

Murder at Oakwood Grange

It was the most important and dangerous case Holmes ever undertook. If I am ever tempted to forget how vital it was for the nation that he was successful, then I am reminded by the continual attempts to access and destroy the notes of the case currently residing in the strong room of a certain bank. I gave fair warning of my intentions in the sad tale of Eugenia Ronder, but these have not been heeded and so I shall detail the story of the politician, the lighthouse and the trained cormorant.

Sherlock Holmes has expressed a wish that I should do so and given his consent accordingly. When it is complete, he has undertaken to conceal it in a place he will not divulge even to me. He is also taking steps to let certain persons know that, should any further attempts be made to destroy the notes, the full account of the case will be published immediately.

It began so innocuously. Indeed, at first, it seemed to be the kind of case which Holmes so relished for it had no features which could be considered in the least important. It appeared at first to solely concern the troubles of a young lady. The year was 1889 and it was early June. The spring sunshine engendered a feeling of such well being that I determined to walk to Baker Street to see my old friend after I had finished my morning surgery. The pavements were sparkling from a few hours of overnight rain and London looked fit for a festival. As I found myself in that ever-familiar street, I could not help feeling a thrill of excitement remembering the many adventures that had begun at the front door of No 221B.

On entering those much-loved rooms, I found no sign of Holmes. A well-dressed and delicately beautiful young lady sat in the visitor's chair. Never an early riser unless hot on a scent, Holmes had obviously not yet finished his morning toilet. I embarked on an apology on behalf of my friend. As I introduced myself Holmes entered the room.

'Ah, doctor. Splendid. And this,' he said turning to the young lady, 'must be Miss Applegarth.'

'Indeed, Mr Holmes,' replied she.

The sound of her trembling voice alerted my professional senses. She was small of stature and almost painfully thin without the usual curves considered to be the prerequisite for beauty. Her face was pale but I judged her normal complexion to be that of the porcelain variety peculiar to those with auburn hair. The curls peeping from under her hat could not hide the classically high cheekbones, but the dark haunted eyes told of a long

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suppressed strain that was almost at breaking point. Holmes himself seemed to divine this for he laid a calming hand on her arm.

‘Take heart, my dear young lady. I am sure that between us, the good doctor and I can calm your fears and set matters aright. Watson, please ask Mrs Hudson to bring a cup of hot coffee for Miss Applegarth. I will stoke the fire.’

All this time, Holmes’ keen eyes were running over her. Miss Applegarth became aware of this scrutiny and looking questioningly at him. Holmes shook his head.

‘Beyond the facts that you started out very early, that your bedroom is lit only by candles, that you are afraid of being followed and that you work in a large country house as a secretary, I can tell you little. The house is in the country to the west of London, with a large park and is within two miles of a railway station.’

Our visitor gasped and half rose from her chair. ‘Indeed, Mr Holmes. This is unworthy of you. To follow a lady and frighten her half to death? How dare you, sir?’

‘Calm yourself, Miss Applegarth. Until you stepped into this room, I give you my word that I had no idea of your existence.’

‘Then how..?’

‘That you started your journey early and your room has only candles is confirmed by the fact that one of your gloves is black and the other very dark blue. It must have been dark when you dressed, otherwise you would have noticed and dawn is just after four in the morning at this time of year. Your obvious haste in dressing denotes the level of your fear as does the fact that you have not noticed the discrepancy in the two colours. You crept early from the house through the kitchen to avoid being detected and followed. There is a smear of goose fat on your jacket at the height of a cooking range. Your duties are obviously not those of the kitchen and you would have no reason to go there unless you wanted to leave the house unobtrusively and without exciting notice. That you earn your living in this large house is answered by the quality of your clothes. They are not so sumptuous as to belong to the daughter of the house, but they are better than a servant’s. You could be a companion or governess. However, the worn area on the cuffs of your jacket are caused by constant friction with a desk, ergo, you are a secretary. You walked through the grounds of your employou’s house this morning, the hem of your skirt

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declares it. 'That the house is to the west of London is confirmed by the colour of the mud on your shoes.'

'You are right in every particular, Mr Holmes. You give me courage. I think that you are perhaps the only man who can help me in my trouble.'

Holmes leaned back in his chair, nodding to me to take notes. He then closed his eyes. 'Tell me every detail, Miss Applegarth. Leave nothing out, however trivial you might think it to be and be assured that you may speak as freely before Dr Watson as before me.'

