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The Case of Colonel Warburton's Madness

By: Sarah Jeanette Wingert

In my story regarding the case of a certain engineer's thumb, I made mention of another case: that of Colonel Warburton's madness. It was not for lack of sensationalism or original facets for observation that stayed my hand in relating this case to the public, and oddly enough I had the entire blessing of Sherlock Holmes to publish it. It was because it had quite the profound effect on me personally and it has taken quite some time for me to come to think of the matter without it still giving me a terrible fright that only now, many years after the fact that my readers will know of this singular event.

The year was '90, after the case of Mr. Hatherley's thumb, and I was in my consulting room on a fall day that announced the coming of an early winter with rapidly dropping temperatures which agitated my old war wounds in my leg and shoulder. Still, I made it through a full day of seeing patients and was glad when it was time for me to return home to my wife and spend a quiet evening in front of a warm fire. It was with a some annoyance, then, that I heard my nurse arguing with a patient outside. I could hear her telling him I couldn't see anyone else today.

"Please," a male voice implored, "It is of the utmost importance I see Doctor Watson!"

I gave a long sigh and rubbed my shoulder before getting to my feet and crossing to the door.

"Thank you, Jenny, let him in," I said in as cheerful a voice as I could manage.

She sighed and stepped aside to let a young man pass. He was about thirty-five years of age and had curly brown hair that was matted to his forehead from sweat. He had

piercing gray eyes and calluses on his left hand. He was dressed very neatly in a gentleman's clothes, but was in a state of agitation. The man was an American, an apprentice, much of day was spent writing, he was left-handed, and had come for me not because of any illness of his own, but to bring me to another. A relative, I deduced. Most likely his father.

The young man hurried into my consulting room.

"Thank you, Jenny, you may go," I said.

She frowned at me. "You, sir, need to learn to say 'no.'"

I gave her a smile that said I knew. "I'll see you on Monday, Jenny. Thank you. Oh, and would you..."

"Let your wife know you'll be late? Yes, sir."

She reluctantly picked up her things and left, leaving me alone with the young man who seemed intent on wearing a hole in the floor with his pacing.

"Now, what can I do for you, Mr.?"

"Warburton. Thomas Warburton," he drawled in a way that could only ever tell even the most casual observer that he was American. I decided he was probably from one of the Southern states, possibly Georgia. That deduction was possibly erroneous, however, as I wasn't sure I had actually ever met a chap from Georgia. Still, once one gets in the habit of deduction it's not like a switch that can be turned on or off so the conclusion came to mind incorrect though it may be.

I held out my hand to him. "I am Doctor Watson." He paused long enough to grip my hand in the vice-like way only Americans do. "What may I do for you?"

“Doctor Watson, you must help me. I have heard from all accounts of you that you are an honest man whose discretion can be relied upon. Combining this with the fact that you are acquainted, as the public well knows, with the strange and sometimes grotesque, as well as your experiences as a soldier and a medical man, you are the person I need. Please, doctor, no one else will do.”

“Mr. Warburton, I beg you to take a seat and tell me what the matter is.” I breathed a silent sigh of relief as he finally sank into a chair. “Here,” I said as I offered him a glass of brandy.

“Thanks,” he said and gulped it down.

I took a seat across from him and waited expectantly for his story.

“Doctor Watson, my father was a colonel for the South in the American Civil War. When the South lost, as you know they did, he decided to abandon his country and come here, to England. I was eleven years old when the war ended, Doctor. Ah, I see you are surprised. My accent is very American, isn’t it? Well, that is just part of my queer tale. See, my accent comes from my father, of course, and the reason living here for nearly all my life hasn’t softened it is because I rarely ever see anyone but my father. He is a recluse, and demands I be one as well. I do everything for him: manage his business, write his correspondence, keep his house in order, and so you see there is no time for anything else even if my father doesn’t demand I be by him constantly.

