

A
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TO
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**A Collection of Previously Unknown Cases from the Extraordinary
Career of Mr Sherlock Holmes**

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Preface

It is with a very sad heart, yet enormous pride, that I pen these few words in introducing this collection of previously unknown cases from the extraordinary career of Mr Sherlock Holmes. In reality, it would be more appropriate to refer to the ‘...*extraordinary careers of Mr Sherlock Holmes and his ever-loyal partner, John H Watson, MD.*’ as I am firmly of the view that had it not been for the lasting friendship and assiduous note taking, file keeping and penmanship of my late uncle, the consulting detective’s fame would have been considerably diminished with the passing of years.

That is not to say that I have anything other than the greatest admiration and respect for Sherlock Holmes. Had it not been for his intervention, the course of my life would have been very different and considerably poorer to be sure. I will say no more of the matter at this stage, for the full details of the case are set out in the narrative which Dr Watson has entitled *An Affair of the Heart* and which forms the first of the tales in this new volume.

My real point is that Watson’s role, in many of the conundrums and investigations we have come to know and relish as the enduring performance of a genius, is all too easily overlooked or played down with Holmes taking centre stage. And yet, the good doctor was no mere support act or bit-part player. He was the light to Holmes’ darkness and the candle to his flame. The great detective did indeed shine, but it was Watson that provided much of the illumination and kept him firmly in the spotlight.

John Hamish Watson passed away in the early hours of Monday, 6th February 1939, at the age of eighty-six. He is sadly missed by us all. His health had declined rapidly in the two weeks prior to his death, so much so, that when he sent word to me that the bowel cancer he had been diagnosed with some months before had finally placed a firm and irremediable grip on his frail body, I knew that the end was near and raced to be at his bedside. Not once did he complain and not once did he question why it should be at that moment that his own extraordinary life should come to such an end.

My uncle had let it be known a decade earlier that on his death he wished me to be the executor of his will and guardian of all of his personal and pecuniary affairs. One of the tasks he had sanctioned very deliberately was that I should use my discretion in selecting for publication some of the three dozen or so cases where he had assisted Holmes, which had not already seen the light of day for one reason or another. One of these was *The Trimmingham Escapade*, which was the last case the pair enjoyed together and one which only reached a point of some conclusion last year. I am delighted to present it in this collection.

The other tales I have chosen for this volume demonstrate more of the critical interplay between the two men which made their partnership so memorable and endearing. *The Curious Matter of the Missing Pearmain* is a murder story to rank alongside the best of the tales being produced by our current crop of ‘Golden Age’ crime writers, what some authors of American detective fiction might term a locked-room mystery. *The Case of the Cuneiform Suicide Note* is a tale in which Dr Watson uses his expert knowledge to help solve a mystery, while *A Study in Verse* has the pair assisting the Birmingham City Police in a complicated case of robbery which leads them towards a new and dangerous adversary. All are very fine tales.

I am not sure whether the release of any more of these previously unknown cases would be in the public interest. I will determine that in due course, having considered the critical response to this first volume. Either way, I hope I have contributed in some small part to the lasting memory of two extraordinary men.

Christopher Henry Watson, M

1. An Affair of the Heart

In my long association with Sherlock Holmes, I only ever knew him to be an honourable and loyal friend, who could be relied upon to act with the utmost tact and discretion on any matters of a personal nature. So it was that when I found myself embroiled in a distinctly delicate family matter in the autumn of 1886, it was to Holmes that I naturally deferred.

We were sitting in the congenial surroundings of Brown's Hotel in Albemarle Street having just met with the establishment's proprietor in his newly refurbished lounge bar. Holmes had been engaged to tackle a potentially damaging case of jewellery theft from one of the more expensive suites in the hotel, occupied at that time by a crown prince from Eastern Europe. I had high hopes that this would turn out to be a colourful and absorbing episode, which might showcase my friend's remarkable talents. In reality, what I had envisaged somewhat prematurely as *The Curious Case of the Ukrainian Emerald* was solved by Holmes in less than half an hour, leading to the very public arrest by Scotland Yard of both the crown prince and his criminally-complicit manservant. It was clearly not the outcome that the hotel owner had anticipated and, having paid Holmes very discreetly for his services, the red-faced manager left us to finish what remained of our strong Turkish coffee and Panamanian cigars.

