The Dancing Men

Arthur Conan Doyle · 1903

A Norfolk squire brings Holmes a page of little stick figures that has frightened his American wife half to death. More appear in chalk and pencil, on the tool-house door and the sundial. Doyle's own third favourite, complete — Doyle's original figures on screen, Holmes's solution letter by letter, and a man from Chicago.

Performed and printed exactly as Doyle published it. The messages are drawings, not words: in the episode Doyle's figures appear on screen in silence, as they did on the page, and only Holmes's half-solved lines are read aloud.

LISTEN FOR

— Holmes builds a chain of six links from the chalk on Watson's finger at the start, and a chain of letters from the figures at the end: the same method twice, on a billiard cue and on a murder.

— Who knows what: Elsie knows who draws the figures and never says; Hilton has promised not to ask; Holmes has the answer from New York two days before anyone in Norfolk hears a shot.

— Where each message turns up: window-sill, tool-house door, sundial, a second panel of the door, the pedestal of the sundial. One of them is Elsie's only answer.

— Hilton Cubitt's phrase 'a promise is a promise', said twice, and what he does each time instead of asking his wife.

THE PEOPLE, AS THE BOOK NAMES THEM

Dr. Watson	the narrator · at Baker Street
Sherlock Holmes	at his chemistry
Hilton Cubitt	of Riding Thorpe Manor, Norfolk
Mrs. Hilton Cubitt	Elsie, née Patrick · of America
The Station-Master	at North Walsham
Inspector Martin	of the Norfolk Constabulary
The Country Surgeon	old and white-haired
Mrs. King	the cook · with Saunders, the housemaid
The Stable-Boy	
Abe Slaney	of Chicago

THE PLACES

London · Norwich · North Walsham · Riding Thorpe · Chicago

CHAPTERS, WITH THEIR TIMES IN THE VIDEO

0:00	Holmes had been seated for some hours
3:03	A child's drawing
3:40	Mr. Hilton Cubitt, of Riding Thorpe Manor
6:03	Elsie Patrick
7:30	A letter from America
8:35	The figures on the window-sill
11:58	A fortnight later

15:25	Two in the morning
19:16	Two hours of figures and letters
20:46	The sundial
22:42	North Walsham
24:53	Riding Thorpe Manor
30:24	The study
31:53	The third bullet
35:07	The flower-bed
39:16	The cipher
48:16	Abe Slaney
56:06	The last message
57:09	Epilogue

WORDS AND THINGS, FROM THE MARGIN

The Dancing Men The Strand Magazine, December 1903 — the third story of The Return of Sherlock Holmes. Doyle ranked it third among all his Holmes stories.

Riding Thorpe Manor Invented, seven miles from North Walsham. In May 1903 Doyle stayed at the Hill House in Happisburgh, on that coast, kept by a family named Cubitt; their young son drew stick men in an autograph book.

The Jubilee Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee, June 1897: sixty years on the throne and London full of visitors. 'Last year' dates the case to 1898.

A registry office A civil wedding, without banns or a church. For a family five centuries at Riding Thorpe, a quiet and slightly irregular choice.

Not guttered A candle in a draught burns unevenly and runs down one side. A straight candle means the window and door stood open only for a moment.

One hundred and sixty ciphers The monograph is Holmes's own. Poe's 'The Gold-Bug' (1843) had solved a cipher by counting letters sixty years before.

E Frequency analysis, known since the Arab scholar al-Kindi in the ninth century. Holmes's order — T, A, O, I, N, S, H, R, D, L — is close to modern counts.

The flags A figure holding a flag ends a word. Without the flags the line looks like nothing but a child's scrawl, which was the point.

The Joint Slaney's name for the gang. Elsie's father, 'old Patrick', invented the writing.

The winter assizes Judges on circuit tried capital cases in each county town; Norfolk's sat at Norwich. The sentence is commuted because Cubitt fired first.

PASSAGES TO HEAR AGAIN

"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 be content with my word for it, and to allow me to be silent as to all that passed up to the time when I became yours."
Elsie's terms, the day before the wedding, as Hilton repeats them at Baker Street.

"A promise is a promise, Mr. Holmes. If Elsie wished to tell me she would. If not, it is not for me to force her confidence. But I am justified in taking my own line—and I will."
Hilton's answer when Holmes suggests he simply ask his wife.

"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."
The station-master at North Walsham: the first news from Riding Thorpe, and who he assumes did it.

"I anticipated it. I came in the hope of preventing it."

Holmes to Inspector Martin at the door of the Manor, hours after the shots.

"As you are aware, E is the most common letter in the English alphabet, and it predominates to so marked an extent that even in a short sentence one would expect to find it most often."

The first step of the cipher, explained in the drawing-room while they wait for Slaney.

"What one man can invent another can discover,"

Holmes to Slaney, who has just asked how anyone outside the Joint could write the dancing men.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Holmes says that knocking out the middle links produces 'a startling, though possibly a meretricious, effect.' List the six links of the chalk chain, then the steps by which he gets from E to 'never' to 'ELSIE' to 'COME'. Where in the second chain does he guess rather than count?
2. Elsie sets her conditions the day before the wedding. What exactly does she ask Hilton to accept, and what does she offer him in return? Keep to her words as he repeats them.
3. Hilton Cubitt says 'a promise is a promise' twice. Find both places. What does he decide to do instead of asking her, each time?
4. Make the list of messages in order: where each was found, whether in chalk or pencil, and who found it. Which one is Elsie's reply, and how does Holmes know it is hers?
5. At the first interview Holmes sends Cubitt home. What three things does he ask him to do? When the long inscription arrives Holmes says 'We have let this affair go far enough.' What has changed between the two moments, according to the text?
6. Inspector Martin asks how Holmes could reach Norfolk as soon as he did. Compare Holmes's answer at the door with what Watson tells us he did the evening before and on the journey down.
7. The servants are certain the window was shut and fastened. Follow Holmes from the smell of powder on the top floor to the hole in the window-sash. What does each step depend on, and what does he say he did to find the hole?
8. The hand-bag holds twenty fifty-pound notes. What does Slaney say Elsie brought the money for, and what does Holmes say must be done with the bag? Who else in the story talks about money, and for what?
9. Slaney says 'If I shot the man he had his shot at me, and there's no murder in that.' Set his account of the shots beside what Holmes reconstructed from the room before Slaney arrived. Where do they agree, and what is in one that is not in the other?
10. Holmes tells Slaney that Elsie 'fled from America to avoid you'; Slaney says 'she gave us all the slip and got away to London.' What does each man say about why she left? What does the epilogue tell us about her, and what does it leave out?
11. The story opens with Holmes predicting that Watson will call his reasoning 'absurdly simple', and ends with 'What one man can invent another can discover.' What does Holmes claim about his own method in each place?

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