

The Adventure of the Dancing Men

Simplified from the original story by Arthur Conan Doyle

Version 1: CEFR B1 — Upper Beginner / Pre-Intermediate

Note for teachers and students: This story is set in England around 1900. Some background notes are included in [brackets] to help explain the culture of that time.

Part 1: A Strange Message

Sherlock Holmes was a famous detective who lived in London at 221B Baker Street. His friend and helper was Dr. Watson, who told all their stories. [In England in 1900, "detective" was a new and exciting job. Holmes was known all over England for solving crimes that the police could not solve.]

One day, Holmes surprised Watson by telling him something about his private life. He had noticed small clues — chalk on Watson's fingers — and used them to work out that Watson had been playing billiards [a popular indoor game, similar to pool, often played at gentlemen's clubs] the night before. This was one of Holmes's great skills: he could observe tiny details that other people missed and use them to understand what was happening.

Then Holmes showed Watson a strange piece of paper. On it were small drawings of stick figures in different positions — like people dancing. Watson thought it was just a child's drawing, but Holmes was more careful. He put the paper aside to study later.

Soon, a visitor arrived. His name was Hilton Cubitt, a country gentleman from Norfolk [a county in the east of England, far from London, known for its flat farmland and quiet villages]. He was a tall, healthy-looking man with an open, honest face. Holmes could see from his appearance that he lived in the countryside, not in London.

Hilton Cubitt told them his story. The year before, he had come to London for the Jubilee [a big national celebration for Queen Victoria, who had been queen for 60 years — a very important event in England at that time]. While staying at a boarding house [a private home where people pay to stay, with meals included], he met an American woman named Elsie Patrick. They fell in love quickly and got married quietly at a registry office [a government office where people can marry without a religious ceremony — this was considered unusual and slightly surprising for a man of good family at that time].

Before they married, Elsie was honest with him. She said she had a difficult past and wanted to forget it. She asked Hilton to never ask about her life before they met. He agreed. They returned to his family home — Riding Thorpe Manor in Norfolk — and were happy together for a year.

Then, one month ago, everything changed. Elsie received a letter from America. She went pale, read it, and immediately burned it in the fire. She never explained what was in the letter. After that, she always seemed frightened.

A week later, Hilton noticed small drawings of dancing figures on a window ledge — drawn in chalk. He washed them away, but then more appeared on a door, and later on a piece of paper left on the garden sundial [a stone decoration in the garden, used in older times to tell the time using the shadow of the sun]. When Elsie saw this paper, she fainted.

Part 2: More Messages, More Fear

Holmes told Hilton to go home, copy any new drawings carefully, and try to find out if any strangers had been seen in the area. Hilton returned to Norfolk.

A short time later, Hilton came back to London with more drawings. He also told Holmes that one night, he had seen a dark figure near the tool-house [a small outdoor building where garden tools are kept]. When he tried to go outside, Elsie held him back and begged him not to go. The unknown visitor ran away, but left more dancing figures on the door.

Holmes was very interested in the new drawings. He could see that one message — written separately from the others — was a reply. This meant that Elsie herself had written back to the mystery person. She knew what the dancing figures meant. Holmes kept this information to himself for now.

As soon as Hilton left, Holmes spread all the drawings on the table and worked for two hours. He was trying to break the code — to understand what the dancing figures meant. He sent a telegram [a message sent using electrical wires — the fastest way to communicate over long distances in 1900, before telephones were common] to a contact in the police in New York, asking for information.

Two days later, he received a letter from Hilton with a new and terrifying message. In the dancing figures code, it said: "ELSIE — PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD" [an old-fashioned, dramatic way of threatening someone with death]. Holmes now understood that this person — whoever he was — was going to do something violent. Holmes also received a telegram from New York: the man's name was Abe Slaney, and he was described as the most dangerous criminal in Chicago.

Holmes and Watson caught the last possible train to Norfolk. But they were too late.

Part 3: Tragedy at the Manor

When Holmes and Watson arrived at the nearest station, the station master told them the news: during the night, there had been a shooting at Riding Thorpe Manor. Hilton Cubitt was dead, shot through the heart. His wife Elsie was alive but seriously injured — she had a bullet wound to the head and was unconscious.

