The Continuing Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

THE PHANTOM OF SORREL HOUSE
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It was during that memorable dry autumn of 1886, a factor that would play a significant role in the case I am about to chronicle. I had been visiting a seriously ill patient and on my late return to our Baker Street lodgings fully expected to find my companion gone to bed. I was somewhat astonished then to find him slumped in his chair, listening to a tall young gentleman who had evidently been pacing our floorboards.

"Ah, just in time. Mr. Hugh Banks. My companion, Dr. John Watson Pray continue your narrative. And speak as freely as you will."

The gentleman viewed me with an appraising eye.

"I suppose it makes no difference. As I said, my uncle, Sir Godfrey sorrel, made his fortune in the Far East. He speaks little of it, but his experiences there seem to have left him superstitious and secretive. And ill. Uncle Godfrey had been born with hemophilia, a disease of the blood, and has always been of rather poor constitution. He retired home at a relatively young age and now lives in Sussex with his only son Keifer. My brother Andrew and I have grown quite fond of Uncle Godfrey. And, since he rarely ventures off the estate, Andrew and I have taken to visiting him."

"You were there just this weekend," Holmes said, "if I am to trust the red Sussex clay clinging to the instep of your left boot. And what was the emergency that made you catch the 9:42 Paddington Express from Ripley?"

"It was the 9:42. Very skillful." Hugh Banks allowed himself a fleeting smile. "My uncle, you see, has developed an interest in astronomy, and through that pursuit has grown fascinated with the spirit world. After dinner this evening, he persuaded us to assist him in a seance. A harmless pursuit, all the rage with women, so I hear. The spirit sitting itself did not seem very successful. Uncle Godfrey lapsed into some sort of trance and mumbled a lot of nonsense. On leaving the room, however, I was just shutting the door behind me when I saw the knife. It was a deadly looking thing and was pinning a note to the outside of the dining room door."

My companion sat up and stretched out an arm. Banks produced the note from his waistcoat and Holmes read aloud.

"Godfrey sorrel, Prepare to die. You will meet your maker at exactly two tomorrow afternoon. Sleep well. (signed) a phantom from
your past.”

Uncle Godfrey grew quite alarmed. The servants had seen no intruder which only increased his nervous state. He begged me to come to London and enlist your help. We tried to assure him it was merely a mean-spirited prank.”

“On the contrary,” Holmes said, his gaze still firmly on the note. “The threat is quite genuine. We will be joining you at Sorrel House tomorrow morning. Tonight you have nothing to fear. Since your phantom went to so much trouble as to warn his victim, we can only assume he'll abide by his timetable. Good-night, Mr. Banks.”

* * *

All the next morning, the surrey line of the admirably reliable British rail system wa under going unanticipated delays. As was his habit, Holmes sat silently in our compartment, revealing not a glimmer of his thoughts. He might well have been asleep except for the light rapping of fingers on the armrest.

“Most intriguing problem,” I ventured. It wa slightly past noon and we were finally crawling into the Ripley station.

“Indeed,” Holmes answered, opening his eyes at long last. “Though probably for a different reason than you have in mind. Ah, Banks has sent a trap and driver. Splendid.”

A warm ride through a bright autumn day brought us to a Palladian pile called Sorrel House, framed at the rear by a woods on one side and a lake on the other. Hugh Banks met us at the door, his hands clenched in distress.

“Distracted but not overwrought,” Holmes addressed him. “Am I to assume that our uncle has taken matters into his own hands?”

“Quite,” Banks said with embarrassment, leading the way through the great hall and out to a pillared portico beyond. He stood on the top step and pointed to a brick cottage not far from the edge of the woods. “Uncle Godfrey has blockaded himself inside. He had the servants lay a fire, bring in food and tea. Then he locked the door with the only key. He intends to remain put until well after two.”

Holmes regarded the cottage. “Single door? Facing us?”
Banks nodded. "How many windows?"

"One. Facing the woods. Long and vertical. Not wide enough to admit a man. I visited my uncle at about ten this morning and he allowed me in. He had changed into a dressing gown and was occupied with a book. I could not persuade him to exit."

"And why should you?" Holmes queried. A heavyset youth in shirtsleeves had suddenly joined us. "Ah," Holmes continued. A gentleman tanned from country life and bearing no marked resemblance to yourself. Mr. Keifer Sorrel, good-day."

Sorrel smiled broadly. "Mr. Holmes, I presume. Thank you for coming." The Jolly fellow proceeded to shake our hand as the more formal introductions were made. "Father has always been rather tight-lipped about his past life. We youngsters were always left with the feeling of oriental brigands and dark deeds." He grew suddenly serious. "For someone to seek revenge after all these years, and in such a mysterious manner..."

