

Thierry James Francis

The Adventures of the Eleven Cuff-Buttons



James Thierry

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Eleven Cuff-Buttons**

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James Francis Thierry

The Adventures of the Eleven Cuff-Buttons

Being one of the exciting episodes in the career of the famous detective Hemlock Holmes, as recorded by his friend Dr. Watson

Chapter I

Well, you see, it was like this:

After my illustrious friend, Hemlock Holmes, champion unofficial detective of the world, had doped out "The Adventure of the Second Stain," – the last one to be pulled off after his return to life, – thereby narrowly averting a great war, he got sick of London life and hiked over to the United States. He prevailed upon me to accompany him to that remarkable country; and we stayed there for three years, living in New York City all the time. There, on many occasions, Holmes displayed to great advantage his marvelous powers, and helped the New York police to clear up many a mystery that they had been unable to solve; for we found the police of that city to be just as stupid and chuckle-headed as those of London.

While in New York Holmes and I both learned to use American slang, and in case this little book should happen to be read by any of London society's "upper crust," I humbly beg their pardon for any examples of slang that may have crept into its pages.

Upon the death of King Edward in May, 1910, Hemlock Holmes was called back to London by the Scotland Yard officials to solve the mysterious disappearance of the British royal crown, which somebody had swiped the same day that Ed kicked the bucket; and of course I had to trail along with him! Well, to cover up a "narsty" scandal, my unerring friend, Hemlock Holmes, detected the guilty wretch within two days, but the culprit was so highly placed in society that the cops couldn't do a thing to him. In fact, he was one of the dukes, and after King George, Ed's successor, had recovered the crown, – which was found in an old battered valise in a corner of the duke's garage, – and had got a written confession out of him in Holmes's old rooms in Baker Street, in the presence of myself and Inspector Barnabas Letstrayed, we all swore a solemn oath, on a bound volume of Alfred Austin's poems, that we would never, never tell who it was that had stolen the English crown in the year 1910! Wild horses shall not drag from me the name of that ducal scoundrel, and, besides, there might be a German spy looking over your shoulder as you read this.

Holmes and I decided to stay back in the tight little isle for a while after that episode, and there in the same old den, at 221-B Baker Street, in the city of London, we were domiciled on that eventful April morning in 1912 that saw us introduced to what turned out to be positively the dog-gonedest, most mixed-up, perplexing, and mysterious case we ever bumped up against in all our long and varied career in Arthur Conan Doyle's dream-pipe. It completely laid over "The Sign of the Four" and "The Study in Scarlet," and had "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle" all beaten to a frazzle.

To be painfully precise about it, it was just twenty minutes after nine, Monday morning, April the eighth, 1912, the day after Easter, and it was raining something fierce outside. The whirling raindrops pattered against our second-story windows, and occasional thunder and lightning varied the scene.

Holmes was sitting, or, rather, sprawling in a Morris chair, wrapped in his old lavender dressing-gown, and was wearing the red Turkish slippers King George had given him for Christmas a few

months before. He had his little old bottle of cocaine on the table beside him, and his dope-needle, which he had just filled, in his hand. I was sitting on the opposite side of the littered-up table, engaged in rolling a pill, that is to say, a coffin-nail. I had just poured out the tobacco into the rice-paper, and Hemlock Holmes had pulled back his left cuff, baring his tattooed but muscular wrist, just ready to take his fifth shot in the arm since breakfast, when all of a sudden there was a terrible clatter and racket down at our front door; we heard the door jerked open and then slammed shut; somebody rushed up the stairway three steps at a time; our own door was kicked open, and a tall, bald-headed man, about forty years old, wearing a monocle in his right eye, and with a derby hat in one hand, and a wet, streaming umbrella in the other, stood before us.

"Say! The cuff-buttons are gone, – the cuff-buttons are gone! One pair of them, anyhow. Come quick! The earl is nearly wild about it. Money's no object to him!" the apparition yelled at us.

I was so completely taken aback by the way that chump had burst in on us that I spilled all the beautiful tobacco off the cigarette-paper onto the floor. Holmes, however, like the cold-blooded old cuss that he always was, didn't even bat an eye, but calmly proceeded to squirt the cocaine into his wrist, and then, with the usual deep sigh of contentment, he stretched out full length in the chair, with his arms above his head, and yawned.

"Well, my hasty friend from Hedge-gutheridge, so you haven't got all your buttons, eh?" he drawled. "I congratulate you upon your frankness, as it isn't everybody who will admit it. But sit down, anyhow, and make yourself at home. Watson has the 'makings' over there; I've got a cocaine-squirter here you can use, if you wish, and you will find a nice dish of red winter apples up on the mantelpiece. Beyond the mere facts that you are a bachelor, live at Hedge-gutheridge in County Surrey, do a great deal of writing, belong to the Fraternal Order of Zebras, and shaved yourself very quickly this morning, I know nothing whatever about you."

Of course, I knew that was the cue for *my* little song and dance.

"Marvelous! marvelous!" I shouted.

But our visitor was a long ways more surprised than I was. He flopped down in a chair, stared at Holmes as if he were a ghost, and said:

"Good Lord! How in thunder did you get onto all that?"

My eminent friend smiled his old crafty smile, as he waved his hands, and replied:

"Why, you poor simp, it's all as plain as that little round window-pane called a monocle that you've got stuck in your eye there. I knew right away that you were a bachelor, because there is a general air of seediness about you and two buttons are missing from your vest; I knew that you live at Hedge-gutheridge, because you've got a ticket marked to that place sticking out of your vest-pocket; I knew that you do lots of writing, for the perfectly obvious reason that you have ink smeared over the thumb and first two fingers of your right hand; I knew that you belong to the Fraternal Order of Zebras, because I can see an F. O. Z. watch-charm on your pocket; and, finally, I knew that you scraped the incipient spinach off your mug very rapidly this morning because I can see three large recent razor-cuts on your chin and jaws! Perfectly easy when you know how!" And old Hemlock winked at me. "So spill out your little story to me, one mouthful at a time, and don't get all balled up while you're telling it either, – or eyether."

