

The dancing men

1

A Strange Drawing

One morning, Sherlock Holmes handed me a sheet of paper.

'Look, Watson,' he said. 'Can you explain this problem?'

I looked at the paper. To my surprise, it was covered with a line of strange pictures. These pictures looked like little dancing men.

'A child must have drawn these,' I said. 'Where did you get this piece of paper, Holmes?'

'It arrived by post this morning,' answered Holmes. 'A man called Hilton Cubitt, of Ridling Thorpe Manor in Norfolk, sent it to me. Mr Cubitt is coming to see me today.'

'There's a ring at the doorbell, Watson. Perhaps that's Mr Cubitt now.'

A moment later, a tall gentleman entered the room. He had a handsome face with clear blue eyes and looked very strong and healthy.

This gentleman shook hands with both of us. Suddenly he caught sight of the strange drawings.

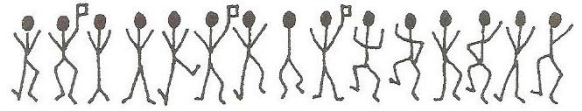
'Here's a mystery, Mr Holmes,' he said. 'What do you think of these drawings?'

'They look like children's drawings,' replied Holmes. 'But why do you think they are important?'

'I don't, Mr Holmes. But these drawings are making my wife very frightened. That's why I have come to see you. I want to find out what they mean.'

Holmes held up the paper so that the

sunlight shone through it. It was a page torn from a notebook and the markings on it looked like this:



Holmes examined the paper carefully. Then he folded it up and put it in his pocket.

'This is a most interesting and unusual case, Mr Cubitt,' he said. 'Please tell us your story from the beginning.'

2

Mr Cubitt's Story

'I'm not very good at telling stories,' said Mr Cubitt. 'But first, I want to explain something.'

'I'm not rich, but I come from a very old and well-known family. My family has lived at Ridling Thorpe Manor, in Norfolk, for nearly five hundred years.'

'Last year, while I was visiting London, I met an American lady called Elsie Patrick. Elsie and I became friends and soon fell in love. I didn't know anything about Elsie's family or her past life. But I decided to ask her to marry me.'

'The day before our wedding, Elsie spoke to me. "I've had some very sad things happen to me in my past life, Hilton. I've done nothing wrong, but I wish to forget my

past. Please promise me you will never ask me anything about it. If you are unable to make this promise, then please go back to Norfolk and leave me."

'So I promised Elsie I would never ask her anything about her past life. We've been married for a year now and we've been very happy. During all this time, I've kept my promise. But one day, about a month ago, my wife received a letter from America – I saw the American stamp. She read the letter and her face turned white. Then she threw the letter in the fire.

'She said nothing, but from that time, there's been a look of fear on her face.

'Mr Holmes, my wife is a very good woman. I'm sure she has not done anything wrong in her past life.

'But Elsie knows I am very proud of my family. My family's long history is very important to me. She would never do anything to upset me. Perhaps that's the reason she's afraid to tell me her troubles.'

'Please go on,' said Holmes.

'Well,' continued Mr Cubitt, 'yesterday morning, a strange thing happened. I found this piece of paper lying on the sundial¹ in the garden. At first, I thought it was a child's drawing.

'But when I showed the paper to Elsie, she fainted. Since then, she has seemed like someone in a dream, and there is terror in her eyes.

'I didn't know what to do. If I took the paper to the police, they would laugh at me. So I came to you. Mr Holmes, please help me. I'm not rich, but I'll spend all my money to protect my wife from danger.'

I was sorry for Mr Cubitt. He was a good man and I saw that he loved his wife very much.

Holmes did not speak for some time.

'Mr Cubitt, don't you think,' he said at last, 'you should ask your wife to tell you everything?'

'But I promised Elsie I would never ask her about her past,' replied Hilton Cubitt. 'If she wants to tell me something, she will. But I will not ask her to tell me.'



'I found this piece of paper lying on the sundial.'

'I'll be pleased to help you,' said Holmes. 'I believe there is a meaning in the pictures of the dancing men. But I need more information before I can say what it is.

'Go back to Norfolk. If there are any more pictures of dancing men, make a copy of them for me. If anything important happens, I'll come to Norfolk at once.'

Mr Cubitt's Second Visit

During the next few days, Holmes was very quiet. Several times he looked at the paper with the dancing figures on it.

Then one afternoon, about a fortnight later, we had another visit from Mr Cubitt. He seemed worried and tired.

