

The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes

Adventure L – The Problem of Thor Bridge



omewhere in the vaults of the bank of Cox and Co., at Charing Cross, there is a travel-worn and battered tin dispatch-box with my name, John H. Watson, MD, Late Indian Army, painted upon the lid. It is crammed with papers, nearly all of which are records of cases to illustrate the curious problems which Mr Sherlock Holmes had at various times to examine. Some, and not the least interesting, were complete failures, and as such will hardly bear narrating, since no final explanation is forthcoming. A problem without a solution may interest the student, but can hardly fail to annoy the casual reader. Among these unfinished tales is that of Mr James Phillimore, who, stepping back into his own house to get his umbrella, was never more seen in this world. No less remarkable is that of the cutter Alicia which sailed one spring morning into a small patch of mist from where she never again emerged, nor was anything further ever heard of herself and her crew. A third case worthy of note is that of Isadora Persano, the wellknown journalist and duellist, who was found stark staring mad with a matchbox in front of him which contained a remarkable worm, said to be unknown to science. Apart from these unfathomed cases, there are some which involve the secrets of private families to an extent which would mean consternation in many exalted quarters if it were thought possible that they might find their way into print. I need not say that such a breach of confidence is unthinkable, and that these records will be separated and destroyed now that my friend has time to turn his energies to the matter. There remain a considerable residue of cases of greater or less interest which I might have edited before had I not feared to give the public a surfeit which might react upon the reputation of the man whom above all others I revere. In some I was myself concerned and can speak as an eye-witness, while in others I was either not present or played so small a part that they could only be told as by a third person. The following narrative is drawn from my own experience.

It was a wild morning in October, and I observed as I was dressing how the last remaining leaves were being whirled from the solitary plane tree which graces the yard behind our house. I descended to breakfast prepared to find my companion in depressed spirits, for, like all great artists, he was easily impressed by his surroundings. On the contrary, I found that he had nearly finished his meal, and that his mood was particularly bright and joyous, with that somewhat sinister cheerfulness which was characteristic of his lighter moments.

'You have a case, Holmes?' I remarked.

'The faculty of deduction is certainly contagious, Watson,' he answered. 'It has enabled you to probe my secret. Yes, I have a case. After a month of trivialities and stagnation the wheels move once more.'

'Might I share it?'

'There is little to share, but we may discuss it when you have consumed the two hard-boiled eggs with which our new cook has favoured us. Their condition may not be unconnected with the copy of the Family Herald which I observed yesterday upon the hall-table. Even so trivial a matter as cooking an egg demands an attention which is conscious of the passage of time, and incompatible with the love romance in that excellent periodical.'

A quarter of an hour later the table had been cleared and we were face to face. He had drawn a letter from his pocket.

'You have heard of Neil Gibson, the Gold King?' he said.

'You mean the American Senator?'

'Well, he was once Senator for some Western state, but is better known as the greatest gold-mining magnate in the world.'

'Yes, I know of him. He has surely lived in England for some time. His name is very familiar.'

'Yes, he bought a considerable estate in Hampshire some five years ago. Possibly you have already heard of the tragic end of his wife?'

'Of course. I remember it now. That is why the name is familiar. But I really know nothing of the details.'

Holmes waved his hand towards some papers on a chair.

'I had no idea that the case was coming my way or I should have had my extracts ready,' said he. 'The fact is that the problem, though exceedingly sensational, appeared to present no difficulty. The interesting personality of the accused does not obscure the clearness of the evidence. That was the view taken by the coroner's jury and also in the police-court proceedings. It is now referred to the Assizes at Winchester. I fear it is a thankless business. I can discover facts, Watson, but I cannot change them. Unless some entirely new and unexpected ones come to light I do not see what my client can hope for.'

'Your client?'

'Ah, I forgot I had not told you. I am getting into your involved habit, Watson, of telling a story backwards. You had best read this first.'

The letter which he handed to me, written in a bold, masterful hand, ran as follows:

CLARIDGE'S HOTEL, October 3rd. DEAR MR SHERLOCK HOLMES, I can't see the best woman God ever made go to her death without doing all that is possible to save her. I can't explain things - I can't even try to explain them, but I know beyond all doubt that Miss Dunbar is innocent. You know the facts

- who doesn't? It has been the gossip of the country. And never a voice raised for her! It's the damned injustice of it all that makes me crazy. That woman has a heart that wouldn't let her kill a fly. Well, I'll come at eleven to-morrow and see if you can get some ray of light in the dark. Maybe I have a clue and don't know it. Anyhow, all I know and all I have and all I am are for your use if only you can save her. If ever in your life you showed your powers, put them now into this case. Yours faithfully, J. NEIL GIBSON

'There you have it,' said Sherlock Holmes, knocking out the ashes of his after-breakfast pipe and slowly refilling it. 'That is the gentleman I await. As to the story, you have hardly time to master all these papers, so I must give it to you in a nutshell if you are to take an intellectual interest in the proceedings. This man is the greatest financial power in the world, and a man, as I understand, of most violent and formidable character. He married a wife, the victim of this tragedy, of whom I know nothing save that she was past her prime, which was the more unfortunate as a very attractive governess superintended the education of two young children. These are the three people concerned, and the scene is a grand old manor-house, the centre of an historical English estate. Then as to the tragedy. The wife was found in the grounds nearly half a mile from the house, late at night, clad in her dinner dress, with a shawl over her shoulders and a revolver bullet through her brain. No weapon was found near her and there was no local clue as to the murder. No weapon near her, Watson - mark that! The crime seems to have been committed late in the evening, and the body was found by a gamekeeper about eleven o'clock, when it was examined by the police and by a doctor before being carried up to the house. Is this too condensed, or can you follow it clearly?'

