The Adventure of the Dancing Men

By Arthur Conan Doyle

My name is Dr. John Watson. Some years ago, I retired from my position as a medical officer in the British army and settled in London. Since that time, I have followed the casework of my remarkable friend and associate, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Holmes has applied his scientific method to the solution of countless crimes across the length and breadth of England, and I have had the honor of writing the stories of these criminal investigations. In that sense, one could call me the professional biographer of this most famous of detectives.

Holmes’ cases are generally difficult and often interesting. One of the most interesting arose from a set of figures that appeared to be children’s art. I came upon the mystery as I walked in on Holmes at work in his laboratory. He had been seated for some hours in silence with his long, thin back curved over a magnifying glass through which he was viewing a particularly strange set of marks. His head was sunk upon his breast, and he looked from my point of view like a strange, slender bird, with dull gray plumage.

“Watson! There you are! Take a look at these. Now Watson, I’ve told you that every difficult logical problem becomes childishy simple when once it is explained. Here is a childish problem--an unexplained one. See what you can make of it.” He tossed a sheet of paper onto the table and turned once more to his analysis.

I looked with amazement at some absurd little figures upon the paper.

"Why, Holmes, it is a child's drawing -- what else should it be?"

"That is what Mr. Hilton Cubitt, of Riding Thorpe Manor in the county of Norfolk, is very anxious to know. This little mystery came by the first mail delivery, and he was to follow by the next train. There's a ring at the bell, Watson. I should not be very much surprised if this were he."
Steps were heard upon the stairs, and an instant later there entered a tall, clean shaven gentleman, whose clear eyes told of a life led far from the fogs of London. Having shaken hands with each of us, he was about to sit down, when his eye rested upon the paper with the curious markings, which I had just examined and left upon the table.

"Well, Mr. Holmes, what do you make of these?" he cried. "They told me that you were fond of mysteries, and I don't think you can find a stranger one than that. I sent the paper on ahead, so that you might have time to study it before I came."

"It is certainly rather a curious production," said Holmes. "At first sight it would appear to be some childish prank. It consists of a number of little figures dancing across the paper upon which they are drawn. Why should you attribute any importance to it?"

"I wouldn't, Mr. Holmes. But my wife does. It is frightening her to death."

Holmes held up the paper so that the sunlight shone full upon it. It was a page torn from a notebook. The markings were done in pencil, and ran in this way:

![Curious Markings]

Holmes examined it for some time, and then, folding it carefully up, he placed it in his pocketbook.

"This promises to be a most interesting case," said he. "Mr. Cubitt, I should be very much obliged if you would kindly go over the details of your story for the benefit of my friend, Dr. Watson."

"I'm not much of a story-teller," said our visitor. I'll begin at the time of my marriage last year. I live in the county of Norfolk, about three hours northeast of London. Last year I came to London for the Queen's Anniversary, and I stopped at a boarding house. There was an American young lady there -- Elsie Patrick was her name. In some way we became friends, until before my month was up I was as much in love as man could be. We were quietly married, and we returned to Norfolk a wedded couple.
"The only strange thing about our relationship was the way she insisted that I not ask about her past life. She was very straight about it, was Elsie. `I have had some very bad friends in my life,' she said. `I wish to forget all about them. I would rather never speak of the past, for it is very painful to me. If you take me, Hilton, you will take a woman who has nothing that she need be personally ashamed of, but you will have to take my word for it and allow me to be silent as to all that passed up to the time when I became your wife. If these conditions are too hard, then go back to Norfolk, and leave me to the lonely life in which you found me.' It was only the day before our wedding that she said those very words to me. I told her that I would take her on her own terms, and I have been as good as my word.

"Well we have been married now for a year, and we have been very happy. But about a month ago, I saw for the first time signs of trouble. One day, my wife received a letter from America. I saw the American stamp. She turned deadly white, read the letter, and threw it into the fire. She made no mention of it afterwards, but there is always a look of fear upon her face.