“I am biding my time, doctor, waiting for the day I take over the business and the house and can be my own man. My father knows I yearn for freedom from his rule, but

alas, I am greedy and my father is a rich man. We are never hostile to each other, but we want different things. Anyway, we’ve gone on in this manner for some time, nearly my entire life. I am his only son, as he very often reminds me, and whether he likes it or not once he passes the Warburton name will be known far and wide in English high society. I will get my wish soon enough. My father was already an older man when I was born, see, and he is well advanced now.

“But despite our differences, Doctor, he is my father and I love him dearly. So you can imagine it distressed me greatly when suddenly there appeared signs he may be going mad.”

“Mad?”

“Yes, Doctor, mad.”

“Then it is not I, a general practitioner, who you need.”

“Please, allow me to continue, there is much more to it than just that.”

“Yes, of course, my apologies.”

“The first time it happened I was sitting up with a book by the fire. Father had gone to bed. He sleeps in a room directly below mine. I was just thinking of retiring myself when I heard him cry out. At first I couldn’t make out any words, but then heard him say clear as crystal: ‘My son, my son.’ He repeated it over and over. Well, naturally I rushed to him. He was awake and trembling all over, staring at the doorway I just came through.

“Here I am, father,’ I told him. He just kept mumbling over and over until he regained focus, shoved me off of him, and stormed out of his room, through the front door, and out into the night. It was the first time in years I’d seen him leave the house, and I confess I was

dumbfounded into inaction. By the time I regained my wits he was gone. I spent a sleepless night searching for him, but when I came home to get some breakfast to revitalize myself for my continued search, he was sitting there with his plate piled high with scrambled eggs and even berated me for leaving without his permission.

“He never spoke of it, but from then on things changed. He locked down the house: barred every window and put new locks on every door. That first night was two weeks ago, and I have been living in a veritable prison since.”

“So why come to me now?” I asked.

“The strange shouting, he did it again last night. Again, when I got there nothing was out of the ordinary. Still, he began shouting about ‘his son’ and of blood and heat and the field of battle. I didn’t understand it all. But then as he began roving the house checking the locks, I saw something on the ground. It was blood, Doctor Watson. My father didn’t have a scratch on him, but there was blood on the floor.

You must surely see now why I’ve come to you specifically.”

“Indeed. It’s not quite a case for a regular doctor. I will visit your father and see what I can do for him, though I warn you if you wanted a detective instead of a doctor, you should have gone to one. I can promise nothing beyond a medical opinion.”

“It is that which I want, Doctor.”

“Then you shall have it. Just answer a few questions for me.”

“Anything.”

“Is there anyone who lives in the house besides you and your father?”

“No, though there is plenty of room. We hire a girl to come in and make meals and run errands for us and generally keep the house clean. I do everything else.”

“I see. And what, if I may ask, is the exact nature of your father’s business?”

“He owns several trading ships that take goods like spices and silks from India to America. Most of the work is correspondence and management. There is a man, a Mr. James Hoover, who works with the ships directly on my father’s behalf. But though I have written him thousands of letters I have never met him.”

“I see. Now, there is something I’d like you to do.”

“Of course! Just say the word.”

“Go around to the local shops. I want you to try to track your father’s movements that first night. And Mr. Warburton, there is a hotel near the locksmiths with excellent beer. I suggest a nice dinner and a stroll to calm your nerves before you return to your father’s house. You’re in no condition to continue like this. Here, take this. It will help you sleep tonight.”

The young man thanked me profusely and gave me his address and a house key in case his father should refuse me entry. I was glad to help him, of course, but as I stepped outside to find a light snow had begun to fall I wondered moodily why I couldn’t learn to take my nurses advice and tell people ‘no.’

When I arrived at the Warburton house I involuntarily felt a chill sweep through me and I shuddered. The home was elegant once, but it was easy to see no one had cared for the yard consistently in many years, and the

peeling paint and bars on the windows made it seem especially ominous.

I squared my shoulders and marched up to the door, knocking solidly with my walking stick. When no answer came I knocked again. I could hear someone moving within, but no one came to the door.

“Colonel Warburton?” I shouted, then knocked again. “Colonel Warburton?”

Suddenly, there came a shouting from inside the house. I quickly used the key given me and rushed in. The shout had come from up the stairs, so I rushed up the steps and then stopped dead in my tracks.