"Yes," Holmes interrupted. "When did you last see your father?"

"An hour or more ago. He seemed quite settled in, less in a nervous state. I tried to persuade him to shutter the window."

"Really?" Hugh Banks was taken aback. "The window was shuttered tight when I was in there. We had to use candles."

Sorrel smiled again. "The candles became hard on his eyes. But there's a sleeping alcove completely out of sight of the window. Father promised me he would spend the afternoon there. He locked the door behind me when I left. He should be safe."

"For now," Holmes agreed as he consulted his pocketwatch. Like the rest of us, Holmes had been observing a third yourn man. For a minute or more, the gentleman had stood by the cottage door ten disappeared around the side. Half a minute later, he emerged from the other side of the brick structure and began striding toward us across the lawn.

"Uncle must be asleep in the alcove," he said as he strode within earshot. "I tried rousing him at the door but he wouldn't answer my knock."

"So we saw. Was the window unshuttered?" Holmes asked.

"Yes. I peered inside. He was nowhere in sight. I don't believe I've had the pleasure." Andrew Banks did not extend his hand. The affability of nature his elder brother held no place in his elder brother held no place in his hard features. Holmes seemed unaware of his reserve and exchanged pleasantries with greater than usual warmth.

Andrew Banks and the younger Sorrel soon retreated into the
house as Hugh Banks performed the duties of host and offered us refreshments. Holmes accepted for the both of us on the condition that we could enjoy them in the bright sunshine of the portico. This was easily arranged and we sipped our tea on Indian wicker with a view of the cottage across the lawn.

As the hour approached 1:30, the agitation that had been gnawing the pit of my stomach since our arrival became almost unbearable. "Holmes," I whispered. "Shouldn't we at least walk out to see him?"

"Shortly," he whispered in return. "Sir Godfrey will remain safe as long as our three young gentlemen remain in Sorrel House."

"Pardon me." Hugh Banks was standing by a column several feet away. "I couldn't help overhearing. As it happens, Keifer and y brother are not in the house. While I was pouring, I saw them following the hedge toward the woods and the lake."

"Good heavens, man, why didn't you say so?" Holmes sprang from his chair. "Watson come. There's no time to waste."

The three of us went racing out toward the cottage with holmes in the lead. We had traversed a full half of th lawn when a terrified scream halted us in our tracks. It had come form the cottage.

"It's half past one only," I sputtered

"Blast it. Of Course. Watson, I've been a fool. Come. Help me break it down."

Andrew Banks and Keifer Sorrel also heard the scream and, by the time the door was broken off its hinges, had joined us at the entrance. What lay inside, just under the window, was the prostrate form of Sir Godfrey Sorrel, still in his dressing gown, an evil looking dagger piercing the space between his shoulder blades.

"Odd that a man seeking revenge should stab his victim in the back," Holmes muttered. "Blood still liquid and trickling. a messy job. And deep. I'm surprised he had the strength to scream." Holmes turned quickly, his effort at self-control quite evident. "Mr. Banks. Mr. Sorrel. Did you see anyone?"

Andrew Banks shook his head angrily. "No one. As two o'clock neared, my cousin and I grew concerned. We decided to perform a
search of the grounds, I by the lake, Keifer in the woods. Perhaps if you had done the same, sir, instead of drinking tea...”

Holmes dismissed him with a wave. “If you gentlemen will excuse us Dr. Watson and I have work to do.”

Once we were left alone, Holmes crossed to the fireside and knelt. The room was oppressively warm. A small fire crackled in the grate and a kettle bubbled on the hearth. A steaming hot cup of tea rested on the table. The window was unshuttered but latched securely from the inside.

I ventured an observation. “Sir Godfrey had just poured himself a cup when he was attacked. But how did the killer get in and out? for the past hour, we have been watching the only possible exit.”

“A phantom, no doubt,” Holmes said with annoying scorn. “As the note predicted, though his timing was off by half an hour. You noticed, of course, no key. Sir Godfrey held the door’s only key and now it’s gone.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” I sighed. “And I’m sure you will tell me a dozen other things I didn’t see.”
"Not a dozen, old friend. Other than Sir Godfrey’s telescope on the lawn, the blood smears on the floor, the missing item of Godfrey’s apparel and this..." He held up a small white button covered with fireplace ashes. "Once the fire is extinguished, I’m sure we’ll find this little fellow’s mates. Other than these, I don’t believe there is very much here to see."

"But how in blazes did the killer leave? Fly up the chimney?"

"Hardly. I was stupid from the beginning, I admit. but at least I have the satisfaction of knowing I could not have prevented this death. A small but significant satisfaction. And now, dear Watson, let us go after our quarry."