Our visitor gasped again in amazement, handed Holmes his card, and began:

"Well, my name is Eustace Thorneycroft, private secretary to George Arthur Percival Chauncey Dunderhaugh, the ninth Earl of Puddingham, who lives at Normanstow Towers, near Hedge-gutheridge, over in Surrey. As you are probably aware, the Earl's most precious treasure is, – or, rather, are the six pairs of fancy, diamond-studded, gold cuff-buttons that His Majesty King George I presented to his ancestor, Reginald Bertram Dunderhaugh, the second Earl of Puddingham, upon King George's accession to the British throne in the year 1714.

"It is an historical fact that King George paid twenty-four hundred pounds for the six pairs of cuff-buttons, – their value being considerably greater now, – and the diamond in each one is as large

as the end of a man's thumb; so you can see at once how very valuable they are, to say nothing of the sentimental value of having been a present from a king to the Earl's ancestor two centuries ago."

"Oh, yes; I have heard about the Puddingham cuff-buttons," said Holmes, as he reached over, and grabbing the cigarette I had just rolled, calmly stuck it in his own mouth, and lit it. "Old King George I had no more taste than a Pittsburg millionaire! But go on with your little yarn."

Thornycroft continued, occasionally taking a bite out of one of the apples Holmes had offered him:

"Well, just this Easter Monday morning, when the Earl was being dressed by his valet, an Italian named Luigi Vermicelli, he noticed with horror that his nice pink-and-green silk shirt, lying over the back of the mahogany arm-chair beside his bed, had the ancestral cuff-buttons missing from the cuffs!

"He is absolutely sure that they were in the cuffs when he took the shirt off last night, since he remembers distinctly having polished them up a bit with his handkerchief when he retired, and he cannot account for their mysterious disappearance. He has a large and ferocious bulldog on guard outside the castle every night, so he is sure no burglar got in, as the dog made no noise during the night.

"As for any possible suspicion attaching to the Earl's servants, I will say that they have all been with him for several years, all came highly recommended, and he would not presume to suspect any of them of having stolen the heirlooms."

"Which apparently reduces us to the two interesting hypotheses that either the cuff-buttons flew away by themselves or else the Earl hid them while he was drunk," interrupted Holmes, as he thoughtfully rubbed his left ear.

At this, the secretary stared, but went on:

"The constables from the village of Hedge-gutheridge, a half a mile from the castle, to whom the Earl telephoned immediately upon discovering his loss, and who came up there within twenty minutes after, were not so confident of the servants' innocence, however, as they insisted on lining up all fourteen of them in the main corridor and searching them in a very ungentlemanly manner! As an after-thought, the constables even had the temerity to search *me*, as if I would dream of doing such a thing as that, – me, Eustace Thornycroft!

"But they couldn't find the precious pair of diamond cuff-buttons on them at all; so the Earl had me beat it right into London on the next train, and engage you to ferret out the scoundrels responsible for this dastardly outrage! His Lordship didn't even give me time to finish my breakfast, he was so worked up about it, and compelled me to catch the eight-fourteen train out of Hedge-gutheridge, with a rasher of bacon and a half-empty cup of coffee on the dining table behind me. So that's why you see me tearing into these red apples so voraciously, Mr. Holmes! I reckon the swift ride through the Surrey downs on a rainy morning sharpened my appetite, too.

"So that's all there is to tell you, except that here's a hundred gold sovereigns for your retaining fee, and the Earl will positively pay you a reward of ten thousand pounds more when you recover the lost pair of cuff-buttons."

And Thornycroft threw a chamois bag, full of coins, across the table.

"Ah, ha! Five hundred cold bucks in Yankee money!" cried Hemlock Holmes, as he rubbed his hands with pleasure. "Gather up this mazuma, Watson, and give His Nibs a receipt for it, as we are both after the coin, only you haven't got the nerve to admit it. Well, Mr. Wormyloft, – er, I mean Thornycroft, – tell the Earl of Puddingham that I and my bone-headed assistant here will guarantee to give him a run for his money, and that if we don't find the ancestral cuff-buttons, at least we'll tear up half of County Surrey looking for them!"

Our bald-headed visitor here took up his hat and umbrella and opened the door, about to depart.

"Gosh, it's raining worse than ever now!" he said. "Well, I've got to shovel dust, – or, rather, mud, – back to Normanstow Towers, anyhow, or the Earl will raise the deuce with me! Be sure to come out on the next train after this, Mr. Holmes, which leaves London at one-twenty-two, as the

Earl will be expecting you, and what's more, he'll have a coach-and-four waiting for you at the Hedgegutheridge station. So long!"

And the Earl's secretary stepped out, closed the door after him, and was gone.

As we heard him going down the stairs, and then leaving by the outer door, Holmes got up, shook himself, stretched out his lanky arms, and yawned.

"Well, we've got a hundred pounds in gold here, Watson," he said. "Now it's up to us to scare up a good bluff at earning it! Let's see, – it's ten o'clock now, and we must leave the rooms at one o'clock to get to the station for the one-twenty-two train. So we'll have luncheon, – or lunch, just as you prefer, – at twelve-thirty. That leaves me two hours and a half to read 'Old Nick Carter.'"

Hemlock got out several yellow-back dime-novels from the book-rack in the corner, pulled the Morris chair over to the window, and started in on his light literature.

"What! Aren't you worrying about the Puddingham cuff-buttons at all? Aren't you going to try to dope out an explanation of their disappearance?" I inquired anxiously.

"There you go again, Watson, you old boob!" my friend replied. "How many times must I tell you that it is a capital mistake to theorize in advance of the facts! Keep your shirt on till we get out to the castle, Doc; and in the meantime *ich kebibble* who swiped the cuff-buttons!"

I knew from long experience that it was useless to argue with him, so I just sat there like a bump on a log for the rest of the morning, wondering why the Sam Hill it was that I still continued to swallow such talk as that, when I knew it was my duty to rise up and paste him one in the eye for his sarcasms.