'It is all very clear. But why suspect the governess?'

'Well, in the first place there is some very direct evidence. A revolver with one discharged chamber and a calibre which corresponded with the bullet was found on the floor of her wardrobe.' His eyes fixed and he repeated in broken words, 'On-the-floor-of-her-wardrobe.' Then he sank into silence, and I saw that some train of thought had been set moving which I should be foolish to interrupt. Suddenly with a start he emerged into brisk life once more. 'Yes, Watson, it was found. Pretty damning, eh? So the two juries thought. Then the dead woman had a note upon her making an appointment at that very place and signed by the governess. How's that? Finally, there is the motive. Senator Gibson is an attractive person. If his wife dies, who more likely to succeed her than the young lady who had already by all accounts received pressing attentions from her employer. Love, fortune, power, all depending upon one middle-aged life. Ugly, Watson - very ugly!'

'Yes, indeed, Holmes.'

'Nor could she prove an alibi. On the contrary, she had to admit that she was down near Thor Bridge - that was the scene of the tragedy - about that hour. She couldn't deny it, for some passing villager had seen her there.'

'That really seems final.'

'And yet, Watson - and yet! This bridge - a single broad span of stone with balustraded sides - carries the drive over the narrowest part of a long, deep, reed-girt sheet of water. Thor Mere it is called. In the mouth of the bridge lay the dead woman. Such are the main facts. But here, if I mistake not, is our client, considerably before his time.'

Billy had opened the door, but the name he announced was an unexpected one. Mr Marlow Bates was a stranger to both of us. He was a thin, nervous wisp of a man with frightened eyes, and a twitching, hesitating manner - a man whom my own professional eye would judge to be on the brink of an absolute nervous breakdown.

'You seem agitated, Mr Bates,' said Holmes. 'Pray sit down. I fear I can only give you a short time, for I have an appointment at eleven.'

'I know you have,' our visitor gasped, shooting out short sentences like a man who is out of breath. 'Mr Gibson is coming. Mr Gibson is my employer. I am manager of his estate. Mr Holmes, he is a villain - an infernal villain.'

'Strong language, Mr Bates.'

'I have to be emphatic, Mr Holmes, for the time is so limited. I would not have him find me here for the world. He is almost due now. But I was so situated that I could not come earlier. His secretary, Mr Ferguson, only told me this morning of his appointment with you.'

'And you are his manager?'

'I have given him notice. In a couple of weeks I shall have shaken off his accursed slavery. A hard man, Mr Holmes, hard to all about him. Those public charities are a screen to cover his private iniquities. But his wife was his chief victim. He was brutal to her — yes, sir, brutal! How she came by her death I do not know, but I am sure that he had made her life a misery to her. She was a creature of the Tropics, a Brazilian by birth, as no doubt you know?'

'No, it had escaped me.'

'Tropical by birth and tropical by nature. A child of the sun and of passion. She had loved him as such women can love, but when her own physical charms had faded — I am told that they once were great - there was nothing to hold him. We all liked her and felt for her and hated him for the way that he treated her.'

'But he is plausible and cunning. That is all I have to say to you. Don't take him at his face value. There is more behind. Now I'll go. No, no, don't detain me! He is almost due.'

With a frightened look at the clock our strange visitor literally ran to the door and disappeared.

'Well! well!' said Holmes, after an interval of silence. 'Mr Gibson seems to have a nice loyal household. But the warning is a useful one, and now we can only wait till the man himself appears.'

Sharp at the hour we heard a heavy step upon the stairs and the famous millionaire was shown into the room. As I looked upon him I understood not only the fears and dislike of his manager, but also the execrations which so many business rivals have heaped upon his head. If I were a sculptor and desired to idealize the successful man of affairs, iron of nerve and leathery of conscience, I should choose Mr Neil Gibson as my model. His tall, gaunt, craggy figure had a suggestion of hunger and rapacity. An Abraham Lincoln keyed to base uses instead of high ones would give some idea of the man. His face might have been chiselled in granite, hard-set, craggy, remorseless, with deep lines upon it, the scars of many a crisis. Cold grey eyes, looking shrewdly out from under bristling brows, surveyed us each in turn. He bowed in perfunctory fashion as Holmes mentioned my name, and then with a masterful air of possession he drew a chair up to my companion and seated himself with his bony knees almost touching him.

'Let me say right here, Mr Holmes,' he began, 'that money is nothing to me in this case. You can burn it if it's any use in lighting you to the truth. This woman is innocent and this woman has to be cleared, and it's up to you to do it. Name your figure!'

'My professional charges are upon a fixed scale,' said Holmes coldly. 'I do not vary them, save when I remit them altogether.'

'Well, if dollars make no difference to you, think of the reputation. If you pull this off every paper in England and America will be booming you. You'll be the talk of two continents.'

'Thank you, Mr Gibson, I do not think that I am in need of booming. It may surprise you to know that I prefer to work anonymously, and that it is the problem itself which attracts me. But we are wasting time. Let us get down to the facts.'

