

THE COPPER BEECHES (Sherlock Holmes) by Conan Doyle.

One morning last Spring a young lady called Violet Hunter came to see Holmes to ask for advice.

She had worked as a governess for five years but the family had moved abroad and now she was without work. She had joined an employment agency and last week when she went to see them she was introduced to a gentleman called Mr Rucastle. Immediately he saw her he said that Miss Hunter was just what he was looking for and offered her £100 a year.

Mr Rucastle lived in a house called the Copper Beeches, which was about eight miles outside Winchester. Miss Hunter's main duty would be to teach his six year old son.

However there were some other rather curious things she was expected to do "My wife" said Mr Rucastle " will sometimes give you a certain dress which she will ask you to put on. Will you do that?"

"Yes" replied Miss Hunter

"You must also, before you arrive, cut your hair short" continued Mr Rucastle

But Miss Hunter had very long beautiful hair and she didn't want to cut it short. So she refused.

"In that case" said Mr Rucastle "I can't give you the job."

Miss Hunter was very upset. She had no money and to make matters worse because she had turned down a good job, the agency refused to represent her any longer.

The next day she received a letter from Mr Rucastle repeating his offer, but also repeating that if she wanted the job she must have her hair cut off.

Now Miss Hunter had come to Holmes to ask his advice. Holmes also thought there was something odd about the proposal...not only the subject of the hair but also the amount of money Mr Rucastle was prepared to pay.

"Why should they pay you £100 a year when they could find someone for £40 a year. They must have a good reason " he said .

"I know" said Miss Hunter "But I need a job."

"Then take it" said Holmes "and if you are ever in danger send me a telegram and I'll come straight down."

Miss Hunter was very grateful and having declared that she would cut her hair that night she said goodbye and left us.

Two weeks later a telegram arrived "Please come to the Swan Hotel in Winchester at

noon tomorrow. It is very important”—Violet Hunter.

The next day we travelled down to Winchester and met Miss Hunter.

“They have not DONE anything to me” she said “But I am afraid. When I first arrived Mr Rucastle met me and drove me out to their house, The Copper Beeches. I met his wife. She is Mr Rucastle’s second wife. He has a daughter from his first marriage called Alice. She is twenty and lives in America. The little boy I teach is from the second marriage and Mr Rucastle loves them both very dearly. But there’s something terribly wrong,” continued Miss Hunter “ Mrs Rucastle seems so sad and she often cries.

Two other people live at the house. They are Mr and Mrs Toller,”

Miss Hunter took a deep breath and went on with her story “On the third day I was there Mr Rucastle told me his wife wanted me to put on a blue dress that I would find in my bedroom. Although the dress had been worn before it fitted me. When I went downstairs I was told to sit in a chair with my back to the window. Mr Rucastle then told me funny stories for about an hour which made me laugh. But Mrs Rucastle didn’t laugh she just looked even sadder.”

“Two days later exactly the same thing happened. I realised that something was going on behind my back in the garden, so the next time I was told to put the blue dress on I hid a small mirror in my handkerchief. Mr Rucastle started telling me his funny stories and while I was pretending to laugh I put my handkerchief to my eyes and looked in the mirror. A man was standing on the road, looking at the house. Mrs Rucastle spotted the mirror and told her husband. He then told me to turn around and signal the man to go away. I did, and the man disappeared.”

Miss Hunter then also told us of the enormous black dog that Mr Rucastle owned. Only Mr Toller could control the dog. Every night he was put in the garden so that no one could come near the house. The dog was a killer.

Mr Rucastle had told Violet “Don’t ever leave the house at night, Miss Hunter, the dog would kill you too.”

There were two more strange things Miss Hunter had discovered at The Copper Beeches. The first was that she had found in the bottom of her wardrobe a box containing a great deal of hair. Hair that was exactly the same colour as her own.

The second thing she discovered was that at the top of the house where Mr and Mrs Toller lived there was a room whose windows were boarded up and whose door was always locked. One day when she thought no one was in the house Miss Hunter had gone up there and she had heard sounds coming from behind the locked door. Suddenly Mr Rucastle had appeared. He was terrible angry and threatened to feed her to the dog if he ever caught her up there again.