There, in front of my eyes, was Thomas Warburton, the man I had just met. But he was aged about twenty years, with skin tanned and wrinkles on his forehead. A scar marred the flawless cheek I had seen earlier, but there was no mistaking the curly brown hair or the piercing gray eyes. He was dressed in light blue pants, a gray woolen shirt, a dark blue jacket, a blue overcoat with a cape, and heavy shoes with woolen socks. In his hands was a long musket. He was the exact image of a union soldier from the American War. He was also covered in blood.

What was most interesting, however, was that he seemed to mirror my own look of shock. Before I could gather my own wits, he regained his. He struck out violently with his rifle, hitting my on my bad shoulder with the butt which resulted in my stumbling backwards down the stairs.

When I next became aware I found I had been moved onto a settee and lay with my collar and first few buttons of my shirt undone.

“Is he dead? Oh, he’s dead, isn’t he? He’s dead and it’s all my fault!” came the voice of Thomas Warburton.

“He’s not dead,” came the annoyed voice that could only ever be Sherlock Holmes, “a fact which you’d know if you had paused and observed for only a moment before you came rushing off to me. Instead, you just left him on the floor for anyone or anything... wait! He’s coming around! Watson? I say, old boy, it’s nice to have you back in the land of the living.”

I felt something cold press to my lips, and the taste of brandy on my tongue brought me back to full wakefulness. I opened my eyes to find my old friend Sherlock Holmes leaning over me and looking at my face intensely.

“You’ll have to imagine my shock, Doctor, when this young man burst into Baker Street shouting that you’d been murdered.”

“Murdered?” I asked in a raspy voice.

“Yes, Doctor,” said Thomas, who stood behind Holmes. “I’m sorry, really I am. When I came back and found you lying at the bottom of the stairs with blood on your face I panicked and ran for Mr. Holmes.”

I pulled myself up to a sitting position and very nearly would have tipped right back over again had it not been for Holmes who reached out to steady me.

“Easy,” he said, “you hit your head on your way down the stairs. Can you see clearly?”

“Yes,” I replied, “though I’m not sure I remember clearly.” Suddenly, a vision of the terrible, bloody, pale soldier I’d seen rushed back into my mind and I blanched. “You!” I said, pointing at Warburton. “It was you!”

Immediately Holmes was on his feet and, with one swift move, had subdued Warburton.

“What are you doing?” Warburton demanded.

“Did you do this to him?” Holmes demanded right back.

“Wait, Holmes, let him go,” I said. “It wasn’t him, but...”

“Yes, Watson?” Holmes asked as he released Warburton, “What is it?”

I shook my head. “I think I must share your father’s madness, Warburton. What I saw, it couldn’t possibly be real.”

“I think perhaps we should retire to Baker Street,” Holmes said. “This is a story I would very much like to hear in its entirety. And we can have your wife see to your wounds, Watson. I personally think it was a bit dramatic of you to stay unconscious for so long, but then I’m hardly an authority.”

I looked to Warburton. “Where is your father?”

“He’s pulled another disappearing act, I’m afraid.”

“Then yes, by all means let’s go back to Baker Street. Wait, why would my wife be there?”

Holmes looked unsettled. “I sent her a message telling her to go Baker Street and I’d meet her there.”

I remembered what he’d said earlier about being told I was killed, and it wasn’t hard to connect the dots from there. I laid my hand on his shoulder. “Thank you, Holmes.”

“Well, um, yes, of course he stammered. “Here,” he said as he helped pull me to my feet. “Alright, old boy?”

“Yes, thank you.”

We made our way back to Baker Street where my wife was waiting anxiously. I was as glad to see her as she me, and I embraced her on the front steps, not caring that we were fully illuminated by the lamp above. It was a bit hard to convince her that it was I who had led Holmes into danger and not the other way around, but she was mostly relieved I was all right and soon Warburton, Holmes, and I found ourselves sitting around the fire as Warburton retold his singular tale. When he got to the point where I came into the story, I took over the narrative and told of the strange, ghostly, bloody image I’d seen on the stair.