'I think that you will find all the main ones in the Press reports. I don't know that I can add anything which will help you. But if there is anything you would wish more light upon - well, I am here to give it.'

'Well, there is just one point.'

'What is it?'

'What were the exact relations between you and Miss Dunbar?'

The Gold King gave a violent start, and half rose from his chair. Then his massive calm came back to him.

'I suppose you are within your rights - and maybe doing your duty - in asking such a question, Mr Holmes.'

'We will agree to suppose so,' said Holmes.

'Then I can assure you that our relations were entirely and always those of an employer towards a young lady whom he never conversed with, or ever saw, save when she was in the company of his children.'

Holmes rose from his chair.

'I am a rather busy man, Mr Gibson,' said he, 'and I have no time or taste for aimless conversations. I wish you good morning.'

Our visitor had risen also and his great loose figure towered above Holmes. There was an angry gleam from under those bristling brows and a tinge of colour in the sallow cheeks.

'What the devil do you mean by this, Mr Holmes? Do you dismiss my case?'

'Well, Mr Gibson, at least I dismiss you. I should have thought my words were plain.'

'Plain enough, but what's at the back of it? Raising the price on me, or afraid to tackle it, or what? I've a right to a plain answer.'

'Well, perhaps you have,' said Holmes. 'I'll give you one. This case is quite sufficiently complicated to start with, without the further difficulty of false information.'

'Meaning that I lie.'

'Well, I was trying to express it as delicately as I could, but if you insist upon the word I will not contradict you.'

I sprang to my feet, for the expression upon the millionaire's face was fiendish in its intensity, and he had raised his great knotted fist. Holmes smiled languidly, and reached his hand out for his pipe.

'Don't be noisy, Mr Gibson. I find that after breakfast even the smallest argument is unsettling. I suggest that a stroll in the morning air and a little quiet thought will be greatly to your advantage.'

With an effort the Gold King mastered his fury. I could not but admire him, for by a supreme self-command he had turned in a minute from a hot flame of anger to a frigid and contemptuous indifference.

'Well, it's your choice. I guess you know how to run your own business. I can't make you touch the case against your will. You've done yourself no good this morning, Mr Holmes, for I have broken stronger men than you. No man ever crossed me and was the better for it.'

'So many have said so, and yet here I am,' said Holmes, smiling. 'Well, good morning, Mr Gibson. You have a good deal yet to learn.'

Our visitor made a noisy exit, but Holmes smoked in imperturbable silence with dreamy eyes fixed upon the ceiling.

'Any views, Watson?' he asked at last.

'Well, Holmes, I must confess that when I consider that this is a man who would certainly brush any obstacle from his path, and when I remember that his wife may have been an obstacle and an object of dislike, as that man Bates plainly told us, it seems to me—'

'Exactly. And to me also.'

'But what were his relations with the governess, and how did you discover them?'

'Bluff, Watson, bluff! When I considered the passionate, unconventional, unbusiness-like tone of his letter, and contrasted it with his self-contained manner and appearance, it was pretty clear that there was some deep emotion which centred upon the accused woman rather than upon the victim. We've got to understand the exact relations of those three people if we are to reach the truth. You saw the frontal attack which I made upon him and how imperturbably he received it. Then I bluffed him by giving him the impression that I was absolutely certain, when in reality I was only extremely suspicious.'

'Perhaps he will come back?'

'He is sure to come back. He must come back. He can't leave it where it is. Ha! isn't that a ring? Yes, there is his footstep. Well, Mr Gibson, I was just saying to Dr Watson that you were somewhat overdue.'

The Gold King had re-entered the room in a more chastened mood than he had left it. His wounded pride still showed in his resentful eyes, but his common sense had shown him that he must yield if he would attain his end.

'I've been thinking it over, Mr Holmes, and I feel that I have been hasty in taking your remarks amiss. You are justified in getting down to the facts, whatever they may be, and I think the more of you for it. I can assure you, however, that the relations between Miss Dunbar and me don't really touch this case.'

'That is for me to decide, is it not?'

'Yes, I guess that is so. You're like a surgeon who wants every symptom before he can give his diagnosis.'

'Exactly. That expresses it. And it is only a patient who has an object in deceiving his surgeon who would conceal the facts of his case.'

'That may be so, but you will admit, Mr Holmes, that most men would shy off a bit when they are asked pointblank what their relations with a woman may be — if there is really some serious feeling in the case. I guess most men have a little private reserve of their own in some corner of their souls where they don't welcome intruders. And you burst suddenly into it. But the object excuses you, since it was to try and save her. Well, the stakes are down and the reserve open and you can explore where you will. What is it you want?'

'The truth.'

The Gold King paused for a moment as one who marshals his thoughts. His grim, deep-lined face had become even sadder and more grave.

