

Charles Augustus Milverton

A short story by Arthur Conan Doyle

*Adapted for Reader's Theatre
by Al Rodin*

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STORY

Charles Augustus Milverton is a blackmailer who preys on women who have at times slipped into indiscretions. Lady Eva Blackwell wrote several imprudent letters to a young squire which Milverton now possesses, and threatens to release them to her husband if she does not give him 7,000 pounds. Sherlock Holmes, who agrees to represent her, refuses payment. Instead he and his assistant, Watson, resort to obtaining the letters by burglarizing Milverton's home. While doing so, they surreptitiously witness his meeting with a veiled woman whose letters had been sent by Milverton to her husband because she had refused to meet his exorbitant financial demands. While taunting her, she draws a revolver, killing him and then leaving. Holmes then empties Milverton's safe and burns all the letters therein, barely escaping from the converging servants.

The next day they see the woman's photograph in a shop windows display of beautiful women and celebrities. Watson is staggered by the fact that she is listed as the wife of a great nobleman and statesman who had died after becoming greatly disturbed by her compromising picture which Milverton had sent to him on her refusal to pay blackmail.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(With doubling: 3 m, 1 w)

SHERLOCK HOLMES: Austere, at times haughty, with occasional humor shown as a wry smile. Intolerant of sham and dull-witted individuals. Not overly enamored of the opposite sex, but exhibits gentlemanly behavior. Has so deeply repressed his romantic nature that he no longer is aware of its existence. Prides himself on his remarkable ability to make conclusions which are deducted from observations. His conclusions are always correct, yet completely mystifying to others, especially Dr. Watson.

DR. WATSON: Prosaic and somewhat stodgy. Faithful and obedient to Holmes, being often used as his foil. Unable to unravel a mystery until after Holmes' concise denouement. A ladies' man, but always proper in his relationship with them, and shocked by any impropriety on their part. At Holmes' beck and call, being quite willing to leave his practice (and his wife.) immediately whenever asked.

LADY EVA BRACKWELL: A debutante, blonde and vivacious. In her early 20s. Always fashionably and expensively dressed.

CHARLES AUGUSTUS MILVERTON: A man, about 40 years old, with a large head and round, plump face. Has a perpetual, insincere, frozen smile, and smooth, suave

VEILED WOMAN: Aristocratic. Tall and in her late 20s or early 30s.

INSPECTOR LESTRADE: Adheres to conventional police methods, but is quick and energetic.

DOUBLING: Milverton can double as Lestrade and Lady Brackwell can double as the Veiled Woman.

CHARLES AUGUSTUS MILVERTON

PROLOGUE

DR. WATSON: *(Enters to down CS.)* It is years since the incidents of which I speak took place, and yet it is with diffidence that I allude to them. For a long time, even with the utmost discretion and reticence, it would have been impossible to make the fact public, but now the principle person concerned is beyond the reach of human law, and with due suppression the story may be told in such a fashion as to injure no one. It records an absolutely unique experience in the career both of Mr. Sherlock Holmes and of myself. Excuse me if I conceal the date or any other fact by which he might trace the actual occurrence. *(Exits.)*

SCENE 1

(AT RISE: The year is 1899. The parlor at 221B Baker Street. HOLMES and WATSON enter in outdoor clothes, having been walking in frosty evening. They remove them. Holmes sits, Watson stands.)

WATSON: *(To audience.)* We had been out for one of our evening rambles, Holmes and I, and had returned about six o'clock on a cold, frosty winter's evening. As we sat down, I noticed a card on the table. *(Sit and picks up card and reads it.)* "Charles Augustus Milverton, Appledore. Towers, Hampstead. Agent." Who is he?

HOLMES: *(Dramatically.)* The worst man in London! Is anything on the back of the card?

WATSON: *(Turns card over.)* "Will call at 6:30 - C.A.M."

HOLMES: Hum! He's about due. Do you feel a creeping, shrinking sensation, Watson, when you stand before the serpents in the zoo, and see the slithery, gliding, venomous creatures, with their deadly eyes and wicked, flattened faces? Well, that's how Milverton impresses me. I've had to do with fifty murderers in my career, but the worst of them never gave me the repulsion which I have had from this fellow. And yet I can't get out of doing business with him -- indeed, he is here at my invitation.

WATSON: But who is he?