Holmes turned towards me with a telling grin. "Not one for your journal then, Watson? I fear that a simple case of insurance fraud is unlikely to excite the interests of your expectant readers. Still, while we have a quiet moment, it might be a good time for you to share with me the concerns you have about your nephew Christopher's impending marriage to Mrs Virginia Aston-Cowper."

His offhand comment caught me completely by surprise. "Holmes, I had no idea that you had spoken recently to young Christopher. I do indeed have some reservations about the match, but cannot see how my nephew knows of these - it is a good six months since we last had any sort of conversation. In any case, it was only four days ago that I received the wedding invitation, which, to have to say, came very much out of the blue."

"My dear friend, I have had no such conversation with Christopher. In fact, if you remember, I have only met him but the once, on the infamous occasion that he called upon us at Baker Street, claiming to have lost his wallet and being without the train fare to enable him to get back to his student digs in Oxford."

"Yes, of course," I replied, remembering how embarrassing the incident had been. "Not the first time his excessive gambling has got him into trouble. But how, then, do you know about his recent news and my thoughts on the matter? Please tell me this isn't some elaborate parlour trick on your part."

Holmes laughed heartily. "From a lesser man, I might have taken that as an insult, Watson. There is no trickery I can assure you. As you said, the wedding invitation arrived four days ago. It was the only letter addressed to you from the pile that Mrs Hudson brought up to me that day. I cast a glance at the envelope and then placed it in your post rack."

"I trust you didn't return to the letter and open it without my knowledge?"

"Of course not - the envelope told me all that I needed to know. The letter was postmarked 'Oxford' and the address was written in that small, spidery hand which I have come to recognise as that of your nephew. While you may not see or speak to him often, I have observed that Christopher's letters have been arriving more frequently of late, no doubt linked to his gambling debts, but expressed to you in his polite requests for small amounts of money to support his continuing medical studies at the

university. That this particular letter was not one of those regular communiqués was apparent from the oddly-sized envelope, which enclosed a card of some sort. Coupled with the clearly displayed ‘RSV’ on the back, it was not hard to discern that this was a wedding invitation. And on reading through the announcements in *The Times* that same day, I couldn’t fail to see the notice regarding the forthcoming marriage of ‘Mr Christopher Henry Watson of Trinity College, Oxford, to Mrs Virginia Belveder Aston-Cowper of Bexley Heath, Kent’.”

“Very neat, Holmes, but how did you know that I had failed to greet the news with any great relish? It is true, that I have tried to support my nephew through all of the troubles he has encountered since the death of my alcoholic brother. I have a great affection for the boy, especially since he has chosen to devote himself to a course of study which mirrors my own. But this latest caper is indeed troubling. And yet, I cannot recollect saying anything to you about the matter.”

“Precisely so, and the very fact which prompted me to take note. It is not every day that one receives an invitation to a family wedding and yet you chose not to mention it. Of late, you have been less garrulous than normal and given to periods of intense introspection. The invitation also required a prompt response - something you would attend to ordinarily by return of post. Thus far, you have seen fit to leave the invitation inside the envelope, which this morning still sat within the letter rack. Lethargy is not a characteristic you are prone to, Watson, so I can only conclude that you have chosen to delay your response, being troubled once again by the imprudence of your nephew.”

His pinpoint accuracy in targeting such a raw nerve left me deflated. “I was unaware that my innermost thoughts were so easily exposed,” said I. “What do you make of the situation?”

He lent across to the low coffee table in front of us and stubbed out what remained of his cigar. “As you know, I am not given to any moral panics or ethical dilemmas when it comes to affairs of the heart. I do not profess to know what drives a man to declare his undying love for another and be content to live out his existence in the shadow of *a better half*. In this case, I take it that your major concern is the fact that Mrs Aston-Cowper is both a widow and a woman some years older than Christopher?”

“Eighteen years older, to be precise!” My anger had surfaced finally and I could no longer hide my frustrations of late: “Christopher is a rash, happy-go-lucky, sort of fellow. But his heart has always been in the right place. A more devoted, loving individual it would be hard to find - exactly as my brother had been, before he descended into poverty and took to the bottle. What I fear, is that his mounting debts and overriding material desires are clouding his judgement. Mrs Aston-Cowper is a wealthy woman, who is no doubt flattered by the attentions of a younger man. As such, they both have something to gain from the union. And yet, I fear it will be a marriage of simple convenience that one or both parties will live to regret.”

