

The Adventure of Shoscombe Old Place

(by A. Conan Doyle)

Sherlock Holmes looked impatiently at his watch.

'I am waiting for a new client,' he said, 'but he is late. By the way, Watson, do you know anything about horse-racing?'

'Yes, I do,' I answered. 'What do you want to know?'

'I should like to know something about Sir Robert Norberton. Does the name tell you anything?'

'Well, yes,' I answered. 'Sir Robert Norberton lives in Shoscombe Old Place. He is the most daredevil rider in England. He is also a boxer and an athlete. But people say he is a dangerous man.'

'How is that?' said Holmes.

'Everybody knows that he horsewhipped Sam Brewer once. He nearly killed the man.'

'And who is Sam Brewer?'

'Sam Brewer is a well-known money-lender,' I said.

'Ah,' said Holmes, 'that sounds interesting. Now, Watson, can you give me some idea of Shoscombe Old Place?'

'Only that it is in the centre of Shoscombe Park and that the famous Shoscombe stud and training quarters are there.'

'And the head trainer,' said Holmes, 'is John Mason. Don't look surprised at my knowledge, Watson, for this is a letter from him which I have in my hand. But let us have some more about Shoscombe.'

'There are the Shoscombe spaniels,' I said. 'You hear of them at every dog show. The lady of Shoscombe Old place is very proud of them.'

'The lady of Shoscombe Old Place... Sir Robert Norberton's wife, I suppose,' Sherlock Holmes said.

'No,' I said, 'Sir Robert has never married. He lives with his widowed sister, Lady Beatrice Falder. The place belonged to her late husband, but when she dies it will go to her husband's brother. Norberton has no right to it at all. His sister draws the rents every year...'

'And brother Robert, I suppose, spends the money?' asked Holmes.

'Yes,' I said. 'He gives her a lot of trouble, and still I have heard that she is very fond of him. But why do you ask me all these questions? What is wrong at Shoscombe?'

'Ah, that is just what I want to know. And here, I think, is the man who can tell us.'

The door opened and a tall, clean-shaven man with a firm, serious expression came in. He bowed coldly and calmly and seated himself upon the chair which Holmes pointed to.

'You had my note, Mr. Holmes?' he said.

'Yes, but it explained nothing.'

'It was too difficult for me to put the details on paper,' said the man. 'It was only face to face I could do it.'

'Well, we are at your service.'

'First of all, Mr. Holmes,' went on the man, 'I think that my employer, Sir Robert, has gone mad.' Holmes raised his eyebrows. 'I am a detective, not a doctor,' he said. 'But why do you think so?'

'Well, sir, when a man does one queer thing, or two queer things, there may be a meaning to it. But when everything he does is queer, then you begin to wonder.'

'What is wrong with your employer?' asked Holmes.

'I'll tell you everything, Mr. Holmes,' said the horse trainer. 'I know you are gentlemen of honour and I know that it won't go beyond the room. Sir Robert has got to win this Derby. You see, he is up to the neck in debt, and it's his last chance. He thinks of nothing but the Derby and his young horse — Shoscombe Prince. His whole life depends on it. If the horse wins the race, he is saved. If Shoscombe Prince does not win — his money lenders will tear him to pieces.'

'It seems really a difficult situation,' said Holmes, 'but why do you say he is mad?'

'Well, first of all, you have only to look at him, I don't believe he sleeps at night. His eyes are wild. And then he behaves very strangely to Lady Beatrice.'

'And how is that?'

'They have always been the best of friends. The two of them liked the same things, and she loved the horses as much as he did, and above all, she loved the Prince. But that's all over now.'

'Why?'

'Well, she seems to have lost all interest in the horses and never goes to the stable any longer.' 'Do you think there has been a quarrel?' asked Sherlock Holmes.

'I am sure they have quarrelled. If they had not, he would never have given away his sister's favourite spaniel. He gave it a few days ago to old Barnes who keeps the "Green Dragon" inn, three miles away.'

'That certainly does seem strange.'

'She couldn't go out with him because she was an invalid, but he spent two hours every evening in her room. That's all over, too, now. He never goes near her. And she takes it to heart. She is drinking like a fish now, Mr. Holmes.'

'Did she drink before this quarrel?' asked Holmes.

'Well, she drank her glass of wine. But now it's often a whole bottle an evening. The butler told me. But then, again, what is master doing down at the old church crypt at night? And who is the man that meets him there?'

'Go on, Mr. Mason,' said Holmes. 'You get more and more interesting.'

'It was the butler who saw him go,' the horse trainer went on. 'It was twelve o'clock at night and raining hard. So next night I went up to the house, and the butler and I went after him. We were afraid to get too near him. If he had seen us, it would have been a bad job, for he is a terrible man when he starts fighting. It was the church crypt that he was making for, and there was a man waiting for him there.'

'What is this church crypt?' asked Holmes.