"Well, now I come to the strange part of my story. About a week ago, I found on one of the window-sills of my house a number of absurd little dancing figures like these upon the paper. They were scrawled with chalk. I thought that it was the stable-boy who had drawn them, but the lad swore he knew nothing about it. Anyhow, and I mentioned the matter to my wife afterwards. To my surprise, she took it very seriously, and begged me if any more came to let her see them. None did come for a week, and then yesterday morning I found this paper lying on the sundial in the garden. I showed it to Elsie, and down she dropped in a dead faint. Since then she has looked like a woman in a dream, with terror in her eyes. It was then that I wrote and sent the paper to you, Mr. Holmes."

Holmes had listened to his story with the utmost attention, and now he sat for some time in silent thought. Then he spoke: "Have you heard of any strangers being seen in your neighborhood?"

"No."

"I presume that your neighborhood a quiet country place. Any fresh face would cause comment?"

"In the immediate neighborhood, yes. But we have several small hotels not very far away. And the farmers take in lodgers."

"These hieroglyphics have evidently a meaning. I have no doubt that
we shall get to the bottom of it. But this particular sample is so short that I can do nothing, and the facts which you have brought me are so indefinite that we have no basis for an investigation. I would suggest that you return to Norfolk, that you keep a lookout, and that you take an exact copy of any fresh dancing men which may appear. When you have collected some fresh evidence, come to me again. That is the best advice which I can give you, Mr. Hilton Cubitt.”

The interview left Sherlock Holmes very thoughtful, and several times in the next few days I saw him take his slip of paper from his notebook and look long and earnestly at the curious figures inscribed upon it. He said nothing until one afternoon a week or so later. I was going out when he called me back. “Watson,” he said, “I received a telegraph message from Hilton Cubitt this morning. He may be here at any moment. I gather from his message that there have been some new incidents of importance.”

We had not long to wait, for he came straight from the station as fast as a carriage could bring him. He was looking worried and depressed, with tired eyes and a lined forehead.

"It's getting on my nerves, this business, Mr. Holmes," said he, as he sank into an armchair. These messages are just killing your wife by inches; she's wearing away under it."

"Has she said anything yet?"

"No, Mr. Holmes, she has not. And yet there have been times when the poor girl has wanted to speak, and yet could not quite bring herself to…"

"But you have found out something for yourself?"

"A good deal, Mr. Holmes. I have several fresh dancing-men pictures for you to examine, and, what is more important, I have seen the fellow."

"What, the man who draws them?"

"Yes, I saw him at his work. When I got back after my visit to you, the very first thing I saw next morning was a fresh message of dancing men. They had been drawn in chalk upon the black wooden door of the tool-house, which stands beside the lawn in full view of the front windows. I took an exact copy, and here it is." He unfolded a paper and laid it upon the table.

"Excellent!" said Holmes. "Excellent! Please continue."
"When I had taken the copy, I rubbed out the marks, but, two mornings later, a fresh inscription had appeared. I have a copy of it here":

Holmes rubbed his hands and chuckled with delight. "Our material is rapidly accumulating," said he.

Cubitt continued his story. "Three days later, a message was left scrawled upon paper, and placed under a pebble upon the sundial. Here it is. After that, I determined to lie in wait; so I got out my revolver, and I sat up in my study, which overlooks the lawn and garden. At about two in the morning, I was seated by the window when I heard steps behind me, and there was my wife in her dressing-gown. She begged me to come to bed. I told her that I wished to see who it was who played such absurd tricks upon us. She answered that it was some senseless practical joke, and that I should not take any notice of it.

"As she spoke, I saw her white face grow whiter in the moonlight, and her hand tightened upon my shoulder. Something was moving in the shadow of the tool house. I saw a dark, creeping figure which crawled round the corner and squatted in front of the door. Seizing my pistol, I was rushing out, when my wife threw her arms round me and held me back. I tried to throw her off, but she clung to me most desperately. By the time I had opened the door and reached the house, the man was gone. He had left a trace of his presence, however, for there on the door was the very same arrangement of dancing men which had already twice appeared, and which I have copied on that paper. There was no other sign of the fellow anywhere, though I ran all over the place. And yet he must have been there all the time, for when I examined the door again in the morning, he had scrawled some more of his pictures under the line which I had already seen."

"Do you have that fresh drawing," asked Holmes?

"Yes, it is very short, but I made a copy of it, and here it is."