“Watson, you have the upper hand on me. I feel disinclined to venture any opinion on Christopher’s romantic inclinations and cannot claim to know his wider motivations. But what of the lady herself? What more do you know of her?”

“Alas, very little. I made some discreet enquiries at one of my dining clubs. A steward there knew of her, and furnished me with a few particulars. She is the widow of Sir Ashley Aston-Cowper, the eminent anatomist, famed for carrying out some pioneering arterial surgery on one of the Queen’s continental cousins. When he passed away in February of last year, he left his wife a fashionable and expensive home in Bexley and a tidy annual income to match. Inexplicably, she has, since that time, ceased to use the honorific title of ‘Lady Aston-Cowper’.”

“Yes, indeed. But there is something more. I cannot recollect all of the details, but seem to remember that she was embroiled in some sort of scandal involving the younger son of the Duke

Buckland.”

“Well, that is news to me!” I spluttered. “And what was the nature of this impropriety?”

“Given the delicacy of the situation, Watson, I am loath to tell you anything that is not completely accurate. I suggest we retrace our steps back to Baker Street, where I can consult my files and tell you all of the pertinent facts surrounding the *Cheddington Park Scandal*.

The two-mile walk back to Baker Street lifted my mood considerably and I felt reassured that I had, at last, confided in Holmes. But at the back of my mind, I was now anxious that the matters he had referred to might exacerbate my woes about the marriage.

On entering 221B, we were greeted immediately by an agitated Mrs Hudson. “I’m so sorry, Mr Holmes, but the lady insisted on waiting for your return. I have just taken her a cup of tea, but she seems very emotional and has already sat upstairs for the best part of an hour.”

“Understood, Mrs Hudson, then we will delay her no longer,” Holmes replied, removing his overcoat and hat and nodding for me to do the same. “But do please tell us - who is our resolute, yet excitable guest?”

Mrs Hudson’s reply came as a surprise to us both. “Her calling card says ‘Aston-Cowper’... ‘Mrs Virginia Belvedere Aston-Cowper’.”

We climbed the seventeen steps to the upstairs room and entered the study. Mrs Aston-Cowper stood promptly to greet us, dropping her small handbag on to the chair she had been sitting in. It was clear that she had been crying and she still held within her delicate, gloved left hand a small handkerchief which I gathered she had been using to dry her tears.

The lady appeared to be considerably younger than I had expected. While I knew her to be just over forty years of age, I could not in all honesty say that she looked a day over thirty. She was slender build and around five feet, ten inches tall. Beneath her heavy black shawl, she wore a long, exquisitely tailored dress of green silk, which accentuated her slim figure. Her bright, delicate face was framed with a mass of dark curls, on which sat a velvet bonnet festooned with a colourful assembly of flowers. As I approached her, I was transfixed by her intense blue eyes.

Holmes greeted her warmly. “Mrs Aston-Cowper! I am so sorry to have kept you waiting.” She raised her right hand towards him and he shook it gently. “I am Sherlock Holmes, as you may have guessed, and this is my colleague, Dr John Watson, the man you have really come to see. Please, be seated.”

Her face took on a look of gentle surprise and she smiled pleasantly as I too shook the hand that was extended towards me. She then sat back down and proceeded to remove her shawl, black gloves and the green velvet bonnet, revealing the full extent of her brunette locks. “I suppose I should have guessed that a celebrated consulting detective would have little trouble in discerning the primary reason for my visit,” she said, in a confident tone.

We both took seats facing her and I could not resist the opportunity to make an immediate observation: “Mrs Aston-Cowper, no doubt you wish to talk to me about your forthcoming marriage to my nephew Christopher? I imagine that he asked you to come here, knowing that if he had consulted himself, I would have expressed my displeasure at his hasty matrimonial plans. You may view me as overly-protective and unreasonably paternalistic towards him, but I think I should point out that Christopher is, in many respects, the closest thing I have to a son of my own. I have no reason to question your affections for him, but fear that he may be marrying you for his own selfish reasons.”

