

THE ADVENTURE OF THE NORCROSS RIDDLE A Solar Pons story By August Derleth (From Regarding Sherlock Holmes: The Adventures of Solar Pons, Copyright 1945 by August Derleth) Version 1.0 - January 17, 2002 "THE SCIENCE OF deduction rests primarily on the faculty of observation," said Solar Pons, looking thoughtfully at me with his keen dark eyes, the ghost of a smile at his thin, firm lips. "Perhaps you're right," I answered, "but I find that much of my so-called observation arises out of intuition. What do you make of that?" Pons chuckled. "I don't deny it. We are all intuitive in varying degrees. But for accuracy in conclusions, observation must stand first." He turned and rummaged through the papers scattered on the table beside his chair; from among them he drew an ordinary calling card, which he tossed over to me. "What does your intuition make of that?" The card bore an embossed legend: "Mr. Benjamin Harrison Manton," and in one corner, in smaller print, "Norcross Towers." I turned it over. The caller had written on its back, Will call at three. "My observation tells me that the gentleman used a broad-point pen; the character of the writing indicates that he is firm and steady. I see he uses the Roman e consistently; my intuition tells me he is an intelligent man." Pons' smile widened, and he chuckled again. "What do you make of it?" I asked, somewhat nettled. "Oh, little more," replied Pons matter-of-factly, "except that the gentleman is an American by birth, but has resided in England for some length of time; he is a man of independent means, and is between thirty-five and thirty-nine years of age. Furthermore, his ancestry is very probably Southern United States, but his parents were undoubtedly members of the American Republican political party." "You have seen the man!" "Nonsense!" Pons picked up the card. "Observe:--The name Manton is more common to the Southern part of the United States than to any other region; undoubtedly it is English in ancestry. In that part of the States, political sentiment is very largely Democratic, but it is not amiss to suggest that Manton's parents were Republican in sentiment, since they named him after a Republican president." "Well, that is simple," I admitted. "Precisely, Parker. But there is no intuition about it. It is mere observation. Now test yourself; tell me how I know he is of independent means." "He calls at three," I ventured. "Certainly if he were not of independent means he could not break into an afternoon like that." "He might well get away from his work to visit us," objected Pons. "Examine the card more closely." "Well, it is embossed; that is a more expensive process than simple printing." "Good, Parker. Come, you are getting there!" "And the card itself is of very fine quality, though not pretentious." I held it up against the window. "Imported paper, I see. Italian." "Excellent!" "But how do you know he has lived in England for some time?" "That is most elementary of all. The gentleman has purchased or rented a country place, possibly an abandoned English home, for 'Norcross Towers' is certainly the name of a country house." "But his age!" I protested. "How can you know the man's age merely by glancing at his calling card?" "That is really absurdly simple, Parker. In the States it is considered fashionable even today to name children after the president in office at the time of the child's birth; doubtless the American tendency to hero-worship plays its part in that, too. Harrison was president from 1889 to 1893; hence it follows that our man was born in one of the four years of Harrison's term. The age is more likely to be thirty-nine years, because the tendency to name children in such fashion is strongest during the inaugural period." I threw up my hands. "The contest is yours!" Pons smiled. "Well, here it is three o'clock, and I should not be surprised if our client is at the door." As he spoke, there was a steady ring at the doorbell and, after the usual preliminary of shuffling feet on the stairs, Mrs. Johnson finally ushered into our rooms a youngish, black-haired man, whose smooth-shaven face was partly concealed by large, horn-rimmed glasses with dark panes. He was clothed in the best fashion, and as he stood before us, leaning on his stick he held in his hand a motoring cap, indicating he had come some distance--possibly from his country place. Our visitor looked from one to the