Our visitor breathed deeply for a few moments and began her story. 'My name is Celia Applegarth. My father is Laurence Applegarth, the Member of Parliament for Seale Green in Devon. Before he settled with my mother in our present house, he was a successful sea Captain in Plymouth. He married late in life and was above forty when I was born. At the time of his second marriage, he moved with his new wife to the north of England near York and became the Member of Parliament for Harrogate. My mother died when I was six and since her death, my father has devoted himself to me. Two years ago, he confessed that he yearned to go back to the south coast near to his home port and so we eventually settled in Seale Green not far from Worthing.

At that time, his colleagues in the House of Commons persuaded him that he still had a valuable contribution to make as a member. He was fortunate to secure the constituency six months after our arrival when the previous member died. Father's eyes are weak and need regular medication, so, two years ago, I took a course of shorthand and typewriting and began to read everything to him. After his election, I became his secretary.

We were very happy until ten months ago when Sir Walter Hardwick came into our lives. My father told me that they had met whilst transacting business for the government although Sir Walter is not a Member of Parliament and even now I can tell you little about him.

He seemed at first to be the perfect gentleman, but from the day he walked into our lives, he has become an evil shadow hanging over my father. I know not what hold Sir Walter exercises, but my father has lost flesh and his clothes hang on him as they would on a starving beggar. When I lived at home, I could hear him shouting and screaming in his sleep in the depths of nightmares. He is as one who has lost all hope. I have begged him to tell me all, but he refuses.' She sighed deeply, paused and then carried on.

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Eight months ago, Sir Walter invited us to his house, Oakwood Grange, near Leatherhead for the weekend. His hospitality was everything and more that might be expected from a gentleman of his class and social standing. At this point, his hold over my father had not become apparent to me and, I will be honest, Mr Holmes, I was flattered by his attention, assuming that it derived from his association with my father.

A few weeks later, I began to notice that my father was more and more uneasy in Sir Walter's presence, and that his visits to our house were developing into a daily ritual. My father's uneasiness affected me, so when Sir Walter trapped me in the dining room of our house and professed that the dearest wish of his heart was that I should marry him, I refused. He insisted that I had awakened love in his heart. I refused again. I told him that my dearest wish was that he should leave my father and me alone and never worry us again. He tried to take me in his arms, but I pushed him away.

He was extremely angry and went out of the room vowing that I would be his wife if I knew what was good for me.

Soon after this my father came in. He was in a terrible state, white to the lips and shaking. I surmised correctly that his distress was because I had refused Sir Walter, although it was clear to me as his daughter that marriage between Sir Walter and myself was the last thing he wanted. I quizzed him. He would not meet my eye, Mr Holmes.

The next day, he beseeched me, virtually on bended knee, to at least agree to an engagement. He looked so beaten that I agreed. Sir Walter also insisted that, as his future wife, I should come to live at Oakwood Grange, where I am chaperoned by Emma Stackpole, the late Lady Mary Hardwick's companion. In truth, I believe I am a hostage against my father's conduct.'

Miss Applegarth paused again to sip at her coffee. She was not so pale now, but her countenance was so troubled and anxious that my heart went out to her. She put the cup down and resumed her narrative.

'I have been at Oakwood Grange for some five months now. Sir Walter asked me to take on the duties of a secretary, ostensibly so that I am familiar with the estate, but in reality to ensure that I am constantly under his eye. I am permitted to see no one who is not dependent on him, nor can I leave the grounds.

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Last month, he held a weekend party for the Prince of Wales. The prince, along with the Princes Albert Victor and George were there, plus some of Sir Walter's more questionable acquaintances. For this event, Miss Stackpole had altered some dresses belonging to the late Lady Mary. I did not find the company congenial, Mr Holmes. There was a lot of gambling and enough money won and lost to feed half of London for a year.

The fine dresses he had ordered me to wear were taken from me as soon as the party broke up. When I questioned this, Sir Walter told me that I could have as many new dresses as I required as soon as I stopped prevaricating and named our wedding day.

I have seen my father only twice since the day I arrived, both times in Sir Walter's presence. Conversation under those conditions was, of course, impossible, but I could tell on each occasion that my father was thinner than he had been previously.