Again he produced a paper. The new dance was in this form:
"Tell me," said Holmes -- and I could see by his eyes that he was much excited -- "was this a mere addition to the first or did it appear to be entirely separate?"

"It was on a different panel of the door."

"Excellent! This is by far the most important of all for our purpose. It fills me with hope. Now, Mr. Cubitt, please continue your most interesting statement."

"I have nothing more to say, Mr. Holmes. I want your advice as to what I ought to do.

"Leave me these papers, and I think that it is very likely that I shall be able to pay you a visit shortly and to throw some light upon your case."

Sherlock Holmes preserved his calm professional manner until our visitor had left us, although it was easy for me to see that he was very excited. The moment that Hilton Cubitt had disappeared through the door, my friend rushed to the table, laid out all the slips of paper containing dancing men in front of him, and threw himself into an intricate and elaborate calculation. For two hours I watched him as he covered sheet after sheet of paper with figures and letters, so completely absorbed in his task that he had evidently forgotten my presence. Then he wrote a long telegram.

"If my answer to this is as I hope, Watson," said he, "I expect that we shall be able to go down to Norfolk tomorrow, and to take Mr. Cubitt some very definite news as to the secret of the dancing men."

As it happened, two days of impatience followed. On the evening of the second day there came a letter from Hilton Cubitt. A detailed inscription had appeared that morning in the yard. He enclosed a copy of it, which is here reproduced:
Holmes bent over this message for some minutes, and then suddenly sprang to his feet with an exclamation of surprise and dismay. "We have let this affair go far enough," said he. "Is there a train to Norfolk tonight?"

I turned up the train time-table. The last had just gone.

"Then we shall breakfast early and take the very first train in the morning," said Holmes. "Our presence is most urgently needed."

So, indeed, it proved. And as I come toward the conclusion of the story, I wish that I had some brighter ending to communicate to my readers; but this is a story of fact, and I must follow events to their dark resolution. Attentive readers will prepare themselves for tragedy.

continued on the following page
Sherlock Holmes had just interviewed Mr. Hilton Cubitt about a series of figures appearing on and around the home he shared with his new American wife, Elsie. Cubitt could neither explain nor understand these “dancing men,” though he was convinced that they had something to do with his spouse. Holmes told Cubitt to leave copies of these messages and to send any new ones. When our guest departed, the work of investigation would begin.

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Our train had just arrived at Norfolk when the station-master hurried towards us. "I suppose that you are the detectives from London?" said he. A look of annoyance passed over Holmes's face. "What makes you think such a thing?"

"Because Police Inspector Martin from Norwich has just passed through. But maybe you are the surgeons. She's not dead—or wasn't by last accounts. You may be in time to save her yet—though it be for the gallows."

Holmes's eyes were dark with anxiety. "We are going to Riding Thorpe Manor," said he, "but we have heard nothing of what has happened there."

"It's a terrible business," said the stationmaster. "They are shot—both Mr. Hilton Cubitt and his wife. She shot him and then herself—so the servants say. He's dead, and her life is in danger. Dear, dear, one of the oldest families in the county of Norfolk, and one of the most honored."

Without a word Holmes hurried to a carriage, and during the long seven miles' drive he never opened his mouth. Seldom have I seen him so utterly depressed. He leaned back in his seat, lost in gloomy speculation.

At last, the driver pointed with his whip to two old brick and timber walls which projected from a grove of trees. "That's Riding Thorpe Manor," said he.

As we drove up to the front door, I observed in front of it, beside the tennis court, the tool house and the sundial that Mr. Cubitt spoken of. A man stepped forward—a little man, with a quick, alert manner and a waxed moustache. He introduced himself as Inspector Martin, of the Norfolk Police, and he was astonished when he heard the name of my companion.

"Why, Mr. Holmes, the crime was only committed at three this morning. How could you hear of it in London and get to the spot as soon as
"I anticipated it. I came in the hope of preventing it."

"Then you must have important evidence," replied Inspector Martin, evidence of which we are ignorant. They were said to be a most united couple, and no one can believe they would do violence upon each other."