'Well, sir, there is an old church in the park. And under this church there is a crypt which has a bad name among us. It's a dark, damp, lonely place by day, and there are few people who would not be frightened to go near it at night. But master is not afraid. He never feared anything in his life. But what is he doing there in the night-time?'

'Wait a bit!' said Holmes. 'You say there is another man there. It must be one of your own stablemen, or somebody from the house. I'm sure you have only to find out who it is and question him.'

'It's no one I know.'

'How can you say that?'

'Because I saw him, Mr. Holmes. It was on that second night. Sir Robert turned and passed us. while the butler and I were hiding in the bushes like two rabbits, because the moon was shining that night. But we could hear the other man going behind. We were not afraid of him. So we got up when Sir Robert had passed us. We pretended that we were just having a walk in the moonlight. We went straight towards him. "Oh, hullo," said I "who may you be?" I don't think he had heard us coming, so he looked over his shoulder with a face as if he had seen the devil himself... He gave a loud cry and ran away as fast as he could in the darkness. Oh, yes, he could run! In a minute he was out of sight and hearing... And who he was or what he was we never found.'

'But did you see him clearly in the moonlight?' asked Holmes.

'Oh, yes, I would recognize his yellow face again. What could he have in common with Sir Robert?'

Holmes sat for some time thinking hard.

'Who sits with Lady Beatrice?' asked Holmes.

'She has a devoted maid, who has been with her for five years.'

There was a pause.

'And then,' began Mr. Mason again, 'why should Sir Robert want to dig up a dead body?'

Holmes sat up quickly.

'We only found it out yesterday — after I had written to you. Yesterday Sir Robert went to London, so the butler and I went down to the crypt. It was all in order, sir, except that in one corner there was a bit of a human body.'

'You informed the police, I suppose?'

'Well, sir,' answered the man with a grim smile, 'I don't think it will interest the police. It was just the head and a few bones of a mummy, maybe a thousand years old. But it wasn't there before. That I'll swear and so will the butler. It had been hidden away in a corner and covered over with a board, but that corner had always been empty before.'

'What did you do with it?' asked Holmes.

'Well, we just left it there.'

'That was wise,' said Holmes. 'You say Sir Robert was away yesterday. Has he returned?'

'We expect him back today.'

'When did Sir Robert give away his sister's dog?'

'It was just a week ago today. The dog was howling and Sir Robert got very angry. He caught it up and I thought he would kill it. Then he gave it to Sandy Bain, the jockey, and told him to take the dog to old Barnes at the "Green Dragon", for he never wished to see it again.'

Holmes lit his pipe and sat for some time in silent thought.

'It's not clear to me yet what you want me to do in this matter, Mr. Mason,' he said at last. 'Can't you make it more definite?'

'Perhaps this will make it more definite, Mr. Holmes,' said our visitor.

He took a paper from his pocket and, unwrapping it carefully, showed us a burned piece of bone.

Holmes examined it with interest.

'Where did you get it?'

'There is a central heating furnace in the cellar under Lady Beatrice's room. The boy who runs the furnace came to me this morning with this thing. He had found it in the furnace. He did not like the look of it.'

'Nor do I,' said Holmes. 'What do you make of it, Watson?'

'It is burned black,' said I, 'but there's no doubt that it is part of a human leg bone.'

'Exactly!' Holmes became very serious. 'When does the boy who runs the furnace leave the cellar?'

'He leaves it every evening,' said Mr. Mason.

'Then anyone could visit it during the night?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Can you enter it from outside?' asked Holmes again.

'There is one door from outside. There is another which leads up by a stair to the floor in which Lady Beatrice's room is situated.'

'You say, Mr. Mason, that Sir Robert was not at home last night?'

'No, sir, he wasn't.'

'Then whoever was burning bones in the furnace, it was not he,' said Holmes.

'That's true, sir,' said the horse trainer.

'What is the name of that inn you spoke of?'

'The "Green Dragon".'

'Is there good fishing in that part of the country?' The honest trainer showed very clearly upon his face that he was sure that Sherlock Holmes had gone mad, too.

'Well, sir,' he said, 'I've heard there are fish in the river not far from the "Green Dragon", and in the Hull lake. It's in Shoscombe Park.'

'Very good! Watson and I are famous fishermen — are we not, Watson? We shall reach the inn tonight. Of course I need not say that we don't want to see you, Mr. Mason. But a note will reach us, and I'm sure I can find you if I want you.'

* * *

On a bright May evening Holmes and I were discussing our plans for fishing with Mr. Barnes, the innkeeper.

'What about the Hull lake?' asked Holmes. 'Are there many fish in it?'

'Don't fish there, sir,' answered the innkeeper. 'You may find yourself in the lake before you have finished.'

'How is that?'

'It's Sir Robert, sir, he doesn't want any strangers to come near his park. Sir Robert is the sort that strikes first and speaks afterwards. Keep away from the park,' 'Of course,

Mr. Barnes,' said Holmes, 'we certainly shall. By the way, you have a beautiful spaniel here. We saw it in the hall.'