

FEATURING AN EXCERPT FROM
MORIARTY

The **THREE
MONARCHS**

*A Sherlock Holmes
Short Story*

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HOUSE OF SILK AND
MORIARTY

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The Three Monarchs

A Sherlock Holmes Short Story

It has never been my desire to write very much about my own affairs for I am well aware that it is only my long and intimate acquaintance with Mr Sherlock Holmes and the many insights that I have been afforded into his deductive methods that are of interest to the public at large. Indeed, it has often struck me that, but for our chance introduction, when I was looking for inexpensive lodgings in London, I would simply have followed my calling as a doctor of medicine and might never have set pen to paper at all.

And yet some aspects of what might be called my private life have, necessarily, appeared in these pages. Readers will, for example, be aware of the wound that I received at the decisive Battle of Maiwand and the frequent troubles that it caused me in my career. I believe I have had reason to mention my older brother, Henry, who having disappointed everyone in his life, none more so than himself, took to drink and died young. On a happier note, my marriage to Miss Mary Morstan, as she was when I met her, has been central to at least one of my narratives for I would never have met her had she not first presented herself as a client of Sherlock Holmes. I loved her from the very start and made no attempt to disguise the fact from my readers – and why should I have? We were married soon afterwards and, although our union was not to be a long one, we were as close to each other as it is possible for a man and a woman to be.

Our first home was in a quiet street close by Paddington Station: not perhaps the most elegant part of town, but one that was conducive to my return to civil practice. It was a pleasant house with a large, airy consulting room at street level and two further floors above, which my new wife decorated with both modesty and good taste. And yet I will confess that to find myself surrounded by all the hallmarks of domesticity, with everything in its right place and almost nothing surplus to requirement, caused me at first an uneasiness which was hard to define. Even the maid, a neat little creature who seemed determined to avoid me, inspired in me a vague sense of threat. It was a strange sensation. On the one hand I was completely happy, but at the same time I was uncomfortable, missing something without knowing exactly what it was.

It embarrasses me that I was not able to diagnose more quickly the source of my disquiet. The many months that I had spent at 221b Baker Street had of course left their mark on me. Quite simply, I was missing my old rooms. I might have complained often enough about Holmes's abominable habits; his refusal to throw away a single document so that every surface was piled high with papers of one sort or another, his extraordinary untidiness with cigars in the coal scuttle, test tubes and flasks scattered amongst the breakfast things, bullets lined up along the window sill and tobacco stored in the toe of a Persian slipper. Well, I missed them now. How often had I gone to bed with the sound of Holmes's Stradivarius winding its way up the stairs, or risen to the scent of his first morning pipe? And added to this was the bizarre array of visitors who beat a path to our front door – the grand duke from Bohemia, the typist, the schoolteacher, or, of course, the harassed inspector from Scotland Yard.

I had seen little of Sherlock Holmes in the year following my marriage. I had stayed away perhaps purposefully for there was a part of me that worried that my new wife might take it amiss if I went in search of a life I had left behind. I was also, I will admit, concerned that Sherlock Holmes himself might have moved on. There was a part of me that dreaded to find a new lodger in my place, although Holmes's finances were such that he would have had no need to continue such an arrangement. I said nothing of this, but my dear Mary already knew me better than I thought for one evening she broke off from her needlework and said, 'You really must visit Mr Holmes.'

'What on earth makes you think of him?' I asked.

'Why, you do!' she laughed. 'I could see that he was on your mind a moment ago. Do not deny it! Just now, your eye settled on the drawer where you keep your service revolver and I noticed you smile at the recollection of some adventure you had together.'

'You are very much the detective, my dear. Holmes would be proud of you.'

'And he will, I am sure, be delighted to see you. You must visit him tomorrow.'

I needed no further prompting and, having dealt with the few patients who had come to my door, I set off the following afternoon, planning to arrive in time for tea. The summer of '89 was a particularly warm one and the sun was beating down as I made my way along Baker Street. Approaching my old lodgings I was surprised to hear music, and moments later came upon a small crowd gathered round a dancing dog that was performing tricks for its master who was accompanying it on the trumpet. Such entertainers could be found all over the capital although this one had strayed some distance from the station. I was forced to step off the pavement and make my way round in order to enter the familiar front door where I was greeted by the boy in buttons who led me upstairs.