"I will explain the entire matter to you later," said Holmes. "Meanwhile, since it is too late to prevent this tragedy, I am very anxious that I should use the knowledge which I possess in order to insure that justice be done. Will you associate me in your investigation, or do you prefer that I should act independently?"

"I should be proud to feel that we were acting together, Mr. Holmes," said the inspector.

"In that case I should be glad to hear the evidence and to examine the premises without an instant of delay."

Inspector Martin had the good sense to allow my friend to do things in his own fashion, and contented himself with carefully noting the results.

The local surgeon had just come down from Mrs. Hilton Cubitt's room, and he reported that her injuries were serious, but not necessarily fatal. The bullet had passed through the front of her brain, and it would probably be some time before she could regain consciousness. On the question of whether she had been shot or had shot herself, he would not express any decided opinion. Certainly the bullet had been fired at very close quarters. There was only the one pistol found in the room, two barrels of which had been emptied. Mr. Hilton Cubitt had been shot through the heart. It was equally conceivable that he had shot her and then himself, or that she had shot him and then herself, for the revolver lay upon the floor midway between them.

"Has he been moved?" asked Holmes.

"We have moved nothing except the lady. We could not leave her lying wounded upon the floor."

"How long have you been here, Doctor?"

"Since four o'clock."
"Anyone else?"

"Yes, the police here."

"And you have touched nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Excellent. You have acted with great care. Who sent for you?"

"The housemaid, Mrs. Saunders."

"Was it she who gave the alarm?"

"She and Mrs. King, the cook."

"Where are they now?"

"In the kitchen, I believe."

"Then I think we had better hear their story at once."

The kitchen was turned into a court of investigation. Holmes sat in a great, old-fashioned chair, his eyes gleaming with determination. I could read in those eyes a set purpose to devote his life to this quest until the client whom he had failed to save should at last be avenged. The trim Inspector Martin, the old, gray-headed country doctor, myself, and a local village policeman made up the rest of that strange company.

The two women told their story clearly enough. They had been aroused from their sleep by the sound of an explosion, which had been followed a minute later by a second one. They slept in adjoining rooms, and Mrs. King had rushed in to Saunders. Together they had descended the stairs. The door of the study was open, and a candle was burning upon the table. Their employer lay upon his face in the centre of the room. He was quite dead. Near the window, his wife was crouching unconscious, her head leaning against the wall. She was horribly wounded, and the side of her face was red with blood. She breathed heavily, but was incapable of saying anything. The passage, as well as the room, was full of smoke and the smell of powder. The window was certainly shut and fastened upon the inside. Both women were positive upon the point. They had at once sent for the doctor and for the police. Then, with the aid of the groom and the stable-boy,
they had carried the injured lady to her room. Both she and her husband had occupied the bed. Husband and wife were found in their dressing gowns -- obviously just aroused from their bed. Nothing had been moved in the study. So far as they knew, there had never been any quarrel between husband and wife. The staff of the house had always looked upon Mr. and Mrs. Cubitt as a very loving couple.

These were the main points of the servants' evidence. In answer to Inspector Martin, they were clear that every door was fastened upon the inside, and that no one could have escaped from the house. They both remembered that they were conscious of the smell of powder from the moment that they ran out of their rooms upon the top floor.

"I commend that fact very carefully to your attention," said Holmes to his professional colleague, Inspector Martin. "And now I think that we are in a position to undertake a thorough examination of the room."

The study proved to be a small chamber, lined on three sides with books, with a writing table facing an ordinary window, which looked out upon the garden. Our first attention was given to the body of the unfortunate Mr. Cubitt, whose corpse lay stretched across the room. His disordered dress showed that he had been hastily aroused from sleep. The bullet had been fired at him from the front, and had remained in his body after penetrating the heart. His death had certainly been instantaneous and painless. There was no gun powder marking either upon his dressing-gown or on his hands. According to the country surgeon, the lady had powder stains upon her face, but none upon her hand.

"The absence of the powder upon her hands means nothing, though its presence may mean everything," said Holmes. "Unless the powder from a badly fitting cartridge happens to spurt backward, one may fire many shots without leaving a sign. I would suggest that Mr. Cubitt's body may now be removed. I suppose, Doctor, you have not recovered the bullet which wounded the lady?"

