



Arthur Conan Doyle

The Valley of Fear



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PART 1
The Tragedy of Birlstone

Chapter 1
THE WARNING

“I am inclined to think—” said I.

“I should do so,” Sherlock Holmes remarked impatiently. I believe that I am one of the most long-suffering of mortals; but I’ll admit that I was annoyed at the sardonic interruption. “Really, Holmes,” said I severely, “you are a little trying at times.”

He was too much absorbed with his own thoughts to give any immediate answer to my remonstrance. He leaned upon his hand, with his untasted breakfast before him, and he stared at the slip of paper which he had just drawn from its envelope. Then he took the envelope itself, held it up to the light, and very carefully studied both the exterior and the flap.

“It is Porlock’s writing,” said he thoughtfully. “I can hardly doubt that it is Porlock’s writing, though I have seen it only twice before. The Greek e with the peculiar top flourish is distinctive. But if it is Porlock, then it must be something of the very first importance.”

He was speaking to himself rather than to me; but my vexation disappeared in the interest which the words awakened.

“Who then is Porlock?” I asked.

“Porlock, Watson, is a nom-de-plume, a mere identification mark; but behind it lies a shifty and evasive personality. In a former letter he frankly informed me that the name was not

his own, and defied me ever to trace him among the teeming millions of this great city. Porlock is important, not for himself, but for the great man with whom he is in touch. Picture to yourself the pilot fish with the shark, the jackal with the lion—anything that is insignificant in companionship with what is formidable: not only formidable, Watson, but sinister—in the highest degree sinister. That is where he comes within my purview. You have heard me speak of Professor Moriarty?”

“The famous scientific criminal, as famous among crooks as—”

“My blushes, Watson!” Holmes murmured in a deprecating voice.

“I was about to say, as he is unknown to the public.”

“A touch! A distinct touch!” cried Holmes. “You are developing a certain unexpected vein of pawky humour, Watson, against which I must learn to guard myself. But in calling Moriarty a criminal you are uttering libel in the eyes of the law—and there lie the glory and the wonder of it! The greatest schemer of all time, the organizer of every deviltry, the controlling brain of the underworld, a brain which might have made or marred the destiny of nations—that’s the man! But so aloof is he from general suspicion, so immune from criticism, so admirable in his management and self-effacement, that for those very words that you have uttered he could hale you to a court and emerge with your year’s pension as a solatium for his wounded character. Is he not the celebrated author of *The Dynamics of an Asteroid*, a book which ascends to such rarefied heights of pure mathematics that it is said that there was no man in the scientific press capable of criticizing it? Is this a man to traduce? Foul-mouthed doctor and slandered professor—such would be your respective roles! That’s genius, Watson. But if I am spared by lesser men, our day will surely come.”

“May I be there to see?” I exclaimed devoutly. “But you were speaking of this man Porlock.”

“Ah, yes—the so-called Porlock is a link in the chain some little way from its great attachment. Porlock is not quite a sound link—between us. He is the only flaw in that chain so far as I have been able to test it.”

“But no chain is stronger than its weakest link.”

“Exactly, my dear Watson! Hence the extreme importance of Porlock. Led on by some rudimentary aspirations towards right, and encouraged by the judicious stimulation of an occasional ten-pound note sent to him by devious methods, he has once or twice given me advance information which has been of value—that highest value which anticipates and prevents rather than avenges crime. I cannot doubt that, if we had the cipher, we should find that this communication is of the nature that I indicate.”

Again Holmes flattened out the paper upon his unused plate. I rose and, leaning over him, stared down at the curious inscription, which ran as follows:

**534 C2 13 127 36 31 4 17 21 41 DOUGLAS 109 293 5 37
BIRLSTONE 26 BIRLSTONE 9 47 171**

“What do you make of it, Holmes?”

“It is obviously an attempt to convey secret information.”

“But what is the use of a cipher message without the cipher?”

“In this instance, none at all.”

“Why do you say ‘in this instance’?”

“Because there are many ciphers which I would read as easily as I do the apocrypha of the agony column: such crude devices amuse the intelligence without fatiguing it. But this is different. It is clearly a reference to the words in a page of some book. Until I am told which page and which book I am powerless.”

Chapter 2

SHERLOCK HOLMES DISCOURSES

It was one of those dramatic moments for which my friend existed. It would be an overstatement to say that he was shocked or even excited by the amazing announcement. Without having a tinge of cruelty in his singular composition, he was undoubtedly callous from long overstimulation. Yet, if his emotions were dulled, his intellectual perceptions were exceedingly active. There was no trace then of the horror which I had myself felt at this curt declaration; but his face showed rather the quiet and interested composure of the chemist who sees the crystals falling into position from his oversaturated solution.

