

## The Man with the Twisted Lip

Mr Isa Whitney was, and had been for many years, an opium addict. He could not get rid of the habit. He had once been a fine man, but now people only pitied this bent, unfortunate person with the yellow, unhealthy face. Opium was both his ruin and his only pleasure.

One night in June, when it was almost time to go to bed, I heard the doorbell ring. I sat up in my chair, and Mary, my wife, put her sewing down in annoyance.

‘A patient!’ she said. ‘At this hour!’

We heard the servant open the front door and speak to someone. A moment later the door of our sitting room was thrown open and a lady came in. She wore a black veil over her face.

‘Please forgive me for calling on you so late,’ she began. But then she could no longer control her feelings. She ran forward, threw her arms round Mary’s neck, and cried bitterly on her shoulder. ‘Oh, I’m in such trouble!’ she said. ‘I need help so much!’

‘Well!’ said my wife, pulling up the visitor’s veil. ‘It’s Kate Whitney. This is a surprise, Kate! I had no idea who you were when you came in.’

‘I didn’t know what to do, and so I came straight to you.’

That was how it always happened. People who were in trouble came to my wife like birds to a lighthouse.

‘We are very glad to see you,’ Mary said. ‘Now you must have some wine and water, and sit here comfortably and tell us all about it. Or would you like me to send John off to bed?’

‘Oh, no, no! I want the doctor’s advice and help too. It’s about

Isa. He hasn't been home for two days. I'm so worried about him!

This was not the first time that Mrs Whitney had spoken to us of her husband's bad ways: she and Mary had been at school together. We did our best to calm her down and comfort her.

'Have you any idea where he has gone?' I asked.

'Yes,' Mrs Whitney replied. 'He's probably at a place called the Bar of Gold, in East London, down by the river. It's in Upper Swandam Street. It's a place where opium addicts go. This is the first time that Isa has spent more than a day there.'

I was Isa Whitney's doctor and had a certain influence with him.

'I will go to this place,' I said. 'If he is there, I will send him home in a carriage within two hours.'

Five minutes later I had left my comfortable chair and sitting room and was in a fast carriage on my way east.

Upper Swandam Street was on the north side of the river, to the east of London Bridge. The Bar of Gold was below the level of the street. Some steep steps led down to the entrance, which was little more than a hole in the wall. There was an oil lamp hanging above the door. I ordered the driver to wait, and went down the steps.

Inside, it was difficult to see very much through the thick brown opium smoke. Wooden beds lined the walls of a long, low room. In the shadows I could just see bodies lying in strange positions on the beds; and little red circles of light burning in the bowls of metal pipes. Most of the smokers lay silently, but some talked softly to themselves. Near one end of the room was a fireplace, in which a small fire was burning. A tall, thin old man sat there, his elbows on his knees, looking into the fire.

A Malayan servant who belonged to the place came up to me with some opium and a pipe. He pointed to an empty bed.

'No, thank you,' I said. 'I haven't come to stay. There is a friend

of mine here, Mr Isa Whitney, and I want to speak to him.'

A man on one of the beds suddenly sat up, and I recognized Whitney. He was pale, untidy, and wild-looking.

'Watson!' he cried. 'Tell me, Watson, what time is it?'

'Nearly eleven o'clock.'

'On what day?'

'Friday, June the 19th.'

'Good heavens! I thought it was Wednesday.'

'No, it's Friday. And your wife has been waiting two days for you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!'

He began to cry. 'I was sure I had been here only a few hours! But I'll go home with you. I don't want to worry Kate – poor little Kate! Give me your hand: I can't do anything for myself. Have you come in a carriage?'

'Yes, I have one waiting.'

'Good. But I must owe something here. Find out what I owe them, Watson.'

As I walked along the narrow passage between the beds, looking for the manager, I felt someone touch my arm. It was the tall man by the fire. 'Walk past me, and then look back at me,' he said. When I looked again he was still leaning over the fire – a bent, tired old man. Suddenly he looked up and smiled at me. I recognized Sherlock Holmes.

'Holmes!' I whispered. 'What on earth are you doing in this terrible place?'

'Speak more quietly! I have excellent ears. Please get rid of that friend of yours. I want to talk to you.'

