mission, the consciousness that it was unselfish and chivalrous, the villainous character of our opponent, all added to the sporting interest of the adventure. Far from feeling guilty, I rejoiced and exulted in our dangers.”

“I don’t mind confessing to you that I have always had an idea that I would have made a highly efficient criminal. This is the chance of my lifetime in that direction.” – Holmes

“You’ve done me.” – The last words Milverton ever spoke on this earth.

Other interestings:

Holmes was betrothed to Agatha, Milverton’s housemaid, and pumped her for information on the household. Watson was aghast, but Holmes assures him there was a hated rival who would no doubt cut him out the instant his back was turned.

Milverton wore a shaggy astrakhan overcoat. Astrakhan is a Russian city near the Caspian sea, known for fine wool made of the dark curly fleece of lambs raised there.

Watson was described by a witness as a middlesized, strongly built man — square jaw, thick neck, and a moustache.

When all was said and done:

Holmes & Watson’s burglary succeeded; they got the papers from the safe and burned them. But while they were engaged in that, another of Milverton’s victims paid him a midnight visit and pumped him full of lead. The noise raised the household, and Holmes & Watson barely escaped over the garden wall. A close shave. Lestrade knew, but did nothing (our interpretation, not given as a fact by Watson).

The next morning Holmes recalled face of the killer, and verified by looking at a display of photographs the time-honoured title of the great nobleman and statesman whose wife was the vengeful victim of Milverton. In the photo she was a regal and stately lady in Court dress, with a high diamond tiara upon her noble head.

McMurdo’s Camp