Inspector Martin from the local police [In England, large towns and counties had their own police forces. The Norfolk Constabulary was the local police for the area] was

already there. He was surprised to see Holmes arrive so quickly from London. Holmes explained that he had expected something terrible might happen.

Holmes examined the room carefully. The servants — the cook and the housemaid [female servants who cleaned the house] — had heard two shots in the night. They found Hilton dead on the floor and Elsie badly wounded near the window. The window was closed and locked from the inside.

The local police believed it was possible that Elsie had shot her husband and then shot herself. But Holmes noticed something important: there was a third bullet hole in the window frame. Someone had fired a shot from outside through the window. This proved that a third person had been present.

Holmes also found footprints in the flower bed outside — large men's footprints — and a bullet cartridge [the small metal case left behind after a gun is fired] on the ground. Holmes now had enough evidence to understand what had happened.

Holmes also found a small handbag on the desk. Inside it were twenty fifty-pound notes [a very large amount of money in 1900 — enough to pay a worker's wages for several years]. Elsie had prepared this money, most likely to try to pay the man to go away and leave her alone.

Part 4: Solving the Code

While waiting for the suspect to arrive, Holmes explained the code to Watson and Inspector Martin. The dancing figures were a secret alphabet — each position of the figure represented a letter. Some figures held a small flag, which showed where one word ended and the next began.

Holmes began by finding the most common letter in English — E — and looking for the most repeated symbol in the messages. He then used the name "Elsie" and the word "come" to identify more letters. Slowly, word by word, he decoded the messages. The first one said: "AM HERE ABE SLANEY." Another said: "COME ELSIE." And the final, threatening one said: "ELSIE PREPARE TO MEET THY GOD."

Holmes had also written a note — in the same dancing figures code — and sent it to Abe Slaney at a nearby farm where he was hiding. The note, written as if from Elsie, said: "COME HERE AT ONCE." Holmes was sure that Slaney would come.

Part 5: The Arrest

They did not have to wait long. A tall, dark-haired man with a black beard walked up to the front door of the manor with great confidence. The moment he stepped inside, Holmes put a gun to his head and Inspector Martin put handcuffs on his wrists. It was Abe Slaney.

When Holmes told him that Elsie was badly wounded and near death, Slaney was shocked and very upset. He insisted that he could never have hurt Elsie — he loved her. He was angry and confused.

Holmes explained the truth coldly. Elsie had escaped from Slaney and her criminal past in America. She had built a new life in England. Slaney had followed her, sent threatening messages, and refused to let her live in peace. His actions had caused the death of a good man and driven Elsie to try to take her own life.

Slaney then told his version of events. He explained that he had known Elsie since she was a child. Her father had been the leader of a criminal gang in Chicago, and it was her father who invented the dancing figures code. Elsie had left the gang and come to England to start a new life. Slaney had been engaged to her [the couple had agreed to marry, but were not yet married] and had come to England to find her.

On the night of the shooting, Elsie had agreed to meet Slaney at three in the morning through the study window, to give him money and beg him to leave her alone forever. When Slaney tried to pull her out through the window, Hilton arrived with a gun. The two men shot at each other almost at the same time. Hilton missed. Slaney's shot killed Hilton. Slaney escaped through the garden. Elsie, in her great sadness and shock, then shot herself.

A police carriage [a horse-drawn vehicle used by the police to transport prisoners, since cars were not yet common] arrived to take Slaney away. Holmes and Watson took the afternoon train back to London.

Ending

Abe Slaney was put on trial [judged in a court of law] at the winter assizes [the regular court sessions held several times a year in different towns around England]. He was found guilty and sentenced to death, but his sentence was later reduced to imprisonment. This was because the court accepted that Hilton had fired the first shot.

Elsie Cubitt recovered fully from her injuries. She never remarried. For the rest of her life, she took care of poor people in the community and looked after her late husband's estate [the land and property that had belonged to Hilton's family for hundreds of years].