other of us, but, before Mrs. Johnson had closed the door behind her, he had fixed his gaze on Pons, and it was to him he now addressed himself. "You are Mr. Solar Pons?" he asked in a low, well-modulated voice. Pons nodded. "Please be seated, Mr. Manton." "Thank you." With simple dignity our visitor seated himself and immediately threw a dubious glance in my direction. "My assistant, Dr. Parker," said Pons. "Anything you say is eminently safe with him." Manton nodded to me and gave his attention again to Pons. "The matter about which I have come to consult you is one of disturbing mystery. I don't know that anything criminal is at its root, and I cannot afford to have any word of it leak out." "You have our confidence," Pons assured him. Manton nodded abstractedly, and for a few moments he was silent, as if trying to decide where to begin. Finally, however, he looked up frankly and began to speak. "The matter concerns my country estate, Norcross Towers, which fell into my hands a little over six months ago. I might say that it was purchased to please my wife, who had lived there before I married her, and is again mistress of her old home. I have been very fortunate in business, and I am able to keep both town and country houses; but since I am usually kept in the city, I don't often have time to join my wife at Norcross Towers. "However, a month ago I drove to the Towers for a short vacation. Though the estate had been in my possession for some months, I had not yet had time to go over it thoroughly, and this I now set about to do. One of the first places to attract my attention was the fens, which had claimed the life of my wife's first husband." Pons, who had been sitting with closed eyes, looked suddenly at our visitor. "Are the fens on your estate called 'Mac's Fens'?" Manton nodded. "They were named after my wife's first husband--by the natives in that country." "Then your wife was Lady McFallon." "I married her six months after her husband's tragic death." "Scott McFallon was the man who with one servant and his hounds set off across the fens near his home and sank in a bog. His servant, I understand, pointed out the exact spot where he went down." Manton nodded again. "Yes, that is quite right." "Go on with your story, Mr. Manton." "The fens," Manton resumed, "are quite large and, in common with most fens, almost entirely marshland, with a few scattered patches of firm ground. On this considerable tract of land stand the ruins of a very old building at one time used as an abbey. It is of stone, and one wing of the place has a kind of intactness. I had taken it into my head to examine this ruin, and I started out alone for it one afternoon in my car; I had had a road built to wind through the fens to the village of Acton, to reach which previously it had always been necessary to make a wide detour. The new road was open to the public, of course. "As I drove toward the ruin, it occurred to me that I had forgotten to instruct my secretary about a business matter of some importance; so I decided to drive straight on to Acton and wire him, examining the ruin on my return. But dusk had already fallen when I returned, and I had no intention of prowling about the building with a flashlight. Just as I was approaching my home, a car came speeding past me, going in the direction of Acton. I thought nothing of it then, for it was possible that someone was taking this convenient short cut to the village, though it is not often used." "You made a note of the car?" "Not definitely. It was a large, touring car--a Daimler, I thought; but I could not be sure. However, I did see three people in the car, for I noticed this especially because one of them seemed to be ill." "What gave you that impression?" "He was sitting in the rear seat with a companion, and was almost completely covered with rugs and coats. As I flashed by, it seemed to me that his companion was trying to soothe him." Pons nodded, and indicated that Manton was to continue. "I speedily forgot this incident, and went into the house for dinner. Throughout the meal, I observed that my wife ate very little, and I became alarmed at the thought that something troubled her. I had noticed something like this before--a certain uneasiness and nervousness--but had put it down to some passing physical disorder. I could now see, however, that she was deliberately trying to appear normal, and eat dinner as if she were perfectly herself. This is unusual for my wife; she is a remarkably straightforward woman, and illness