“Remarkable!” said he. “Remarkable!”

“You don’t seem surprised.”

“Interested, Mr. Mac, but hardly surprised. Why should I be surprised? I receive an anonymous communication from a quarter which I know to be important, warning me that danger threatens a certain person. Within an hour I learn that this danger has actually materialized and that the person is dead. I am interested; but, as you observe, I am not surprised.”

In a few short sentences he explained to the inspector the facts about the letter and the cipher. MacDonald sat with his chin on his hands and his great sandy eyebrows bunched into a yellow tangle.

“I was going down to Birlstone this morning,” said he. “I had come to ask you if you cared to come with me—you

and your friend here. But from what you say we might perhaps be doing better work in London.”

“I rather think not,” said Holmes.

“Hang it all, Mr. Holmes!” cried the inspector. “The papers will be full of the Birlstone mystery in a day or two; but where’s the mystery if there is a man in London who prophesied the crime before ever it occurred? We have only to lay our hands on that man, and the rest will follow.”

“No doubt, Mr. Mac. But how do you propose to lay your hands on the so-called Porlock?”

MacDonald turned over the letter which Holmes had handed him. “Posted in Camberwell—that doesn’t help us much. Name, you say, is assumed. Not much to go on, certainly. Didn’t you say that you have sent him money?”

“Twice.”

“And how?”

“In notes to Camberwell post office.”

“Did you ever trouble to see who called for them?”

“No.”

The inspector looked surprised and a little shocked. “Why not?”

“Because I always keep faith. I had promised when he first wrote that I would not try to trace him.”

“You think there is someone behind him?”

“I know there is.”

“This professor that I’ve heard you mention?”

“Exactly!”

Inspector MacDonald smiled, and his eyelid quivered as he glanced towards me. “I won’t conceal from you, Mr. Holmes, that we think in the C.I.D. that you have a wee bit of a bee in your bonnet over this professor. I made some inquiries myself about the matter. He seems to be a very respectable, learned, and talented sort of man.”

“I’m glad you’ve got so far as to recognize the talent.”

PART 2
The Scowrers

Chapter 1
THE MAN

It was the fourth of February in the year 1875. It had been a severe winter, and the snow lay deep in the gorges of the Gilmerton Mountains. The steam ploughs had, however, kept the railroad open, and the evening train which connects the long line of coal-mining and iron-working settlements was slowly groaning its way up the steep gradients which lead from Stagville on the plain to Vermissa, the central township which lies at the head of Vermissa Valley. From this point the track sweeps downward to Bartons Crossing, Helmdale, and the purely agricultural county of Merton. It was a single track railroad; but at every siding—and they were numerous—long lines of trucks piled with coal and iron ore told of the hidden wealth which had brought a rude population and a bustling life to this most desolate corner of the United States of America.

For desolate it was! Little could the first pioneer who had traversed it have ever imagined that the fairest prairies and the most lush water pastures were valueless compared to this gloomy land of black crag and tangled forest. Above the dark and often scarcely penetrable woods upon their flanks, the high, bare crowns of the mountains, white snow, and jagged rock towered upon each flank, leaving a long, winding, tortuous valley in the centre. Up this the little train was slowly crawling.

The oil lamps had just been lit in the leading passenger car, a long, bare carriage in which some twenty or thirty people were seated. The greater number of these were workmen returning from their day's toil in the lower part of the valley. At least a dozen, by their grimed faces and the safety lanterns which they carried, proclaimed themselves miners. These sat smoking in a group and conversed in low voices, glancing occasionally at two men on the opposite side of the car, whose uniforms and badges showed them to be policemen.

Several women of the labouring class and one or two travellers who might have been small local storekeepers made up the rest of the company, with the exception of one young man in a corner by himself. It is with this man that we are concerned. Take a good look at him; for he is worth it.

He is a fresh-complexioned, middle-sized young man, not far, one would guess, from his thirtieth year. He has large, shrewd, humorous gray eyes which twinkle inquiringly from time to time as he looks round through his spectacles at the people about him. It is easy to see that he is of a sociable and possibly simple disposition, anxious to be friendly to all men. Anyone could pick him at once as gregarious in his habits and communicative in his nature, with a quick wit and a ready smile. And yet the man who studied him more closely might discern a certain firmness of jaw and grim tightness about the lips which would warn him that there were depths beyond, and that this pleasant, brown-haired young Irishman might conceivably leave his mark for good or evil upon any society to which he was introduced.

Having made one or two tentative remarks to the nearest miner, and receiving only short, gruff replies, the traveller resigned himself to uncongenial silence, staring moodily out of the window at the fading landscape.

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