'I can give it to you in a very few words, Mr Holmes,' said he at last. 'There are some things that are painful as well as difficult to say, so I won't go deeper than is needful. I met my wife when I was gold-hunting in Brazil. Maria Pinto was the daughter of a Government official at Manaus, and she was very beautiful. I was young and ardent in those days, but even now, as I look back with colder blood and a more critical eye, I can see that she was rare and wonderful in her beauty. It was a deep rich nature, too, passionate, wholehearted, tropical, ill-balanced, very different from the American women whom I had known. Well, to make a long story short, I loved her and I married her. It was only when the romance had passed — and it lingered for years — that I realized that we had nothing — absolutely nothing — in common. My love faded. If hers had faded also it might have been easier. But you know the wonderful way of women! Do what I might nothing could turn her from me. If I have been harsh to her, even brutal as some have said, it has been because I knew that if I could kill her love, or if it turned to hate, it would be easier for both of us. But nothing changed her. She adored me in those English woods as she had adored me twenty years ago on the banks of the Amazon. Do what I might, she was devoted as ever.

'Then came Miss Grace Dunbar. She answered our advertisement and became governess to our two children. Perhaps you have seen her portrait in the papers. The whole world has proclaimed that she also is a very beautiful woman. Now, I make no pretence to be more moral than my neighbours, and I will admit to you that I could not live under the same roof with such a woman and in daily contact with her without feeling a passionate regard for her. Do you blame me, Mr Holmes?'

'I do not blame you for feeling it. I should blame you if you expressed it, since this young lady was in a sense under your protection.'

'Well, maybe so,' said the millionaire, though for a moment the reproof had brought the old angry gleam into his eyes. 'I'm not pretending to be any better than I am. I guess all my life I've been a man that reached out his hand for what he wanted, and I never wanted anything more than the love and possession of that woman. I told her so.'

'Oh, you did, did you?'

Holmes could look very formidable when he was moved.

'I said to her that if I could marry her I would, but that it was out of my power. I said that money was no object and that all I could do to make her happy and comfortable would be done.'

'Very generous, I am sure,' said Holmes, with a sneer.

'See here, Mr Holmes. I came to you on a question of evidence, not on a question of morals. I'm not asking for your criticism.'

'It is only for the young lady's sake that I touch your case at all,' said Holmes, sternly. 'I don't know that anything she is accused of is really worse than what you have yourself admitted, that you have tried to ruin a defenceless girl who was under your roof. Some of you rich men have to be taught that all the world cannot be bribed into condoning your offences.'

To my surprise the Gold King took the reproof with equanimity.

'That's how I feel myself about it now. I thank God that my plans did not work out as I intended. She would have none of it, and she wanted to leave the house instantly.'

'Why did she not?'

'Well, in the first place, others were dependent upon her, and it was no light matter for her to let them all down by sacrificing her living. When I had sworn - as I did - that she should never be molested again, she consented to remain. But there was another reason. She knew the influence she had over me, and that it was stronger than any other influence in the world. She wanted to use it for good.'

'How?'

'Well, she knew something of my affairs. They are large, Mr Holmes - large beyond the belief of an ordinary man. I can make or break - and it is usually break. It wasn't individuals only. It was communities, cities, even nations. Business is a hard game, and the weak go to the wall. I played the game for all it was worth. I never squealed myself and I never cared if the other fellow squealed. But she saw it different. I guess she was right. She believed and said that a fortune for one man that was more than he needed should not be built on ten thousand ruined men who were left without the means of life. That was how she saw it, and I guess she could see past the dollars to something that was more lasting. She found that I listened to what she said, and she believed she was serving the world by influencing my actions. So she stayed - and then this came along.'

'Can you throw any light upon that?'

The Gold King paused for a minute or more, his head sunk in his hands, lost in deep thought.

'It's very black against her. I can't deny that. And women lead an inward life and may do things beyond the judgement of a man. At first I was so rattled and taken aback that I was ready to think she had been led away in some extraordinary fashion that was clean against her usual nature. One explanation came into my head. I give it to you, Mr Holmes, for what it is worth. There is no doubt that my wife was bitterly jealous. There is a soul-jealousy that can be as frantic as any body-jealousy, and though my wife had no cause - and I think she understood this - for the latter, she was aware that this English girl exerted an influence upon my

mind and my acts that she herself never had. It was an influence for good, but that did not mend the matter. She was crazy with hatred, and the heat of the Amazon was always in her blood. She might have planned to murder Miss Dunbar - or we will say to threaten her with a gun and so frighten her into leaving us. Then there might have been a scuffle and the gun gone off and shot the woman who held it.'

'That possibility had already occurred to me,' said Holmes.

'Indeed, it is the only obvious alternative to deliberate murder.'

'But she utterly denies it.'

'Well, that is not final - is it? One can understand that a woman placed in so awful a position might hurry home still in her bewilderment holding the revolver. She might even throw it down among her clothes, hardly knowing what she was doing, and when it was found she might try to lie her way out by a total denial, since all explanation was impossible. What is against such a supposition?'

'Miss Dunbar herself.'

'Well, perhaps.'

Holmes looked at his watch. 'I have no doubt we can get the necessary permits this morning and reach Winchester by the evening train. When I have seen this young lady, it is very possible that I may be of more use to you in the matter, though I cannot promise that my conclusions will necessarily be such as you desire.'

There was some delay in the official pass, and instead of reaching Winchester that day we went down to Thor Place, the Hampshire estate of Mr Neil Gibson. He did not accompany us himself, but we had the address of Sergeant Coventry, of the local police, who had first examined into the affair. He was a tall, thin, cadaverous man, with a secretive and mysterious manner, which conveyed the idea that he knew or suspected a very great deal more than he dared to say. He had a trick, too, of suddenly sinking his voice to a whisper as if he had come upon something of vital importance, though the information was usually commonplace enough. Behind these tricks of manner he soon showed himself to be a decent, honest fellow who was not too proud to admit that he was out of his depth and would welcome any help.