'I have a carriage waiting outside.'

'Then send him home in it. And I suggest that you give the driver a note for your wife. Tell her you are with me. And wait outside for me: I'll be with you in five minutes.'

In a few minutes I had written my note, paid Whitney's bill, led him out to the carriage, and said good night to him. Then

Holmes came out of the Bar of Gold, and we walked along together. At first he walked unsteadily, with a bent back, but after the first few streets he straightened up and laughed loudly.

‘I suppose you think I have become an opium addict, Watson!’ he said.

‘I was certainly surprised to find you in that place,’ I replied.

‘And I was surprised to see you there!’

‘I came to find a friend.’

‘And I came to find an enemy!’

‘An enemy?’

‘Yes, Watson, one of my natural enemies – a criminal! I am working on one of my cases. I fear that Mr Neville Saint Clair entered the Bar of Gold and that he will never come out of the place alive. There is a door at the back of the building that opens onto the river. I believe that many men have been murdered there, and that their bodies have been thrown out through that door. If I had been recognized, the evil Indian sailor who owns the place would have murdered me too! I have used the Bar of Gold before for my own purposes, and have often found useful clues there in the conversation of the opium addicts. The owner has sworn to have his revenge on me for it.’ Suddenly Holmes whistled loudly. ‘The carriage should be here by now!’ he said.

We heard an answering whistle in the distance. Then we saw the yellow lamps of the carriage as it came near.

‘Now, Watson, you will come with me, won’t you?’ said Holmes, as he climbed in.

‘If I can be of any use.’

‘Oh, a friend is always useful. And my room at the Saint Clairs’ has two beds.’

‘At the Saint Clairs?’

‘Yes. I am staying there while I work on the case.’

‘Where is it, then?’

‘Near Lee, in Kent. It’s a seven-mile drive. Come on!’

‘But I don’t know anything about your case!’

‘Of course you don’t. But you soon will! Jump up here. All right, Harold,’ he said to the driver, ‘we shan’t need you.’ He handed the man a coin. ‘Look out for me tomorrow at about eleven o’clock. Good night!’

For the first part of our drive Holmes was silent and I waited patiently for him to begin.

‘I have been wondering what I can say to that dear little woman tonight when she meets me at the door,’ he said at last. ‘I am talking about Mrs Saint Clair, of course.’

‘Neville Saint Clair came to live near Lee five years ago. He took a large house and lived like a rich man. He gradually made friends in the neighbourhood, and two years ago he married the daughter of a local farmer, by whom he now has two children. Neville Saint Clair was a businessman in London. He used to leave home every morning and then catch the 5.14 train back from Cannon Street Station each evening. If he is still alive he is now thirty-seven years old. He has no bad habits; he is a good husband and father, and everybody likes him. He has debts of £88 at present, but his bank account contains £220. There is no reason, therefore, to think that he has any money troubles.’

‘Last Monday he went into London rather earlier than usual. He said that he had two important pieces of business to do that day. He also promised to buy his little boy a box of toy bricks. Now, that same day his wife happened to receive a telegram from the Aberdeen Shipping Company. This informed her that a valuable package which she was expecting had arrived at the Company’s offices in London. These offices are in Fresno Street, which is off Upper Swandam Street, where you found me tonight. Mrs Saint Clair had her lunch, caught a train to London, did some shopping, and then went to the shipping company’s offices. When she came out it was 4.35. She walked slowly along Upper Swandam Street, hoping to find a carriage. It was a very

hot day, and she did not like the neighbourhood at all. Suddenly she heard a cry, and saw her husband looking down at her from a window on the first floor of one of the houses. He seemed to be waving to her, as if he wanted her to come up. The window was open, and she had a clear view of his face. He looked very worried and nervous. She noticed that he had no collar or tie on; but he was wearing a dark coat like the one he had put on that morning. Then, very suddenly, somebody seemed to pull him back from the window.