Sherlock Holmes was languishing in an armchair with the blinds half drawn and a shadow across his forehead reaching almost to his eyes. He was evidently pleased to see me, for he greeted me as if nothing had changed and as if I had never really been away. Slightly to my regret, however, I saw that he was not alone. My old chair on the other side of the fireplace was taken by a burly, sweating figure whom I recognised at once as Inspector Athelney Jones of Scotland Yard, the detective whose wrong-footed assumptions and subsequent actions had caused us both irritation and amusement when we were investigating the murder of Bartholomew Sholto at Pondicherry Lodge. Seeing me, he sprang up as if to leave but Holmes hastily reassured him. 'You have timed your visit quite perfectly, my dear Watson,' he said. 'I have no doubt you will remember our friend, Inspector Jones. He arrived just a few moments before you and was about to consult me on a matter of the greatest delicacy – or so he assured me.'

'I am quite happy to come back if it is not, after all, convenient,' Jones demurred.

'Not at all. I confess that I have found it increasingly difficult to rouse myself without the friendship and good counsel of my own Boswell. Take the Trepoff murder, for example, or the strange behaviour of Dr Moore Agar – in both instances it was only through purest chance that I prevailed. You have no objection, Watson, to hearing what the inspector has to say?'

'Not at all.'

'Then it is agreed.'

But before Jones could begin, the door opened and Mrs Hudson bustled in carrying a tray laden with tea, scones, a small plate of butter and a seed and currant cake. The pageboy must have informed her of my arrival, for I noticed that she had included a third cup but, casting his eye over the spread, Holmes came to a very different conclusion.

'I see, Mrs Hudson, that you were unable to resist the charms of the street entertainer who has chosen our doorstep for his performance.'

'It is true, Mr Holmes,' the good woman replied, blushing. 'I heard the music and did watch for a while from an upstairs window. I was going to call out to them to move on but the dog was so amusing and the crowd so good-natured that I thought better of it.' She scowled. 'But I cannot see what it is on my tea tray that could possibly have given you any information concerning my movements.'

'It is of no great importance,' Holmes laughed. 'The tea looks excellent and, as you can see, our good friend Watson is here to enjoy it.'

'And a great pleasure it is to see you again, Dr Watson. The house isn't the same without you.'

I waited for Mrs Hudson to leave before turning to my friend. 'You will forgive me, Holmes,' I said. 'But I cannot see how you could have drawn such a conclusion from a plate of scones and a seed cake.'

'Neither of them told me anything,' Holmes replied. 'It was in fact the parsley that Mrs Hudson has placed on top of the butter.'

'The parsley?'

'It has been placed there only a minute ago. But the butter has been out of the pantry and in the sun. You will see that it has melted in this warm weather.'

I looked down. It was indeed the case.

'The parsley has not sunk into the butter, which suggests an interval of time during which Mrs Hudson was interrupted in her duties. Apart from the arrival of my two visitors, the only distraction has been the music and the applause of the crowd outside.'

'Astonishing!' Jones exclaimed.

'Elementary,' Holmes returned. 'The greater part of my work is founded upon just such observations as these. But we have more serious business at hand. You must tell us, Inspector, what it is that brings you here. And meanwhile, Watson, might I inveigle upon you to pour the tea?'

I was happy to oblige and, while I set about my work, Athelney Jones began his narrative, which I set down as follows.

'Early this morning, I was called out to a house in Hamworth Hill, in North London. The business that had brought me there was a death by misadventure, not a murder – that had been made clear to me from the start. The house was owned by an elderly couple, a Mr and Mrs Abernetty, who lived there alone, for they had never had children. They had been woken up at night by the sound of breaking wood and had come downstairs to discover a young man, darkly dressed, rifling through their possessions. The man was a burglar. There can be no doubt of that for, as I would soon discover, he had broken into two other houses in the same terrace. Seeing Harold Abernetty standing at the doorway in his dressing gown, the intruder rushed at him and might well have done him serious harm. But as it happened, Abernetty had brought down with him a revolver, which he always kept close by, fearing just this eventuality. He fired a single shot, killing this young man at once.