'Anyhow, I'd rather have you than Scotland Yard, Mr Holmes,' said he. 'If the Yard gets called into a case, then the local loses all credit for success and may be blamed for failure. Now, you play straight, so I've heard.'

'I need not appear in the matter at all,' said Holmes, to the evident relief of our melancholy acquaintance. 'If I can clear it up I don't ask to have my name mentioned.'

'Well, it's very handsome of you, I am sure. And your friend, Dr Watson, can be trusted, I know. Now, Mr Holmes, as we walk down to the place there is one question I should like to ask you. I'd breathe it to no soul but you.' He looked round as though he hardly dare utter the words. 'Don't you think there might be a case against Mr Neil Gibson himself?'

'I have been considering that.'

'You've not seen Miss Dunbar. She is a wonderful fine woman in every way. He may well have wished his wife out of the road. And these Americans are readier with pistols than our folk are. It was his pistol, you know.'

'Was that clearly made out?'

'Yes, sir. It was one of a pair that he had.'

'One of a pair? Where is the other?'

'Well, the gentleman has a lot of fire-arms of one sort and another. We never quite matched that particular pistol - but the box was made for two.'

'If it was one of a pair you should surely be able to match it.'

'Well, we have them all laid out at the house if you would care to look them over.'

'Later, perhaps. I think we will walk down together and have a look at the scene of the tragedy.'

The conversation had taken place in the little front room of Sergeant Coventry's humble cottage, which served as the local police station. A walk of half a mile or so across a wind-swept heath, all gold and bronze with the fading ferns, brought us to a side-gate opening into the grounds of the Thor Place estate. A path led us through the pheasant preserves, and then from a clearing we saw the widespread, half-timbered house, half Tudor and half Georgian, upon the crest of the hill. Beside us there was a long, reedy pool, constricted in the centre where the main carriage drive passed over a stone bridge, but swelling into small lakes on either side. Our guide paused at the mouth of this bridge, and he pointed to the ground.

'That was where Mrs Gibson's body lay. I marked it by that stone.'

'I understand that you were there before it was moved?'

'Yes, they sent for me at once.'

'Who did?'

'Mr Gibson himself. The moment the alarm was given and he had rushed down with others from the house, he insisted that nothing should be moved until the police should arrive.'

'That was sensible. I gathered from the newspaper report that the shot was fired from close quarters.'

'Yes, sir, very close.'

'Near the right temple?'

'Just behind it, sir.'

'How did the body lie?'

'On the back, sir. No trace of a struggle. No marks. No weapon. The short note from Miss Dunbar was clutched in her left hand.'

'Clutched, you say?'

'Yes, sir, we could hardly open the fingers.'

'That is of great importance. It excludes the idea that anyone could have placed the note there after death in order to furnish a false clue. Dear me! The note, as I remember, was quite short. "I will be at Thor Bridge at nine o'clock. - G. Dunbar." Was that not so?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did Miss Dunbar admit writing it?'

'Yes, sir.'

'What was her explanation?'

'Her defence was reserved for the Assizes. She would say nothing.'

'The problem is certainly a very interesting one. The point of the letter is very obscure, is it not?'

'Well, sir,' said the guide, 'it seemed, if I may be so bold as to say so, the only really clear point in the whole case.' Holmes shook his head.

'Granting that the letter is genuine and was really written, it was certainly received some time before - say one hour or two. Why, then, was this lady still clasping it in her left hand? Why should she carry it so carefully? She did not need to refer to it in the interview. Does it not seem remarkable?'

'Well, sir, as you put it, perhaps it does.'

'I think I should like to sit quietly for a few minutes and think it out.' He seated himself upon the stone ledge of the bridge, and I could see his quick grey eyes darting their questioning glances in every direction. Suddenly he sprang up again and ran across to the opposite parapet, whipped his lens from his pocket, and began to examine the stonework.

'This is curious,' said he.

'Yes, sir, we saw the chip on the ledge. I expect it's been done by some passer-by.'

The stonework was grey, but at this one point it showed white for a space not larger than a sixpence. When examined closely one could see that the surface was chipped as by a sharp blow.

'It took some violence to do that,' said Holmes thoughtfully. With his cane he struck the ledge several times without leaving a mark. 'Yes, it was a hard knock. In a curious place, too. It was not from above but from below, for you see that it is on the lower edge of the parapet.'

'But it is at least fifteen feet from the body.'

'Yes, it is fifteen feet from the body. It may have nothing to do with the matter, but it is a point worth nothing. I do not think we have anything more to learn here. There were no footsteps, you say?'

'The ground was iron hard, sir. There were no traces at all.'

'Then we can go. We will go up to the house first and look over these weapons of which you speak. Then we shall get on to Winchester, for I should desire to see Miss Dunbar before we go farther.'

Mr Neil Gibson had not returned from town, but we saw in the house the neurotic Mr Bates who had called upon us in the morning. He showed us with a sinister relish the formidable array of fire-arms of various shapes and sizes which his employer had accumulated in the course of an adventurous life.

'Mr Gibson has his enemies, as anyone would expect who knew him and his methods,' said he. 'He sleeps with a loaded revolver in the drawer beside his bed. He is a man of violence, sir, and there are times when all of us are afraid of him. I am sure that the poor lady who has passed was often terrified.'