Can you match
Sherlock Holmes' powers of observation?
Complete the jigsaw puzzle and examine it for vital clues.
Even after the confession and the arrest, I admit to being as confused as ever. "How did Keifer Sorrel manage to kill his father?"

Holmes explained. "From the start, I knew it wasn't an outsider. An outsider could not have knifed a note to the dining room door. Sorrel had to have been in the house at the time. I think that's why we missed the note. An outsider was just as likely a suspect as Sorrel was, and it was his father."

I nodded. "That's sensible." The sky was clear.

"Quite possible. During his 11:30 visit, Keifer stabbed his father to death. He opened the shutters, then dragged the body under the window. The blood, he used as camouflage before leaving. Keifer put on a false set of clothes, and his only misstep involved him shirt. blood had accidentally split on it. Sorrel's solution was to burn the bloody item in the fireplace, then take his father's shirt from the chair and wear it. The buttons in the grate naturally turned my attention to the one suspect with a shirt, and I took his father's. A key and simply locked."

"What about the scream?" I protested. "What about the hot tea and the flowing blood?"

Holmes smiled. "If Keifer's blood was not hot, it would not have clotted. The room was also warm, thereby slowing the body's natural cooling. The steaming hot tea was the only sticking point for me, until I saw Sir Godfrey's telescope out on the lawn. A dou-
ble-convex lens is quite capable of focusing sunlight through a window pane. I suspected something was off, and I kept my time table. Our presence here frightened him into earlier action. While Andrew Banks was searching for intruders, Sorrel came through the woods to this window. Approximately three minutes' worth of focused sundial meets its death, and a dramatic cremation would bring us all running. If you inspect that tele-
scope, Watson, I believe you'll find the double-convex lens lifts out quite easily."

I pondered for a moment. "So, Sir Godfrey was dead before we even arrived."

Holmes nodded. "It was obvious to me from the very first."

Miss Withers tried again. "George Ringley is about as opposite to Victor as could be imagined. Though only an inch or two taller, George is clean-shaven with a lean face. His habits are slowly, his voice like graper and his manner coarse. While Victor smoked cigars endlessly, George abstained. Their daily routines were also quite different. Victor was often up and out of the house almost before the sun was rising, while George breakfasted in the sitting room, smoking a civilized hour then walked to the bank."

"Fellow lodgers often have differing lives," Holmes said with the smallest crack of a smile. "I suppose sharing with someone on a schedule so different made life easier. Mrs. Sumner said it was an odd evening when they had to prepare two dinners for their guests. Miss Withers sighed. "Let me describe my first meeting with George Ringley."

"It was a Saturday morning and I was in the Marylebone, visiting the shops with Mother. Mother had grown quite fond of Victor and, as we were close by to Wimpole Street, suggested that we join him for an early luncheon. We arrived unannounced but were assured by Mrs. Sumner that neither Victor nor Mr. Ringley had left. It was Mr. Ringley who answered the door, still in his dressing gown. He was surprised by our arrival but seemed to know us both.

"Mother and I sat on a quiet street, my mind turned to Victor's life. His father died last spring, after a long illness. His guardian, Miss Withers, please come in. He us all politeness, but immediately we saw his nervous agitation. My work as a journalist provides me with unthodox hours and I am forced to take my leisure when I can. Victor had not returned home late. It would be all right. I would be back. If you wish to wait..."

"Their sitting room was a shambles," Miss Withers continued and her eyes gravely resisted inspection of our own. "Among all the foodstuffs and laundry, I was shocked to see Victor's briefcase lying open, papers from the bank strewn over a table. As I moved to pick them up, I noticed he left the bank's papers behind so in plain view. Mr. Ringley begged us to stay but we refused."

Mrs. Sumner explained. "From the start, we didn't want to intrude on our patient of mind to their incompetent landlord. Mother and I sat down Wimpole Street. We had traveled perhaps three blocks when Mr. Ringley's voice calling us from behind. He had been visiting the shops as well and had just seen us by chance on his way back home. I told him of our encounter with Mr. Ringley. He pretended not to be disturbed by the condition of his fellow lodger."

"Throughout our conversation, he kept his eye on me. I turned his mind to the weather. He had maintained an admirable silence which he broke. "Illuminating. Am I safe in assuming that your fiancé is the same Victor Gillette who mentioned his engagement to Miss Withers last Thursday?"

"Yes," Miss Withers said with a blush. "The facts seemed painfully clear. When the Cavendish Square Bank opened its doors that Monday morning, they found the bank manager missing, along with fifty thousand pounds in gold and notes."