I do not get paid. If I ask for payment or threaten to leave, I am met with the most odious threats. He has even taunted me with your name. Not even the great Mr Sherlock Holmes can help you, he told me last week. He has said with increasing frequency that he has it in his power to ruin my father and that I will be a pauper begging on the streets or ending up as one of the street women, giving myself to anyone for the price of a crust of bread. This is his usual reaction to what he calls my coldness. On the other hand, if I marry him, I will be the chatelaine of Oakwood, have a life of luxury and my father will have his protection. I am at my wits end, Mr Holmes. There have been signs over the last few days that Sir Walter is fast becoming impatient. I do not know what to do.'

'I suppose I should be flattered that I am so well known,' said Holmes momentarily opening his eyes. 'Tell me about the household at Oakwood.'

'Sir Walter's parents both died last year in a carriage accident and he succeeded to the title. Lady Mary Hardwick, Sir Walter's mother, stipulated in her will that Emma Stackpole must be retained by Sir Walter as she is without means or relatives to look after her. Miss Stackpole had been with her mistress for over thirty years and would find it impossible to obtain other employment.'

'What is this Miss Stackpole like?'

'I find it difficult to say. Neither of us is given to gossip and although we pass the time of day harmoniously enough, I know no more of her

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now than I did when I first arrived. At that time, Sir Walter suggested that I occupy his mother's old room, but I refused, as I did not then and do not now think it seemly. I believe that this pleased Miss Stackpole although the matter has never been discussed between us.

However, the feeling has grown upon me that this woman loathes and detests me and I am sure that she positively enjoyed removing the dresses from my room after the royal party had left. I have no idea why she should dislike me so, but I am quite certain of it. If I walk into a room, she makes an excuse and leaves. If I try to engage her in conversation, she either does not answer or responds so shortly that it is a blatant snub.'

'What of the staff?' asked Holmes next.

'The household appears huge to me, but I am used to there being just my father and me, Mr and Mrs Turnbull, a housemaid and someone who comes in from the village to do the heavy scrubbing.

The butler at Oakwood is called Truscott. I am sure he looks down on most people and I am no exception. The housekeeper, Mrs Able, is distant and forbidding. She has the ability, often practised, of walking up behind me and making me jump. Indeed, I do not mind admitting that she frightens me. There are two footmen, John and James, as well as Annie, the house/parlour maid and Lily, the Tweeny. Mrs Barrow, the cook, has a scullery maid and there is also a laundry maid, but I do not have anything to do with the kitchen staff.

The groom is Mr Fletcher. He also drives the coach and has a stable boy. Bertram is the Head Gardener with four men under him. Bertram does not like anyone but himself to pick the flowers for the house as I found to my cost. I had walked into the garden to pick some tulips for the dining room. He came running up from the kitchen garden waving his arms and shouting the most abusive things at me. When I complained of his insolence, Sir Walter merely laughed at me and said that only the mistress of the house had the authority to choose the house flowers and if I wanted, the solution to the problem was in my own hands. I asked him to discipline Bertram for his offensiveness. Sir Walter's response was that Bertram was not answerable to anyone but the master of Oakwood and that he was entirely satisfied with him. Before I could stop myself, I retorted that if that was indeed the case, there was no likelihood of my setting a firm date for our wedding. Sir Walter then resorted to his usual sinister threats against my father and I rushed out of the room. However,

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I believe that he has told Bertram to consult me about the flowers for the drawing room because the oaf did so yesterday, with a fawning countenance but couching his request in terms that were both sneering and almost as if I was the butt of a joke known to him and Sir Walter.'

'How very singular,' replied Holmes with a frown. 'Please go on.'

'The estate bailiff is called Henry Jorkins and is a rough coarse fellow, who makes free with Sir Walter's brandy if he is able. Jorkins has an assistant, I believe, but I have never seen him. If discussions are necessary, Sir Walter usually visits Jorkins at his home on the estate.'

My friend sat deep in thought for a few moments. 'How have you explained your absence today?'

'Yesterday, I gave Sir Walter to understand that I was softening towards him. I thought it politic to do so. His eagerness disgusted me. I do not know what it is about the man, Mr Holmes, but the thought of him within five feet of me revolts and sickens my soul. I suggested to him that I should come up to London to look at fabrics and fashions for my wedding gown.'

