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The case of the locked house

The finished mystery

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After the death in 2012 of Dr. Robert Joynt, who served Neurology® as CPC Section Editor, an unfinished manuscript was found on his computer. It would have been his sixth Sherlock Holmes pastiche. Intrigued by the story but deflated at the lack of an ending, the editors published the case in the September 10, 2013, issue of Neurology and requested that readers finish it. A panel of editors reviewed over 30 submissions and the top 4 were posted online and on the iPad. Readers voted online, on the iPad, and during the 2014 American Academy of Neurology Annual Meeting in Philadelphia. The winning coauthors are Peter A. Kempster, from Melbourne, and Andrew J. Lees, from London. The runners-up are Anonymous (ending 1), Gerald Honch (ending 2), and Clifton Gooch (ending 4). The editors thank all participants and voters. The rule on page 662 indicates where the winning ending begins.

It was a mid-August day and the stifling heat that had settled over London seemed to stop all activity. I was sitting at my desk preparing to write, and Holmes was lying languidly on a couch, lightly strumming his violin. Mrs. Hudson had opened all the windows, but there was not a trace of a breeze. All we could hear were the newsboys shouting their headlines and the clatter of horses' hooves as the carriages went by.

Many of our adventures ended on a happy note with the perpetrator in the hands of the police, the mistakenly accused freed, and the jewels or treasures recovered. This new adventure, however, was different. Neither Holmes nor I was in a joyous mood, and Holmes was particularly somber that evening.

Two weeks before, sensational headlines had reported the murder by strangulation of a young woman born to a wealthy family in a small village about 10 miles from Oxford. Details in the newspapers were scanty, but it was evident that the perpetrator was unknown, and the local constabulary had called in Scotland Yard to help them with their inquiries.

A day or so later a telegram arrived from Inspector White of Scotland Yard, requesting the help of Holmes. It was a plea that Holmes had often answered before, but as he passed me the telegram he mumbled his usual derogatory remarks about the criminal investigation system. However, I knew he would respond as he always did, and the next morning we found ourselves on a train from Paddington headed to Oxford, from whence we transferred on a branch line to Burnt Crossing. This quaint, well-kempt village contained the usual few shops, a bank, and a rustic inn with a tavern.

Holmes and I settled in to acceptable rooms at the inn and waited in the tavern for Inspector White. As good as his word, he appeared promptly at 2 o'clock. After introducing himself, he ordered a round of drinks for us and began his narrative.

"Mr. Holmes, I have been on several peculiar cases in my life but never one as mystifying as this one. As you know, the victim, Sally Wareham, was strangled in her sleep 3 nights ago. There is no clue as to how the murderer got into or left the house; neither is there any good reason that we know of that she should have been treated in such ill fashion."

The inspector went on to provide the background of the Wareham family. Squire Wareham had made a great deal of money in South Africa in the gold trade, and he and Mrs. Wareham bought the manor house some time ago. They had 2 children, George and Sally. George was older than Sally by 10 years. He went off to Sandhurst for his military training and was then sent overseas to India. Sally was sent away to school and spent very little time in the village. Two years ago, both parents died of the typhoid within 6 weeks. George resigned his commission as captain, Sally had finished her school, and they both came to live in the manor house.

"They were a kind and lively brother and sister. No one was turned off his farm while George owned the land. When one of the croppers fell upon hard times, Sally was there with baskets of food. They attended most of the parties and Sally was the last to leave the dance floor."

"She was so beautiful and fun-loving that she attracted many suitors. Three in particular became very

†Deceased.

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enamored of her, and here is the worry. Richard Symonds has a large plot of land next to the Warehams and keeps riding horses. Colby Calkins owns the ironmongery and has done very well financially. The third is Mortimer Penny, the local banker and a wonderful athlete who plays cricket for the County.”

“At one time or another, Sally had shown special affection for each of the three. Unfortunately, they all have temperaments with a violent strain. Symonds, the horseman, is said to beat his workers with a whip when he is angered. Calkins, the ironmonger, has been known to throw customers bodily out of the store when money was not forthcoming promptly. Penny, the banker, a pugilist of note, apparently knocked some of his opponents down when in the Pavilion after a losing a match.”

“They all hate each other and all have said or implied that if they cannot have Sally for themselves no one else can have her. Now this may be the spirits talking, as they each drink too much, but the villagers that have heard them do not regard these outbursts as drunken threats.”

“We have no evidence on any of them the night of the strangling, and all have lame excuses as to where they were.”

Holmes held up his hand. “Inspector, do you know how anyone could get into the manor house?”