Her response was both earnest and considered. “Dr Watson, I thank you for your honesty and

directness, as I much prefer a man who says what is on his mind. Christopher knows nothing of my visit today. He holds you in high regard and has told me much about your loyalty and steadfast support for him and his studies. I have taken on the task of arranging all of the preparations for the wedding in order that Christopher may concentrate on the final batch of his university examinations. Of all the invitations I had sent out, yours was the only one which had not prompted any sort of reply. I am told that you are a proactive man, with a military disposition to get things done, so could envisage only two reasons for this. Either, you had not received the letter, or, having taken delivery of it, you had decided that you did not wish to attend the ceremony. My visit today was designed, in part, to clarify if the latter was the case and I recognise now that it was. I know how hurt Christopher will be if you are absent on the day, so I implore you to reconsider, for both our sakes.”

I could not fail to be moved by her appeal and apologised for having not replied to the invitation. At that same time, I resisted the temptation to glance at Holmes, and wondered what he must be making of all this. I then found myself agreeing to attend the wedding, which elicited a most radiant smile from our guest.

“I am so happy to hear you say that, sir! And please, rest assured, I have the measure of Christopher and his wayward habits. Since we first met two months ago at a charitable event in Oxford, we have been the closest of kindred spirits and have both determined that there should be no secrets between us. I have been candid in telling him about my first marriage to Sir Ashley Aston-Cowper and some of the incidents in my life of which I am less than proud. He, likewise, has been open in sharing with me his addiction to gambling and his dishonesty in approaching many of his family and friends for funds to support his compulsion...”

Holmes shuffled in his chair and stifled a chortle with the pretence of a cough.

“...I am convinced now that he has put all of that behind him and is genuinely determined to complete his studies and take up a position he has been offered at Guy’s Hospital.”

I could but marvel at the turnaround in my nephew’s fortunes if what I had heard was true. Having now met his intended and listened to her passionate defence of him, I hoped that this was indeed the case. I turned to the question of his career prospects - “And you say he has been approached by Guy’s?”

“Yes, well, *approached* may not be an accurate interpretation. I will be honest in sharing with you that it was I that secured the offer. My late husband was very well regarded in his surgical role at Guy’s and I have maintained close friendships with some of his former colleagues. It was not difficult to put in a good word for Christopher, knowing that he has both the skills and determination to succeed in his career.”

This time it was Holmes who spoke. “It seems you have taken an extraordinary risk in placing your faith and love in a young man you have known for such a short time and who has yet to establish himself in society. You are a woman with both status and wealth. Are you not concerned that others may judge your betrothal to be reckless?”

“I have ceased to worry about what others may think. Call it an affectation of age, but I have reached a point in life where I choose to do those things which *feel* right, rather than those which are deemed by others to be the most rational or sensible course. Knowing something of your professional approach, Mr Holmes, I imagine that may be anathema to you.”

My admiration for this woman was growing steadily and I could understand now why my nephew had become so infatuated with her. Undoubtedly, she had the measure of most of the men she encountered.

Holmes ignored her passing remark and changed tack, as only he could. “Mrs Aston-Cowper,

seems you have resolved the matter of Watson's attendance at your wedding. Perhaps now you will turn to the other pressing issue which has brought you here today. If I am not mistaken, you are seeking my help on the delicate matter of the *Cheddington Park Scandal*.

The lady was quite taken aback. She looked to me fleetingly, possibly seeking some sort of explanation or reassurance, but then turned her gaze back to Holmes, her penetrating blue eyes fixed on his. "That is most remarkable. How could you possibly know that?"

"Aligning a few facts and observations into a feasible hypothesis is the very essence of my craft, the science of deduction. Your earlier comments suggested that beyond the immediate matter of the wedding, you had a further, *secondary* reason for travelling across to Baker Street. This was clearly an issue of some importance, for you were prepared to wait over an hour for our return. And yet, you had not thought to send a telegram or to alert us in any other way to your impending visit. That this is all a very personal matter is evident from your emotional state. Putting both facts together suggests to me that something has happened very recently which has made this a more immediate concern, which you feel unable to deal with on your own. Perhaps there was also a degree of opportunism in coming here, knowing that your visit to Dr Watson might also provide you with access to his colleague, the detective. I am also aware that last year you were embroiled in some delicate matters at your Cheddington Park home, which may now have ramifications for the planned wedding. All in all, it seemed most likely that that would be the topic on which you would wish to consult me."

She continued to look at him in astonishment. "I declare that I am rarely shocked by much these days, Mr Holmes, but that has certainly caught me by surprise. I hope you will be able to assist me, but I fear that I may be clutching at straws, as this is a most delicate and intractable problem. I would, of course, be pleased to reward you handsomely for any help you can provide..."