HOLMES: I'll tell you, Watson. He is the king of all the blackmailers. Heaven help the man, and still more the woman, whose secret and reputation come into the power of Milverton! With a smiling face and a heart of marble, he will squeeze and squeeze until he has drained them dry. The fellow is a genius in his way, and would have made his mark in some more savory trade. His method is to let it be known that he is prepared to pay very high sums for letters which compromise people of wealth and position. He receives these wares not only from treacherous valets or maids, but frequently from genteel ruffians, who have gained the confidence and affection of trusting women.

WATSON: But surely there are not so many rogues as to make his trade profitable.

HOLMES: Milverton deals with no niggard hand. I happen to know that he paid seven hundred pounds to a footman for a note two lines in length, and that the ruin of a noble family was the result. Everything which is in the market goes to Milverton, and there are hundreds in this great city who turn white at his name.

WATSON: Can he not be stopped?

HOLMES: No one knows where his grip may fall, for he is far too rich and far too cunning to work from hand to mouth. He will hold a card back for years in order to play it at the moment when the stake is best worth winning. I have said that he is the worst man in London, (*With increasingly intense feeling.*) and I would ask you how could one compare the ruffian, who in hot blood bludgeons his mate, with this man, who methodically and at his

HOLMES: (*Cont'd.*) leisure, tortures the soul and wrings the nerves in order to add to his already swollen money bags?

WATSON: (*Emphatic.*) But surely the fellow must be within the grasp of the law.

HOLMES: Technically, no doubt, but practically not. What would it profit a woman, for example, to get him a few months imprisonment if her own ruin must immediately follow? His victims dare not hit back. If ever he blackmailed an innocent person, then indeed we should have him, but he is as cunning as the Evil One. (*Strongly.*) No, no, we must find other ways to fight him.

WATSON: And why is he here?

HOLMES: Because an illustrious client has placed her piteous case in my hands. It is the Lady Eva Blackwell, the most beautiful debutante of last season. She is to be married in a fortnight to the Earl of Dovercourt. This fiend has several imprudent letters -- imprudent, Watson, nothing worse -- which were written to an impecunious young squire in the country. They would suffice to break off the match. Milverton will send the letters to the Earl unless a large sum of money is paid him. I have been commissioned to meet him and to make the best terms I can. (*Freezes.*)

WATSON: (*Stands and goes DS as KNOCK on door and MILVERTON enters and stands frozen.*) Charles Augustus Milverton was a man of about fifty with a perpetual frozen smile, and broad, gold-rimmed glasses. His voice was as smooth and suave as his countenance. He extended his hand to Holmes

(*Disregards it and looks at him severely. MILVERTON then sits as does WATSON.*)

MILVERTON: (*Concerned about Watson.*) This gentleman. Is it discreet? Is it right?

HOLMES: Dr. Watson is my friend and partner.

MILVERTON: (*Condescendingly.*) Very good, Mr. Holmes. It is only in your client's interests that I protested. The matter is so very delicate.

HOLMES: Dr. Watson has already heard of it.

MILVERTON: Then we can proceed to business. You say that you are acting for Lady Eva. Has she empowered you to accept my terms?

HOLMES: What are your terms?

MILVERTON: Seven thousand pounds.

(WATSON is shocked.)

HOLMES: *(Coolly.)* And the alternative?

MILVERTON: *(Complacently.)* My dear sir, it is painful for me to discuss it, but if the money is not paid on the 14th, there certainly will be no marriage on the 18th.

HOLMES: *(Pausing for a minute.)* You appear to be taking matters too much for granted. I am, of course, familiar with the contents of these letters. My client will certainly do what I may advise. I shall counsel her to tell her future husband the whole story and to trust to his generosity.

MILVERTON: *(Chuckling.)* You evidently do not know the Earl.

HOLMES: *(Looking baffled.)* What harm is there in the letters?

MILVERTON: *(Smirking.)* They are sprightly - very sprightly. The lady was a charming correspondent. But I can assure you that the Earl of Dovercourt would fail to appreciate them. However, since you think otherwise, we will let it rest at that. It is purely a matter of business. *(HOLMES glowers.)* If you think that it is in the best interest of your client that these letters should be placed in the hands of the Earl, then you would indeed be foolish to pay so large a sum of money to regain them.

HOLMES: *(Angrily.)* Wait a little. You go too fast. We should certainly make every effort to avoid scandal in so delicate a matter.

MILVERTON: *(Purring.)* I was sure that you would see it in that light.

HOLMES: At the same time, Lady Eva is not a wealthy woman. I assure you that two thousand pounds would be a drain upon her resources, and that the sum you name is

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