“That is the problem, and one that makes this more mysterious,” replied the inspector. “George, the current squire, during his time in India lived in a cantonment outside of Mathura, where, as I understand it, thievery was common and several things were stolen. Upon his return to England, he installed double locks in the house and made the rounds each night, even after Sally came home late, to ensure that everything was secured, including the windows and doors. Two servants, who are retainers from their parents, have a small cottage about a furlong from the manor, so they do not have access to the big house at night.”

“Inspector,” said Holmes, “is there any place in the house where someone might secret themselves before the house was secured at night?”

The inspector said, “If there is, Mr. Holmes, I cannot find it, and I have gone over the house very thoroughly. But you know these old houses may have secret passages, and, of course, hiding places such as a priest hole, built during the Dissolution of the Monasteries.”

“Inspector, is there any sign of anyone being outside the house during the night?”

The inspector sighed. “Alas, no. We had 2 days of heavy rain, which turned most of the outside ground into mud.”

“Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson, I told the squire I agreed to take tea with him at the manse; obviously, he is very distraught about Sally. I have a dogcart outside that will take us to the manor house.”

The journey took only 20 minutes until we came to a tree-lined drive. This led up to an imposing brick structure that probably dated from the time of Henry VIII, as the inspector had suggested.

The butler opened the door and was very downcast. He took us into the large drawing room and George rose in greeting. He said, “Thank you, gentlemen, for coming down to help in this dreadful situation. This has been a major blow to me, as Sally and I were very close and our lives were so very pleasant before her horrible murder.”

Holmes uttered the necessary words of condolence, and we sat down for questioning. Holmes said, “I know this is dreadfully painful for you, but please recite the circumstances of the evening so I can get an idea of the run of events.”

Wareham said, “It was rather a routine evening. Sally and I had supper and she went out for the evening to visit some friends. The 2 servants had cleared away, and I saw them out the door. Sally returned about that time as it was raining heavily and the outdoor party was postponed. She went up to her room on the second floor, and I secured the locks. As the inspector may have told you, I have a fetish about security, and I have routine which never varies....”

...My bedroom is in the opposite wing. I rose next morning, unlocked the house, and admitted the staff. The maid discovered Sally. She was crying hysterically and I told her husband, the butler, to take her home. I rode to summon the police myself.”

Holmes fixed him with a steady gaze, sensing that he had more to tell. “I understand that theft is an unusual occurrence in Burnt Crossing. Is there any other reason for all of these locks on the doors and windows?”

“Mr. Holmes, I must relate something that has troubled me acutely since Sally’s death. I suffer from epileptic fits. They are infrequent, and they only occur in my sleep. But periodically after an attack, I enter a state of dazed confusion and wander out of doors. It happened several times in India. Fortunately, my brother officers restrained me and kept my illness in confidence, for had it come to the attention of my superiors I would have been discharged from the Army. I have no memory of these episodes afterwards, but on one occasion, I struck one of my fellows. After that I took to locking myself inside my quarters at night, a practice that I have maintained since my return to England.”

“Did Sally know about your disorder?” asked Holmes.

“Yes. I told her of my concern that the affliction could cause me to act violently, and suggested that

she have her own door locked at night. She said that she knew I could never harm her..."

His lower lip trembled imperceptibly, but he gathered himself and looked up. "What do you think, Mr. Holmes? Could I have done this terrible thing and not been aware of it?"

"Was Sally her usual self when she returned home?"

"She was soaking wet from the rain, but was in good heart and told me our friends had conveyed their cordial greetings."

"Is there any way that someone else could have gained access to Ellerslie, either before or after you secured the entrances?" Holmes continued.

"The locks were unbroken next morning. Before lock-up, the servants, who believe that my obsession arises from an irrational fear of thieves, methodically check the house. The rooms are large and sparsely furnished, and it is inconceivable that an intruder could remain undetected."

Immediately after conducting his own careful inspection of the manor house and its surrounds, Holmes departed for London. I met him on his return 3 days later.

"Watson, I consulted yesterday with Dr. Henry Maudsley at his residence in Hanover Square. Like Dr. Hughlings Jackson, who assisted us previously, he is a Yorkshireman and a nerve specialist. But his interest is more focused upon the mind than the brain, and he is an expert on homicidal insanity. Known in the profession as a man of reserved, weighty manner, he is given to vivid flashes of insight and imagination. Dr. Maudsley expressed the opinion that a form of homicidal mania may occur in connection with brain storms, and that such derangements may precede or follow an epileptic fit, or even take the place of an attack in what he called vertiginous epilepsy. I have a copy of his paper 'Remarks on crime and criminals,' which he presented recently to a meeting of the Medico-Psychological Association. We have here, I believe, the explanation for this perplexing crime."