Holmes looked troubled by the reference to money and was quick to interject. "My dear lady, you need not concern yourself with the latter. I ask only that you acquaint me with the relevant facts of the case, so I may determine if there is any way that I can assist. Without the data, I can do nothing."

Mrs Aston-Cowper appeared to take this as a positive signal and offered up another of her beguiling smiles. "I will, then, begin at the very start and tell you all that I can. I am not sure how much will be relevant, but will let you decide the matters of substance. You will then understand why it is such a personal and immediate concern."

I took the opportunity to ask a quick question: "You have indicated that this is a very personal matter. Would you prefer it, if I were to leave at this point?"

"Certainly not, Doctor. I know that you work in close collaboration with Mr Holmes and can be trusted to be discreet. You have thus far been very open and honest with me. It is fitting that I should extend you the same courtesy."

I smiled and nodded. Holmes brought his fingertips together and raised them to his chin. He then planted his elbows on the arms of his chair and closed his eyes. Mrs Aston-Cowper then began her narrative.

"My story begins in the summer of 1863, when I was just nineteen years old. My parents, Henry and Vivienne Melrose, felt strongly that all four of their female progeny should experience as much of life as was possible before marrying well and settling down to a quiet life of domesticity. Central to their enlightened ethos was the belief that travel would broaden our horizons and enrich our conversation. I had no great desire to travel, but faced with the gentle encouragement of my mother and the generous financial backing of my father, found myself that year in the colourful city of Paris. All of the

arrangements had been made for me to stay for a period of six weeks, to see all that the metropolis had to offer and to make good use of the conversational French I had been learning for about a year. Travelling with me was Mrs Rose Sutherland, a seventy-year-old chaperone chosen by my mother who had earlier accompanied my three older siblings to their favoured destinations in other parts of Europe.

“From the outset, the carefully formulated plans of my sojourn began to unravel, when dear Mrs Sutherland contracted a debilitating stomach complaint on the sea crossing to France and then spent the first week of the trip confined to her bed within the Hôtel de Crillon. I was content to amuse myself in and around the hotel while she recuperated, each day gaining the confidence to walk a little further from my base, seeking out whatever cultural diversions I could find. Of course, I told Mrs Sutherland nothing of these little excursions.

“On my third day, I visited the impressive gothic cathedral of Notre-Dame, and while walking close to the River Seine chanced upon a group of English artists painting an exterior view of the building. The party had travelled across to France together - a mixed group of male and female painters of all ages who seemed to revel in the relaxed bohemian atmosphere that Paris afforded them. My eye was drawn, in particular, to a watercolour by one of the older men, Gerald Stanhope, who told me that he was a student of the Royal Academy. Imagining that the picture would make a perfect gift for my parents, I asked him politely if it was for sale. He smiled and said that while he could not possibly take any money from me, he would be prepared to let me have the painting if I agreed to sit for him the next day.

“You will no doubt think me naïve, gentlemen, when I say that the proposition - put to me as it was on that fine, sunny day, along a beautiful stretch of river and among a group of talented artists - did not at the time strike me as odd or offensive. I agreed to meet up with the very charming Stanhope the next day, in the Pigalle garret he had rented for the duration of his stay. The following afternoon, I found my way to the garret and climbed the stairs to what was a small, but luxurious attic complete with access to a rooftop terrace overlooking the city’s fine skyline. Stanhope had been true to his word and already had the watercolour wrapped for me to take away. That left the small matter of the sitting.

“Looking around the garret, I could see that he had been extremely industrious in his work; the walls, floor, tables and sofas of the apartment were covered in sketches, watercolours and canvases of all sizes. I could also see various bits of equipment which Stanhope informed me he had acquired for his developing interest in amateur photography. But the two small canvasses which really caught my attention were those hanging in pride of place on the wall of the main room. Both were of young women no older than myself, and each had been captured reclining and naked. I felt myself flush with embarrassment as I realised that this was what the artist now had in mind for me. With the bargain struck, I was immature enough to believe that I had no alternative but to go through with the sitting.

“I should say at this stage, that Stanhope acted without any hint of impropriety, busying himself with the easel and canvas and selecting his oil paints, as I began to remove my clothes. I thought on the of the classical tradition of creative muses and the many women before me who had bared themselves in the name of art. It all felt very wrong, but I convinced myself mentally that it would all soon be over and no lasting harm would result. The artist then directed me to recline on the chaise longue he had prepared and which I recognised from the two paintings on the wall.