'Did you ever witness physical violence towards her?'

'No, I cannot say that. But I have heard words which were nearly as bad - words of cold, cutting contempt, even before the servants.'

'Our millionaire does not seem to shine in private life,' remarked Holmes, as we made our way to the station. 'Well, Watson, we have come on a good many facts, some of them new ones, and yet I seem some way from my conclusion. In spite of the very evident dislike which Mr Bates has to his employer, I gather from him that when the alarm came he was undoubtedly in his library. Dinner was over at eight-thirty and all was normal up to then. It is true that the alarm was somewhat late in the evening, but the tragedy certainly occurred about the hour named in the note. There is no evidence at all that Mr Gibson had been out of doors since his return from town at five o'clock. On the other hand, Miss Dunbar, as I understand it, admits that she had made an appointment to meet Mrs Gibson at the bridge. Beyond this she would say nothing, as her lawyer had advised her to reserve her defence. We have several very vital questions to ask that young lady, and my mind will not be easy until we have seen her. I must confess that the case would seem to me to be very black against her if it were not for one thing.'

'And what is that, Holmes?'

'The finding of the pistol in her wardrobe.'

'Dear me, Holmes!' I cried, 'that seemed to me to be the most damning incident of all.'

'Not so, Watson. It had struck me even at my first perfunctory reading as very strange, and now that I am in closer touch with the case it is my only firm ground for hope. We must look for consistency. Where there is a want of it we must suspect deception.'

'I hardly follow you.'

'Well, now, Watson, suppose for a moment that we visualize you in the character of a woman who, in a cold, premeditated fashion, is about to get rid of a rival. You have planned it. A note has been written. The victim has come. You have your weapon. The crime is done. It has been workmanlike and complete. Do you tell me that after carrying out so crafty a crime you would now ruin your reputation as a criminal by forgetting to fling your weapon into those adjacent reed-beds which would for ever cover it, but you must needs carry it carefully home and put it in your own wardrobe, the very first place that would be searched? Your best friends would hardly call you a schemer, Watson, and yet I could not picture you doing anything so crude as that.'

'In the excitement of the moment-'

'No, no, Watson, I will not admit that it is possible. Where a crime is coolly premeditated, then the means of covering it are coolly premeditated also. I hope, therefore, that we are in the presence of a serious misconception.'

'But there is so much to explain.'

'Well, we shall set about explaining it. When once your point of view is changed, the very thing which was so damning becomes a clue to the truth. For example, there is the revolver. Miss Dunbar disclaims all knowledge of it. On our new theory she is speaking truth when she says so. Therefore, it was placed in her wardrobe. Who placed it there? Someone who wished to incriminate her. Was not that person the actual criminal? You see how we come at once upon a most fruitful line of inquiry.'

We were compelled to spend the night at Winchester, as the formalities had not yet been completed, but next morning, in the company of Mr Joyce Cummings, the rising barrister who was entrusted with the defence, we were allowed to see the young lady in her cell. I had expected from all that we had heard to see a beautiful woman, but I can never forget the effect which Miss Dunbar produced upon me. It was no wonder that even the masterful millionaire had found in her something more powerful than himself - something which could control and guide him. One felt, too, as one looked at that strong, clear-cut and yet sensitive face, that even should she be capable of some impetuous deed, none the less there was an innate nobility of character which would make her influence always for the good. She was a brunette, tall, with a noble figure and commanding presence, but her dark eyes had in them this appealing, helpless expression of the hunted creature who feels the nets around it, but can see no way out from the toils. Now, as she realized the presence and the help of my famous friend, there came a touch of colour in her wan cheeks and a light of hope began to glimmer in the glance which she turned upon us.

'Perhaps Mr Neil Gibson has told you something of what occurred between us?' she asked, in a low, agitated voice.

'Yes,' Holmes answered, 'you need not pain yourself by entering into that part of the story. After seeing you, I am prepared to accept Mr Gibson's statement both as to the influence which you had over him and as to the innocence of your relations with him. But why was the whole situation not brought out in court?'

'It seemed to me incredible that such a charge could be sustained. I thought that if we waited the whole thing must clear itself up without our being compelled to enter into painful details of the inner life of the family. But I understand that far from clearing it has become even more serious.'

'My dear young lady,' cried Holmes, earnestly, 'I beg you to have no illusions upon the point. Mr Cummings here would assure you that all the cards are at present against us, and that we must do everything that is possible if we are to win clear. It would be a cruel deception to pretend that you are not in very great danger. Give me all the help you can, then, to get at the truth.'

'I will conceal nothing.'

'Tell us, then, of your true relations with Mr Gibson's wife.'

'She hated me, Mr Holmes. She hated me with all the fervour of her tropical nature. She was a woman who would do nothing by halves, and the measure of her love for her husband was the measure also of her hatred for me. It is probable that she misunderstood our relations. I would not wish to wrong her, but she loved so vividly in a physical sense that she could hardly understand the mental, and even spiritual, tie which held her husband to me, or imagine that it was only my desire to influence his power to good ends which kept me under his roof. I can see now that I was wrong. Nothing could justify me in remaining where I was a cause of unhappiness, and yet it is certain that the unhappiness would have remained even if I had left the house.'