'All this I learned from Mr Abernetty. He struck me as an elderly, completely harmless fellow. His wife, a few years his junior, sat in an armchair and sobbed almost the entire time I was there. I learned that they had inherited the house from its former owner, a Mrs Matilda Briggs. She had given it to them, quite freely, to thank them for their long service. They had lived there for the past six years, quietly and without incident. They were retired and devout members of the local church and it would be hard to imagine a more respectable couple.

'So much for the owners. Let me now describe to you the victim. He was, I would have said, about thirty years of age, pale of complexion and hollow-eyed. He was wearing a suit and a pair of leather shoes which were spattered with mud. These were of particular interest to me as it had rained two nights before the break-in and, venturing into the Abernettys' garden – they had a small square of land behind the house – I had quickly found footprints made by the dead man. He had evidently come round the side and broken in through the back door. I also discovered the jemmy he had used. It was in the bag which he had brought with him and which also contained the proceeds of the robbery.'

'And what was it that this young man had stolen from the elderly and harmless Abernettys?' Holmes asked.

'Mr Holmes, you hit the mark! It is exactly the reason I am here.'

Jones had brought with him a portmanteau bag which, I assumed, had belonged to the dead man. He opened it and, deliberately, with no attempt at a drama, produced three china figures that he stood in front of us, side by side. They were identical, crude and vulgar representations of our monarch, Queen Victoria, the Empress of India herself. Each one was about nine inches high and brightly coloured. They showed her in ceremonial dress with a small diamond crown, a lace veil and a sash across her chest. Holmes examined them, turning each one briefly in his hands.

'Souvenirs of the Golden Jubilee,' he muttered. 'There is barely an arcade in London that does not sell them and I believe they are of little value. These have been taken from three different houses. The first belongs to a hectic and disorganised family with at least one small child. The second, I would say, was the property of an artist or a jeweller who attended the jubilee celebrations with his wife. The third must therefore have come from the Abernettys themselves.'

'You are absolutely right, Mr Holmes,' Jones exclaimed. 'The Abernettys live at number six, at the end of a short terrace. My investigation led me to discover that both of their neighbours, the Dunstables at number five and a lady by the name of Mrs Webster at number one, had been burgled during the same night. Mrs Webster is now a widow but her husband was a watchmaker while the house next door is indeed occupied by a family with two small children. They're currently away. But all three figurines are identical. How could you possibly have known?'

'It is simplicity itself,' Holmes replied. 'You will observe that the first figurine has not been dusted for some time and carries the small, sticky fingermarks that can only belong to a child – and one who has

used our monarch as a plaything. The second has been broken and very skilfully repaired – I will presume by the owner and he, surely, would not have undertaken such a task unless the day of the jubilee did not have some special significance for him. It is quite likely he was there with his wife – or, as she now is, his widow. Are you telling me that nothing else was taken, Inspector?’

‘That is precisely why I am here, Mr Holmes. When I first visited the house on Hamworth Hill, I thought I would be investigating a straightforward burglary, though one that had gone tragically awry. Instead, what I found was an unfathomable mystery. Why should any young man risk his liberty and end up losing his life for the sake of three statuettes that, you rightly say, he could have bought for a few shillings anywhere in London? I have to know the answer – and recalling my acquaintance with you I took the liberty of coming here in the hope that you might be able to help.’

Holmes fell silent and I wondered how he was going to respond to the Scotland Yard man. It was part of his mercurial character that a case with no obvious interest might set him alight while a mystery such as might have come from the pen of Poe himself would leave him languidly reclining in his chair. At last he spoke.

‘Your problem does present a few features of interest,’ he began. ‘At the same time, though, it would seem that no crime has been committed. This man, Abernety, was defending himself and his wife and, on the face of it, there is no doubt that he was confronted by a desperate and a dangerous young man. Where is the body, by the way?’