“Little by way of conversation passed between us, as he seemed to prefer to work without interruption and with an intensity of concentration that I had rarely seen in a fellow human being. The one concession I did extract from him was that in naming the finished painting, he was not to make any specific reference to the identity of the artist’s model. This he agreed to happily, pointing out the

he had already done that with his two earlier models. In any case, throughout the short time that I had known him, I had only ever referred to myself as 'Virginia'.

"Time passed very slowly in that cramped garret and within a couple of hours I announced that I would have to get dressed and make my way back to the hotel, as my elderly chaperone would, without doubt, be wondering where I was. As ever, Stanhope was friendly and obliging, but indicated that he was far from finished and would have to carry on the following day, expecting clearly that I would make a return visit. Realising this to be the case, my emotions got the better of me and the tears welled up within my eyes. He could see my obvious distress and suggested an alternative, which in the awkwardness of the moment seemed to be preferable. He would set up his camera and take a single photograph of me, from which he could then work at his leisure without any further imposition on me.

"That then was that. When I arrived back at the hotel, I found that Mrs Sutherland had barely missed me. I vowed never to tell a soul about the incident and believed that no one could possibly know what I had done. I realised, of course, that in my haste to get away from that claustrophobic apartment, I had not even paused to look at how Stanhope had portrayed me. Had I done so, I may not have been so confident that this was the end of the matter.

"There is little more to say about the Parisian trip beyond that. Mrs Sutherland failed to return to full health after that first week and we concluded that our best course of action would be to return home early. Over time, I put the whole affair out of my mind and it would only re-enter my thoughts when I glanced occasionally at the Notre-Dame watercolour that graced the wall of my parents' conservatory.

"When I was twenty-five, I met and fell in love with Sir Ashley Aston-Cowper, a distinguished medical man, some years older than me. We were not to be blessed with children and despite his status as a surgeon he suffered with persistent heart problems, exacerbated by his extravagant lifestyle and love of fine wine and rich food. Ours was a happy marriage for the most part, although we had distinctly different circles of friends with whom we spent time, when not together. My preference was to visit my parents and sisters. Sir Ashley liked to mix with the more elite and wealthy members of his various clubs, societies and medical institutions. Occasionally, he would invite some of these to stay for the weekend in the exterior lodge close to the entrance of our Cheddington Park home. It was during this time that I first became acquainted with Roger Morton, the youngest son of the Duke of Buckland.

"From the outset, I disliked the man intensely. He was close to my own age, and younger than most of the group that my husband entertained on a regular basis. In short, he was brash, uncouth and self-obsessed. But what I particularly detested, were his barely concealed attempts to flirt with me in the presence of my husband. Sir Ashley seemed not to notice and clearly saw something in the man that eluded me. Morton lived off the not insignificant allowance that he received from his father, but maintained that he was an art dealer. And it was in this capacity, that he was to bring the past back to haunt me.

"Sir Ashley had invited a dozen guests over one weekend in February last year. Morton had arrived ahead of the others and seemed particularly pleased with himself, saying - out of earshot of my husband - that he had a surprise for me. He explained that the previous week he had purchased a job lot of paintings and ephemera from a major dealer in Brussels. This had included a number of works by British artists, including 'Gerald Stanhope'. He paused, allowing the name to hang in the air and watching for my reaction. I froze instantly, in the dawning realisation of what he had just said, and felt a cold chill descend through my body. 'So, it is you in the painting - I guessed as much!' he whispered with a smirk, before following one of our servants who was carrying Morton's bags and cases.

through the door of the lodge.

“I recognised that Morton had the upper hand and the future of my marriage, if not my standing in society generally, would indeed be precarious if he were to reveal the painting to anyone. That Friday evening he seemed content to let the matter rest, casting me lascivious looks every time our eyes met. And it was only before lunchtime the following day that his intentions became clear. Catching me on the grounds of the house as I strolled through my favourite rose garden, Morton took me by the arm and announced that he wanted me as his mistress. He then added that if I were to refuse, he would reveal the painting to our guests that very evening. He left me to think it over.

“In that instant, I determined that I would not be held to ransom by the scoundrel and realised on the immediate fact. Namely, that in threatening me, he had clearly brought the canvas with him. If I could find a way to get to the picture and destroy it, my future might yet be saved. As luck would have it, Sir Ashley had provided me with a perfect opportunity to put my plan into action. Over lunch, he announced that all of the guests were invited to take part in a bridge tournament in the main house, a proposal that all agreed to readily.