“Do you think it was my imagination, Holmes? Did I let the atmosphere of the place get to me?”

Holmes puffed on his pipe and was silent for a while. I had nearly forgotten my own question and was being lulled by the fire to drowsiness when suddenly Holmes sprung to life once more.

“My dear Watson, you are the last man on Earth I should ever think mad. Therefore, what you say you have seen must have really been there. And if I did not believe you, the way you’re holding your arm says you were indeed hit there. And why does a ghost need defend himself from a living man?”

“I don’t understand,” said Warburton, “Doctor Watson said he looked just like me. How is that possible? He couldn’t have been my father, even if my father were not the one being tormented because my father is bald, and older than the apparition in any event.”

“Please, Mr. Warburton, tell me more about your family,” Holmes demanded.

“There’s not much to tell, Mr. Holmes. My mother died shortly after giving

birth to me. For most of my childhood in America my father was off in the war and I in the care of a nanny. There are a few times I remember having to hide in the basement for fear of the gunfire, but when it was all over my father took me and came here, to England. I know I have some relatives left in Atlanta, but I haven't have any contact with them."

"I see," Holmes said. Then, after a pause, "we must find your father, Mr. Warburton. He should be home by now. Doctor, I think you should stay here and get some rest. I'll be back in an hour or two."

"What, take a nap while you confront a ghost? Of course I'm coming with you."

"Good man! Though I doubt we'll be having any more trouble from the ghost. Come on, then!"

We donned our coats and headed out again. I kissed my wife who was enjoying a cup of tea with Mrs. Hudson.

"Will you be home tonight?" She asked worriedly.

"Perhaps early in the morning. Mr. Warburton here has a problem that may not be able to wait."

"Don't worry, Mrs. Watson, I'll return your husband before midnight and completely unharmed at that," Holmes said.

"You, sir," Mary scolded, "would be much easier to believe if I hadn't heard that same promise a month ago and then John came home with..."

"Yes, yes, we must be off," Holmes interrupted and Mrs. Hudson hid a laugh behind her napkin. I kissed my wife one more time before heading out as well. As soon as I felt the chill of the wind I wished I had taken Holmes' offer of resting by the fire and leaving

him to take care of the whole confusing business, but Warburton had come to me for help and I was determined to see the case through to the end. Besides, despite Holmes' assurance, I wasn't completely convinced that the danger was over. And of course my natural curiosity led me on.

Back at the Warburton home we found a light on: Colonel Warburton was home. He had the same eyes as the his son and the ghost I'd seen earlier but was significantly older with a balding head.

"Father, this is Mr. Sherlock Holmes and Doctor John Watson."

"And just what are they doing here?" Colonel Warburton demanded.

"Colonel, I think it is time you come clean to your son about... certain persons of whom he should make the acquaintance."

"And just what are you saying?" the colonel said as he took a menacing step forward. I moved in between Holmes and the angry old man, but my friend only grabbed my arm and stepped up so we were side by side.

"Now, Colonel," he said, "I'm sure this will go much more smoothly if you cooperate and tell the truth."

"I owe you nothing!" he growled and held up his walking stick threateningly.

"Father!" Warburton cried, "what's gotten into you? Please, this gentleman is a doctor, let him help you!"

"I don't need a doctor! There's nothing wrong with me! Now leave my home or heaven help me I'll thrash you both!"

"Father, calm down!"

"You too, son! Why if you weren't my only boy..."

“Ah, yes, there is a point worth pondering. Mr. Warburton, if you would, I believe it is time you came out now. Please, do be so kind,” he bellowed through the house.

Warburton looked confusedly at Holmes. “Come out of where?”

“Not you,” he replied gruffly. Then, yelling again, “Mr. Warburton! My name is Sherlock Holmes! You murdered John Hamish Watson earlier today! That man was a doctor! He saved people’s lives! More importantly he was my friend! I’ll see you hanged for your deed if you don’t come out this instant and convince me on your knees that it was an accident! Mr. Warburton!”

“Holmes, what are you on about?” I asked but he hushed me as a thumping was heard, then a creaking.

