

Watson's Quick Mysteries

A Locked Room Mystery

"What do you think, Watson?" Sherlock Holmes asked.

Dr. Watson arose from his examination of the body lying on the stretcher.

"Well, Holmes, there is little doubt that Lord Bennington died from a gunshot wound to the head.

"It doesn't take a doctor to see that.

"There are powder burns around the wound.

"He was certainly shot at close range.

"All seems to be consistent with a self-inflicted wound."

"Is that your conclusion, too?"

Holmes directed this question to Inspector Lestrade.

"There has been no official pronouncement from The Yard as yet, Mr. Holmes, but most of the evidence seems to point to a simple case of suicide." Lestrade answered.

"Then why did you call on us?" Mr. Holmes wanted to know.

"Wait... you said, 'most of the evidence'?"

"Well, yes. The windows were all locked from the inside and no one else was found in the room.

"This is the only door and we had to break it down to gain access to the room.

"There is no other way in or out of the room... Yet..." the Inspector hesitated.

"Yet? Yet what?"

"One thing has been disturbing me, Mr. Holmes.

"If you will look at the arrangement of items on his desk you can see that they indicate that Lord Bennington was left-handed.

"Would you agree, Mr. Holmes?"

"Yes, the teacup is on the left side of the desk with the handle pointed to the left and his writing tablet has its top slanted toward the right.

"Left handedness would seem to be indicated.

"We can confirm that issue by asking the servants," Mr. Holmes suggested.

"Certainly, and one of our constables is interrogating them now.

"I doubt that our observations will be contradicted.

"And therein lies the problem, Mr. Holmes, you see, the revolver was found in Lord Bennington's right hand," the Inspector said almost in a whisper.

"Humm," Sherlock Holmes mused, "Let us examine this matter further.

"You had to break down the door to enter the room, is that correct?"

"Yes, sir, and it took four of our lads to do it, too.

"That was a solid one, it was."

"Yes, I see that the whole wooden door facing was ripped off the wall and the door is barely dangling on its hinges.

"How was the door locked?"

"Well, the bolt controlled by the key was thrown into the receiver on the frame and that connection was so sturdy that the whole door facing came completely loose before the lock gave way."

"Was the key in the lock on the inside of the door?" Holmes asked.

"No, it was lying on the floor on the inside of the room, but it could well have been dislodged from the keyhole by our vigor of our lads' force.

"I can see no way in which any second person could have gotten in or out of that room without unlocking the door," Lestrade puzzled.

"Not only that, Mr. Holmes, but the latch chain was fastened, too.

"You know how those security latches function, Mr. Holmes.

"The chain is attached to the door facing and it has a little knob on it which fits into a receiver screwed to the door, itself.

"When the chain is in place, the door can only be opened an inch, or two, before the chain stops it.

"Such a chain can only reach the receiver if the door is closed.

"It has to be latched from the inside and, once latched, nothing

larger than a small kitten could have gotten out of that door."

"Yes, I see that the screws holding the chain plate have been torn completely out of the door facing, too."

"Quite, Mr. Holmes, our lads smashed that door in with considerable vigor.

"I'm not surprised that the chain torn completely off its wooden

mount," Lestrade said with a hint of both humor and satisfaction.

"And therein might well lie a solution to a problem which seems to have no solution.

Let me suggest, Lestrade, that you ask your fine constabulary associates to press their interrogations further.

I suspect that the matter at hand is not suicide at all, but more likely, murder!"

The Answer to the Mystery is on the next page.

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Answer to the Quiz

As Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson walked back to Baker Street, Dr. Watson reviewed the details of the case.

"I understand, Holmes, that it is unlikely that a left-handed man would shoot himself using his right hand, but such is not an impossibility."

"True, old friend," Mr. Sherlock Holmes confirmed.

"But what other explanation could there be for Lord Bennington's death."

"No one could have gotten out of that room."

"The uncommonly strong key bolt had been thrown and the latch chain was in place."

"I am completely baffled, old man."

"My dear Watson, there are several ways in which a key operated lock can be activated from the outside in such a way as to make it appear that the door was locked from the inside."

"For example, there is the old trick of inserting a thin piece of metal, a small nail for example, into the handle of the key and tying that to a long piece of string."

"The key is placed in the lock, the nail properly angled, and the string stretched underneath the door."

"A sharp tug on the string can take advantage of the leverage of the inserted nail and turn the key."

"At the same motion, if luck is with the perpetrator, the nail will fall loose and can be retrieved underneath the door - but, if all goes well, the key, itself, will remain in the keyhole."

"Then string and nail are simply stuffed into the perpetrator's pocket as he, or she, strolls casually away."

"It is a matter of elementary physics, my dear Watson."

"However, in this case the murderer didn't have to be nearly so clever or so dexterous."

"This one simply locked the door from the outside and slid the key back into the room underneath the door."

"The murderer knew that the door would have to be broken in in order to gain access to the room, and the presence of the key on the floor, instead of in the keyhole, would be accounted for in just the erroneous fashion suggested by Lestrade."

"But the latch chain?"

"How could that possibly be connected from the outside, Holmes?"

"Now, that was a stroke of genius."

"Think for a moment, Watson, the key operated bolt is a strong piece of steel which slides, firmly and rigidly, between the door and the door frame."

"It was this firmness and rigidity that caused the door facing to be ripped completely off the doorframe."

"That ripping of the wooden facing must have occurred when the bolt exerted force against the door facing."

"Now, consider the latch chain."

"Before the chain would experience any tension, the door would have to be separated an inch or two from the facing; before such separation, the chain would be slack."

"But, as you noticed, the chain on Lord Bennington's door was ripped completely out of its moorings."

"There should have been either no, or negligible, damage to that fixture because the door facing would have ripped loose before the separation between the door and its facing became so large as to rip the chain off its moorings."

"The facing and the door would have moved together once the facing had been ripped off."

"Here is what happened."

"The perpetrator killed poor Lord Bennington, placed the gun in his hand - the wrong hand - this was a careless mistake, if he had not done this, Lestrade would not have called us and the perpetrator would, in all probability, have gotten completely away with murder."

"Then, in order to enhance the locked room illusion, the murderer very cleverly went to the closed door, fastened the chain, and tugged sharply on the door from the inside hard enough to tear the screws holding the chain from the wood."

“He then went out of the room, locked the door, and slid the key underneath the door so that it would be found on the inside.

“The murderer knew that it would be assumed that the chain had been ripped loose in the violent breaking of the door and that the key had been also dislodged from the keyhole by that same force.

“The perpetrator couldn't have known that the door facing would tear completely off the wall and, therefore, the chain and facing should have been still attached, or, at most, slightly damaged.

“That chain was ripped loose before the constables smashed the door to gain entrance.”

“But how could the murderer be sure that there wasn't a duplicate key

which would obviate smashing the door?” Watson asked.

“That, old man, would suggest the direction of Scotland Yard's further investigation.

“They must most diligently search for a singular person among Lord Bennington's servants, friends, or associates who knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Lord Bennington's door had only one key.”