“That afternoon, feigning a headache, I left our guests to their card playing and headed for the kitchen, where I took from one of the cutlery drawers a small, sharpened fruit knife, which I hoped would be sufficient to cut the canvas from its frame. I then took a side door from the house, out of sight of the servants, and walked the short distance down the drive to the lodge. With all of the guests being entertained at the main house, I knew that the lodge would be deserted.

“When I entered Morton’s room, I could see no obvious place in which he could have hidden the painting. All of the bags and cases he had brought with him were empty, their original contents having been placed in the drawers and wardrobe of the bedroom. That left only the small loft space above the bed. I retrieved a set of wooden steps from an adjoining room and climbed until I was able to push open the loft door and look inside. To my frustration, I could see nothing in the darkness and had to come back down the ladder to find a hurricane lantern in a store cupboard, which I lit to take back up with me. My second attempt met with success as I could now see, some five feet from my grasp, a wrapped package which I guessed to be the canvas. But as I went to climb further up the ladder and into the loft, I felt a rough tug on my left ankle and heard Morton shout loudly for me to come down. Startled, I lost control of the lantern and it fell heavily, the glass globe breaking and igniting the paraffin which spilled out from the lamp.

“Morton dragged me bodily from the ladder and pushed me aside before climbing on the steps and trying to ascend into the loft. I seized the opportunity and ran from the room as he was driven back by the flames now engulfing the tinder dry rafters of the roof space. When I managed to get back to the safety of the house, I raised the alarm and soon both servants and guests were running to and from the lodge with buckets of water in a futile attempt to extinguish the inferno.

“Sir Ashley knew that at the time of the fire only Morton and I had been at the lodge. Morton had dropped out of the card game early on, saying that he needed to retrieve something from the lodge. Having raced back to the house to raise the alarm, it was obvious that I had not been in my room, suffering with a headache. That evening, with the lodge now completely devastated by the fire, my husband called both Morton and I to his study and asked for an explanation. My initial fear was that our guest would now take his revenge by telling Sir Ashley all about the painting, which had also been destroyed. However, he went one step further in his vengeance, claiming that we had been having a secret affair for months and I had talked about the prospect of marriage once Sir Ashley had succumbed to the inevitable heart disease with which he was afflicted.

“I need hardly tell you, Mr Holmes, that what Morton did that evening was far worse than revealing

the existence of a scandalous painting. When Sir Ashley looked at me for some challenge or corroboration of the story, I fell mute - unable to defend myself or tell him what had really gone on. Morton was told in no uncertain terms to leave Cheddington Park immediately and to never show his face in front of Sir Ashley again. I was instructed that while we would give outsiders and household staff the impression that our marriage was solid we would, from that moment on, cease to be husband and wife. In the event, there was no need for any such pretence. The shock of the alleged affair was more than my husband's heart could take and during the night he suffered a fatal attack.

"Of course, with a house full of well-connected guests whose weekend had been cut short by the drama of what had gone on, it did not take long for the rumours to start circulating. A mysterious fire, the unexpected death of a Knight and talk that his Lady wife had been having an affair were bound to have a resonance. Some of Sir Ashley's friends and colleagues began to shun me, but on the whole most were supportive in my hour of need. Most significantly, Roger Morton seemed to have disappeared and I was told later by one of our circle that he had gone to New York to work for an auction house.

"The fact that the provisions of Sir Ashley's will remained unchanged and I was left with Cheddington Park and an annual income helped to persuade some doubters that there had been no obvious rift between the two of us. But I felt distinctly uncomfortable about the bequest and decided to cease using the title 'Lady Aston-Cowper'. It was a small gesture, but it was my way of showing that I did not want to dishonour the memory of my dear husband.

"After some months, my life began to return to some semblance of normality, helped by the unerring support of my family. And, most recently, I met Christopher, who has proved to be the most loyal and compassionate man I have ever known. As we became closer, I took the decision to share with him the full story of what the newspapers had called the *Cheddington Park Scandal*."

Our guest paused briefly, and Holmes - who had to that point given every impression of being fast asleep - opened his eyes quizzically, and prompted our guest: "Please, Mrs Aston-Cowper, I think you were about to bring us up to date and reveal the telegram you received this morning from Roger Morton threatening to make public the photograph taken of you by Gerald Stanhope."