"A serious operation will be necessary before that can be done. But there are still four cartridges in the revolver. Two have been fired and two wounds inflicted, so that each bullet can be accounted for."

"So it would seem," said Holmes. "Perhaps you can account also for the bullet which has so obviously struck the edge of the window?"

He had turned suddenly, and his long, thin finger was pointing to a hole
which had been drilled right through the lower window-sash, about an inch above the bottom.

"By God!" cried the inspector. "How ever did you see that?"

"Because I looked for it, replied Holmes."

"Wonderful!" said the country doctor. "You are certainly right, sir. Then a third shot has been fired, and therefore a third person must have been present. But who could that have been, and how could he have got away?"

"That is the problem which we are now about to solve," said Sherlock Holmes. "You remember, Inspector Martin, when the servants said that on leaving their room they were at once conscious of a smell of gun powder, I remarked that the point was an extremely important one?"

"Yes, Mr. Holmes; but I confess I did not quite follow you."

"It suggested that, at the time of the firing, the window as well as the door of the room had been open. Otherwise the fumes of powder could not have been blown so rapidly through the house. A draft in the room was necessary for that. Both door and window were only open for a very short time, however."

"How do you prove that?"

"Because the candle was not blown out."

"Wonderful!" cried the inspector "Amazing!"

“Elementary,” said Holmes, as if the whole world should see things with his accuracy and intelligence.

“But what does the open window mean,” I asked.

“It means that there was probably a third person present. If the window had been open at the time of the tragedy, there was likely a third person in the affair, who stood outside this opening and fired through it. Any shot directed at this person might hit the sash. I looked, and there, sure enough, was the bullet mark!"

"But how came the window to be shut and fastened, asked the inspector?"
"The woman’s first instinct during such an emergency would be to shut and fasten the window.” Suddenly, Holmes’ burst out, “But, halloa! What is this?"

It was a lady's hand bag which stood upon the study table. Holmes opened it and turned the contents out. There were twenty fifty-pound notes of the Bank of England, held together by a rubber band -- nothing else.

"This must be preserved, for it will figure in the trial" said Holmes, as he handed the bag with its contents to the inspector. "It is now necessary that we should try to throw some light upon this third bullet, which has clearly, from the splintering of the wood, been fired from inside the room. I should like to see Mrs. King, the cook, again.

The cook was immediately brought to Holmes, and he looked at her with penetrating eyes. “You said, Mrs. King, that you were awakened by a loud explosion. When you said that, did you mean that it seemed to you to be louder than the second one?"

"Well, sir, it wakened me from my sleep, so it is hard to judge. But it did seem very loud."

"You don't think that it might have been two shots fired almost at the same instant?"

"I am sure I couldn't say, sir."

"I believe that it was undoubtedly so. I rather think, Inspector Martin, that we have now exhausted all that this room can teach us. If you will kindly step round with me, we shall see what fresh evidence the garden has to offer."

A flower-bed extended up to the study window, and we all broke into an exclamation as we approached it. The flowers were trampled down, and the soft soil was imprinted all over with footmarks. Large, masculine feet they were, with peculiarly long, sharp toes. Holmes hunted about among the grass and leaves like a retriever after a wounded bird. Then, with a cry of satisfaction, he bent forward and picked up a little cylinder.

"I thought so," said he, "the revolver had an ejector, and here is the third cartridge. I really think, Inspector Martin, that our case is almost complete."
The country inspector's face had shown his intense amazement at the rapid and masterful progress of Holmes's investigation. He was overcome with admiration and ready to follow without question wherever Holmes led.

"Whom do you suspect?" he asked.

"I'll go into that later. There are several points in this problem which I have not been able to explain to you yet. Now that I have got so far, I had best proceed on my own lines, and then clear the whole matter up once and for all. I have no desire to make mysteries, but it is impossible at the moment of action to enter into long and complex explanations. I have the threads of this affair all in my hand. Even if this lady should never recover consciousness, we can still reconstruct the events of last night and insure that justice be done.

"Just as you wish, Mr. Holmes, so long as we get our man, said Martin."

First of all, I wish to know whether there is any inn in this neighborhood known as 'Elrige's'?"