Chapter II

As Holmes and I were sitting down to luncheon at twelve-thirty that noon, and Mrs. Hudson, our old reliable landlady, was placing a fried pork-chop on my plate, we were again startled at hearing a terrific banging at the front door. The rain had died down somewhat, but it was still cloudy and disagreeable outside. In a moment more our own door was thrust open, and another visitor, – a young man of about thirty, – butted in on our privacy.

"Oh, I'm sure I beg your pardon, gentlemen," said this guy as he entered, "but I am Lord Launcelot Dunderhaugh, younger brother of the Earl of Puddingham, whose secretary, Mr. Thorneycroft, was here this morning. I came to tell you that since his return, two more pairs of those historic cuff-buttons have been stolen, and to see that you come out to the castle on the one-twenty-two train without fail!"

"Hum, that's hard lines, ain't it, Launcelot?" said Holmes, as he waved him to a chair; "you'll excuse us if Watson and I go on with our luncheon while you talk. Got any idea who lifted the second and third pair, – any clues at all to the guilty wretches?"

"No, Mr. Holmes; I really haven't," replied Lord Launcelot, as he sat down. "It's quite annoying to have to think about such a disconcerting event, so much out of my usual line, doncherknow."

And the Earl's brother contemplated the floor in gloomy silence for the next twenty-five minutes, while H. H. and I were feeding our faces.

When we had finished and had lit a couple of cigarettes, Holmes, handing one to Launcelot, said:

"Well, it's just one o'clock. Time to beat it, boys!"

"All right, Mr. Holmes, I'm your man," said our visitor.

And, the rain having stopped now, we left the house together, after hurriedly packing a few things in our suit-case.

We soon arrived at the station, where we boarded the Surrey train. No further word could be got out of our noble companion as we sped through the southern London suburbs and along the country landscape, – not even after the April sun had straggled through the clouds and begun to brighten up the scene.

"Ax-gibberish!" yelled the guard, – or words to that effect, – as he slammed open the door of our compartment, and the train slowed down and at length stopped in front of a dinky little two-by-four station, with a cluster of worm-eaten old houses and a couple of sloppy-looking store buildings near it that looked as if they had all been erected prior to the Norman Conquest, or even possibly antedated the Christian era.

"Well, I guess this must be Hedge-gutheridge all right, in spite of the guard's mispronunciation of its euphonious name," remarked Holmes, stepping off the train onto the decayed platform, which sagged perilously under his athletic tread.

As Launcelot and I followed suit, a short, nervous-looking man of about thirty-five, with a florid countenance, rushed out of the ancient station toward us, and shouted:

"O Launcie, Launcie, misfortune has followed misfortune upon our venerable family of Dunderhaugh this miserable day! Two more pairs of those cuff-buttons have been abstracted during your absence, making five pairs in all that are gone! I suppose this is the eminent Mr. Holmes?"

And the noble Earl of Puddingham hurriedly shook hands with my boss.

"Right you are, Your Lordship," said Holmes, "and here is the egregious Dr. Watson, also at your service. You see, he's my old side-kicker, and I couldn't think of entering upon a crook-chase without him tagging along after me to write it up in well-chosen language. Do you get me, Steve? And, say, don't worry about the cuff-buttons. We'll find 'em all right."

"Assuredly, Mr. Holmes," said the Earl, as we all stepped into a coach that was waiting back of the station, with Launcelot more gloomy and depressed than ever.

"Home, Olaf! And get a move on!" This to the fat little coachman who drove the ancestral chariot.

"Ay bane get there pooty qvick, Your Lordship," said that Norwegian worthy, as he whipped up the horses, and in five minutes' time we had dashed up to a large and imposing stone castle with round towers at each corner, – apparently about five hundred years old and five stories high, – surrounded by an extensive garden and park, with a small woods in the rear: just the kind you read about, with green gobs of ivy hanging down over the gray walls.

"Well, here we are, my friends," said the Earl, as he stepped out; while two footmen in light green livery assisted us to alight. "Let's see if I've still got the sixth and last pair of my diamond cuff-buttons safe here."

He fumbled with his cuffs a moment, and added:

"Yes, they're still here. What with Lloyd-George soaking all the British nobility with his preposterous income-tax, and everything going to the demnition bow-wows generally, you can't tell but that you'll be beaten out of your eye-teeth the next minute!"

As Holmes stepped out of the Puddingham coach and started up the broad stone stairway leading to the main entrance of the five-story castle, he stumbled over a good-sized rock lying on the graveled road at the foot of the stairs, and would have landed on his revered nose if I had not caught him.

"I fear that this is a bad omen," said the Earl, frowning; "but I trust it may not prevent the success of our undertaking."

"Don't worry! I wasn't hurt," answered Holmes.

And we went up the stairway together.

The great bronze door opened, and a lady dressed in the latest London style (or maybe it was Paris) greeted us with:

"Welcome to Normanstow Towers, Mr. Holmes, and Dr. Watson, also. I am sure that my husband the Earl and all of us will be more than glad if you recover the lost diamond cuff-buttons for us."

"I hope so, madame," said Holmes, as the Earl formally introduced us. "We will certainly do our best."

The butler, standing beside the Countess Annabelle, winked at us as she went into the drawing-room on one side of the corridor, and beckoned to us to enter the library on the other side.

"Well, Harrigan, you may pour us out each a glass of wine," said the Earl, as Holmes, Lord Launcelot, and I followed him into the room.

The library was a very handsomely furnished library, but it looked as if the noble master of Normanstow Towers did more drinking than reading in its luxurious interior, as three trays with at least a dozen empty glasses stood on the broad mahogany table, while a decanter of whiskey, a siphon of seltzer-water, and five quart bottles of wine decorated a smaller table at one side.

The butler filled four glasses with some excellent Burgundy, and as we finished them, the Earl said:

"Where are Uncle Tooter, Mr. Hicks, and Mr. Budd, – and Thorneycroft, too, Harrigan?"