'Now, Miss Dunbar,' said Holmes, 'I beg you to tell us exactly what occurred that evening.'

'I can tell you the truth so far as I know it, Mr Holmes, but I am in a position to prove nothing, and there are points - the most vital points - which I can neither explain nor can I imagine any explanation.'

'If you will find the facts, perhaps others may find the explanation.'

'With regard, then, to my presence at Thor Bridge that night, I received a note from Mrs Gibson in the morning. It lay on the table of the schoolroom, and it may have been left there by her own hand. It implored me to see her there after dinner, said she had something important to say to me, and asked me to leave an answer on the sundial in the garden, as she desired no one to be in our confidence. I saw no reason for such secrecy, but I did as she asked, accepting the appointment. She asked me to destroy her note and I burned it in the schoolroom grate. She was very much afraid of her husband, who treated her with a harshness for which I frequently reproached him, and I could only imagine that she acted in this way because she did not wish him to know of our interview.'

'Yet she kept your reply very carefully?'

'Yes. I was surprised to hear that she had it in her hand when she died.'

'Well, what happened then?'

'I went down as I had promised. When I reached the bridge she was waiting for me. Never did I realize till that moment how this poor creature hated me. She was like a mad woman - indeed, I think she was a mad woman, subtly mad with the deep power of deception which insane people may have. How else could she have met me with unconcern every day and yet had so raging a hatred of me in her heart? I will not say what she said. She poured her whole wild fury out in burning and horrible words. I did not even answer - I could not. It was dreadful to see her. I put my hands to my ears and rushed away. When I left her she was standing still shrieking out her curses at me, in the mouth of the bridge.'

'Where she was afterwards found?'

'Within a few yards from the spot.'

'And yet, presuming that she met her death shortly after you left her, you heard no shot?'

'No, I heard nothing. But, indeed, Mr Holmes, I was so agitated and horrified by this terrible outbreak that I rushed to get back to the peace of my own room, and I was incapable of noticing anything which happened.'

'You say that you returned to your room. Did you leave it again before next morning?'

'Yes, when the alarm came that the poor creature had met her death I ran out with the others.'

'Did you see Mr Gibson?'

'Yes, he had just returned from the bridge when I saw him. He had sent for the doctor and the police.'

'Did he seem to you much perturbed?'

'Mr Gibson is a very strong, self-contained man. I do not think that he would ever show his emotions on the surface. But I, who knew him so well, could see that he was deeply concerned.'

'Then we come to the all-important point. This pistol that was found in your room. Had you ever seen it before?'

'Never, I swear it.'

'When was it found?'

'Next morning, when the police made their search.'

'Among your clothes?'

'Yes, on the floor of my wardrobe under my dresses.'

'You could not guess how long it had been there?'

'It had not been there the morning before.'

'How do you know?'

'Because I tidied out the wardrobe.'

'That is final. Then someone came into your room and placed the pistol there in order to inculcate you.'

'It must have been so.'

'And when?'

'It could only have been at meal-time, or else at the hours when I would be in the schoolroom with the children.'

'As you were when you got the note?'

'Yes, from that time onwards for the whole morning.'

'Thank you, Miss Dunbar. Is there any other point which could help me in the investigation?'

'I can think of none.'

'There was some sign of violence on the stonework of the bridge - a perfectly fresh chip just opposite the body. Could you suggest any possible explanation of that?'

'Surely it must be a mere coincidence.'

'Curious, Miss Dunbar, very curious. Why should it appear at the very time of the tragedy and why at the very place?'

'But what could have caused it? Only great violence could have such an effect.'

Holmes did not answer. His pale, eager face had suddenly assumed that tense, far-away expression which I had learned to associate with the supreme manifestations of his genius. So evident was the crisis in his mind that none of us dared to speak, and we sat, barrister, prisoner, and myself, watching him in a concentrated and absorbed silence. Suddenly he sprang from his chair, vibrating with nervous energy and the pressing need for action.

'Come, Watson, come!' he cried.

'What is it, Mr Holmes?'

'Never mind, my dear lady. You will hear from me, Mr Cummings. With the help of the God of justice I will give you a case which will make England ring. You will get news by tomorrow, Miss Dunbar, and meanwhile take my assurance that the clouds are lifting and that I have every hope that the light of truth is breaking through.'

It was not a long journey from Winchester to Thor Place, but it was long to me in my impatience, while for Holmes it was evident that it seemed endless, for, in his nervous restlessness, he could not sit still, but paced the carriage or drummed with his long, sensitive fingers upon the cushions beside him.

Suddenly, however, as we neared our destination he seated himself opposite to me - we had a first-class carriage to ourselves - and laying a hand upon each of my knees he looked into my eyes with the peculiarly mischievous gaze which was characteristic of his more imp-like moods.

'Watson,' said he, 'I have some recollection that you go armed upon these excursions of ours.'

It was as well for him that I did so, for he took little care for his own safety when his mind was once absorbed by a problem, so that more than once my revolver had been a good friend in need. I reminded him of the fact.

'Yes, yes, I am a little absent-minded in such matters. But have you your revolver on you?'

I produced it from my hip-pocket, a short, handy, but very serviceable little weapon. He undid the catch, shook out the cartridges, and examined it with care.

'It's heavy - remarkably heavy,' said he.

'Yes, it is a solid bit of work.'

He mused over it for a minute.

