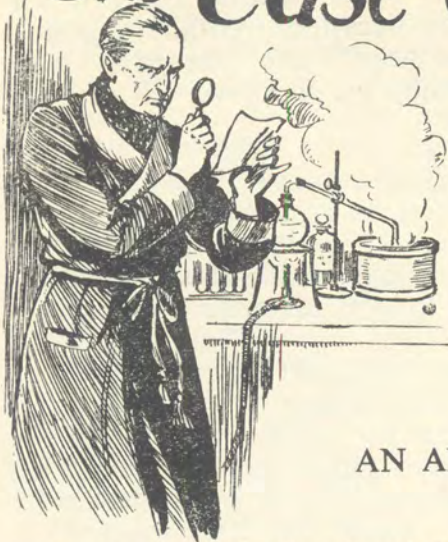


The Case of the Perplexed Painter.

by

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AN ADVENTURE OF HERLOCK SHOLMES

THE CASE of the Perplexed Painter was one in which were displayed most brilliantly the remarkable mental aberrations of my amazing friend, Mr. Herlock Sholmes. We were at lunch in our rooms at Shaker Street when the telephone bell rang, and Sholmes, slipping his fish-sandwich into his pocket, removed his feet from the mantelpiece, and answered the call. His face was very grave when he turned from the instrument.

"A client, Sholmes?" I asked.

"A distinguished one, Jotson," he answered. "No less a person than Mr. Scrooluce, the celebrated painter. You have heard of him, of course. His rise to fame has been recent, but his system of painting his pictures with a blacking-brush, and the mystery surrounding their meaning, if any, have made him a great figure in Art circles. No doubt you have heard how he achieved sudden and dazzling success with his picture 'October Moon'."

I shook my head.

"As a medical man, Sholmes, I have to give my attention to more practical matters than Art," I replied.

"True, my dear doctor. But the story is an interesting one," said Sholmes. "Scrooluce, as a young painter, had no success. He painted ships that looked like ships, cornfields that looked like cornfields, clouds that looked like clouds: and but for a happy accident, might have gone on doing so till this day. But it chanced that, having painted one of his usual landscapes, he inadvertently leaned against the canvas while the paint was still wet: after which it resembled nothing in the earth or in the waters under the earth. A

great Art critic came into the studio, while he was cleaning his coat: and, seeing the picture, was overcome with admiration. He hailed it as a work of undoubted genius: and Scrooluce, who had thought of cleaning the canvas for future use, wisely decided to leave it as it was. He was undecided whether to call it 'Venus Rising from the Waves' or 'The Battle of Lepanto', but finally decided on 'October Moon'. From that time, he never looked back. However," added Sholmes, briskly, "we must not waste time. Mr. Scrooluce is in great trouble, and requires my professional assistance."

"What is the nature of the trouble, Sholmes?"

"It seems that some disaster has occurred, while he was away on a holiday, in connection with a portrait he has painted of Lord Popcorn, and another picture called 'Sunset on the Apennines'. He tells me that his lordship was painted with his favourite collie dog, Rover, at his feet, and that he is calling this very afternoon to see the finished picture. He was so very agitated that it is not easy to deduce what has really happened: but he is very anxious for me to go round at once, before Lord Popcorn arrives. So come, my dear Jotson: we must not lose a moment."

"But, my dear Sholmes—"

"This is no time for butting, Jotson," said Herlock Sholmes, severely.

"But," I persisted. "I have several patients to see this afternoon— I really must call upon my patients, Sholmes—"

"Not at all," answered Sholmes. "Let them live, my dear fellow. Come!"

And without waiting for a reply, my amazing friend hurried me out into Shaker Street and into a taxi.

We found Mr. Scrooluce pacing his studio in a state of wild agitation when we were shown in. Two large canvases stood leaning against the wall: and from moment to moment, the painter paused, and stared at one or the other of them, and shook his head despairingly. What was the matter was not clear: but it was evident that something was very much the matter.

"Which?" the painter was exclaiming. "His lordship will be here in a quarter of an hour—he must see the picture. But which—which—which?"

The painter was obviously in a state of utter perplexity: from what cause I could not fathom. Indeed I doubt whether Herlock Sholmes himself was much wiser than I for the moment. Both of us, however, were deeply moved by the agitation and distress of the artist.

As our names were announced, Mr. Scrooluce turned from the pictures, and rushed across to meet us, in his excitement catching my amazing friend by the arm.

"Mr. Sholmes! Can you help me?" he panted.

"Quite!" said Herlock Sholmes, calmly. "If you will give me a few details—you may speak quite freely before my friend Dr. Jotson—"

"But this is no ordinary case," said Mr. Scrooluce, hoarsely. "I am aware of your great reputation, Mr. Sholmes—I know how successfully you in-

vestigated the case of the missing marksman at Bisley—how you traced Lord Stoney de Broke's watch when it mysteriously disappeared after a visit to his uncle—how you, and you alone, tracked down the Lost Chord. But this case, I fear, must be beyond even your powers. Help me if you can—before Lord Popcorn arrives.”