‘Mrs Saint Clair felt sure that something was seriously wrong. She saw that the entrance to the house was below ground level: this was the door of the Bar of Gold. She rushed down the steps and through the front room, and tried to go up the stairs which led to the upper part of the house. But the owner – the Indian sailor I spoke of – ran downstairs and pushed her back. The Malayan servant helped him to push her out into the street. She rushed along Upper Swandam Street and into Fresno Street, where she fortunately found several policemen. They forced their way into the Bar of Gold and went upstairs to the room in which Mr Saint Clair had last been seen. There was no sign of him there. In fact the only person in the upper part of the house was an ugly cripple who lived there. Both the Indian and this cripple swore that no one else had been in the first-floor front room that afternoon. The policemen were beginning to believe that Mrs Saint Clair had been mistaken when suddenly she noticed a small wooden box on the table. Realizing what it contained, she tore the lid off and emptied out children’s bricks. It was the toy that her husband had promised to bring home for his little boy.

‘Of course the rooms were now examined very carefully, and the police found signs of a terrible crime. The front room was an ordinary room with plain furniture, and led into a small bedroom, from which the river could be seen. Along the edge of the river there is a narrow piece of ground which is dry at low tide, but

which is covered at high tide by at least four and a half feet of water. At that time of day the river is at its highest point. There were drops of blood on the window, and a few drops on the bedroom floor too. Behind a curtain in the front room the police found all Neville Saint Clair's clothes except his coat. His shoes, his socks, his hat and his watch – everything was there. There were no signs of violence on any of the clothes, and Mr Saint Clair, alive or dead, was certainly not there. He seemed to have gone out of the window – there was no other possibility.

‘The Indian had often been in trouble with the police before. But as Mrs Saint Clair had seen him at the foot of the stairs only a few seconds after her husband's appearance at the window, he could not have been responsible for the murder. He said that he knew nothing about the clothes which had been found in the cripple's rooms. The cripple himself, whose name is Hugh Boone, must have been the last person to see Neville Saint Clair.

‘Boone is a well-known London beggar who always sits in Threadneedle Street, near the Bank of England. He pretends to be a match seller, but there is always a dirty leather cap by his side into which people throw coins. I have watched him more than once, and I have been surprised at the very large amount of money that he receives in this way. His appearance, you see, is so unusual that no one can go past without noticing him. He has a pale face and long red hair, and bright brown eyes. His upper lip is twisted as the result of an old accident. And he is famous for his clever answers to the jokes of all the businessmen who go past.’

‘Is it possible that a cripple could have murdered a healthy young man like Neville Saint Clair?’ I asked.

‘Hugh Boone's body is bent and his face is ugly,’ Holmes replied, ‘but there is great strength in him. Cripples are often very strong, you know. When the police were searching him, they noticed some spots of blood on one of the arms of his shirt. But he showed them a cut on his finger, and explained that the blood

had come from there. He also said that he had been at the window not long before, and that the blood on the floor and window probably came from his finger too. He refused to admit that he had ever seen Mr Saint Clair, and swore that the presence of the clothes in the room was as much a mystery to him as it was to the police. If Mrs Saint Clair said she had seen her husband at the window she must have been dreaming – or else she was crazy! Boone was taken to the police station, still complaining loudly.

‘When the water level in the river had gone down, the police looked for the body of Mr Saint Clair in the mud. But they only found his coat. And every pocket was full of pennies and halfpennies – 421 pennies, and 270 halfpennies. It was not surprising that the coat had not been carried away by the tide. But possibly the body itself had been swept away. Perhaps Boone pushed Saint Clair through the window, and then decided to get rid of the clothing, which might give clues to the police. But he needed to be sure that the clothes would sink. So he went to the hiding place where he kept the money he earned in Threadneedle Street, and began by filling the pockets of the coat and throwing it out. He would have done the same with the rest of the clothing, but just then he heard the police coming up the stairs, and quickly closed the window.

‘Boone has been a professional beggar for many years, but he has never been in any serious trouble with the police. He seems to live very quietly and harmlessly. I have to find out what Neville Saint Clair was doing in that house, what happened to him while he was there, where he is now, and what Hugh Boone’s involvement was in his disappearance. The problem seemed to be an easy one at first, but now I don’t think it is so easy.

‘Do you see that light among the trees? That is the Saint Clairs’ house. Beside that lamp an anxious woman is sitting listening, probably, for the sound of our horse.’