'Do you know, Watson,' said he, 'I believe your revolver is going to have a very intimate connection with the mystery which we are investigating.'

'My dear Holmes, you are joking.'

'No, Watson, I am very serious. There is a test before us. If the test comes off, all will be clear. And the test will depend upon the conduct of this little weapon. One cartridge out. Now we will replace the other five and put on the safety-catch. So! That increases the weight and makes it a better reproduction.'

I had no glimmer of what was in his mind nor did he enlighten me, but sat lost in thought until we pulled up in the little Hampshire station. We secured a ramshackle trap, and in a quarter of an hour were at the house of our confidential friend, the sergeant.

'A clue, Mr Holmes? What is it?'

'It all depends upon the behaviour of Dr Watson's revolver,' said my friend. 'Here it is. Now, officer, can you give me ten yards of string?'

The village shop provided a ball of stout twine.

'I think that this is all we will need,' said Holmes. 'Now, if you please, we will get off on what I hope is the last stage of our journey.'

The sun was setting and turning the rolling Hampshire moor into a wonderful autumnal panorama. The sergeant, with many critical and incredulous glances, which showed his deep doubts of the sanity of my companion, lurched along beside us. As we approached the scene of the crime I could see that my friend under all his habitual coolness was in truth deeply agitated.

'Yes,' he said, in answer to my remark, 'you have seen me miss my mark before, Watson. I have an instinct for such things, and yet it has sometimes played me false. It seemed a certainty when first it flashed across my mind in the cell at Winchester, but one drawback of an active mind is that one can always conceive alternative explanations which would make our scent a false one. And yet - and yet - Well, Watson, we can but try.'

As he walked he had firmly tied one end of the string to the handle of the revolver. We had now reached the scene of the tragedy. With great care he marked out under the guidance of the policeman the exact spot where the body had been stretched. He then hunted among the heather and the ferns until he found a considerable stone. This he secured to the other end of his line of string, and he hung it over the parapet of the bridge so that it swung clear above the water. He then stood on the fatal spot, some distance from the edge of the bridge, with my revolver in his hand, the string being taut between the weapon and the heavy stone on the farther side.

'Now for it!' he cried.

At the words he raised the pistol to his head, and then let go his grip. In an instant it had been whisked away by the weight of the stone, had struck with a sharp crack against the parapet, and had vanished over the side into the water. It had hardly gone before Holmes was kneeling beside the stonework, and a joyous cry showed that he had found what he expected.

'Was there ever a more exact demonstration?' he cried. 'See, Watson, your revolver has solved the problem!' As he spoke he pointed to a second chip of the exact size and shape of the first which had appeared on the under edge of the stone balustrade.

'We'll stay at the inn to-night,' he continued, as he rose and faced the astonished sergeant. 'You will, of course, get a grappling-hook and you will easily restore my friend's revolver. You will also find beside it the revolver, string and weight with which this vindictive woman attempted to disguise her own crime and to fasten a charge of murder upon an innocent victim. You can let Mr Gibson know that I will see him in the morning, when steps can be taken for Miss Dunbar's vindication.'

Late that evening, as we sat together smoking our pipes in the village inn, Holmes gave me a brief review of what had passed.

'I fear, Watson,' said he, 'that you will not improve any reputation which I may have acquired by adding the Case of the Thor Bridge Mystery to your annals. I have been sluggish in mind and wanting in that mixture of imagination and reality which is the basis of my art. I confess that the chip in the stonework was a sufficient clue to suggest the true solution, and that I blame myself for not having attained it sooner.'

'It must be admitted that the workings of this unhappy woman's mind were deep and subtle, so that it was no very simple matter to unravel her plot. I do not think that in our adventures we have ever come across a stranger example of what perverted love can bring about. Whether Miss Dunbar was her rival in a physical or in a merely mental sense seems to have been equally unforgivable in her eyes. No doubt she blamed this innocent lady for all those harsh dealings and unkind words with which her husband tried to repel her too demonstrative affection. Her first resolution was to end her own life. Her second was to do it in such a way as to involve her victim in a fate which was worse far than any sudden death could be.

'We can follow the various steps quite clearly, and they show a remarkable subtlety of mind. A note was extracted very cleverly from Miss Dunbar which would make it appear that she had chosen the scene of the crime. In her anxiety that it should be discovered she somewhat overdid it, by holding it in her hand to the last. This alone should have excited my suspicions earlier than it did.

'Then she took one of her husband's revolvers — there was, as you saw, an arsenal in the house - and kept it for her own use. A similar one she concealed that morning in Miss Dunbar's wardrobe after discharging one barrel, which she could easily do in the woods without attracting attention. She then went down to the bridge where she had contrived this exceedingly ingenious method for getting rid of her weapon. When Miss Dunbar appeared she used her last breath in pouring out her hatred, and then, when she was out of hearing, carried out her terrible purpose. Every link is now in its place and the chain is complete. The papers may ask why the mere was not dragged in the first instance, but it is easy to be wise after the event, and in any case the expanse of a reed-filled lake is no easy matter to drag unless you have a clear perception of what you are looking for and where. Well, Watson, we have helped a remarkable woman, and also a formidable man. Should they in the future join their forces, as seems not unlikely, the financial world may find that Mr Neil Gibson has learned something in that schoolroom of Sorrow where our earthly lessons are taught.'