‘I have had it removed to the mortuary at St Thomas’s Hospital.’

‘That is a shame. You will doubtless have removed many of the clues with it. I have one more question, Inspector Jones. How well acquainted were the three neighbours – which is to say, the Abernettys, the Dunstables and Mrs Webster?’

‘They all seem to be on the very best of terms, Mr Holmes, although, as I have explained, I have been unable to speak to Mr Dunstable. He is a stockbroker’s clerk and is currently away.’

‘It is much as I expected.’

‘Do I take it then that, as you show an interest in the matter, you are prepared to help me with my investigation?’

Once again, Holmes said nothing but I saw him glance at the tea tray and saw the twinkle in his eyes that I knew so well.

‘Hamworth Hill is not so very far from here but, that said, I have no desire to make the trek up in this unseasonal weather,’ he began. ‘I would be inclined to leave the matter in your own capable hands, Inspector. However, there is still the question of the parsley in the butter which, though immaterial in itself, would nonetheless seem to have a bearing on the case.’ I thought he was in some way joking, toying with his hapless visitor, but everything about his demeanour was perfectly serious. ‘I will look into this for you. It is too late to do anything today but shall we meet tomorrow at, say, ten o’clock?’

‘At Hamworth Hill?’

‘At the mortuary. And you, Watson, having heard this tale, must come with us. I insist on it. Your practice can, I am sure, manage for a few hours without you.’

‘How can I refuse you, Holmes?’ I asked, although the truth was that my curiosity had been piqued. The three monarchs still stood in front of me and I was keen to know what secret they might conceal.

And so we met the following day in the frigid, white-tiled interior of the mortuary where the body of the unfortunate burglar was presented to us. He was, in appearance, exactly as Inspector Jones had described him. The bullet had struck him just above the heart and I have no doubt that his death would have been instantaneous. Such considerations, however, did not seem to be of interest to Holmes who had barely glanced at the wound before he turned to the silent inspector, one hand resting beneath his chin.

‘I would be interested to know what you were able to construe from the body,’ he said.

‘No more than I have already said,’ Jones replied. ‘He is young, perhaps thirty. He looks English . . .’

‘Nothing more?’

‘I’m afraid not. Is there something I’ve missed?’

‘Only that he has very recently been released from prison. I would say, in the last few days. He served a long sentence. He was drinking sherry before he died. This is a bloodstain, here. But this most certainly is not. That is most curious.’

‘How can you tell that he has been in prison?’

'I would have thought that would be obvious to you. You must have seen men with the pallor that comes of being denied sunshine for a length of time. His hair has been cut in a terrier crop and what are these fibres beneath his fingernails? I detect the smell of pine tar. He has undoubtedly been picking oakum. His shoes are brand new and yet they are out of fashion. Could it be that they were taken from him at the time of his arrest and returned to him on his departure from jail? Ha! There is a fold in his left sock. I find that to be of the greatest significance.'

'I see no significance at all.'

'That is because you are not looking for it, my dear Inspector Jones. You ignore whatever seems irrelevant to your investigation without appreciating that it is in the smallest and most insignificant details that the truth can be found. But there is nothing more to be done here. Let us continue to Hamworth Hill.'

Inspector Jones sat morose and silent as we travelled together by coach to North London. We finally arrived at a quiet road containing a row of six houses, all of them very similar, built in the classical style – brick and white stucco – with the entrance set back from the road and two pillars framing the front door. The Abernettys lived at the far end, as Jones had told us, and it was immediately apparent to me that their house was in a state of some decay, with the paint flaking off the front walls, a few cracks in the plasterwork and the windows tarnished and in need of repair.

'It is strange, do you not think, Watson,' Holmes remarked, 'that our burglar should have considered this house worthy of his attention.'

'You took the very thought out of my mind. It would seem obvious to me that the occupants were not wealthy.'

'You have to remember that it was night,' Jones muttered. He was leaning against the coach and his face was flushed as if the exertion of returning here had worn him out. 'This is a well-to-do street in a fashionable suburb and it might well be that, with the cover of darkness, the house would have looked as enticing as its neighbours. Moreover, the burglar broke into numbers one and five as well as number six.'