“I cannot say that I recall such a name,” said the inspector.

“Let us ask the staff, then,” said Holmes.

The servants were questioned, but none of them had heard of such a place. The stable-boy threw a light upon the matter by remembering that a farmer of that name lived a few miles away in the country.

"Is it a lonely farm -- far from the village and the train station?"

"Very lonely, Mr. Holmes."

"Perhaps they have not heard yet of all that happened here during the night?"

"Maybe not, sir."

Holmes thought for a little, and then a curious smile played over his face.

"Saddle a horse, my lad," said he. "I shall wish you to take a note to Elrige's Farm."
What followed from this errand is one of the most remarkable events in detective work that I’ve ever witnessed. It almost led me to believe that Holmes was some sort of magician who could control events in the external world. Only my better judgment disciplined me to understand that it was science, not wizardry, that gave Holmes so much power over events. If you follow this story to its conclusion, you, dear reader, will soon see how Holmes “got his man.”

continued on the following page
As Sherlock Holmes investigated the mystery of the “dancing men,” he showed an understanding of events far beyond what Inspector Martin and I grasped. First, he seemed to understand the that the figures formed a code, and he did so with an insight the rest of us lacked. Furthermore, Holmes quickly and accurately analyzed the crime scene, determining how the victims -- Mr. and Mrs. Cubitt -- had been shot. Police Inspector Martin’s face had shown his intense amazement at the rapid and masterful progress of Holmes's investigation. He was overcome with admiration and ready to follow without question wherever Holmes led.

"Whom do you suspect in this murder?" he asked.

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He took from his pocket the various slips of the dancing men. With these in front of him, he worked for some time at the study-table. Finally he handed a note to the boy, with directions to put it into the hands of the person to whom it was addressed, and especially to answer no questions of any sort which might be put to him. I saw the outside of the note, addressed in straggling, irregular characters, very unlike Holmes's usual precise hand. It was addressed to Mr. Abe Slaney, Elrige's Farm, Norfolk.

"I think, Inspector," Holmes remarked, "that you would do well to telegraph for guards. If my calculations prove to be correct, you may have a particularly dangerous prisoner to transport to the county jail."

When the youth had been dispatched with the note, Sherlock Holmes gave his instructions to the servants. If any visitor were to call asking for Mrs. Hilton Cubitt, no information should be given as to her condition, but he was to be shown at once into the drawing-room. He impressed these points upon them with the utmost earnestness. Finally he led the way into the drawing-room, with the remark that the business was now out of our hands, and that we must while away the time as best we might until we could see what was in store for us. The doctor had departed to his patients, and only the inspector and myself remained.

"I think that I can help you to pass an hour in an interesting and profitable manner," said Holmes, drawing his chair up to the table, and spreading out in front of him the various papers upon which were recorded
the antics of the dancing men. I am fairly familiar with most forms of secret writings, and am myself the author of a small book upon the subject, but I confess that the dancing men were entirely new to me. Those who invented the secret code wanted to make it seem that these characters were the random sketches of children, when in fact they contain criminal messages.

"I first figured out that these figures stood for letters. The solution followed from logic. The first message submitted to me was so short that it was impossible for me to do more than to say, with some confidence, which figures stood for ‘E’--

-- “How did you do that? Mr. Holmes,” interrupted Inspector Martin.

‘E’ is the most common letter in the English alphabet,” replied my associate. Out of fifteen symbols in the first message, four were the same, so it was reasonable to set these down as ‘E.’ Some of the figures held a flag, and from the way in which the flags were distributed it was possible to think that they were used to break the sentence up into words. I accepted this idea as a hypothesis.

"But now came the real difficulty of the inquiry. Mr. Hilton Cubitt was able to give me one message, which appeared to be a single word -- with five dancing men. A five letter word. This word had two identical figures -- possibly two E's. I concluded that it might very well stand for the name `Elsie.' In this way I got my ‘L,’ ‘S,’ and ‘I.’ I worked on from that understanding. I found an ‘M’ by experimenting.

Gradually, I came up with:

.M    ERE    . . E    SL.NE.

