

The Second Stain

A Short Story by Arthur Conan Doyle

Adapted for Reader's Theatre
By Al Rodin

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Lord Bellinger and the Right Honorable Trelawney Hope, Secretary for European Affairs, visit Sherlock Holmes at 221B Baker Street to have him find a missing document, which, if published, could lead to war. It had been kept in a dispatch box at the Secretary's home. Holmes suggests to his friend Watson three possible individuals, any one of whom could have stolen the document to use for bribery.

One of them, Lucas, is found murdered at his home, which Holmes visits with Inspector Lestrade. They find that the bloodstain on the carpet is not in the same position as the one on the floor. Holmes finds a cavity, but it does not contain the missing document which he had expected.

Holmes deduces that Hope's wife, Lady Hilda, had taken it. She confesses that she gave it to Lucas who was blackmailing her about an indiscreet letter she had written as a girl; and that she was the one who had taken the letter back after she saw a jealous woman kill him at his home.

Holmes tells her to put it back into the dispatch box, where her husband finds it, much to his surprise and puzzlement, but intense relief.

About 45 minutes.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(With doubling 4 m, 2 w)

SHERLOCK HOLMES: Austere, at times haughty, with occasional humor shown by a wry smile. Intolerant of sham and dull-wittedness. Not overtly enamored of the opposite sex, but exhibits gentlemanly behavior in their presence. Has so deeply buried his romantic nature that he no longer realizes its existence. Prides himself on his remarkable ability to make conclusions based on observations that are always correct, yet completely mystifying to others until explained.

DOCTOR WATSON: Prosaic, relatively stodgy. Faithful and obedient to Holmes, although perplexed by how he arrives at his conclusions. A ladies' man, but always proper in his relationship with them, and shocked at any impropriety on their part. At Holmes' beck and call, being quite willing to leave his practice (and his wife) whenever asked.

PRIME MINISTER, LORD BELLINGER: Austere, dominant, shrewd. Is accustomed to being obeyed and to getting his own way.

RIGHT HONORABLE TRELAWNEY HOPE: Highly conscientious statesman (Secretary for Foreign Affairs); quite proper in bearing and in relationship to his wife and the Minister. Has a touch of immaturity in his reactions to potential disaster.

LADY HILDA TRELAWNEY HOPE: Well aware of her status in society and in relating to inferiors. Acutely concerned about any blemish on her husband's position and on her own relationship to him. Is not above dissimulating to save her position.

INSPECTOR LESTRADE: Has a touch of pomposity. Always sure of his deductions until Holmes gives forth with his own ratiocinations.

CONSTABLE MACPHERSON: Straight forward. Not a thinking man. Takes things at face value. A ladies' man.

MRS. HUDSON: A landlady and housekeeper who is resigned to but sometimes aghast at the doings of Sherlock Holmes.

DOUBLING: The roles of Bellinger and Hope can be doubled with Lestrade and MacPherson.

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Scene 1

(AT RISE: The main room of the Sherlock Holmes suite at 221B Baker Street. The year is 1888.)

WATSON: *(Enters with hat on, reads DS center.)* Mr. Holmes has shown considerable reluctance to the continued publication of his experiences since his retirement to bee-farming on the Sussex Down. It was only upon my representing to him that I had given a promise that "The Adventure of Second Stain" should be published when the times were ripe, that I at last succeeded in obtaining his consent that a carefully guarded account of the incident should be laid before the public. If, in relating the episodes of the most important international case which he has ever been called upon to handle, I seem to be rather vague in certain details, the public will readily understand that there is an excellent reason for my reticence.

(HOLMES enters with hat, sits DS.)

WATSON: *(Continued.)* It was, then, in a year, and even in a decade, that shall be nameless that we found two visitors of European fame within the walls of our humble room in Baker Street.

(MINISTER enters with hat, sits, DS, hands clasped tightly and face gloomy.)

WATSON: *(Continued.)* The one, austere, high-nosed, eagle-eyed, and dominant, was none other than the illustrious Lord Bellinger, twice Prime Minister of Britain.

(HOPE enters with hat, sits DS, pulls nervously at chin and fidgets with fingers.)

WATSON: *(Continued.)* The other, dark, clear-cut, and elegant, hardly yet of middle age, and endowed with every beauty of body and mind, was the Right Honorable Trelawney Hope, Secretary for European Affairs, and the most rising statesman in the country. It was easy to see from their worn and anxious faces that it was business of the most pressing importance that brought them.

(WATSON sits, removes hat, and followed by other three in sequence.)

HOPE: *(Anxiously.)* When I discovered my loss, Mr. Holmes, which was at eight o'clock this morning, I at once informed the Prime Minister. It was at his suggestion that we have both come to you.

HOLMES: Have you informed the police?

MINISTER: *(Emphatically.)* No, sir. We have not done so, nor is it possible that we should do so. To inform the police must, in the long run, mean to inform the public. This is what we particularly desire to avoid.

HOLMES: And why, sir?

MINISTER: Because the document in question is of such immense importance that its publication might very easily -
- I might almost say possibly -- lead to European complications of the utmost moment. It is not too much to say that peace or war may hang upon the issue. Unless its recovery can be attended with the utmost secrecy, then it may as well not be recovered at all, for all that is aimed at by those who have taken it is that its contents should be generally known.

HOLMES: I understand. Now, Mr. Trelawney Hope, I should be much obliged if you would tell me exactly the circumstances under which this document disappeared.

HOPE: That can be done in a very few words, Mr. Holmes. The document was received six days ago from a foreign potentate. It was of such importance that I have never left it in my safe, but I have taken it across each evening to my house in Whitehall Terrace, and kept it in my bedroom in a locked dispatch box. It was there last night.

HOPE: (*Cont'd.*) Of that I am certain. I actually opened the box while I was dressing for dinner and saw the document inside. This morning it was gone. The dispatch box had stood upon my dressing table all night. I am a light sleeper, and so is my wife. No one could have entered the room during the night. And yet, I repeat, the paper is gone.

HOLMES: What time did you dine?

HOPE: Half-past seven.

HOLMES: How long was it before you went to bed?

HOPE: My wife had gone to the theatre. I waited up for her. It was half-past eleven before we went to our room.

HOLMES: Then for four hours the dispatch box had lain unguarded?

HOPE: No one is ever permitted to enter that room save the housemaid in the morning, and my valet, or my wife's maid, during the rest of the day. They are both trusty servants who have been with us for some time. Besides, neither of them could possibly have known that there was anything more valuable than the ordinary departmental paper in my dispatch box.

HOLMES: Who did know of the existence of that document?

HOPE: No one in the house.

HOLMES: Surely your wife knew?

HOPE: No sir. I had said nothing to my wife until I missed the paper this morning.

MINISTER: I have long known, sir, how high is your sense of public duty. I am convinced that in the case of this importance it would rise superior to the most intimate of domestic ties.

HOPE: You do me no more than justice, sir. Until this morning I have never breathed one word to my wife upon this matter.

HOLMES: Could she have guessed?

HOPE: No, Mr. Holmes, she could not have guessed, nor could anyone have guessed.

HOLMES: Have you lost any documents before?

HOPE: No, sir.

End of Freeview

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