'I believe you said that a Mrs Webster lives at number one. I think we shall begin with her.'

'Not with the Abernettys?'

'The pleasure of meeting the Abernettys will be all the greater for the anticipation.'

It was, therefore, to the home of the elderly widow, Cordelia Webster, that we next repaired. She was a short, stout woman who greeted us effusively and never once seemed to stop moving from the moment she opened her door and led us into her cosy front room. It was clear that, since the death of her husband, she had lived a somewhat solitary life and that the break-in, and even the death a few doors away, had provided her with considerable excitement.

'I could not believe at first that anything was amiss,' she explained. 'For I heard nothing during the night and, when the police officer called on me the following day, I was sure he must be mistaken.'

'The door at the back had been broken open,' Jones explained. 'I found footprints in the back garden, identical to those I had already observed at the Abernettys.'

'I assumed at once that it was my jewellery he was after,' Mrs Webster continued. 'I have a strongbox in my bedroom. But nothing had been touched. It was only the little statue of Queen Victoria that was missing from its place on the pianoforte.'

'You would have been sorry to lose it, I am sure.'

'Indeed so, Mr Holmes. My husband and I travelled to St Paul's on the day of the jubilee and watched the procession with Her Majesty as it arrived. What an example she is to us all! I have to say that I bear my own loss more easily knowing that we share the pain of widowhood.'

'Your husband died recently?'

'Last year. It was tuberculosis. But I must tell you that Mrs Abernetty could not have been kinder to me. In the days following the funeral, she was here constantly. I was beside myself – I'm sure you can imagine – and she looked after me. She cooked for me, she kept me company . . . nothing was too much trouble. But then she and her husband died exactly the same for old Mrs Briggs. I swear you would not find two more caring people in the world.'

'Mrs Briggs, I understand, was your erstwhile neighbour.'

'Indeed so. It was she who employed the Abernettys. Mrs Abernetty was her nurse and Mr Abernetty was her general servant. That was how the two of them came to live there. She and I were

very close and many times she told me how grateful she was to them. Matilda Briggs was not wealthy. Her husband had been a solicitor, a prominent member of the Law Society. He died at the age of eighty-three or -four and left her quite on her own.'

'There were no children?'

'They had none of their own. There was a sister and she had a son but he was shot dead in Afghanistan. He was a soldier.'

'And how old was the nephew?'

'He could have been no more than twenty when he died. I never met him and poor Matilda would never speak of him without becoming quite upset. The boy was all the family that she had, but she could not even bring herself to have his photograph near her. At the end of her life, she had no one to whom she could leave the house and so she gave it to the Abernettys to thank them for their long service. It was a very generous thing to do.'

'Were you surprised?'

'Not at all. She mentioned to me that they had discussed it with her and she made it clear to me that this was what she had decided. She left the rest of her money to the church but the house she gave to them.'

'You have been most lucid and helpful, Mrs Webster,' Holmes said. He held out a hand and Jones gave him the figurine that he had brought with him. 'You are quite certain, incidentally, that this is the correct one? They are, after all, practically identical.'

'No, no, no. It is mine, most certainly. I managed to drop it while I was doing the cleaning and it was quite badly broken. But my husband took great pains to repair it for he knew how fond I was of it.'

'He could have purchased another one.'

'It would not have been the same. He enjoyed mending it for me.'

There only remained to examine the back door where the break-in had taken place and this we did. Jones showed us the footprints that he had found and which were still clearly visible in the flowerbed. Holmes examined them, then turned his attention to the lock that had been forced open.

'This must have made a great deal of noise,' he said. He turned to Mrs Webster who was standing close by in the expectation and, indeed, the hope of further interrogation. 'You really heard nothing?'

'I do sleep very heavily,' that lady admitted. 'On some nights I take a little laudanum and a few months ago Mrs Abernetty recommended pillows stuffed with camel hair. She was absolutely right. Since then I have had no trouble at all.' We took our leave and walked together to the far end of the terrace, passing the house owned by the Dunstables who were still absent.

'It is a shame we cannot interview them,' I said to Holmes.