"Now the first letter can only be ‘A,’ which is a most useful discovery, since it occurs no fewer than three times in this short sentence, and the ‘H’ is also apparent in the second word. Now it becomes:

AM HERE A.E SLANE.

Or, filling in the obvious vacancies in the name:

AM HERE ABE SLANEY.

"So Abe Slaney is the name of the man writing messages to the lady!” cried Inspector Martin. What did you do then, sir?"
"I had every reason to suppose that this Abe Slaney was an American, since Abe is an American name. I had also every cause to think that there was some criminal secret in the matter. The lady's mention of her past, and her refusal to tell her husband -- they both pointed in that direction. I therefore sent a telegraph message to my friend, Wilson Hargreave, of the New York Police Bureau. I asked him whether the name of Abe Slaney was known to him. Here is his reply: ‘He’s the most dangerous crook in Chicago.’

On the very evening upon which I had his answer, Hilton Cubitt sent me the last message from Slaney. Working with known letters, it took this form:

ELSIE .RE.ARE TO MEET THY GO.

The addition of a P and a D completed a message which showed me

ELSIE PRERARE TO MEET THY GOD.

And that showed me that the criminal was proceeding to threats. So I came to Norfolk to prevent violence, but, unhappily, only in time to find that the violence had already occurred."

Inspector Martin spoke up. "If this Abe Slaney, possibly staying at Elrige's farm, is indeed the murderer, he may get away."

"He will not try to escape."

"Then let us go arrest him."

"I expect him to come here at any instant."

"But why should he come here?"

"Because I have written and asked him."

"But this is incredible, Mr. Holmes! Why should he come because you have asked him? Would not such a request rather make him suspicious and cause him to run?"

"Not the way I wrote the letter," said Holmes. "In fact, if I am not very much mistaken, here is the man himself coming up the driveway."
A man was walking up the path which led to the door. He was a tall, rugged fellow with a Western hat. He swaggered up a path as if as if the place belonged to him, and we heard his loud, confident ring at the bell.

"I think, gentlemen," said Holmes, quietly, "that we had best take up our position behind the door. You will need your handcuffs, Inspector. You can leave the talking to me."

We waited in silence for a minute -- one of those minutes which one can never forget. Then the door opened and the man stepped in. In an instant Holmes clapped a pistol to his head, and Martin slipped the handcuffs over his wrists. It was all done so swiftly that the fellow was helpless before he knew that he was arrested. He glared from one to the other of us with a pair of blazing black eyes. Then he burst into a bitter laugh.

"Well, gentlemen, you have the drop on me this time. But I came here in answer to a letter from Mrs. Hilton Cubitt. Don't tell me that she is in this? Don't tell me that she helped to set a trap for me?"

"Mrs. Hilton Cubitt was seriously injured, and is at death's door."

The man gave a hoarse cry of grief, which rang through the house.

"You're crazy!" he cried, fiercely. "I shot him, not Elsie. I may have threatened my girl -- God forgive me! -- but I would not have touched a hair of her pretty head. Take it back--you! Say that she is not hurt!"

"She was found badly wounded by the side of her dead husband."

He sank with a deep groan on a chair and buried his face in his cuffed hands. Then he raised his face once more, and spoke. "I have nothing to hide from you, gentlemen," said he. "If I shot the man, he had his shot at me, and there's no murder in that. But if you think I could have hurt that woman, then you don't know either me or her. I tell you, there was never a man in this world loved a woman more than I loved her. I had a right to her. She was pledged to me years ago. Who was this Englishman -- this Hilton Cubitt -- to come between us?"

"She broke away from your influence when she found the man that you are," said Holmes, sternly. "She ran away from America to avoid you, and she married an honorable gentleman in England. You stalked her and made her life a misery in order to make her to abandon the husband she loved in order to run away with you. You have ended by killing a man and driving his wife
to suicide. That is what you have done, Mr. Abe Slaney, and you will answer for it to the law."

"If Elsie dies, I care nothing what becomes of me," said the American. But I know you’re lying. He opened one of his hands, and looked at a note crumpled up in his palm. "See here, mister! he cried, with a gleam of suspicion in his eyes. "If the lady is hurt as bad as you say, who was it that wrote this note?" He tossed it forward on to the table.