"Victor had been talking to Bank officers as to what had become a murder case story. In Wimpole Yard we decided to assemble a persuasive collection of evidence against Gillette," he said for my benefit. "A new traveling bag and been bought, appointments had been canceled, travel agencies had been consulted. But despite all these footprints, so to speak, the man himself was never found. Victor Gillette's description was circu-
lated in the giornale and station in England to no read. And there is obviously more to this tale. Miss Withers?"

"It was all in a day's work," I replied. "My poor gentleman.

"Throughout the following weeks, nearly everyone deserted me, even my own family. The one person who was there, the one person who shared any part of my disgrace and loss was none other than George Ringley. The two of us talked endlessly, trying to make sense of Victor's heir's behavior. There was a kindness in George that I hadn't before seen and my initial aversion to him soon transmogrified itself into affection. This was the happy state I found myself in two days ago, just beginning to trust another man when I happened to see the letter."

"Himes' eyes widened ever so slightly. "The letter."

"Upon our engagement, Victor and I exchanged lockets. Alice Withers lifted a gold locket from between the folds of her lace blouse. Reckless, she handed it to Holmes who opened it and inspected the photograph of a bearded man inside. "Victor had an identical one with his picture. There could hardly be another like it."

"A locket, Miss Withers, closing the locking of it back."

"Two days ago I rushed to George's rooms. He had gone down to see Luther, Mrs. Sumner's son, about preparing a light supper. George had made attempts to keep his surroundings, they were still in an unacceptable state. Feeling domestic, I proceeded to clean up the place. I found a lock of Victor's hair and a cap which I took to Wimpole Yard. They had replaced it when George re-entered. At first I thought Victor might have left it behind in his flight and that, on finding it, George had been forced to explain his absence."

"I and Mr. Ringley, I went to see George. I explained this in mind, I greatly prodged George. There were no points about the locket. Had he ever seen it? How would you have felt if Victor had left it behind so that George could have it now. George denied ever having laid eyes on it. Dark thoughts soon began to swirl in me. George never seemed to work at his journalism anymore, yet he had plenty of money. I had no doubt he was playing a part in Victor's situation. As a fellow lodger, I have known of Victor's embezzelement and..."

She shook her head, as the very thought was too monstrous to even acknowledge. "I had his suspicions, but no real evidence until today."

Holmes had lit his old pipe. "Your visit this evening to the morgue, May I assume?"

An expression of pure pain suffused Alice Withers' features. "This morning a fire consumed an abandoned warehouse by the East India Docks. Among the cinders, the fire photographer discovered a body. A ring on his finger, a badly burned man's pocket-
book, a new traveling bag. These items had suffered both fire and water damage, but they were intact enough to lead the police to guess at his identity. Both George and I were asked to come and examine the body, I could barely bring myself to look at the gritty, charred thing. George performed the task for me. Was there any sign of fire? None whatever. Rubber bands hold the police have no idea how he died. Oh, Mr. Holmes. What am I to do?"

"Mr. Ringley, Miss Withers said between sput- tis. "And your present conundrum is whether of not to tell Scotland Yard of the locket and of your suspicions." He rose instantly to his feet. "Watson! If I am not mistaken, our friend Lestrade is even now visiting some pleasant lodgings in Wimpole Street. Miss Withers, if you will accompany us."

Lestrade left the house of Mr. Sumner. His son, Luther, a large, surly fellow, led us to the kitchen where the Inspector was questioning the landlady.

"Highly interesting," said Mr. Lestrade. "Mr. Gillette returned. "He was keeping hours on account of his work, but lately, since Mr. Gillette's vanishing, he's been around a lot more. Seems nice enough."

Lestrade left his witness. "You never fail to amaze, Mr. Holmes. Every time we have ourselves a pretty little puzzle, you pop up like a jack in the box to solve it. I suppose you're just concerned with the body of an embalmer who died at an undetermined time by undetermined means, and not a trace of the fifty thousand pounds he absconded with."

"How are you, Miss Withers?" Mr. Lestrade returned. "I believe another visit is called for. If Mrs. Sumner were to be so good as bring a key and lead us upstairs?"

As was Holmes' intention, George Ringley was taken unaswaras by our arrival in his rooms. Lestrade did his best to soothe the man as we were introduced. At first, as my eyes were riven ed on Holmes. From a careful distance, he inspected the journalist and turned his attention to the sitting room itself.

"What did you do from 11:30 to 11:35?" Holmes asked. "What you did for the hour is late in and the ladies of the party I'm sure will want to be returning to their homes. If you care to listen, Lestrade, I may be able to inform you of the location of the funds from the Cavendish Square Bank. I can certainly tell you what happened to Victor Gillette. That much is obvious."

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