We drove through some private grounds, and stopped in front



of a large house. A servant ran out to take charge of our horse. The front door opened before we had reached it, and a small fair woman in a pink silk dress hurried out to meet us.

‘Well?’ she cried eagerly. ‘Well?’

Perhaps she thought for a moment that Holmes’s friend was her lost husband.

Holmes shook his head.

‘No good news?’ she asked.

‘None.’

‘But no bad news either?’

‘No.’

‘Well, come in. You must be very tired. You have had a long day’s work.’

‘This is my friend Dr Watson. He has been of great use to me in several of my cases. By a lucky chance he has been able to come with me this evening.’

‘I am pleased to meet you,’ said Mrs Saint Clair, pressing my hand warmly. She led us into a pleasant dining room, where there was a cold supper laid out on the table. ‘Now, Mr Sherlock Holmes, I have one or two questions to ask you, and I should like you to answer them truthfully.’

‘Certainly, Mrs Saint Clair.’

‘It is your real opinion that I want to know.’

‘About what?’ Holmes asked.

‘Do you truly believe that Neville is still alive?’

Holmes did not seem to like this question. ‘Truly, now!’ she repeated, looking at him as he leaned back in his chair.

‘Truly, then, I do not,’ he answered at last.

‘You think he is dead?’

‘Yes.’

‘And that he was murdered?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps.’

‘And on what day did he die?’

‘On Monday, June the 15th.’

‘Then, Mr Holmes, how do you explain this letter that I have received from him today?’

Sherlock Holmes jumped out of his chair. ‘What!’ he shouted.

‘Yes, today.’ Smiling, she held up an envelope.

‘May I see it?’

‘Certainly.’

In his eagerness he seized it from her quite rudely, smoothed it out on the table, and examined it very thoroughly. I looked at it over his shoulder. The envelope was a cheap one, and it had been posted at Gravesend in Kent earlier in the day.

‘The handwriting on the envelope is poor,’ said Holmes. ‘Surely this is not your husband’s writing, Mrs Saint Clair?’

‘No, but the letter inside is in his handwriting.’

‘I see that whoever addressed the envelope had to go and find out your address.’

‘How can you tell that?’

‘The name, you see, is in perfectly black ink, and has been allowed to dry slowly. The address is almost grey – which proves that sand has been thrown on the writing to dry it. The man who wrote this envelope wrote the name first, and then paused for some time before writing the address. The only explanation is that he did not know it. But let us look at the letter! Ah! some object has been enclosed in this.’

‘Yes,’ said Mrs Saint Clair, ‘there was a ring. Neville’s ring.’

‘And are you sure that this is in your husband’s writing?’

‘Yes – though it’s easy to see that he wrote it in a great hurry.’

This is what the letter said:

Dearest Olivia,

Do not be frightened. Everything will be all right. There is a mistake that it will take some time to put right. Wait patiently.

NEVILLE.

‘This,’ said Holmes, ‘is written in pencil on a page torn from some book. It was posted by a man with a dirty thumb. And whoever closed the envelope had a lump of tobacco in his mouth. Well, Mrs Saint Clair, things are beginning to seem a little more hopeful, but I do not think the danger is over yet.’

‘But Neville must be alive, Mr Holmes!’

‘Unless this letter is the work of a clever man. After all, the ring proves nothing. It may have been taken from him.’

‘No, no! That’s certainly his own handwriting!’

‘Very well. But the letter may have been written on Monday, and only posted today.’

‘That is possible.’

‘If that is so, many things may have happened between the two days.’

‘Oh, you must not make me lose hope, Mr Holmes! I know that Neville is all right. Our relationship is such a strong one that I always know when he has an accident. On that last morning he cut himself in the bedroom, and although I was in the dining room, I knew immediately that something had happened to him. I rushed upstairs and found that I was right. Do you think I could possibly not know about it if he had been murdered?’

‘But if your husband is alive and able to write letters, why should he remain away from you?’

‘I can’t imagine!’

‘And on Monday he said nothing unusual before leaving home?’

‘Nothing.’

‘And you were surprised to see him at that window in Upper Swandam Street?’

‘Yes, extremely surprised.’

‘Was the window open?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then he could have spoken to you?’