"I wrote it, to bring you here, said Holmes."

"You wrote it? There was no one on earth outside the gang who knew the secret of the dancing men code!"

"What one man can invent another can discover," said Holmes. I decoded the dancing men code. Now, Mr. Slaney, you have time to make some small repayment for the injury you have brought to this family. Are you aware that Mrs. Hilton Cubitt has herself lays under grave suspicion of the murder of her husband? The least that you owe her is to make it clear to the whole world that she was in no way responsible for his tragic death."

"I will," said the American. "I guess the very best case I can make for myself is the absolute truth."

"It is my duty to warn you that everything you say will be used against you in court" said the inspector.

Abe Slaney shrugged his shoulders. "I'll chance that," said he. First of all, I want you gentlemen to understand that I have known this lady since she was a child. There were seven of us in a gang in Chicago, and Elsie's father was the boss of the mob. He was a clever man, old Boss Patrick. He was the one who invented that 'dancing men' code, which would pass as a child's scrawl unless you just happened to have the key to it. Well, Elsie learned some of our ways, but she couldn't stand the business, so she ran away to London. She had been engaged to me, and she would have married me, I believe, if I had taken up another profession, but she would have nothing to do with anything about crime. It was only after her marriage to this Englishman that I was able to find out where she was. I wrote to her, but got no answer. After that I came over, and since she obviously burned all my letters without reading them, I put my messages in code where she could read them -- on her property.

"Well, I have been here a month now. I lived at that farm -- Elrige's
farm -- where I had a rented room. I slipped out every night, and I tried all I could to coax Elsie away. I knew that she read the coded messages, for once she wrote an answer under one of them. But she kept saying, ‘No!’ Then my temper got the better of me, and I began to threaten her. She sent me a letter then, asking me to go away. She said that she would come down when her husband was asleep at three in the morning, and speak with me through the end window, if I would go away afterwards and leave her in peace. She came down and brought money with her, trying to bribe me to go. This made me mad, and so I grabbed her arm and tried to pull her through the window. At that moment in rushed the husband with his revolver in his hand. Elsie had fainted down upon the floor, and he and I were face to face. I held up my gun to scare him off and let me get away. But he fired -- and missed me. I shot at the same instant, and down he dropped. I ran. I made away across the garden, and as I went, I heard the window shut behind me. That's God's truth, gentlemen, every word of it, and I heard no more about it until that boy came riding up with a note which made me come here, like a fool, and give myself into your hands. I only hope to God Elsie lives."

A police carriage had driven up while the American had been talking. Two uniformed policemen sat inside. Inspector Martin rose and touched his prisoner on the shoulder.

"It is time for us to go."

"Can I see her first?"

"No, she is not conscious." Martin turned to the officers: “Take the prisoner away.” And so the sobbing creature -- this once threatening criminal -- was led away to prison.

Inspector Martin then spoke admiringly to Holmes. “Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I only hope that if ever again I have an important case, I shall have the good fortune to have you by my side."

Holmes only nodded.

We stood at the window and watched the cab drive away. As I turned back, my eye caught the piece of paper which the prisoner had tossed upon the table. It was the note -- written by Holmes -- that tricked Slaney into coming over to Cubitt’s and Elsie’s home.

"See if you can read it, Watson," he said with a smile.
It contained no words, but this little line of dancing men:

![Dancing Men Image]

"If you use the code which I have explained," said Holmes, "you will find that it simply says 'Come here at once.' I was convinced that it was an invitation which he would not refuse, since he could never imagine that it could come from anyone but Elsie Patrick, the lady who understood the code.

"Amazing," I said.

"Elementary, my dear Watson. Now, 3:40 PM is the departure time for our train back to London, and if we hurry, I think we should be back in Baker Street for dinner."

And so, dear readers, Sherlock Holmes ended the case by turning the dancing men to good when they had so often been the agents of evil. Abe Slaney was sentenced to a long term in prison for the murder of Hilton Cubitt. He was, however, spared the death penalty when the court determined that Cubitt fired the first bullet. Fortunately, Elsie Cubitt completely recovered from her wounds, and she now spends her time managing her late husband’s Norfolk estate.