'I doubt that they would have very much to tell us, Watson – and I suspect that the same will be true of the Abernettys. However, we shall see. This is the front door . . . in need of fresh paint. The whole house appears neglected. Still, it came to them as a bequest, and a most generous one it must be said. Will you ring, Watson? Ah – I think I hear someone approach.'

The door was opened by Harold Abernetty, a tall, slow-moving man with stooped shoulders, deeply lined features and long, silver hair. He was about sixty years old and reminded me, I must confess, of an undertaker. His expression was certainly very mournful and he was wearing a morning coat, which was sober and a little threadbare.

'Inspector Jones!' he exclaimed, recognising our companion. 'Do you have any news? I am glad to see you. But who are these gentlemen whom you have brought with you?'

'This is Mr Sherlock Holmes, the famous detective,' Jones replied. 'And this is his companion, Dr Watson.'

'Mr Holmes! But of course I know the name. I must say to you, sir, that I am amazed that so trifling a matter should be of interest to one such as you.'

'The death of a man is never trifling,' Holmes retorted.

'Indeed so. I was referring to the theft of the statues. But it was quite wrong of me. Will you please come in?'

The house shared the same proportions as Mrs Webster's, but it had a clammy, quite sombre feel. Even though it was still inhabited, it was as if it had been abandoned. Mrs Abernetty was waiting for us in the parlour. She was a very small woman, almost swallowed up by the armchair in which she sat, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief and still barely able to speak.

'This is a terrible business, Mr Holmes,' Abernety began. 'I have already explained everything to the inspector but I am of course willing to help you in any way I can.'

'This is my fault,' Mrs Abernety sobbed. 'Harold shot that young man for my sake.'

'It was my wife who woke me,' Abernety continued. 'She had heard a door being broken open and sent me downstairs to investigate. I took the gun with me, although I never intended to use it. When the man saw me and came rushing towards me . . . even then, I didn't know what I was doing. I fired the shot and saw him fall – and wish with all my heart that I could have wounded him and not brought an end to his young life.'

'What did you do after he had fallen?'

'I hurried to my wife and told her that I was unharmed. Then I got dressed. My intention was to find the nearest police officer but first I noticed the bag that the young man had brought with him and, although I knew I should not tamper with the evidence, I took a look inside. That was when I saw the three china figures, lying next to each other. I recognised one of them as being our own. I had bought it for my wife as a souvenir of the Golden Jubilee and I saw at once that it was missing from its place on the sideboard. As you can imagine, I was completely astounded by the presence of the other two – but then I remembered that I had seen one in Mrs Webster's front room.'

'It was on her piano,' Mrs Abernety said.

'I realised then that we might not be the only victims of burglary that night, something that was soon confirmed when Inspector Jones began his enquiry.'

'You cannot blame my husband. He did nothing wrong. He never intended to hurt anyone.'

'You do not need to distress yourself, Mrs Abernety,' Holmes assured her. 'I have seen your neighbour, Mrs Webster. She speaks very highly of you.'

'She is a good woman,' Abernety said, 'still much distressed by the loss of her husband last August. But we are all advancing in years. These things are to be expected.'

'She told us about Matilda Briggs.'

Abernety nodded. 'Then you know how much we owe her. Mrs Briggs employed us for many years. Emilia . . .' here he turned to his wife, 'nursed her through a long illness and, out of gratitude, having no immediate family of her own, she bequeathed us this house in her will.'

'There was, I believe, a nephew.'

'He was a colour sergeant with the 92nd Highlanders. He was killed at the Battle of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan.'

'It must have been a great blow to her.'

'She was upset, certainly. But the two of them had never been close.'

'And the rest of the money?'

'She gave it to the local church, for the relief of the poor,' Mrs Abernety said. 'Mrs Briggs was a very devout person and a member of the Royal Maternity Charity, the Temperance Society, the Society for the Rescue of Young Women and many others.'

Holmes nodded then got his feet, signalling that the interview was over. I was surprised that he had no further questions and that in this instance he chose not to examine the back door or the garden, but then he had already said that he had not expected to learn very much from this encounter. It was only as we left that he turned back to the elderly couple.