Colonel Warburton was trembling all over as sweat poured from his forehead. “Stay back, stay back,” I heard him mutter almost incoherently. The air hung thickly around us and no one breathed as the small sounds echoed through the ghostly house. Young Warburton reached in vain for his father who slowly backed away, I gripped my revolver tightly, Holmes took a subtle step forward so he was in between myself and the stair, his hand landing on my arm lightly. Silently, a panel beneath the stair slid back and slowly from the blackness crept the figure I had seen earlier. He surveyed us with his face still half hidden in shadow and then stepped out fully. He was exactly as I had seen earlier, except sans rifle.

As soon as he stepped into the moonlight pouring in from the front windows, Colonel Warburton started shrieking. In

between the incoherent nonsense, I heard what Thomas Warburton had: “my son, my son!”

The figure stood before us still as stone, and my companions stood paralyzed at the sight of him. I could no longer remain motionless.

“Holmes, help me, the Colonel is going into shock!”

That snapped Holmes out of his momentary horror—or perhaps admiration—and he helped me pick the Colonel up and carry him straight past the ghost and onto the settee. I got to work covering him with an afghan and elevating his feet while Holmes stoked the fire to life. I hadn’t lost track of the ghost and Warburton, though, and when the ghost took a step forward I drew my pistol.

“Leave him alone!” I said in my most commanding voice. The ghost turned to me and came into the living room.

“So you are not dead,” he said to me. I swallowed hard. “No, I am not.”

Holmes came and stepped in between us. “Take a seat, Mr. Warburton. My friend may not be dead but you still have deeds to answer for.”

The ghost nodded solemnly once and then took a seat by the fire. Thomas Warburton came in clutching an unlit candlestick as if it may protect him. He looked to me.

“This can’t be real, none of it is real. Right, doctor? Oh, please say I’m going mad rather than that this is real!”

“Sit down,” Holmes commanded, and Warburton did, right on the hardwood floor.

Holmes chuckled. “Perhaps this will lend itself to diffusing the terror of the

situation.” He crossed over to the washbasin, wetted a towel, and then handed it to the ghost. To my astonishment, he washed away all the fresh blood without revealing any open wounds, and when the cloth touched his hideous scar it too wiped away. Even his complexion went from the ghostly pale to a healthy tanned color. Much more tan, even, than the England sun affords.

“Thomas Warburton,” Holmes said with a dramatic flair, “meet...”

“David!” the colonel interrupted. He sat up, though he was still visibly shaken.

“David! It is you? Why would you do this to me, my son?”

“Father?” Thomas Warburton squeaked, “this man is your son?”

Colonel Warburton, however, only had eyes for the man he called David. “David! Oh, my son!”

“Enough, father!” the not-ghost said. “It is time you tell Thomas the truth. Do it now or I shall.”

The Colonel only stared at him blankly.

“Thomas,” said David, “I am your brother, David. Or half-brother, to be precise. I was born nineteen years before you. Twelve minutes and forty seconds after I was born my twin, your brother, Michael was born. When we were seventeen, Michael and I could no longer stand living in our father’s house and moved out after mum died. Father was furious because he thought we should take over the plantation but his overbearing ways were too much.

“We moved north. Michael stayed in Pennsylvania as I made my way further West into Ohio. When the war broke out, Michael

joined and I didn’t. What I did do, however, was make supply runs to our troops. That is to say, the northern troops. Neither of us still had contact with our father so though we knew we were on opposite sides of the war it didn’t really have an effect.

“While on a run one day, I was told that a man who could only be my twin lay wounded in the next camp over. I made the dangerous journey over and found as the soldier had said. My twin brother lay dying in filth. I knew he wasn’t going to make it, but roused him one last time to tell him goodbye before he went. When he realized who I was, he told me clear as crystal that he has looked into the eyes of the man who had wounded him; that man was our father.”

Thomas Warburton was shaking.

“Father? Is this true?” he stammered.

The Colonel sat with his head hung. “Yes.”

There was silence for the space of a minute, though it felt like ten.