in the past has always caused her to refrain from taking heavy meals. I asked her whether she felt ill, and whether I could do anything, but she denied that she was ill, and only redoubled her efforts to appear at her ease. "I tried to forget this incident, and retired to my study, where my wife shortly followed me. Now, Mr. Pons, my study overlooks the moor, and is in a direct line with the ruin. I was sitting directly opposite a low window facing the ruin when I closed my book at about ten o'clock. Judge my surprise, gentlemen, to see in this ruin two lights, one of which was put out even as I looked. Presently the other began to move, going from one room to another, according to its appearance, among those which were left intact in the wing still standing. Then it, too, was put out. "My wife, meanwhile, had caught my look, and since she sat opposite me and could not see the lights, she asked what I saw. 'There's someone in the ruin,' I said. "I caught an exclamation from her, and then in some confusion she said, 'Oh, I forgot to tell you, but I rented the ruin for two months.' "I was astonished, but I recovered quickly enough, and asked to whom she had rented it. There was quite a pause before she replied, with some apprehension, that she had rented it to a professor of psychiatry who had brought a lunatic and his keeper out there for the purpose of isolated observation of his patient. Though I had been somewhat upset at first, I now recalled the car which had passed me on my homeward way that evening, and I assumed at once that the sick man was none other than the psychiatrist's patient. I could not forbear suggesting to my wife that she might first have consulted me, whereupon she seemed hurt and said that we could put them out. Of course, I would not hear of it. "'I'd like to have a talk with the professor, though,' I said. "'I wouldn't disturb them, Benjamin,' she answered. "'Oh, I don't suppose there's any harm in going out there. After all, it's our property and they're our tenants temporarily.' "'But there's no need to disturb them, Benjamin,' my wife insisted. "I could not help feeling that for some reason unknown to me my wife did not want me to go to the ruin, but as I said no more, the matter was closed for the time being. Shortly afterward, I went to bed. My wife usually stays up quite late, reading and embroidering, and I thought nothing of her staying up that night. "Some time during the night, I was awakened by the sound of tapping on glass somewhere about the house. I am a very light sleeper, and I sat up in bed to listen. I heard a window open downstairs. I looked at my watch; it was a quarter of twelve. Then I remembered that in all probability my wife was still in the study. I called down to her from my doorway, and Anna answered at once. Reassured, I returned to bed. "Next day, my wife asked for a thousand pounds. Though it means little to me as money, this sum rather staggered me, and I was naturally curious to know what Anna wanted with so large a cheque. She evaded all my questions with banter, but I believed I would most likely learn to whom Anna signed over the cheque; so I gave it to her. When the cheque came back a month later, I discovered that Anna had cashed it at my bank, and that in consequence I knew nothing of where the money might have gone. "Last night another chapter in this curious puzzle took place. As before, I was awakened close to midnight by the sound of tapping on a window, but this time I slipped from the room into the hall just after the window was opened. I went down the stairs as the window was closed again. Below me I could see my wife's shadow, cast by the lamplight in the room, and distorted by the firelight from the hearth. To me it seemed that she was reading something, but my thoughts were interrupted by a low moan from her. At the same instant I saw her fall to the floor. She fell toward the fireplace, and I ran to her assistance. "She had fainted. As I bent forward, I caught sight of what she had been reading; it had fallen from her hand into the fire, and was now almost entirely consumed. Nevertheless I snatched it, put out the fire with my hands, and on the corner of paper as yet untouched by the flames, I read: five thousand pounds at once ... what will happen if . . . --disconnected certainly, but enough to assure me that my wife was an unwilling party to some conspiracy. I thought immediately of the thousand pounds of the previous month, and of the ruin on the fens, which I feel

instinctively is connected with the mystery in some fashion. The inhabitants of the ruin have never been seen; by day there is no sign of life about the place. "My wife, meanwhile, was coming around, and as she regained consciousness, she looked toward the fireplace; this made me determine to say nothing about the note, for I felt that if she wanted me to know about it, she would speak. She did not. I could think only that some diabolical circumstances were keeping her from confiding in me. There can be no question of doubtful conduct on her part; I know that as only a husband can know that. I have had countless proofs of her devotion to me, and I hope I have given her all reason to feel that I love her fully as much. "This morning, Mr. Pons, my wife asked for five thousand pounds. I quibbled a little, but in the end I handed over the money. Then I came directly to the city and poured out my story to Lord Crichton, who advised me to come to you as a man of the utmost discretion. I left my card on my first visit. Now that you have heard my story, perhaps you could come to visit us--say as friends of mine in the trade--and see what you can make of the matter at close range." Manton leaned back and watched Pons. "The matter certainly has points of interest," mused Pons. "I see no reason to forego it." "Can you come with me at once?" "I believe we can. But first, a few questions." "Go right ahead, Mr. Pons." "I am under the impression that before her first marriage, your wife was the young social leader, Anna Renfield. Has it occurred to you that she is being blackmailed for some past error?" "It has," replied Manton gravely. "But unless I have been grossly deceived, Anna was held up as an example of all that is best in a young lady." Pons nodded, and appeared to reflect for a moment. "You say you married Lady McFallon six months after the tragic death of her husband. Were you aware of the financial condition of the late Scott McFallon?" Our visitor nodded. "When I came to England seven years ago, and came to know the lady who is now my wife, I learned that her husband's affairs were in a bad way, and that it had become necessary to sell Norcross Towers." "You were not then aware that other factors entered into McFallon's weak financial condition at the time of his death?" "Such as what?" asked Manton bluntly. "His lack of honesty with friends and patrons to the extent of causing many of them to lose heavily because of certain ill-advised--if not criminal--activities?" Manton shook his head. "I knew nothing of it." "Perhaps it has so happened that some group of persons has discovered or manufactured evidence to show complicity between McFallon and his wife, and perhaps this is the nature of the blackmailing attempts." Manton sprang from his chair in extreme agitation. "I can't consider such a suggestion, Mr. Pons," he said sharply. "I cannot for a moment believe that Anna was in any way a party to any of McFallon's schemes. If you come to Norcross Towers with that idea, Mr. Pons--" He shook his head violently. "No, it's better to drop the matter at once. Anna's past is spotless; if McFallon was guilty of dishonest or criminal acts, then she knew nothing of it, believe me. You cannot think it." "You forget that I am only suggesting possibilities, and it's entirely possible that forged evidence would cause her to fall a ready victim, fearing the connection with scandal, however ill-founded, might reflect upon your name or your business." Manton looked down at Pons, a light breaking over his features. "Mr. Pons, I believe you have hit it!" he exclaimed. "That must be the reason she didn't want to tell me--for fear of injuring my position--for she knew nothing could ever come between us." "I am not at all sure that my supposition is correct," objected Pons. "I merely consider possibilities. There are more to examine." Pons reached for the telephone and called Scotland Yard. I heard an answering voice which, from my place close to Pons, I recognized as Inspector Jamison's. Pons asked for information concerning Scott McFallon, and we sat in silence while Pons waited until Jamison had given him the data he wanted. He turned from the instrument smiling cryptically. "Apparently death was an escape for McFallon. The day before the bog claimed him, an order for his arrest was signed. He would be in prison today if he had come alive from the fens." "Good God, Mr. Pons!" exclaimed Manton. "My wife must never know that--she can't have suspected