He led us towards the two pictures leaning on the wall. He pointed to them with a trembling finger.

We looked at them. What either was intended to represent, if indeed anything, was a secret known only to the painter. They were, I gathered, painted in his later, or blacking-brush, style: but beyond that I could guess nothing.

“I will tell you the dreadful disaster that has occurred. Mr. Sholmes,” went on Mr. Scrooluce, huskily. “I painted these two pictures before going on a week-end trip. One of them is the portrait of Lord Popcorn with his dog at his feet. The other is ‘Sunset on the Apennines’. Before leaving, I gave strict instructions that nothing in the studio was to be meddled with. Nevertheless, an unthinking housemaid tidied up during my absence. On my return to-day, I found that the pictures had been moved, and, worse than that, that the labels attached to them had disappeared. Lord Popcorn is calling this afternoon for his portrait, Mr. Sholmes, to take it away with him in his car. He will be here in a matter of minutes now. His portrait is here—it is one of these two pictures. But which is it, Mr. Sholmes?”

Mr. Scrooluce paused, and wiped the perspiration from his brow.

Herlock Sholmes nodded, slowly. We now had an inkling of the cause of the painter's perplexity and distress.

“Which?” said Mr. Scrooluce, despairingly. “Which is which? One of these two pictures is the portrait of his lordship—the other is ‘Sunset on the Apennines’. But which, Mr. Sholmes, is which? Is that a problem beyond even your powers, Mr. Sholmes?”

Gazing at the two pictures, I could well understand the painter's perplexity. There was absolutely nothing in either to give a clue. Either might have been the portrait of Lord Popcorn, or a sunset scene in the Italian mountains: or, indeed, anything else. There was not the ghost of a clue.

“His lordship may be here any moment,” muttered Mr. Scrooluce. “Every moment I expect to hear his car. He must take away his picture, Mr. Sholmes. But which is his portrait? Which? Can you help me?”

“I can!” said Herlock Sholmes.

“Bless you for those words,” said Mr. Scrooluce, brokenly.

“Lord Popcorn was painted with his dog Rover?” asked Herlock Sholmes.

“He was! He and his dog are inseparable.”

“Then Rover will be with him when he calls this afternoon?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“Then all is simple,” drawled Herlock Sholmes. “You may rely upon the sagacity of the faithful hound, Mr. Scrooluce, to pick out his master's portrait.”

"Do you think so?"

"I am sure of it. Hark! I hear a cry!" said Sholmes. "Go down and meet his lordship, please, and make sure that his dog accompanies him into the studio. I answer for the rest."

"If you are right—!" gasped Mr. Scrooluce.

"There is no 'if' about it," said Herlock Sholmes, coldly. "My friend Jotson could tell you that. Please go down—"

"You assure me—?"

"I do!"

"I will trust you!" breathed Mr. Scrooluce, and he hurried out of the studio. Alone with Sholmes, I gazed at him. To my surprise, he drew from his pocket the unfinished fish-sandwich which was a part of his interrupted lunch.

"Sholmes!" I exclaimed, "this no time for finishing your lunch—"

"I am not thinking of finishing my lunch, Jotson."

"Then what—"

I broke off, in astonishment, as Herlock Sholmes stepped up to the nearest of the two canvases, and proceeded to rub the fish-sandwich on it. I gazed at him almost open-mouthed. Well as I knew my amazing friend's remarkable methods, I could understand nothing of this.

He stepped back, and replaced the remains of the fish-sandwich in his pocket. There was an inscrutable smile on his face.

"My dear Sholmes—!" I gasped. "What—?"

"Wait and see, my dear Jotson," he replied.

I had not long to wait. The door opened, and Mr. Scrooluce ushered Lord Popcorn into the studio. A collie dog was prancing round their legs.

But the next moment, the dog ceased to prance, made a rush at the canvas on which Sholmes had rubbed the fish-sandwich, and began to lick it with every sign of pleasure.

Mr. Scrooluce stared, evidently amazed by this prompt verification of the assurance Herlock Sholmes had given him. Lord Popcorn smiled genially.

"Rover knows his master!" he remarked. "What?"

"Oh! Yes! He—he—he does!" stammered Mr. Scrooluce. "Undoubtedly! Good dog—good dog!"

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"But—!" I remarked later, when we were back in our rooms at Shaker Street.

"But what, Jotson?" drawled Herlock Sholmes. "My client is satisfied. His client is satisfied. So what?"

"But Lord Popcorn's portrait, which his lordship took away in his car, may after all the 'Sunset on the Apennines', Sholmes."

"Quite possibly, Jotson. But as no one could ever know, that is quite irrelevant. You may add to your memoirs, as one more of my astounding successes—The Case of the Perplexed Painter."