'One last question,' he said. 'Where are your neighbours, the stockbroker's clerk and his family?'

'They are in Torquay,' Mrs Abernety replied. 'They are visiting Mr Dunstable's mother.'

Holmes smiled. 'Mrs Abernety, you have told me exactly what I wanted to know and your answer was exactly what I had expected. I congratulate you and wish you a good day.'

We walked a short way down the hill in silence but at last the man from Scotland Yard could bear it no more.

'Do you have any answer to this riddle, Mr Holmes?' he burst out. 'Three little statues of almost no value at all are stolen from three adjoining houses. What was the purpose of the theft? It seems to me that you have asked no questions that I have not already asked and seen nothing that I had not already noted. I fear I have wasted your time bringing you here.'

'Far from it, Inspector Jones, I have a few enquiries to make but otherwise the affair could not be more clear. Shall we meet at my rooms in Baker Street tomorrow morning? Would ten o'clock be convenient?'

'I can certainly be there.'

'Then let us part company for the time being. Watson, will you walk with me to the station? I find the air a little fresher up here. Good day to you, Inspector Jones. This has indeed been a quite singular case and I thank you for bringing it to my attention.'

This was all he would say and Jones returned to the waiting coach with a look of complete bafflement on his face. I will admit that I was no wiser myself but knew better than to ask questions to which no answers would yet be forthcoming. I also knew that I would have to absent myself from my practice for a third day in succession as it would be inconceivable for me to miss the solution to such a pretty puzzle as the three monarchs had presented.

The next day, I returned to Baker Street at ten o'clock precisely, meeting Inspector Jones at the door. We climbed the stairs together and were met by Holmes who was wearing his dressing gown and just finishing his breakfast.

'Well, Inspector Jones,' he began, when he saw us, 'we have a name for the dead man. It is Michael Snowden. He was released from Pentonville Prison just three days ago.'

'What was his offence?'

'Blackmail, assault, larceny – I fear Master Snowden led a life that was as dissolute as it was short. Well, at least he never went as far as murder. There is some solace in that.'

'But what brought such a man to Hamworth Hill?'

'He came to claim what was rightfully his.'

'Three china figurines?'

Holmes smiled and lit his pipe, tossing the spent match into the fireplace. 'He came to claim the house that had been left to him by his aunt, Mrs Briggs.'

'Are you saying that he was her nephew? Mr Holmes – you cannot possibly know that!' the inspector cried.

'I do not need to know it, Inspector Jones. I deduced it. When all the evidence points in only one possible direction, then you can be fairly certain that as you move forward you must arrive at the truth. Michael Snowden was never a soldier and he did not die in Afghanistan. This was made clear to me from what Mrs Webster told us. She said that Matilda Briggs was so upset by the death of her nephew that she never kept a picture of him in the house. But that did not strike me as even slightly credible. Had he died in the army, serving his country, she would surely have done the exact opposite. She would have been proud to keep his memory alive. However, a churchgoing woman, a member of the temperance society, were she to have a nephew who was a rake and a criminal—'

'She would pretend that he had died abroad!' I exclaimed.

'As a soldier, or something like that. Precisely, Watson! That was why she would not have his image near her.'

'But she still left the house to the Abernettys,' Jones insisted.

'So they say. But again, Mrs Webster – an excellent witness, by the way, with an astonishing grasp of detail – made a most interesting remark. The Abernettys, she said, had discussed the will with their employer, Mrs Briggs. Not the other way round! I saw at once what might have happened. An elderly, sick woman, left on her own with a scheming manservant and a wife who is also her nurse, is persuaded to change her will in their favour. They want the house and they take it, cutting the nephew out.

'However, this is a lady with a conscience. At the last moment, she has a change of heart and writes to her nephew, telling him what has happened and expressing a desire that he should inherit after all. I have spoken to the prison warder, incidentally, and he has confirmed that Snowden did indeed receive a letter a few months ago. As the saying goes, blood is thicker than water and perhaps his aunt believes that even at this late stage he will reform. There is little that Michael Snowden can do about the situation. He is still in jail, serving a lengthy sentence. But the moment he is released, he comes to his aunt's house and confronts the two extortionists.'