At this point in the story Miss Hunter stood up to leave. The Rucastles were going out that evening and she had to get back to look after the child. Holmes asked her if the Tollers would also be out that evening. She told us that Mr Toller always went to the pub but Mrs Toller would be in the house.

“Watson and I shall come to the Copper Beeches at seven o’clock” Holmes told the girl, “I want you to ask Mrs Toller to fetch something from the cellar and then to shut her in. Will you do that?”

“I’ll do it” promised Miss Hunter.

“Very good, Miss Hunter. Don’t worry, we shall soon know the secret of the upstairs room.” Holmes told her. “I believe the person in that room is none other than Mr Rucastle’s daughter Alice. She is not in America at all. I believe Mr Rucastle bought you to the Copper Beeches to take her place. You were chosen because you look like Alice. The hair you found was hers, and the man in the road is very likely to be a man who wants to marry Alice. When you sat in the window he would believe it was his loved one, Alice and when they made you send him away he would think believe that is what she wanted. He can’t speak to her because the dog guards the house at night.”

“I think you are right, Mr Holmes” cried Miss Hunter “We must help the poor girl.”

That evening we reached the Copper Beeches at seven o’clock. Miss Hunter met us and told us she’d managed to lock Mrs Toller in the cellar. She took us up to the attic and showed us the locked door.

“I hope that we are not too late,” said Holmes “I can’t hear anyone in there. Help me Watson.”

Together we pushed against the door and soon it was open. There was no one in the room, but there was a window in the roof, which was open. Holmes climbed on a table and looked through the window.

“There is a ladder against the roof” he said.

“That’s strange” said Miss Hunter “I’m sure there was no ladder there when the Rucastles left this evening.”

Just then we heard someone coming up the attic stairs.

“You have your gun Watson. Get ready” whispered Holmes.

Mr Rucastle suddenly appeared in the doorway. He had a heavy stick in his hand. Sherlock Holmes sprang forward “Where is your daughter?” he said

“I should ask YOU that question” shouted Mr Rucastle “I have caught you. You’ll be sorry.” He turned and ran down the stairs.

“He’s gone for the dog!” cried Miss Hunter.

We ran down the stairs and heard the dog followed by a terrible cry. An old man came through a side door. It was Mr Toller.

“My God!” he cried “Someone has let the dog out. It hasn’t eaten for two days. Quick or it will be too late.” We rushed into the garden and saw the great dog standing over Mr Rucastle tearing at his neck.

I ran up to the dog and shot it in the head. We carried the badly hurt Mr Rucastle into the house.

At this point MRS Toller appeared. Her husband had let her out of the cellar. She told us the full story. It was very much what Holmes had surmised.

Mr Rucastle’s daughter, Alice had fallen in love with a Mr Fowler. The couple wanted to get married. Alice had some money that her mother had left her. She asked for her money but Mr Rucastle would not give it to her. He was against her marriage because he wanted to keep her money. So he shut her in her room. This made her ill and they had to cut her hair. When she got better the couple were still determined to marry. So Mr Rucastle put her in that upstairs room.

“Yes, I see, I see,” said Holmes “Then Mr Rucastle brought Miss Hunter here from London hoping that Mr Fowler would believe SHE was his fiancée and also make him believe that she no longer wanted to be involved with him.”

“That’s right Sir,” said Mrs Toller “But you see nobody realised that I was in touch with Mr Fowler and was able to help him and young Miss Alice. This evening, while everyone was out, I put the ladder up, and Mr Fowler came and rescued the poor young lady.”

“Well done, Mrs Toller” said Holmes.

With the mystery resolved we left the Copper Beeches. Mr Rucastle survived but he was never completely well again. He felt very guilty for what he had done and gave his daughter the money she was due. She married Mr Fowler and they live happily in Australia. Violet Hunter is now a well loved teacher of a school in London.