

Watson's Quick Mysteries

Another Case of Identity

"I say, Watson, why do you suppose all those policemen are milling around that house over there?"

"I wonder what game might be afoot."

Sherlock Holmes said to me as our hansom rattled along Oxford Street just past the intersection with Duke Street.

"I have no idea, Holmes." I admitted, "but, look, there is Lestrade among the gathered constabulary.

"We could ask him."

"Good idea, Watson.

"Pull up here, driver!"

"Very good, sir."

Sherlock Holmes and I threaded our way among the crowd of onlookers and Bobbies until we located our old associate, Inspector Lestrade.

"Well, Lestrade, what seems to be the trouble here?"

"Why are all these folks gathered about?" Holmes asked.

"Oh, hello there, Mr. Holmes.

"A great tragedy has occurred here but nothing which would be of interest to you."

"Perhaps it is a matter more in Dr. Watson's line."

"There is a dead man, but it is clearly a case of suicide."

"The body is still here."

"Perhaps you would like to take a look at him, Dr. Watson."

Lestrade led us into the large, tastefully decorated foyer and indicated that we were to take the stairs to an upper floor.

Just then a well-dressed gentleman entered the foyer maneuvering his rather awkward wheelchair through the door leading to what appeared to be a drawing room.

"Mr. Holmes. Dr. Watson.

"This is Alexander Maxwell."

"It is Mr. Maxwell's brother, Bennington, who was the victim of the unfortunate... accident."

"Nice to meet you, Mr. Holmes, Dr. Watson."

"Such a tragic affair."

"Poor Ben had been under a lot of strain lately."

"I'm afraid that I was a part of his trouble."

"You see, since the accident which left me in this state," Alexander Maxwell made a gesture with his head toward the wheelchair, "Ben has been my sole source of support, not to mention comfort."

"I don't know whatever I will do without him," Mr. Maxwell could not prevent his voice from breaking or his chin from quivering with emotion as he lamented his brother's passing and his own present plight, "all I have left is poor Bennington's insurance, but that won't last very long."

"Insurance?" asked Sherlock Holmes, "Life insurance ordinarily does not pay in the event of a... uh... self-induced death."

"My brother's policy had a five year suicide exclusion."

"He has had the policy for almost eight years, now." Mr. Maxwell explained.

"I see," said Sherlock Holmes, "I see."

"Would it be possible for us to go upstairs now, Lestrade?"

As Inspector Lestrade led us upstairs, Sherlock Holmes stopped several times to examine the carpet which served as a stair runner.

"Very fine carpet, Watson, an unusually thick pile, don't you think?" Holmes observed and asked.

"Quite," I agreed without really knowing whether the carpet was unusual or not.

I was shocked when Lestrade lifted the cover from the dead man's face.

"Holmes," I ejaculated, "it is the same man with whom we spoke downstairs!"

"Sorry, Doctor," Lestrade interrupted with an explanation.

"Didn't I mention that Alexander and Bennington Maxwell were not only brothers but identical twin brothers."

"My word!"

"Would you uncover the rest of the body, please, Lestrade?" Holmes asked.

After Lestrade lifted the cover, Holmes spent several minutes examining the body.

He seemed particularly interested in the dead man's shoes.

"Where was the body found hanging?" Holmes asked of Lestrade.

"Just here from this beam," the Inspector indicated.

"Who found the body?"

"Well, there was no one in the house except the two brothers.

"Mr. Alexander said that he saw his brother go upstairs, where, of

course, he couldn't go himself because of his infirmity, and when Mr. Bennington didn't return for over two hours, Mr. Alexander became concerned.

"He called for his brother but got no answer.

"He then went to the front door and called a passing Bobby who actually went upstairs and found the body hanging from that beam."

"I see," Holmes mused, "may we go back downstairs now?

"I have seen all that I think important here."

As we passed the grieving Alexander Maxwell in the foyer, Holmes stopped for a moment to chat with him.

"I must say, Mr. Maxwell, you are a most fashionable dresser.

"Your shoes are among the most handsome I have seen.

"Have you had them long?"

"In spite of my infirmity, Mr. Holmes, I do try to keep my appearance respectable.

"These shoes? Why, now that you ask, my brother bought each of us

an identical pair just a few weeks ago.

