

The Story of "The Dancing Men"

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THE STORY OF "THE DANCING MEN"

Two amazing coincidences have recently fixed my attention once again on the name of Sherlock Holmes, which I had forgotten for years. They have also served to revive in my memory an occurrence which had nearly sunk into oblivion. One of these coincidences was the fact that recently, at a dinner party, I found myself next to Dame Conan Doyle, the daughter of the late Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who is a very charming lady and also the Head of the Women's Royal Air Force. The second was a news item in a newspaper, which told me that America's leading authority in "Holmesiana", William Baring-Gould, had arrived in London to roam through Baker Street in search of traces of the famous detective.

From here I have to go back in telling this story a good many years to the time when I was a schoolboy in Switzerland. We were a group of about fifteen boys in our form — all about twelve years old — who knew no greater hero than Sherlock Holmes. We "borrowed" — without ever asking for permission — all the Sherlock Holmes books from our fathers' libraries and read and re-read them. We probably pronounced all the English names in a very un-English way. But we felt at home in Baker Street, where Holmes and his somewhat stupid assistant Dr. Watson had rooms in Mrs. Hudson's house. We knew Scotland Yard inside out, and we sneered at its Chief Detective Inspector Lestrade who was outsmarted time after time by Holmes and was reduced by him to the menial task of having to carry out the arrests and to put handcuffs on the prisoners' wrists.

We knew the "Sign of the Four", the "Speckled Band", the "Yellow Face", the "Empty House" and kept hoping and hoping that our hero would, at last, get the better of the incredibly clever, devilishly sly arch criminal Professor Moriarty. But we did not only know the Holmes stories inside out, we also acted them. Everybody always wanted to be Holmes, but when it came to being Watson, there were few volunteers. As Holmes always smoked a pipe, we made pipes out of chestnuts, into which we put dry leaves. We roamed through the attics of our parents' houses and turned all kinds of items of junk into Holmesian props. An old hat was turned into the famous deerstalker cap, an old toy became the famous violin and an old gardening tool the famous syringe which Holmes used to give himself morphia injections when he had no problem to solve. We lived in this world of make-believe and loved it dearly.

The books we had "borrowed" from our parents' libraries went round and round. We talked about London's underworld as though we knew every nook and cranny of it. We travelled — mentally at any rate — in hansom cabs through the gaslit London streets, which were mostly foggy. We called each other Holmes, Watson, Moriarty, Lestrade, Sir Henry Baskerville, Stapleton. We knew — having read "The Sign of the Four", the shipyards of Gravesend, the lower reaches of the Thames and we had excellent relations with Mrs. Hudson. We had a wonderful time and amused ourselves royally — until one day a teacher, whom we disrespectfully called "Rollmops", put a sudden inglorious and, for me, somewhat painful end to all this.

We were in class and "Rollmops" gave a lesson of grammar. Doing this he walked up and down and occasionally through our rows of benches. We had our grammar books open, but I frankly found his lesson boring.

I therefore carefully put a Holmes book underneath my grammar book — ever ready in case of danger to cover the former by the latter — and began to read and enjoy myself.

It was the glorious story of the "Dancing Men" I delved into. Sherlock Holmes was just on the point of deciphering the secret code message, composed of figures of small dancing men, with which Abe Slaney had threatened Hilton Cubitt. It was at this very moment that it happened. "Rollmops", whom I had not noticed at all, stood actually next to me and with one fell swoop got hold of my Holmes-book. He fingered it and then slowly walked towards his desk, becoming ominously red in the face with anger and indignation.

He thereupon did two things which were, for me, the final proof that this man utterly lacked any feeling and understanding for a situation such as this. First he declared the book confiscated — and in fact never returned it afterwards. Then he began to display a kind of sense of humour, which got him a few laughs, but which I, at any rate, thought completely out of place. The title of the story I had just enjoyed gave him his opening for this. While fishing around inside his desk, he began to make a nauseatingly biting sort of speech, at the end of which he declared that he would now show the whole form what a "dancing man" really looked like. With this he brought out a fairly long, yellow cane. I watched this from where I sat with growing concern and felt how my heart began to beat faster.

Now old "Rollmops" did not cane us half as often as some other masters did. But when he did decide that a whacking was due, he staged his administrations of justice in such a way that they had, apart from being painful, something terribly deflationary and ego-crushing about them. He wanted them, as he said, not only to serve as a lesson to the wrongdoer, but also as a deterrent to everybody. It was then that the story of the "Dancing Men" lost much of its glamour for me and came, glorious as it had been, to its rather inglorious end.

"Rollmops" called out: "Come here, Willy, right in front." And then, to tease me and to demonstrate that he knew the Sherlock Holmes stories too, the fiend said: "The solution to the problem of the 'Dancing Men' is really quite elementary, my dear Watson, quite elementary. I have here — holding up his cane — a little magic wand, which *never* fails to solve any problem. *Never*."

Making my way to the front slowly, watched by some thirty pairs of eager eyes, I quickly sent up a prayer that old "Rollmops" might have a stroke or that some other miracle might stop him at the last moment from carrying out what he seemed quite resolved to do. But, of course, things did not turn out that way. They never seemed to for me. Instead I was sternly ordered to shift an empty desk into the centre of the empty space in front. Over this I had to lay myself face downwards and in such a way that my tightly stretched seat faced the class. When I left this desk a few minutes afterwards, utterly deflated, I had a salty taste in my mouth, a tear or two in my eyes and a glowingly hot, stinging sensation inside my shorts. "Rollmops" had given me no fewer than fourteen of the best. And to make matters worse, instead of laying them on in quick succession, as most other masters did, he took his time and showed his poor taste by making some sarcastic remark about would-be detectives before each

new stroke. But I could not deny that, frail as old "Rollmops" looked, the man had plenty of muscle. It was not for nothing that his relatively infrequent canings were greatly feared and talked of with awe and much respect. Upon sitting down again in my desk, I fully realised why. Fully.