anything bad of McFallon." Pons nodded and rose to dress for the long ride before us. Norcross Towers was a large rambling structure, a typical English country house, not far from the highroad, which connected with the road Manton had had constructed across the fens to Acton. The two-storey building was surmounted at the rear by twin turret-like towers, from which the estate no doubt derived its name. The house was of old grey stone, made extremely attractive by great masses of ivy that flung its vines far up along the old walls. As we came up the flagstone walk toward the house, I noticed that all the windows within range were set very low, close to the ground. Mrs. Manton was the type of woman most often described as ash-blonde. Her features were thin, well formed, and her body was very lithe. She had lost neither the dignity of bearing nor the singular beauty which had helped to make her a social leader before her marriage. We met the lady in Manton's study, where we were introduced under our own names as brokers, for Pons considered it unlikely that Mrs. Manton would recognize either of us. It was dusk when we arrived at Norcross Towers, and the first duty before us was dinner, over which we spent an hour, chatting about stocks and bonds, a subject about which Pons knew much more than I had given him credit for, and, for the benefit of the lady, the news of the day. However, Pons and I excused ourselves immediately after dinner and retired to our room on the first floor, where Pons had insisted it be, for he planned on some nocturnal reconnoitering, and had no wish to be forced to descend the stairs each time he wanted to prowling about. In our rooms, Pons gave a sigh of relief. He changed into an old hunting outfit, complete with a rifle, and stepped out of the low window to the adjoining terrace. I watched him make his way over the lawns to the road leading across the fens, and saw him at last trudging away down the road. I settled myself to read and await his return. But it was after midnight when Pons came back, and I was dozing in my chair, book in my lap, when he slipped into the room. I awoke with a start to see him standing before me, removing his hunting jacket, and regarding me with a tolerant smile. "You examined the ruin, I suppose?" I guessed. Pons nodded. "There's certainly some kind of patient there. The fellow is in an improvised bed, and if I'm not mistaken, he won't last long; he is quite wasted by disease. He looks sixty, but cannot be much over forty." "And his keeper?" "A burly fellow, but never a country man. I daresay I should not be wrong in asserting that he is not unfamiliar with Limehouse or Wapping. The patient's doctor is here, too--a great hulk of a man, who shows some traces of culture. He is well-dressed, wears pince-nez on a gold chain, and has fascinating--that is to say, hypnotic--eyes. There is nothing definite to be said about him, save that under pressure, he might well become a very ugly customer. I should not like to cultivate his acquaintance. "All in all, it has the appearance of what it is meant to be: a case of experimentation on the health, mental and/or physical, of the patient, though he seemed to protest his imprisonment. Unfortunately, I could hear nothing of the conversation, for the room was tightly shut--they are occupying but one room, incidentally--and the three spoke in low voices. It's entirely possible that we may be assuming too much in suggesting a connection between the trio and the unknown blackmailers, but there is something very suspicious about them. I have the feeling I have seen the three before, but I'm hanged if I can place them at the moment." "They must be in it," I put in. "I see no reason for this kind of treatment of a patient, lunatic, or not. The man is exposed to consumption in this atmosphere; it is perfectly ridiculous." "Consumption!" exclaimed Pons. "Yes, the patient out there strikes me as a consumptive; if he is, then his doctor is no more a physician than I am, and the patient's presence there is vitally necessary to the blackmail plot. It may be that the patient is the directing genius, but that is unlikely, for he would endanger his life by staying out there." He shrugged. "Ah, well, let us just sleep on it." The next day Pons drew Manton aside. "Do you think it possible for me to have a few words with the servant who accompanied McFallon on the day of his death?" "Why, the fellow has been dead for years. He had a stroke two days after his master was drawn under by

