



The Return of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure XXXIX – The Adventure of the Abbey Grange

Once again, Stanley Hopkins summoned Holmes and Watson to the scene of a crime. This time in the early dark of a bitterly cold winter morning. But when they arrived at the Abbey Grange, an estate of wealthy Sir Eustace Brackenstall, Hopkins greeted them with an apology. The matter was not as mysterious as he had first thought, Hopkins said. The murder of Sir Eustace was obviously the work of the Randall gang, a group of three burglars: a father and his two sons. Cut-and-dried, said Hopkins. Sorry to have bothered you on such a morning.

At first, Holmes agreed. The apparent facts of the case, as related by Sir Eustace's widow Lady Mary Fraser Brackenstall, were overwhelmingly convincing. And yet...and yet...Holmes turned the case over and over in his mind while he and Watson were returning to Baker Street. His instincts told him that something was not right in the scenario as it had been depicted. Reversing course, he and Watson headed back to the Abbey Grange for another look.

If Moran was the most dangerous man in London and Milverton was the worst man in London, what sobriquet would apply to Sir Eustace Brackenstall? I have always considered him to be a complete scoundrel, as Izaak Walton might have put it. Here we have a man who beats his wife and stabs her with a hatpin, among other indignities which we can only imagine.

He hurls a decanter (probably after he had emptied it first) at his wife's faithful maid, and in a fit of abominable cruelty, soaks a little dog in petroleum and ignites it. Is there a more despicable character anywhere in the Canon?



Watson tells us that Lady Mary Brackenstall is a handsome woman with a fine figure, who evidently wore a black sequin-covered dinner-dress the evening of her husband's murder. Given her professed intense dislike for her husband, why would she go to the trouble of dressing so finely for dinner?

Lady Brackenstall was of a fair complexion; Watson rather lasciviously mentions her "white, round limbs." In her narrative, she tells Holmes that her assailant "caught me first by the wrist and then by the throat." But Watson mentions no bruises in either place, which surely would have occurred if someone so fair-skinned was roughly handled. Why would Lady Brackenstall tell such a story when she did not have the marks to show for it?

Supposedly, Lady Brackenstall was "so firmly bound that [she] could not move," and yet we learn that "In releasing the lady, the cord had been slipped off her, but the knots with which it had been secured still remained." How was this possible, particularly with the cord twined through the structure of the chair to which the victim was bound? (Kids, don't try this at home!)

Chislehurst, and the Abbey Grange, was located near Sydenham. Was it a coincidence that Jack Croker lived in Sydenham, or perhaps did he follow Mary Fraser Brackenstall after her marriage to Sir Eustace? In any case, when Croker decided to tell Holmes the whole story, he thought about it for a little, and then cried, "I'll chance it!" But what choice did he have, really?

The above are prolegomena to the central question: Was Croker as innocent as he proclaimed? The same set of circumstances, the same clues would have been present had he and Mary Fraser Brackenstall conspired to get rid of her abusive and sodden spouse. The only fact he would have needed to alter was that the tryst was innocent. Holmes is by nature a suspicious man, given to questioning apparent "facts." Was he justified in allowing Croker to go free?

We have had several exposures to Stanley Hopkins in the past few weeks. Once more, I ask the Hounds: Is his performance in ABBE in any wise improved over what we have witnessed in the previous cases?

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