'My wife hasn't told me anything yet, Mr Holmes,' he said. 'But I have more pictures of dancing men and – more important – I've seen the man who draws them.'

'But I'll tell you everything that has happened. The morning after I visited you, I found another line of dancing men. They were drawn with chalk on the toolhouse² which stands in the garden, near the house. I made this copy.'

Hilton Cubitt unfolded a paper and laid it on the table.



'Excellent!' cried Holmes. 'Please go on.'

'After I'd made the copy,' continued Mr Cubitt, 'I cleaned off the marks. But two days later, another drawing appeared. Here it is:'



Holmes was delighted.

'We're beginning to get a lot of information,' he said.

'I decided to find out who was drawing these pictures,' went on Hilton Cubitt. 'So the next night, I took my gun and sat beside a window which looks out onto the garden.'

'At about two o'clock in the morning, my wife came into the room. She was wearing her night clothes. She asked me to come to bed. But I refused.'

"No, Elsie," I said. "I want to see who is drawing these pictures."

'Suddenly I saw Elsie's face turn very white in the moonlight. She was looking out of the window. I looked out of the window, too. I saw something moving near the toolhouse. A dark figure came slowly round the corner of the toolhouse and stopped beside the door.'

'Immediately, I picked up my gun. I wanted to run out of the house, but my wife caught me in her arms and held me back. By the time I got outside, the man was gone.'



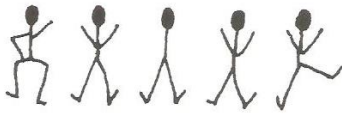
'A dark figure came slowly round the corner of the toolhouse and stopped beside the door.'

'On the toolhouse door was the same drawing I copied before:



'I looked everywhere, but I couldn't find the man. However, in the morning, when I looked at the toolhouse door again, I saw a second line of dancing men. This new line is very short, but I made a copy and here it is.'

Hilton Cubitt gave another piece of paper to Holmes.



I could see that Holmes was very excited.

'Tell me,' he said, 'was this second line of figures separate from the first?'

'It was on a different part of the door.'

'Excellent!' cried Holmes. 'This last drawing is very important. It makes me feel hopeful. Please continue your interesting story.'

'I've nothing more to say,' replied Hilton Cubitt, 'except, I was angry with Elsie for holding me back. I'm sure she knows who this man is and what these pictures mean.'

'Now I must go back to Norfolk. Elsie is very frightened and I don't want to leave her alone at night.'

'Well,' said Holmes, 'please leave these pictures with me. I will examine them carefully. I think I'll be able to solve the mystery soon.'

4

Terrible News

As soon as Hilton Cubitt left the room, Holmes ran to a table. He put all the papers with pictures of dancing men on the table. He began to examine them carefully.

For the next two hours, Holmes worked hard examining the papers. At last, he jumped up excitedly. Then he sat down again and wrote out a long telegram³.

'As soon as we get an answer to this telegram, Watson,' he said, 'we'll visit Mr Cubitt in Norfolk. I have some important information for him.'

I was very curious about the telegram. I very much wanted to know what Holmes had found out about the meaning of the dancing men. But I didn't ask any questions. I knew Holmes would tell me when he was ready.

Two days passed. Then on the evening of the second day, Holmes received another letter from Hilton Cubitt.

In this letter, Mr Cubitt said he had found a new drawing of dancing men. He had found the drawing that morning, on the sundial in the garden. Mr Cubitt had made a copy of the drawing in his letter:



Holmes examined these pictures carefully. Suddenly he jumped up.

'We must go to Norfolk at once, Watson,' he said.

At that moment, a telegram arrived for Holmes. It was the answer he had been waiting for. Holmes read the telegram and his face looked serious.

The Investigation Begins

'Mr Cubitt is in terrible danger,' he said.
'He needs our help.'

But, unfortunately, we were not able to go to Norfolk that evening. It was late and the last train had gone. The next train was not until the morning. In the morning, we travelled to Norfolk. At the station, we asked our way to Ridling Thorpe Manor.

'Are you the detectives from London?' the stationmaster asked.

'Why do you think we are detectives from London?' asked Holmes in surprise.

'Because the Norfolk police are already on their way to Ridling Thorpe Manor,' said the stationmaster. 'But perhaps you are doctors? The lady isn't dead yet. You may be in time to save her life.'

Holmes looked very worried.

'What do you mean?' he asked. 'What has happened at Ridling Thorpe Manor?'