"They're all up in the billiard room, trying to forget the unseemly tragedy that has marred the tranquil tenor of our lives here," replied Harrigan, winking at us again.

"Well, I only wish I, too, could forget it; but how can I? King George will never receive me again if those precious cuff-buttons aren't coughed up."

And the Earl started up the stairs to the second floor. "Come on up and join them, Mr. Holmes, before you begin your usual tape-measuring, snooping around with a magnifying-glass, and analyzing cigar ashes! You see, I'm on to all your little tricks."

"Well, say, hold on a minute, Puddy, – er, I mean Your Lordship. I don't mind stalling awhile before I begin pulling off my historic stunts, as this detective business is only a graft anyhow. But as my long suit has always been to criticize the regular police force, I must ask you why in thunder those constables from the village aren't here on guard, considering that three successive thefts have occurred here in the same day," remonstrated my friend.

"Oh, they went back to Hedge-gutheridge at noon," replied the Earl, shrugging his shoulders, "telling me they would wait till all six pairs of cuff-buttons were stolen before they would do anything more, as they would then probably have more clues to follow!"

"Can you beat it, Watson?" said Holmes to me as we ascended the elegant stairway to the fourth floor. "These guys are just about as brainy as the average American cop I bumped into on the other side of the Big Pond."

On the fourth floor we entered a large room with a billiard table and a pool table in it, where four men were busily engaged in killing time, – two at each table.

"Put up your cues a minute, Uncle Tooter and the rest of you, while I introduce you to Mr. Hemlock Holmes, the celebrated butter-in on other people's business, whom I have hired at an exorbitant price to run down the depraved scoundrels who cabbaged my diamond cuff-buttons. If he can't catch 'em, nobody can, I guess. Mr. Holmes, meet the Countess's uncle, Mr. J. Edmund Tooter, of Hyderabad, India; my friend, Mr. William Q. Hicks, of Saskatoon, Canada; and Mr. William X. Budd, of Melbourne, Australia." The Earl had us shake hands with the three. "My secretary, Eustace Thorneycroft, you have already met."

"Hello, Holmes, old fellow," was the smiling greeting of this worthy. "I'll shoot you a game of pool. Billiards is too intricate a game for my limited intellect to follow."

"All right," agreed Holmes with a grin.

The Earl stepped to a speaking-tube on the wall and called downstairs to the butler:

"Say, Harrigan, hurry us up a box of Havanas, – will you?"

In a minute the jovial master of refreshments came running up the stairs with a box of cigars under each arm.

"I thought I might as well bring two, Your Lordship," he explained.

"Sure, Harrigan; hand 'em around. Now, smoke up, gents," said the Earl. "'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.' As long as I've still got the last pair of those blarsted cuff-buttons in my cuffs," – here he took off his coat and displayed to full view the famous heirlooms, which gleamed like a pair of locomotive headlights, – "we'll wait till to-morrow before tearing up the foundations of the castle looking for the others!"

So they played on, at pool and billiards, for the rest of that Monday afternoon, Hemlock Holmes and the six gilded loafers, while I sat idly in a chair at one side, smoking several good cigars, my job being that of an innocent looker-on, trying to figure out who was the biggest fool in the place, – the easy-going Earl of Puddingham, for shoveling out good money to my grafting partner, or Holmes himself, for frittering away his brilliant talents in such piffle pastimes.

At six o'clock we were served a delectable dinner in the great oak-paneled dining-room of the castle, prepared by the Earl's French chef, Louis La Violette; and we passed the evening in the library, sipping away several more bottles of the Earl's best vintages and listening to the more or less improbable tales of their adventures in the three faraway realms of the world by Messrs. Tooter, Hicks, and Budd, while Holmes managed to pump Harrigan on the Q. T., and found out from him that the Earl was rated at two million pounds, in the form of several thousand acres of valuable land up in Yorkshire, including one or two good-sized towns.

At half-past ten Holmes and I retired for the night, having been assigned to one of the spacious guest-rooms on the third floor; and soon we were wrapped in slumber.

Chapter III

Thud – thud – thud! Biff! Rattle! Bang! came a noise from below.

I sat bolt upright in bed, and hollered through the pitch-darkness at the top of my voice:

"Help! Police! Burglars! Robbers! Wake up, Holmes, and catch 'em!"

Despite the racket I made, which was increased by my jumping out of bed and falling head-first over a chair, upsetting the latter, the hardened old cuss slept on. When I yelled again, and shook him by the shoulder, he half opened his eyes and said:

"Well, what's eating you, Watson? Got the nightmare? I told you that you took too much mince-pie last night!"

"For Heaven's sake, didn't you hear the noise downstairs, Holmes?" I shouted. "Somebody is breaking in, trying to steal the Earl's last pair of diamond cuff-buttons!"

Holmes yawned lazily, rolled over in bed, and said, as he settled himself to sleep again:

"Well, I can't help it, Watson. I was hired to work in the daytime, not at night. I guess the excitement will keep till morning."

And, – would you believe it? – I couldn't get another word out of him! I looked at my watch by the moonlight, and found that it was thirteen minutes after two a. m. Then, thinking I might get a sight of the burglar from our bedroom window, I drew the heavy, old-fashioned curtains aside, and peered out over the silent landscape thirty feet below. But I couldn't see a blamed thing but trees and grass, and a moss-covered stone wall out by the road; the Earl's bulldog not being in evidence anywhere.

I knelt down by the window, put my elbows on the sill, and resolved to wait there awhile, to see if the nocturnal disturber would hike out again.

Apparently I fell asleep in this attitude, for the next thing I knew, Holmes, fully dressed, was bending over me with a grin on his face, and it was broad daylight.

"Well, why don't you wake up yourself, Doc? It's eight o'clock," he said. Then I arose sheepishly, and dressed.