the mire out there," said Manton. For a moment Pons stood as if petrified, his eyes fixed on our host in open astonishment, his pipe hung loosely from his mouth. Then he clapped his hand to his head and exclaimed, "What a fool I have been!" Without a further word, he astounded Manton and me by stepping from the study window and vanishing into the mists of early evening in the direction of the ruin on the fens. "Do you think he has discovered something?" asked Manton guardedly. "Unless I'm greatly mistaken, he has. Pons displays every sign of being off on a strong and perhaps conclusive trail!" Pons' face on his return was jubilant. His easy grace had returned, and his attentions were all for Mrs. Manton. He managed to seat himself next to her at the table that night, and he chatted with her amiably throughout the meal. It was as she was rising to retire that Pons bent to assist her, and muttered into her ear five words, which, however lightly they were said, I managed to overhear. "He died tonight of consumption." I think Mrs. Manton would have fallen, had not Pons been at her side. Manton, however, noticed nothing; for her recovery was instant, and there now passed between our hostess and Pons a glance of understanding which had our host as its object. Sometime after Mrs. Manton had left us, Pons turned to Manton and said quietly, "I think your charming wife will no longer be bothered by the rascals out there on the fens." "You've cleared up the matter, then?" asked Manton eagerly. "I have." "In heaven's name, what could they have held over Anna?" "Forgery, my dear sir. And what an elaborate forgery!" "Poor Anna!" "But they will be well on their way to the coast by now," continued Pons. "What!" cried Manton, springing to his feet. "You didn't let them off?" "In the circumstances, I thought it best," said Pons calmly. "The rascals would be certain to drag up the scandal of McFallon's questionable activities, with which they are thoroughly familiar." Manton nodded glumly. "But sit down, my dear sir, and let me tell you the clever story the fellows had forged to deceive your wife." Manton sat down expectantly. "Two blackmailers, familiar with McFallon's history, met a young man whose resemblance to your wife's first husband was very remarkable. These two persuaded this third man to fall in with their plan and impersonate McFallon in order to blackmail the present Mrs. Manton. Their plan was this: they were to go to Mrs. Manton with the clever story that her first husband had not been lost in the bog, but had fled to the Continent to escape the consequences of his stock juggling--'certain unpleasant circumstances,' they told your wife. Now these fellows were supposed to have encountered McFallon on the Continent, persuaded him to return to England with them some time ago, and forced him to reveal his presence to his wife through his writing, carefully copied from the real McFallon's. Then the blackmailing was to begin, to rise from small sums to larger and ever larger sums, forcing the lady to give and give under fear of the exposure of her first husband's presence here on the fens, and the scandal of a bigamous marriage. "How long this might have kept up, it is difficult to say; for all went well for them at the beginning over a month ago. Your wife believed their fantastic story, and fell prey to them. Unfortunately for the villains, the fellow they had chosen to play the part of McFallon was a consumptive. The damp air of the fens brought about a quick collapse in his constitution, and only tonight he died and was buried in the bog. The rascals are gone, and my advice to you, Mr. Manton, is to say no word of the affair to your wife. She will soon know that her trouble is over, and she will feel better if you know nothing of it." He sighed. "And now let us get to bed, for I should like to be in London early tomorrow." "What a curious tale," I said, when we were once more alone in our room, "and yet, in a way, very clever. The idea of having McFallon vanish with the servant as accomplice is perfectly logical in the circumstances of McFallon's imminent arrest; his supposed stay on the Continent and his meeting with those rascals when he could no longer return to England because his wife had remarried after the unexpected death of his accomplice prohibited her from knowing the true state of affairs; those fellows forcing him to aid them, for he was noble enough to keep away all these years and now fell victim to them--why, every

step is perfectly logical!" I exclaimed in admiration. I stopped suddenly and looked at Pons, whose face looked gray and gaunt in the dimmed light of the room. "Why, Pons!" I cried. "It was true!" "Every word of it!" Pons nodded. "Except that McFallon killed himself rather than be instrumental in his wife's suffering. He rests now in the bog, and no one will ever know he has not been there alls these years!" "Good God! And you let those scoundrels get away?" Pons turned his inscrutable eyes on me. "I had all I could do to keep my hands from their throats--but there are better ways of handling these matters. I sent a wire to Jamison before lunch; they'll be taken at Dover."

# About this Title

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