'It's terrible news,' replied the stationmaster. 'Both Mr Hilton Cubitt and his wife have been shot. Mr Cubitt is dead and his wife is seriously injured.'

At once, Holmes hurried to a carriage. During the journey to Ridling Thorpe Manor, he did not speak at all. But I could see he was very worried.

Holmes had known that Hilton Cubitt was in danger. But he had not arrived in time to save his client.

At last, we could see a large, old house through the trees. This was Ridling Thorpe Manor. As we came near the front door, I saw the toolhouse and the sundial in the garden. These were the places where Hilton Cubitt had found pictures of dancing men.

A carriage was standing outside the front door and a small man was getting out. This man introduced himself as Inspector Martin of the Norfolk police. Holmes introduced himself to Inspector Martin.

Inspector Martin was very surprised when he heard my friend's name.

'But, Mr Holmes,' he said, 'the crime was committed⁴ only a few hours ago, at three o'clock this morning! How did you get here from London so quickly?'

'When I left London, I didn't know a crime had been committed,' replied Holmes. 'I was on my way to here to prevent a crime. But I've arrived too late.'

'Now, Inspector Martin, shall we work together on this investigation⁵? Or do you want to work alone?'

'I'd be very pleased to work with you,' replied the inspector.

'Good,' said Holmes. 'Then let's try to find out what happened.'

At that moment, the doctor, an old, white-haired man, came downstairs from Mrs Cubitt's room. The doctor said the lady was

very badly injured, but that she would not die.

The bullet which wounded Mrs Cubitt had gone into her brain. The gun which fired the bullet had been very close to her. Hilton Cubitt had been shot through the heart.

A gun had been found lying halfway between the two bodies. Two shots had been fired from the gun.

But we did not know if Mrs Cubitt had shot her husband first, and then shot herself. Or if Mr Cubitt had shot his wife, and then killed himself.

'Has Mr Cubitt's body been moved?' asked Holmes.

'No,' replied the doctor. 'We had to move the lady. We couldn't leave her lying injured on the floor.'

'Who found the body?'

'Two of the servants,' said the doctor.

'Then let's hear their story,' said Holmes.

The two women told their story very clearly. They had been awakened from their sleep by a loud noise. A minute later, they heard another noise.

Both women ran downstairs from their rooms. The door of a downstairs room was open and Mr Cubitt lay dead on the floor.

Near the window, his wife was sitting with her head against the wall. One side of her face was red with blood.

The window was shut and the room was full of smoke and the smell of gunpowder.

Immediately, the two servants sent for the doctor. When he arrived, they carried Mrs Cubitt upstairs.

The servants did not understand why the crime had been committed. Mr and Mrs Cubitt had been in love with each other and had never quarrelled.



Mr Cubitt lay dead on the floor. His wife was sitting with her head against the wall.

'Tell me,' said Holmes, 'when did you first notice the smell of gunpowder?'

'When we ran out of our rooms upstairs,' replied the women.

'Good,' said Holmes. 'Now let's examine the room downstairs.'

6

Holmes Sends a Note

The room was small, with a window looking onto the garden. Mr Cubitt's body lay on the floor.

'You can take away the body now,' said Holmes. Then he turned to the doctor. 'Have you found the bullet which injured Mrs Cubitt?' he asked.

'No,' replied the doctor. 'The bullet is still somewhere in her brain. We will have to operate to remove the bullet.'

'We know that two bullets were fired from the gun,' said Inspector Martin. 'And we know where each bullet went. One bullet killed Mr Cubitt and the other injured his wife.'

'Yes,' said Holmes, 'but what about the third bullet – the bullet which passed through the window frame⁶'

He turned suddenly and pointed to a hole in the bottom of the window frame. This hole was the exact shape and size of a bullet.

'Wonderful!' cried Inspector Martin. 'Then three shots were fired, not two. A third person was in the room.'

'But, Mr Holmes, how did you know a bullet had passed through the window frame?'

'Well,' said Holmes, 'you remember that the two servants smelt gunpowder as soon as they left their rooms?'

'Yes,' said the Inspector, 'but I still don't understand.'

'The servants' rooms are upstairs. But the gun was fired *downstairs*. So the smell of the gunpowder must have been blown from this room to the rooms upstairs. Therefore the window must have been open.'

'A third person could have stood outside

the window and fired through it. If somebody inside the room fired at this person and missed, the bullet would pass through the window frame.'

'I understand,' said Inspector Martin. 'But when the servants entered this room, they said the window was shut.'