After our ablutions in the lavatory next door, – where we helped ourselves to a bottle of whiskey we found in a medicine cabinet on the wall, – we descended the two flights of stairs to the main floor. Finding nobody around, we walked through the different rooms on an exploring tour, seeking evidences of the disturbance the night before.

"Say, they evidently don't use alarm-clocks in this shack, Watson. Not a thing stirring yet," said Holmes, as we came to a room with the door slightly ajar.

"Hello, what's this?" he exclaimed, as we entered the room. "His Lordship must have retired in a rather submerged condition! Look at him there!"

I was surprised to see the noble heir of all the Puddinghams lying on the floor of his bedroom, flat on his back, his eyes closed, and with one foot resting on an overturned chair; and horrified, as I came closer, to see a large purple bruise on his forehead, and a heavy iron poker lying on the floor beside him. The diamond cuff-button was also gone from his right cuff, but the rays of the morning sun, coming through the east windows, shone on the other glittering bauble, still in his left cuff.

Holmes very unconcernedly took a cigarette out of his pocket and lit it, his eyes meanwhile glancing about the room; but I dropped on my knees beside the Earl and placed my ear over his chest. To my horror, I could not hear even the faintest heart-beat. My face paled as I looked up at my companion.

"Holmes," I said solemnly, "the Earl is dead! Murder has been added to robbery here!"

"That so, Doc?" queried the cold-blooded old cuss, blowing out a cloud of cigarette-smoke and yawning. "Well, what'll I do first, – magnifying-glass or tape-measure?"

"Holmes," I remonstrated sharply, unable to contain myself at his manner, "if you had come down here six hours ago when we heard that noise, we might have caught the criminals! Now it's too late."

And I turned to examine the bruise on the Earl's forehead.

"Oh, keep your shirt on, Watson," retorted Holmes, "I'm not the Earl's private bodyguard, and what's more, I'm not concerned with what might be, but with what *is*. Are you sure he's dead, or are you only making another awkward mistake? 'Twould be rather embarrassing, I should think, to have the Earl wake up in a minute and tell us he's not dead!"

At this insult to my professional ability as a physician, I got on my ear, and said with a grouch:

"Well, if you don't think he's dead, just see whether *you* can detect any heart-beat there, – smart as you are."

Holmes was bending down over the apparent corpse, when we heard some one walking along the corridor outside.

"Quick, Watson, sneak into this closet here, and observe developments!" whispered Holmes, as he gripped me by the arm, and hustled me into the closet, the door of which stood slightly ajar.

In a moment more Her Ladyship, Annabelle, Countess of Puddingham, appeared in the Earl's room, took one look at her husband's recumbent form on the floor, and let out a scream that might have been heard in the next county, before she toppled over in a dead faint.

Holmes rushed out of the closet, seized her just in time to prevent her falling over the Earl's body, and whispered to me, as he placed her propped up in a chair, and as various people were heard running through the other rooms toward us, attracted by the Countess's scream:

"Well, *she* didn't have a hand in this, Doc. That scream was genuine, and she didn't know we were listening, either."

A small crowd of servants, all gaping in amazement, now filled the doorway, and Holmes asked authoritatively:

"Which one of you people is the Earl's valet?" Adding: "You had better lay your master on the bed there."

One of the men stepped forward, and answered:

"I am the Earl's valet, sir. Is His Lordship dead?"

"Well, Dr. Watson says he is. But lay him out on the bed, anyhow, – he will look more respectable there than on the floor," said Holmes, as Vermicelli, the valet, assisted by another man, who said he was Peter Van Damm, valet to Lord Launcelot, picked up the Earl's body and deposited it, or him, on the bed.

Launcelot, Uncle Tooter, Budd, Hicks and Thorneycroft here crowded themselves into the room and, on seeing what had happened, added to the general buzz of excited exclamations; but Holmes took command of the situation, like the old hand that he was, entirely used to such gruesome sights, and stepped to the telephone on a small table in one corner of the Earl's room.

"Give me the village constables, – any of them, – at Hedge-gutheridge, quick!" he called through the instrument. "This one of the constables?" – after a moment. "This is Normanstow Towers. The Earl of Puddingham has apparently been murdered by some one attempting to steal the last of his diamond cuff-buttons... Hemlock Holmes, from London, talking. Have all your men come up here at once and surround the place, letting no one in or out!.. Whom do I suspect? Never mind whom I suspect. I'd never suspect you constables of having too much brains after the way you left here yesterday noon, with the castle unguarded, – that's a cinch!.. Now don't take all day getting here. Good-by!"

And Holmes slammed the receiver back on the hook, whirled around on the chair, and faced the gaping crowd of people in the room.

"Well, what are you looking at?" he demanded. "Get together there, some of you, and bring order out of chaos. You there, with the vacant look on your face, are you the Countess's maid?" –

addressing one of the three woman servants. "Take care of your mistress there in that chair. Can't you see she's coming out of her faint? If the cook is among you, he'd better get back to the kitchen and prepare breakfast. Watson, you take this revolver here," – fishing a six-shooter out of his pocket and handing it to me, – "go to the rear entrance of the castle, and stand guard there till those tortoise-like constables arrive. Let no one in or out; and I will do the same at the front entrance. Do you get me, Steve?"

And Holmes jumped up, full of renewed "pep," and boldly pushed those of the friends and servants of the deceased Earl who didn't move quickly right out of the room into the corridor, the Countess having been assisted in the meantime up to her own room on the second floor by her Spanish maid.

"I say there, Holmes, don't you think you're going it pretty strong?" protested Billie Budd, the man from Australia, as he was shoved along with the rest of them by the masterful detective.

"Just keep your shirt on, Mr. Budd," said the latter, as he locked the door of the Earl's room behind him and put the key in his pocket. "I'm running this show, not you. I was sent here to get results, and I'm going to get 'em, – see?"

"I guess the old cocaine is beginning to work on him again," I muttered.

Then I started with the gun to the rear door of the castle, while Holmes, after overawing the others, stationed himself at the front door, with another loaded and cocked revolver in his hand.