Finally, Holmes finished the story. “When you found out your father had fled to England you were alright with that,” he said, “You thought it was remorse. But then you learned your father had another son, one he was raising without knowing the truth. One he was raising to be just like him. This was intolerable. So, a little makeup, a fake scar, and you became your dead brother.”

“Yes,” David replied. “I wanted to scare him into a confession of his guilt. I wanted Thomas to see what he truly is!”

“Just clear up one or two points for me, please,” Holmes said. “You found out about Thomas from Mr. James Hoover, did you not?”

“Yes, Mr. Holmes. He never liked my father neither, but did mention to me that my young brother seemed decent enough. I pressed him, and that’s how I found out. I’d gone to see him to see if my father had left me anything before going to England.”

“And it was Mr. Hoover who you ran off to send a telegram to the first night the ‘ghost’ appeared?” Holmes asked the colonel.

“Y-yes,” he replied. “I thought I was going to die. I wanted to get my affairs in order.”

“David Warburton,” Holmes announced, “there will be no more playing ghost.”

“No, Mr. Holmes, I think it’s time we discussed what happened all those years ago, my father and me.”

“One more thing,” Holmes said, and now he looked at David dangerously, “from how you acquiesced to my demands earlier I can deduce harming Watson was never your intention and you felt guilt about it. Still, I would appreciate it if you’d swear to that fact.”

“I swear it! He startled me is all! I panicked. I’m very sorry, Doctor.”

“Good!” Holmes exclaimed and clapped his hands. “Now come, Doctor, we need not interrupt this delicate family matter any longer, and I have but thirty minutes to get you home or I fear Mrs. Watson will never trust me again!”

We bid the Warburtons adieu and left them to have their long needed talk.

“What a terrible business,” I remarked to Holmes as we rode back toward my home. I admit I was more than ready to finally get some rest and yawned widely.

“Yes,” he said. “A father kills his son in the heat of battle and the brother—worse, the twin!—can’t take it. Seeing another child grow up in the same kind of hostile environment with no one ever knowing the truth, well, it was just too much for him. Hopefully, they will work something out.”

I repressed another yawn, “But how the deuce did you work it out?”

“The first clue was how old the Colonel was. With such a young son his wife must have been significantly younger than he. And when an old man has a very young wife you can bet he had one before her. And another wife means there may be other children. Combine this with Thomas Warburton not knowing about his own relatives and my guess that there were more children somewhere is all but confirmed. Didn’t you think the Colonel’s insistence that Thomas was his only child was a bit odd?”

“Well, yes, I suppose I did, but I didn’t make anything of it.”

“Beyond that there’s the fact that Colonel Warburton is an independently wealthy man without the income of his slave plantation, as evidenced by his trading ships. Therefore it was most likely something beyond losing the war that drove him to England.

“You were surely not attacked by a real ghost, my dear doctor, and so who else could the man be but a real relative of Thomas Warburton, in this case his brother. What you described could be nothing else, and I do trust your judgement.”

“Thank you. But Holmes, what about Mr. Hoover?”

Holmes shrugged. "He was the only one who fit that piece of the puzzle. Anything else?"

I yawned again and he chuckled at me.

"Ah, here we are, and ten minutes to spare! Go on, Doctor!"

I paused as I stepped out of the hansom cab we'd been lucky to catch this late. "Holmes, would you like to step in? Have a cup of tea?"

He hesitated. "I suppose..."

"Splendid!" I said, feigning wakefulness. Mary and I had been plotting how to get Holmes to pay us a social visit for months now and I wasn't going to let this opportunity pass. I admit I fell asleep while Holmes told Mary the edited highlights of our adventure, but the next month he came round again for a purely social visit and so we counted the night a success nevertheless, though I suspect it may have been the scare of being told I had been murdered that drove him to visit Mary and I more regularly. His willingness to take care of Mary had I really been killed touched me deeply, though of course I was glad I wasn't and we never did bring up the incident again.

As for the Warburton's, they never did become a household name like Thomas would have liked, but I have a feeling his priorities changed after that night. The last I heard of them Colonel Warburton had passed away and both his sons were now in America again, specifically Atlanta, Georgia. And so ends the bizarre and grotesque tale of Colonel Warburton's madness.