'That was because Mrs Cubitt had just shut it,' replied Holmes. 'But what's this?'

A lady's handbag was standing on a small table. I saw it was full of money. The money was tied together. We counted twenty fifty-pound notes.

'This money is important evidence⁷,' said Holmes. 'And now let's find out where the third bullet went, after it passed through the window frame.'

We all went outside into the garden. There were flowers planted underneath the window. The flowers were broken and there were large footprints on the ground.

Holmes searched in the grass. Suddenly he bent forward and picked something up. It was the missing bullet.

'I think, Inspector,' he said, 'that our case is nearly solved.'

'But, Mr Holmes,' said the Inspector, 'who was this other person and how did he get away?'

'I will tell you later,' said Holmes. 'First, I want to know if there is a place near here called Elrige's?'

We asked the servants, but none of them had ever heard the name. Then the boy who worked with the horses remembered a farm with that name. This farm was a very lonely place, many miles away, near a village called East Rushton.

Holmes thought for a moment, then he smiled strangely.

'Bring a horse,' he said to the boy. 'I want

you to take a message to Elrige's Farm.'

Then Holmes took from his pocket all the papers with the pictures of the dancing men on them. He sat down at a table and worked carefully. Finally, he handed a note to the boy.

'Give this note to the person whose name is written on the outside,' said Holmes. 'And don't answer any questions.'

I looked at the outside of the note. It was addressed, in large writing, to:

*Mr Abe Slaney,
Elrige's Farm,
East Rushton,
Norfolk*

Then Holmes turned to Inspector Martin.

'I think you should get more policemen,' he said. 'We'll have to catch a dangerous criminal.'

7

Holmes Explains the Mystery


After the boy had left, Holmes gave some instructions to the servants.

'If anybody comes and asks for Mrs Cubitt,' he said, 'do not tell the person that she is ill. Show the person straight into the sitting-room.'

'There are some things I want to explain,' Holmes said. Then he told the Inspector about Hilton Cubitt's visits to us in London and the pictures of the dancing men.

'These drawings are a kind of secret writing,' said Holmes. 'They look like children's drawings, but they are messages. Each picture of a dancing man is a letter of the alphabet. Let me show you how it works.'

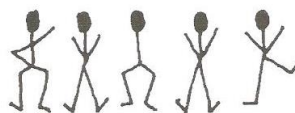
'The letter of the alphabet which appears most often in English is "E". The picture of the dancing man which appeared most often

was  So I knew that this picture was "E".

'Some of the dancing men were holding flags. I guessed that a figure with a flag was the last letter of a word.'




'But how did you find out what the other pictures meant?' I asked.

'On Hilton Cubitt's second visit,' went on Holmes, 'he brought three different messages with him. The last message was:



'In this message, there was no flag. So the message had to be one, single word. What could it be?


'The word had five letters, and the second and fourth letters were "E". It might be "SEVER" or "LEVER" or "NEVER". But the most probable of these words was "NEVER".

So I knew the pictures ,  and  were "N", "V" and "R".'

'Excellent, Holmes!' I cried. 'What did you do next?'


'Well,' said Holmes, 'I knew Mrs Cubitt's first name was Elsie. I noticed that there was another word which had five letters and began and ended with "E".



'So I guessed that  , and probably were "L", "S" and "T".

'In one message, the word "ELSIE" was written twice. In this message, the word before "ELSIE" had four letters and ended with "E". I guessed the writer was asking Elsie to do something.

'So now I looked for an English word of four letters ending in "E". The best word I could think of was "COME".

'So now I knew that  , and were "C", "O" and "M".

'Then I looked again at the first message which Hilton Cubitt brought us:



'I used the figures holding flags to divide the message into words. I wrote out the message, putting dots for the letters I didn't know.

.M .ERE ..E SL.NE.

'The first missing letter had to be "A" and the second letter had to be "H".

AM HERE A.E SLANE.

'Clearly, the two missing letters were part of somebody's name. So it must be:

AM HERE ABE SLANEY

'Then I looked at the second message again:



'This message worked out like this:

A. ELRI.ES

'Here, I worked out that the missing letters could be "T" and "G".

AT ELRIGES

'I decided to find out if there was a place near Ridling Thorpe Manor that was called Elrige's. If there was, then I knew that this was where the writer of the messages was staying.'

Inspector Martin and I looked at Holmes. It was wonderful how my friend had found out the meaning of the dancing men.