After about fifteen minutes of tiresome waiting, while several of the servants peeped out at me from the rear rooms as I stood sentinel at the end of the corridor, just inside the great iron barred door, I heard Holmes's welcome shout from the front of the building:

"All right, Watson; the constables are here!"

In a moment a wooden-faced gink appeared, who said he had come to relieve me. I put the revolver in my pocket and rejoined Holmes in the drawing-room, where I found him with Lord Launcelot and the others.

"Well, boys, I've got four constables completely surrounding the castle now, – one on each side, – so we'll sit down to breakfast. It's nearly nine o'clock now."

And Holmes moved toward the dining-room.

"All right, old top," said Launcelot, smiling at the detective. "As long as George Arthur, – the Earl, you know, – is disabled or dead, I am the master of the house, and I'll back you up in everything you do."

"Even if I should happen to arrest you for stealing some of the cuff-buttons yourself, eh?" queried Holmes with a grin, as we sat down to our delayed breakfast.

Launcelot sort of choked at this, stared at the speaker, and said:

"What queer things you *do* get off, Mr. Holmes! Your idea of a joke, I suppose."

Chapter IV

The ever-smiling butler we had met the day before, whose spirits did not seem dampened by the tragedies that had lately occurred, moved around the table silently and quickly as he waited on us seven men partaking of breakfast, with a dead man in the other room.

As I watched them there, I noticed that the five habitués of the castle all seemed rather embarrassed when Holmes looked at them, and would then look the other way, evidently on account of his brutal remark to the Earl's brother.

Harrigan had just brought me a second cup of coffee, holding it poised over the edge of the table, when the door opened, and His Lordship, the deceased Earl of Puddingham, walked in on us, looking very pale, with one hand pressed to his forehead.

I felt cold chills creep over me, as Harrigan dropped the cup of coffee crash-*splash* on the floor, yelling:

"Good-night! A ghost!"

Every one else in the room was so surprised that he sat speechless, except Holmes. Billie Budd swallowed a peach-stone in his astonishment, and coughed and spluttered for quite a while.

"What, aren't you dead, George?" Launcelot finally managed to gasp, as the Earl walked over to his vacant chair at the head of the table and sat down in it.

"Why, no; of course not. You're a fine bunch of rumdums, though, I must say, to leave a man like that, after he's been assaulted and robbed!" said the Earl, as he motioned to Harrigan to bring him some breakfast.

Holmes turned to me, with his customary irritating grin, and said: "Well, Doc; what did I tell you? Never count your coroner's fees before they're hatched!"

The Earl bade Harrigan summon one of the footmen and tell him to carry the news of his sudden return to life to the Countess in her room upstairs. Then he proceeded with his breakfast, just as much alive as ever.

"For the benefit of you who do not know, I will say that I have a very peculiar heart," he volunteered after a pause, "and it sometimes stops beating entirely for a while. All that I remember since I retired last night, – with my clothes on, after tossing off a few more glasses in the library, – was being awakened in the middle of the night by some one opening the door, darting over to me, and jerking the diamond cuff-button out of my right cuff, which was on the side nearest the door, and my rising up out of bed to hit him a crack, when I was knocked unconscious in my struggles by the iron poker, which the intruder seized from the fireplace. He hit me on the forehead, and I didn't know anything more until just a moment ago, when I woke up with a headache, and only one cuff-button left. If Mr. Holmes can lay hands on the unholy miscreant who is guilty of this and the previous outrages, he will have earned my everlasting gratitude, also a reward of twenty thousand pounds, – double what I had Thorneycroft offer him yesterday."

"That sounds like business," said Holmes, as he jumped up, the Earl and all of us being finished by this time. "Watson, you can put it down in your little red notebook that at precisely" – here he glanced up at the ornate clock on the mantelpiece – "twenty minutes after nine, Tuesday morning, April the ninth, 1912, the burglar-hunt began; just exactly twenty-four hours, by the way, since we were first informed of the Earl's loss."

"All right, go to it, Holmes," said the Earl. "I guess you know how. I give you *carte blanche* to go as far as you like."

We at once adjourned to the drawing-room, at the right side of the front of the first floor of the castle, and Hemlock Holmes issued his orders.

"Your Lordship, the first thing I will pull off is an examination of every one on the place, – your relatives, friends, servants and all, – no one is exempt. Your own story I have heard. Now, then – "

Here we were interrupted by the constable whom Holmes had set to guard the front of the castle, who came in and said:

"Hi beg pahdon, Mr. 'Olmes, but here is Inspector Bahnabas Letstrayed, just arrived from London, to see that everything is hall right."

"I don't see how it could be, when he ain't right himself!" snapped Holmes, with a frown, as the bulky form of our old friend in previous adventures loomed up in the doorway. "Well, come in, you old nuisance," he added, as he motioned him to one end of the room. "It's enough to make a man bite a piece out of the wall when he has to contend with two such rummies as you and Doc Watson around him, particularly when he has a job on hand that requires close and attentive brain-work."

Inspector Letstrayed removed his tweed cap and joined us over by the mantel, with a fatuous smile on his large face.

"As I was about to say, when Barnaby butted in, the first man who noticed any of the cuff-buttons stolen, next to the Earl himself, was Luigi Vermicelli, his Italian valet. Call him in," ordered Holmes.

On a motion from the Earl, his secretary Thorneycroft went out to the corridor and brought in the more or less scared valet.

"What's your full name?" demanded Holmes.

"Luigi Vittorio Vermicelli."

"Where were you born?"

"At Brescia, in the north of Italy."

"How old are you, – and where did you work before you gave the Earl the benefit of your services?"

"Thirty-two. I was valet to a prominent banker in Venice."

"Ever been in jail?"

"Why, er, – yes," and the Italian became embarrassed. "I was arrested for intoxication once just before I left Venice; but I was imprisoned for only ten days."