All this I suddenly remembered quite vividly a few nights ago, when I came to be seated next to Dame Conan Doyle. During the dinner I told her the gist of the story and we both laughed heartily about it. She closed this part of our conversation with the remark that, nevertheless, she was very pleased to know that I had been so intimately in touch and had had such close contact with the writings of her late father. To which I thoughtfully replied that, after all, perhaps the touch had nevertheless been a fraction too close and the contact a trifle too strong . . .

WILLY.

A DISCOVERY BY SWISS INDUSTRY IN THE PHOTO-CHEMICAL FIELD

Continuing its experiments first begun two years ago in the photochemical field, a big Swiss firm in Basle has just perfected a new process in its laboratories enabling it to print colour photographs from slides; the prints possess excellent fastness to light and give a faithful rendering of colours.

This achievement is the result of the efforts made not only in the field of photography but also in other industrial sectors. Swiss chemists are known to have been working on the production of high quality dyestuffs satisfying the severest standards of fastness and purity for the textile industry and its allied branches.

This new process makes it possible to offer distributors colour printing material that is fast to light and consequently free from the unstable character of the traditional printing systems.

[O.S.E.C.]

SUNNE UNTERGANG

Zünd nume d'Lampe no nid a
U lass mi chly i Rueh,
I lueg es grosses Schauspiel a
Und cha nid luege gnue.

A wunderbare September abe,
Isch das Szenario;
Schneebärge si der Hintergrund,
D'Sunnisch am Abego.

Der Himmel leit so nah di nah —
Es isch ungläublich schön —
Die wunderbarste Gwänder a
I allne Farbetön.

Um d'Gipfel spiele d'Wolkelüt
Mit rosa rote Schleier,
Vom Tal tönt sanft es Gloggeglüt
Zur goldene Abendfeier.

Langsam stirbt dä rosig Schimmer,
Würdig wicket d'Sunn der Nacht.
Dankbar falt i d'Händ und immer
Dänk i dem grosse Schauspiel nach.

H. ELLISON.
Interlaken 1963.

LE VACHERIN,

ROI DES FROMAGES DE DESSERT

Ponctuel, doré, parfumé, le vacherin a fait son entrée annuelle dans le royaume des fromages. Pendant quelques mois il conservera une place triomphale que nul ne songe à lui disputer. Puis, il rentrera dans l'ombre, silencieusement, pour préparer de nouveaux éclats à sa gloire future. Tel est le destin du vacherin, ce roi prestigieux mais éphémère, respectueux des usages forgés depuis plus d'un siècle à son berceau, la rude et belle Vallée de Joux.

La naissance du vacherin fut un jour faste pour la gastronomie. Elle apporta aux gourmets l'un des desserts les plus complets et les plus flatteurs. Elle apporta aussi aux amateurs de simple et rustique pitance une manière de repas que beaucoup d'entre eux ne changeraient pas contre le plus somptueux des festins.

Par ce qu'il a d'onctueux, de discrètement parfumé, par sa finesse incomparable et son goût à nul autre pareil où se rencontrent, s'unissent, se marient sa haute saveur fromagère, une douce amertume et ce soupçon de sève de sapin que prodigue l'écorce dont il est sanglé, le vacherin est vraiment le roi des fromages fins. Il n'est rien jusqu'à la vue que le vacherin ne satisfasse: sa croûte ondoiyante et mordorée, sa pâte d'ambre, sa propension naturelle à couler lentement comme le miel de chez nous, tout cela est un spectacle dont on ne se lasse jamais, et qui fait au palais les plus douces promesses.

Il y a un siècle, la principale ressource des habitants du Jura, tant français que suisse, était l'élevage du bétail et la fabrication de produits laitiers. Cette activité subsiste encore de nos jours.

Sur les versants suisse et français du Risoud et le long du Doubs, les laitiers se préparaient, à côté du fromage à pâte dure de gros format, des petits fromages à pâte molle en partant du lait de chèvre. Ils les appelaient chevrotins. On suppose qu'un jour la quantité de lait de vache ne suffit plus à fabriquer une pièce normale; un fromager eut alors l'idée de l'employer comme son lait de chèvre. Il désigna le fromage obtenu, par analogie, du nom de vacherin. On suppose également que l'ayant sorti de sa forme, il constata son extrême mollesse et vit la nécessité de le cercler pour qu'il ne s'affaisse pas complètement. L'écorce de sapin constituait une sangle parfaite à cet usage et avait l'avantage de se trouver à profusion dans les forêts des alentours, à portée de la main. On s'aperçut par la suite qu'elle donnait à la pâte un léger parfum très particulier, original et délicieux, ce qui laisse à penser que la main du Seigneur a guidé celle de l'humble pâtre dans le choix des moyens qui aboutirent à une si heureuse fin. Il restait, pour transporter le vacherin du chalet chez le consommateur, à lui trouver un emballage. Les sapins, encore, fournirent une matière première inépuisable. Taillés en fines planches et en copeaux, ils se transformèrent en boîtes parfaitement adaptées. Le vacherin peut se servir aussi bien accompagné d'un vin blanc que d'un vin rouge. Le choix entre les deux est une question personnelle. Dessert idéal, le vacherin peut aussi constituer un succulent repas. Ce fromage accompagné de pain frais et d'un verre de vin représente vraiment un "moment gastronomique"! Il a en outre l'avantage de réduire les frais de ce repas, ce qui ne gâte rien. Ceci dit, il ne reste qu'à vous souhaiter bon appétit.

(Tiré de "Echo" Revue des Suisses à l'étranger.)