'What did you do then, Mr Holmes?' asked the Inspector.

'I guessed that Abe Slaney was an American. "Abe" is an American name and Mrs Cubitt had recently received a letter from America. This letter had upset her very much.

'So I sent a telegram to a friend in the New York Police, asking about Abe Slaney. This was the reply:

THE MOST DANGEROUS CROOK⁸
IN CHICAGO

'The same evening, I received Hilton Cubitt's final message.



The message worked out like this:

ELSIE .RE.ARE TO MEET THY GO.

Clearly, the missing letters had to be "P" and "D".

ELSIE PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD

'I knew the Cubitts were in terrible danger. Abe Slaney was saying he was going to kill Mrs Cubitt. So Dr Watson and I hurried immediately to Norfolk, but, unfortunately, we were too late. Hilton Cubitt was dead.'

'But what about Abe Slaney, Mr Holmes?' asked Inspector Martin. 'If he is the murderer and he's at Elrige's, he may escape.'

'Don't worry,' said Holmes. 'He won't escape. He's coming here.'

'Here?' said Inspector Martin, in surprise. 'Why should he come here?'

'Because I have written and asked him to come here.'

Holmes stood up and walked to the window. 'Look, here he is!'

8

The Murderer is Caught

A man was coming up the path. He was tall and handsome, with a large, black beard. The front doorbell rang loudly.

'Hide behind the door,' said Holmes quietly. 'This man is very dangerous and we must be careful.'

We waited in silence for a minute. Then the sitting-room door opened and the man stepped into the room. At once, Holmes put a gun against his head and Inspector Martin put handcuffs⁹ on his wrists.

The man looked at us. His black eyes looked angry.

'I received a note from Mrs Cubitt,' he said. 'Where is she?'



At once, Holmes put a gun against his head and Inspector Martin put handcuffs on his wrists.

'Mrs Cubitt is badly injured,' replied Holmes. 'Her life is in great danger.'

The man cried out. He sat down on a chair and put his face in his hands.

'I didn't know she was injured,' he said. 'I shot her husband when he tried to kill me. But I would never injure Elsie. I love her more than anything in the world.'

Suddenly the man looked up.

'Wait,' he said. 'If Elsie is badly injured, who wrote this?'

He opened his hands and threw a note onto the table.

'I wrote it, to make you come here,' said Holmes.

'You wrote it? But how could you know the meaning of the dancing men?'

'I worked out what the figures meant,' replied Holmes. 'But now, tell us your story.'

'All right,' said the man. 'If Elsie dies, it doesn't matter what happens to me.'

'My name is Abe Slaney and I've known Elsie since she was a child. Her father was head of a gang of crooks in Chicago and I was a member of the gang.'

'Elsie's father thought of the secret writing of the dancing men. The members of the gang used it to send messages to one another.'

'Elsie and I were engaged to be married. But Elsie hated her father's business and she didn't want to be married to a criminal. So she ran away to England. She met and married this Englishman, Hilton Cubitt.'

'I wrote to Elsie, but she didn't answer my letters. In the end, I came to England and stayed at Elrige's Farm.'

'I knew Elsie understood the pictures of the dancing men. So I left messages where she would see them. In the messages, I asked her to come away with me. But her only

answer was "Never".'

'Then Elsie wrote me a letter. She said she would meet me at three o'clock in the morning, when her husband was asleep.'

'She brought money with her. She offered me the money and asked me to go away. I became angry and tried to pull her through the window.'

'Just then, her husband rushed in, carrying a gun. He fired the gun at me and missed. At the same moment, I shot at him and he fell down dead.'

'I ran across the garden. As I ran, I heard the window shut behind me.'

'I have told you the truth, gentlemen. I didn't know Elsie was hurt. She must have shot herself after I left.'

While Abe Slaney was talking, a carriage arrived with two policemen in it. Inspector Martin turned to his prisoner.

'It's time for us to go, Slaney. Goodbye, Mr Holmes. I hope I'll work with you again one day.'

As the carriage drove away, I saw the note which Abe Slaney had thrown on the table. This was what Holmes had written:



'If you work it out, Watson,' said Holmes, 'you'll find it means: "Come here at once".'

'I knew Abe Slaney would come when he read the note. He would think Mrs Cubitt had written it.'

'Well,' I said, 'criminals have used the dancing men to help them in their crimes. But now the dancing men have been used to catch a criminal.'

'Yes,' said Holmes. 'The dancing men have finally done some good.'