"So you fell off the water-wagon, eh, – even in the watery city?" commented Holmes. "Well, were you sober when you put away the Earl's shirt last night, with the diamond cuff-buttons in it, – that is, sober enough to notice that the buttons were really there in the cuffs?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I am quite sure that the cuff-buttons must have been stolen during the night."

"Did you hear any noise Sunday night to indicate that burglars were getting in?"

"No, sir; not a thing. I didn't even hear the dog bark, as he usually does. I think that the cuff-buttons were stolen by somebody inside the castle."

"Ah, ha! This is getting interesting," said Holmes, with animation. "And whom do you suspect? Anybody in particular?"

"Yes, sir. I suspect Donald MacTavish, the second footman. I saw him with something shiny in his hand last night, which he hastily concealed when he saw me coming."

"That will be all, Luigi," said Holmes; "you are excused."

The valet looked like Mephistopheles, as he glanced around with a triumphant expression on his swarthy face, and left the room.

"Bring in Lord Launcelot's valet next, Thorneycroft," said Holmes. "And we may as well sit down, as the examination of this crowd will take some time."

The Earl and the rest of us found chairs in the drawing-room as Thorneycroft, looking very important, hustled out in the corridor to rope in the next victim. The constables had the servants all considerably frightened, and they stood around on one foot with mixed expressions on their faces. In a moment the other valet confronted us.

"State your name, age, previous place of employment, and whether you have ever been arrested," commanded Holmes, who seemed to be speeding up a little on his inquisition.

I wondered at my friend's somewhat more nervous manner as he questioned the second servant, until I noticed his old cocaine-squirter being shoved gently back into his pocket with his left hand, as he pointed his right forefinger at the servant. Holmes had evidently just sneaked in an extra shot in the arm without any one's getting wise, and I, who knew him of old, was sure that he would have a fit on for several hours.

"Peter Adrian Van Damm. Twenty-nine. Pretorius Brothers' diamond-importing house in Amsterdam, Holland. No, sir," replied the valet, just as quickly as Holmes had questioned him.

"I see that you are not to be flustered," nodded Holmes approvingly; "also that you are familiar with diamonds. What would you think of a man who would steal the Earl's diamond cuff-buttons?"

"I would say that he didn't show very good taste. They are too large and crude. Not fit to be worn to a prize-fight," answered Van Damm calmly.

"Impudent fellow! I'll fire you for that," growled the Earl.

"Hold on, Your Lordship, we may need this man later. Don't do anything rash. Thorneycroft, send candid Peter out, and bring in the first footman," Holmes commanded, consulting a list of the servants, which the Earl had given him.

"What's your name, age, previous place of employment, and prison-record, – if any?" snapped Holmes impatiently, as he noticed the obese face and low brow of the man before him.

"Why, er, – ah, – my name is Hegbert Bunbury, sir. Hi ham forty-two years old. Hi hused to work for the Duke of Bridgerswold, sir, but Hi 'ave come down hin the world, sir, and now Hi ham working for honly a hearl. Er, what was that hother question you harsked me, sir?"

"I asked if you had any prison-record."

"Well, now, what a question, Mr. 'Olmes! Do you really think that Hi would stoop so low as to swipe 'Is Lawdship's cuff-buttons?"

"I didn't ask you whether you stole the cuff-buttons or not. I'll find out soon enough whether you did. What I want to know is whether you have ever been arrested for anything before."

And Holmes scowled at the fat footman before him, who fidgeted uneasily as he replied:

"Well, er, – ah, yes; Hi was put in chokey once about ten years ago for lifting a diamond stick-pin belonging to a fellow-servant when Hi was working for the Duke of Bridgerswold; but Hi gave it back to him, Hi hassure you Hi did, Mr. 'Olmes."

"After they compelled you to, I suppose, by the third degree," commented Holmes, as he glanced meaningfully at the Earl, who frowned heavily at Bunbury. "Well, do you suspect anybody here of stealing the cuff-buttons?"

A smile passed over the footman's face, as he replied:

"Yes, sir; Hi 'ave no 'esitation whatever in saying that Hi suspect Teresa Olivano, the Countess's Spanish maid, of having stolen them."

"I think that I can account for that accusation," said Uncle Tooter to Holmes. "This fellow Bunbury was recently rejected when he proposed marriage to Teresa. Now, you beat it out of here at once," he added, as he turned to the footman, "and keep your fake suspicions to yourself."

Chapter V

The bald-headed secretary led the discomfited Egbert outside, and, at Holmes's request, returned with Donald MacTavish, the second footman.

"Well, Donald, I don't suppose it makes any difference how old you are, and your name I already know. I only asked those routine questions of the first three servants to humor my fat friend from Scotland Yard here, Inspector Barnabas Letstrayed, who represents the slow and beef-witted majesty of the London police." And Holmes winked at me, as he added: "Now, Mac, have you ever been in prison?"

The second footman, who seemed just as embarrassed as the first footman had been, shifted his feet uneasily and answered:

"Well, I suppose you might call it that, Mr. Holmes. About three years ago, when I was employed at Balmoral Castle, in Scotland, I was taken before the village squire and given three days in jail for having been caught with a bottle in my pocket."

"It isn't a crime in Scotland to carry a bottle, is it?" said Holmes, grinning.

"No; but they claimed that it was half full of Scotch 'smoke,' and that I had been found totally unconscious up in the hayloft at the time," said MacTavish, with downcast eyes.

"Whom do you suspect of having stolen the cuff-buttons?"

The man from Balmoral brightened up, as he answered:

"I am inclined to believe that my partner, Egbert Bunbury, stole them, sir. When he went to propose to Miss Olivano, the Countess's maid, yesterday afternoon, I saw something sparkling in his hand."

"Think he intended to give her a diamond cuff-button, instead of a diamond ring, Donald?" queried Holmes.

"Well, who can say? Perhaps he was going to have it taken out, and then reset in a ring."

"You're an original cuss, – aren't you, Donald? Also pretty good at passing the buck. The Italian valet we examined first accused *you* of having stolen the Earl's precious heirlooms. Now, go and fight it out with him. Thorneycroft, you may bring in the butler."