"Are you sure, Holmes?" I said. "There is no direct proof that Wareham strangled his sister."

"Conclusive proof is a luxury in criminal investigation, Watson. Most of the felonies that we are called to examine must be solved from circumstantial evidence. The house was securely locked and no other person could have got in or out. As I have often said, once you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth."

We travelled straightaway to Ellerslie, where Holmes told George Wareham that he must have committed the crime after an epileptic seizure.

George remained impassive as he absorbed the grave implication of this declaration. Holmes continued: "I shall inform the inspector, who will surely

arrest you. But a strong legal defense will be available to you based on diminished responsibility, and I believe that Dr. Maudsley, who is the country's leading authority on the matter, will be prepared to testify in your favor."

"I beg you, Mr. Holmes, delay notifying the inspector for 1 day so that I can attend Sally's funeral. I give you my word that I will not attempt to flee." After a brief hesitation, Holmes consented. "We will call at 3 o'clock tomorrow."

Holmes and I, accompanied by the inspector and two constables, arrived at Ellerslie on the appointed hour. The butler was already at the door, and we could see that he was in a highly agitated state. "It's M-m-m-mister Wareham," he barely stammered out, pointing the way upstairs. In Sally Wareham's bedroom, her brother was hanging from a rope that he had secured to one of the roof beams, already quite dead.

We were considerably shaken by this turn of events, but with the case seemingly closed, we waited at the railway station early the next day. Holmes sat there, deep in thought.

Endeavoring to make conversation, I said: "I don't suppose it matters now, but I did discover one curious detail while you were away. I dined on Tuesday night with the vicar, who is also the local historian. Richard Symonds, one of Sally's suitors, is last in the line of a family who had owned Ellerslie from medieval times. His father had made unwise investments and the land became unproductive because of their cruel treatment of the tenants. They were obliged to sell the house, which was purchased by the Warehams. His parents retained a section of the original land and built a modest dwelling close by with proceeds from the sale."

Sherlock Holmes gave a start, although his voice was calm as he inquired: "Pray tell me, Doctor, did your source make mention of the religious practices of these people?"

"Why yes, they are an old Catholic family. After the Emancipation, the grandparents donated generously to the building of the church."

"Watson, I fear that we have been beguiled by theories when we should have sought for facts. Let us return with all haste to Ellerslie."

As the tall chimneys of the house appeared above the treetops, Holmes began to speak rapidly: "I should not have allowed Inspector White's imperfect grasp of history to disguise the importance of his remarks. It was not during the Dissolution of the Monasteries that Catholic priests were hunted down, but some 50 years later in the reign of Elizabeth I. Nonetheless, there were a number of recusant houses in this part of England that contained priest holes, and the most cleverly concealed ones were made by Nicholas Owen, a skilful, diminutive carpenter from Oxford."

Inside, Holmes worked his way around the staircase with a grim purposefulness. At length, a carved panel yielded to his probing hands, revealing a modestly sized shelved cupboard. He kicked at its back wall, which opened the way to a larger void, into which we climbed.

“Watson, I have committed such a blunder as anyone who knew me only through your memoirs would think me incapable. Poor Wareham.”

He motioned me back as he surveyed the cramped but elongated space by lamplight. “Observe how the sanctuary is created with different angles and levels to dimensions that cannot be guessed from the stairwell. It is obviously the work of the lay Jesuit Owen. Eventually, he was starved out of one of his own priest holes. He died under torture in the Tower without disclosing what he knew. The Symonds family and the priests whom they sheltered here would have owed their lives to his silence.”

“See there, Watson! The murderer must have removed his muddied footwear to walk through the house, but replaced them once in the hide. It is a clear footprint. The boot that made it will be in Richard Symonds’ house.”

The inspector and his men brought home the investigation with admirable efficiency. The footprint was matched as Holmes predicted. When confronted with the evidence, Symonds confessed. He had long resented the demise of the family fortune. His rejection by Sally Wareham had been the last straw, and boiled up in him a murderous rage. The priest hole had been a closely guarded family secret for over 300 years.

By this time, Holmes and I had returned to London. Holmes confined himself to his Baker Street rooms, where I again joined him to bear witness to his penance. His morose introspection was broken at intervals by self-reproach.

“Had George Wareham not trusted in my omniscience, he would be alive today. The Ancient Greek dramatists often used the flaw of hubris to impel their tragic narratives. I must never allow it to take hold in me again, Watson.”

He picked up his violin and began to play. The piece, which I did not recognize, was set in a minor key.

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