'They murder him!' Suddenly, I could see it all.

'I am sure they tried to reason with him. They gave him a glass of sherry and it was when he proved adamant – doubtless he threatened them – that Mr Abernetty took out his revolver and shot him. Snowden dropped the sherry, spilling it on his shirt but much of the stain was, of course, concealed by his blood.'

Jones had listened to all this with something close to distress etched on his features. 'It all seems quite clear to me, Mr Holmes,' he said. 'But I still cannot see how you worked it out.'

'It was the three monarchs that gave the game away. Mr Abernetty needed a reason to kill a young man who – he could at least pretend – was a complete stranger to him. Simple enough to say that he was a burglar. But why would any burglar choose a house that was in such disrepair and which would clearly contain nothing very much of value? That was his dilemma.

'His solution was ingenious. He would rob two more houses in the same terrace and he would do so in such a way that the police could not fail to assume that mere larceny was the motive. Why did he choose number one and number five? He knew that the Dunstables were away in Torquay – that much Mrs Abernetty told us herself. And he was also aware that Mrs Webster, with her laudanum and camel-hair pillows, was a heavy sleeper and unlikely to wake up.'

'But why the three figurines?'

'He had no choice. There was nothing worth stealing in his own house and he did not have the necessary skills to open Mrs Webster's strongbox. He knew, however, that all three houses happened to contain the same jubilee souvenir and that created a perfect diversion. You may recall that my housekeeper, Mrs Hudson, abandoned the tea because she was distracted by a dancing dog, and very much the same principle applied here. Mr Abernetty correctly assumed that you would worry so much about these wholly inoffensive objects that you would never question whether a real burglary had taken place. He was just unfortunate that on this occasion you chose to bring the matter to me.'

'I presume he left the footprints on purpose.'

'Indeed so. I did wonder why we had a burglar who was so keen to mark out his method of entry. It was, of course, Mr Abernetty, wearing Michael Snowden's shoes, who took care to leave footprints in the flower beds. However, he unwittingly left a fold in the dead man's sock as he dragged one of them off. I remarked upon it in the mortuary.'

'Mr Holmes . . . I am beyond words.' Jones got to his feet but it seemed to me that he did so only with an effort and I was reminded that he had displayed the same infirmity when we were at Hamworth Hill. 'You will forgive me if I leave you,' he continued. 'I must make an arrest.'

'Two arrests, Inspector, for Mrs Abernetty was clearly an accessory to the crime.'

'Indeed so.' Jones examined Holmes one last time. 'Your methods are extraordinary,' he muttered. 'I will learn from them. I *must* learn from them. To have missed so much and to have seen so little – I will not let it happen again.'

A short while later, I learned that Athelney Jones had become ill and taken leave from the police force. It was Holmes's opinion that the dreadful business of the Abernettys might have played a part in his decline and so, out of respect to the poor man, I made the decision not to publish my account but instead to place it with certain other papers in the vaults of Cox & Co. in Charing Cross, affording him the same confidence that I would to any of my own patients. Let it be made public at some time in the future, when the events I have described have been forgotten, allowing the inspector's reputation to remain intact.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

One of the UK's most prolific and successful writers, **ANTHONY HOROWITZ** may have committed more (fictional) murders than any other living author. His recent novel *The House of Silk* has sold over 450,000 copies worldwide in more than 35 countries. His bestselling Alex Rider series for young adults has sold more than 19 million copies worldwide. As a TV screenwriter, he created *Midsomer Murders* and the BAFTA-winning *Foyle's War*, both of which were featured on PBS's *Masterpiece Mystery*; other TV work includes *Poirot* and the widely acclaimed miniseries *Collision* and *Injustice*. Anthony regularly contributes to a wide variety of national newspapers and magazines, and in January 2014, he was appointed an Officer of the British Empire for his services to literature. He lives in London.

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Published in Great Britain in 2014 by Orion Books, an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd.

EPUB Edition November 2014 ISBN 9780062387844