"Ah, that reminds me," said the Earl, "I feel pretty dry. Harrigan, you may pour me out a glass of wine before you answer any of Mr. Holmes's questions," he added as the genial butler stood before us.

When the Earl had been sufficiently refreshed from a bottle that stood handy on a nearby table, Holmes began:

"What is your full name?"

"I have no full name. Despite the fact that I belong to the Bartenders' and Butlers' Union, I am always sober," said Harrigan, with a wink.

"Well, Mr. Smart Alec, what's your entire name?"

"Joseph Patrick Harrigan, and I can lick the first son-of-a-gun that says I stole those darned cuff-buttons!"

"Nobody said you stole 'em. Where were you born, and how did such an able man as yourself come to be working in this menagerie of lowbrows?"

"I was born in little old New York, in the Ninth Ward. I used to be a waiter in a Bowery hash-foundry, and afterwards graduated into one of the Broadway lobster-palaces. I have the reputation of being one of the best living judges of rare wines; and the Earl has said many a time that he could not possibly do without my talents."

"Is that the reason the Earl hired you, – because you are so good at looking upon the grape-juice when it is red?" asked Holmes with a smile, as he winked at His Lordship.

"Your perspicacity is marvelous, Mr. Holmes," replied Harrigan. "My reputation having crossed the ocean, through the men who knew me on Broadway coming over to visit friends in

London, the Earl heard of me, and cabled me my expenses and an offer of double the salary I was getting there; so I snapped it up immediately, and here I am, in full charge of the ancient Puddingham wine-cellar."

And Harrigan cleared his throat, threw out his chest, and winked at me.

"Well, Joe," continued Holmes, "what do you know about the lost and lamented cuff-buttons, – if anything?"

"Not a darned thing, and that's the Gospel truth. And as to whom I may possibly suspect of having cabbaged them, I'll come right out flat-footed and say that I wouldn't put it past a single person in the place, with the sole exceptions of Louis La Violette, the French cook, Heinie Blumenroth, the German gardener, and myself! Nothing backward about *me*, you know. I lay the whole crowd under a blanket suspicion, on general principles; and I'll say, furthermore, that I have particular reason to suspect Bunbury, the first footman, of having stolen the cuff-buttons, because he tried to steal a necktie from my room last week, and I only caught him in the nick of time, helping him out of the room with a couple of well-placed kicks!"

"It's sad, indeed, Harrigan," said Holmes, "to contemplate what one's fellow-man will stoop to. Well, I guess I'll excuse you from any further questions. Thorneycroft, call in His Excellency, Monsieur La Violette, the Chief Cook of this noble castle."

"Harrigan, you may pour me out another glass of wine," interposed the Earl before the butler had a chance to leave the room.

After His Lordship had been refreshed and Harrigan had departed, the Earl said to Holmes:

"Now go on with the bad news. Let's see what kind of an alibi Louis the soup-maker, pancake-tosser, and egg-breaker, has to offer."

And he nudged the fatuous Inspector Letstrayed in the ribs. That worthy, who had been thoughtfully regarding the ceiling for some time, jumped back in surprise.

Just then Thorneycroft returned with the cook, – a short, fat, and irascible-looking man, with black eyes that seemed to snap fire as he returned the stare of the phlegmatic Letstrayed, black hair, and a black mustache and imperial, *à la* Napoleon III.

"Ah, Monsieur La Violette, what do you know concerning the recent sad affair here at the castle, – the theft of the diamond cuff-buttons, you know?" said Holmes, as the Frenchman faced him.

"The diamond cuff-buttons, I know, eh? *Sacré bleu!*" shouted the Frenchman, his face blazing red with anger, as he nearly hit the ceiling in his wrath. "You mean to insinuate that I know where they are, you – you! If you were a gentleman, I'd challenge you to a duel for that!"

"Here, here, keep your shirt on a minute, Louis," Holmes advised reassuringly. "I didn't mean to insinuate anything at all. I was just looking for information."

La Violette regarded Hemlock Holmes for a moment with the bitterest disdain, then he answered:

"Well, if you're such a smart and sagacious detective as you have been cracked up to be, you could ascertain who pilfered those accursed cuff-buttons without using such common methods as lining up the servants, and asking them if they stole them or not. Any one of the servants is likely to be guilty, except only Harrigan, Blumenroth, and myself. All the others are unspeakable imbeciles! Go ahead, then, and get your information, without casting your despicable insinuations upon me."

Holmes shrugged his shoulders, and looked at the Earl.

Barnabas Letstrayed at this point evidently thought it was up to him to pull off something; and he did, – more than he thought.

"Er, Hi say," he began, with great importance, as he motioned to the cook's cuffs, "aren't those the lost cuff-buttons this fellow is wearing now? They look just like them, Hi think."

Every one stared at La Violette's cuffs, and that worthy nearly had an apoplectic fit, as the Earl, after having taken one look at the cook's jewelry, leaned back in his chair and laughed.

"Say, Inspector, those aren't the lost Puddingham cuff-buttons by some lengths. They're diamonds, all right, but the resemblance ends there. The stolen ones are at least twelve times bigger; that's all."

And the Earl laughed again.

Louis La Violette didn't laugh, however, but made a mad rush at the obese police inspector from London, who had so grievously and wrongly accused him.

"Pig-dog, scoundrel, liar!" he yelled at the top of his voice. "I'll carve you up into ribbons for that! Take that, you big heap of over-grown beef-fat!"

And the infuriated Gaul launched a blow with his fist at Letstrayed that knocked that astonished person out of his chair and tumbled him flat on the floor, with the chair upside down on top of him.

"Here, don't let's have another attempted murder in the castle, La Violette," remonstrated Holmes, as he pulled back the enraged cook from a further assault on Letstrayed; "contain yourself. Letstrayed is only a rumdum, anyhow, as I have found out from long experience with him. He's always making bad breaks like that. You really mustn't mind him."

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