"They are relatively new."

"I see," was Holmes' noncommittal response.

As we left the house, Holmes excused himself for a few minutes and spoke with Lestrade quietly beside the front doorway.

"Dreadful business suicide," I commented when he joined me again.

"I couldn't agree more, Watson, suicide is a dreadful business, but I do not believe that such was the business in this house."

"Whatever do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't believe that Mr. Maxwell committed suicide.

"I believe that this house has been witness to murder.

"I have also advised Lestrade to have a police physician give the surviving Mr. Maxwell a thorough physical examination."

"My word, Holmes, whatever led you to that conclusion?"

The Answer to the Mystery is on the next page.

Answer to the Quiz

"My suspicions were first aroused when Mr. Maxwell seemed to have intimate knowledge of the subtle details of his brother's insurance coverage.

"A suicide exclusion clause, when such is written into a policy, is a thoroughly conventional and routine matter and would be scarcely noticed by anyone other than the individual who purchased the policy and who had been particularly apprised of its conditions or, perhaps, someone who hoped to be a beneficiary who had spent some time perusing the policy looking for just such a provision."

"But that is a conjecture on your part, old man," I commented, "you couldn't know that the brothers had not actually discussed the provisions of the policy."

"True, Watson, it was but a matter of suspicion at first," Holmes admitted, "but, then, there were the footprints in the carpet."

"Footprints?"

"Yes, in spite of the fact that the members of the constabulary had trampled up and down the stairs destroying all sorts of evidence, there were a few very deep impressions remaining.

The position of those impressions, that is, close to the banister upon which a person might lean for support, along with the depth of the indentations, led me to believe that a very corpulent person, or someone carrying a heavy load, mounted those stairs.

And since Mr. Bennington Maxwell could not have weighed more than ten, perhaps eleven, stone, I favor the latter contingency.

"I think that Mr. Maxwell was killed, or rendered unconscious, on the lower floor then taken upstairs for the staging of a counterfeit suicide."

"But who could have done such a thing? There was no evidence of anyone's being in the house other than the two brothers.

"Mr. Alexander Maxwell could scarcely have mustered such a feat considering his decrepitude."

"Do you remember, Watson, a gentleman named Josiah Amberley?" Holmes asked.

"That retired colourman; a horrible business.

"Ghastly double murder!" I recalled with revulsion.

"Yes, but do you remember the man, himself?"

"I think so.

"Strange creature; small, frail, back bent over as though carrying a great burden..."

"Legs, Watson, do you remember his legs?"

I mused for a moment and then remembered, "Why yes, he had one artificial leg."

"I observed that at first glance, do you remember how."

"Uh... something about his shoes, if memory serves."

"Yes, the artificial foot does not bend, hence the shoe worn upon such a foot does not undergo usual wear."

"Such a shoe does not show the customary creases which occur behind the toes and along the sides; those signs of use which appear on shoes worn upon normal feet."

"A shoe which is never walked in will show that same dearth of ordinary wear."

"A man confined to a wheel chair should have shoes very much like Josiah Amberley's smooth right one."

"The gentleman in the wheelchair was wearing two well creased shoes."

"Those shoes had been walked in and to some considerable extent."

"A man confined to a wheelchair should not have shoes exhibiting such evidence of having been flexed."

"Really? I didn't notice."

"You see, but you do not observe, Watson."

"You probably did not notice the shoes adorning the feet of the dead man, either."

"Those shoes were as smooth as though they had just been taken out to the box fresh from the haberdasher's."

"In addition, the soles of those shoes were remarkably clean."

"They had never been worn outside of a house by anyone."

"You mean...?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so.

"That is why I advised the physical examination of the man in the wheelchair.

"I suspect that things are not as they seem.

"I believe that the dead man was the crippled brother, Alexander, and that the man in the wheelchair is Bennington Maxwell undertaking a brazen impersonation of his less ambulatory brother in an attempt to collect the benefits of his own life insurance.

"I think that a physical examination will confirm my suspicion that the legs of the Mr. Maxwell who currently

occupies that wheelchair are as sound as yours or mine."

"And if we had not happened along at a propitious time he might well have gotten away with it!"

"Surely, Watson, surely.

"The fates do, indeed, wind a tangled skein."