'Then why did you creep so secretly out of the house?'

'Because I overheard Sir Walter telling Jorkins that I would be travelling today and not to let me out of his sight. I believe that I had already awoken his suspicions by refusing to be accompanied by Miss Stackpole. I told Sir Walter that I would catch the nine-fifteen from Leatherhead, but I arose at three-thirty. I escaped through the kitchen door and walked through the park to the station as you so correctly deduced and caught the milk train.'

Holmes opened his mouth to ask another question but the sound of furious hammering on our front door downstairs silenced him. We all started up and Miss Applegarth uttered a low moan. Her hand flew to her mouth. She had heard as clearly as we the thunder of footsteps on the stairs. Our door burst open to reveal the ferret-like Inspector Lestrade panting on the threshold. He ignored us and pointed to our fair visitor.

'Are you Miss Celia Applegarth, lately of Oakwood Grange?'

Our visitor stood up. 'I am,' she replied, through bloodless lips.

'Then I must arrest you for the wilful murder of Sir Walter Hardwick. We already have your father under lock and key, Miss. He was arrested as he tried to leave the inn in the village. The dagger with which Sir Walter was stabbed has already been identified as belonging to Mr Applegarth.'

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‘By whom?’ interrupted Holmes.

‘By the bailiff, Mr Holmes. Mr Jorkins swears that he saw that same dagger in Mr Applegarth’s possession two nights ago at the village inn. When the butler went into the library this morning to open the curtains, he found his master on the floor with the dagger through his heart. This lace handkerchief, which the maid informs me belongs to Miss Applegarth was pinned by the dagger to the body. It is obvious that in the heat of the moment it was dropped when Sir Walter was stabbed.’

Holmes took the scrap of cloth slightly spotted with a dark rust coloured stain and held it up to the light. The tear was readily visible.

‘Just a moment, Lestrade. Was anything else found?’

‘Not on the body, no.’

‘Anything on the desk, perhaps, or the floor?’

‘Nothing important. The papers on the desk were mostly items relating to the running of the estate, apart from a note in Sir Walter’s handwriting. He obviously intended to throw it away for it had been partially screwed up. It looks very much as if he had been working on some estate improvements when he was struck down and the screwed up paper was on the corner of the desk.’

‘Do you have the paper with you?’

‘The paper means nothing, Mr Holmes. Do not let your love of fancy theories lead you astray. It lay near the plans for extending the estate gardens. I have already read the note. It is unimportant. It is the remnant of a parlour game, that is all. It is not pertinent to his murder. And now, I must insist on taking Miss Applegarth into custody. Come along Miss.’

Both Holmes and I were on our feet staring at the detective. We heard the rustle of silk but neither of us was quick enough to prevent the young lady from swooning to the floor. It was quite five minutes before Miss Applegarth was restored to her senses. I leaned over her keeping my body between her and Lestrade. She was moaning piteously and it was with difficulty that I managed to get a little brandy down her throat. After a few minutes her sobs lessened, but she still clung to me as a drowning sailor will to a sliver of wood. ‘Do not desert me, doctor.’

‘By no means,’ I replied, my voice hoarse with emotion. ‘Put yourself in Holmes’s hands and we will see this matter resolved.’

‘Yes, indeed,’ interrupted Lestrade. ‘It will be resolved with these two standing on the trap-door.’

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I swung round to face him. ‘The law of this land is that one is innocent until found guilty. Please correct me if I am wrong, Inspector.’

He had the decency to look chastened. ‘The thing is as plain as a pike-staff, doctor. I don’t need wild speculation to tell me when I am right.’ I opened my mouth to argue, but the quiet tones of Sherlock Holmes overrode our exchange. ‘This young lady is under my protection, Lestrade. She is to be treated with the utmost respect and dignity or you will answer to me for it.’

‘I must arrest her and take her to Scotland Yard,’ replied Lestrade sullenly.

‘All the same, Inspector, heed my warning.’

I held out a hand to assist Miss Applegarth to her feet. ‘Go with Inspector Lestrade and have faith in Sherlock Holmes.’ She gave us a tremulous smile and nodded slowly.

‘By the way, Lestrade, you do not object if I go to Oakwood myself?’ Holmes asked the Scotland Yard man.

‘You may go where you please, Mr Holmes. I have the murderers in custody. How you waste your time is your own affair.’