The lady swallowed heavily. "Yes, indeed, Mr Holmes, but I am again in awe of your deductive capabilities. I made no mention of the telegram..."

"No. But you did not challenge me when I put it to you earlier that something had happened very recently. And when we entered the room it was clear that you had been re-reading something which had once again brought you to tears. For reasons of vanity, you were quick to dispense with the pince-nez which you slid swiftly into your chatelaine bag. The telegram did not fare so well - it still sits beside you, now looking rather crumpled, but clearly displaying today's date. As for the photograph, it struck me from your account that if Morton had managed to purchase Stanhope's original oil painting - and had been so sure that you were the model in it - it was also extremely likely that he had acquired the accompanying photograph. In my experience, blackmailers relish a solid back-up plan."

"Simply astonishing!" she uttered, a broad smile now covering her face. "So, vanity was my undoing, yet again. And you are quite correct about the content of the telegram. I had not heard one word from Roger Morton since the night of the fire and believed that he had no further hold on me with the destruction of the canvas. The telegram came as a complete shock."

"It would be helpful to see the precise wording of the message," said Holmes.

She rose from her chair and passed the telegram to my colleague. He looked it over for some minutes and then read aloud: '*More to come on Cheddington scandal...a photograph... will prevent marriage = M.*' Very interesting - it seems that Mr Morton is determined to scupper your wedding."

plans, Mrs Aston-Cowper, and is prepared to go to great lengths to do so. That recent announcement in *The Times* has clearly been picked up by our man in America who now plans to travel back to England to sow the seeds of your undoing.”

I then interposed. “Why do you say that, Holmes?”

“Well, he has no way of knowing that Mrs Aston-Cowper has already told your nephew about the canvas and photograph so is labouring under the delusion that his disclosure of the latter would prevent the wedding. That said, if the photograph were to fall into the wrong hands, it could still be tremendously damaging to both their reputations. And yet, Morton clings to some hope that he can negotiate a deal. If that were not the case, he would already have exposed the photograph to the American press, who would no doubt relish a story about the fall from grace of a British Lady. The telegram was sent from New York yesterday evening by the Western Union Telegraph Company. It seems to me that Morton despatched it before boarding a passenger liner for the transatlantic passage to Liverpool.”

With that, he leapt from his seat and began to rummage through a pile of loose folders in a corner of the room. Mrs Aston-Cowper looked on with some consternation. When he returned to his seat a minute or two later, Holmes was waving a bright-coloured pamphlet.

“Here it is - a brochure for the British and North American Royal Mail Steam-Packet Company. The passenger liner *Scotia* was due to set off yesterday for the eastbound crossing. This is the oceangoing steamer that won the *Blue Riband* for the westbound passage three years ago. The voyage is estimated to take between ten and fourteen days, which should mean that Roger Morton will be docking in Liverpool in early September.”

Mrs Aston-Cowper continued to look confused. “And what happens then?”

“Why, it should be a simple matter of greeting him at the port and persuading him to hand over the photograph,” Holmes retorted. “That is a task you can leave to the inestimable talents of Dr Watson here.”

I was flattered by Holmes faith in me, but not a little disturbed at the thought that the social standing of both my nephew and his bride to be might depend on my success in completing the mission. Mrs Aston-Cowper seemed delighted by the plan, rising from her chair to come and shake me warmly by the hand, before offering some words of encouragement.

“Doctor, I will forever be in your debt if you can manage to resolve this issue. It is more than I could have hoped for in coming here today, when my principal objective was to persuade you to attend a wedding! And I will be eternally grateful for the professional assistance you have offered, Mr Holmes. You have a rare set of talents. I must now take my leave. And while I am loath to keep anything from Christopher - as I hinted at earlier - I do believe it would be better for all concerned, if nothing more was said about our meeting today.”

“That would be best for us all,” agreed Holmes, with a mischievous smile. “Without any disrespect to you, Mrs Aston-Cowper, I would not wish it to be known by my colleagues at Scotland Yard that I am now providing guidance on marital matters.”

Our client left us in good humour and I looked forward to meeting her again at the wedding in October. For the next week or so, I sought regular updates from the steamship company on the likely progress of the *Scotia* and made plans to travel up to the Port of Liverpool to greet the arrival of the passenger liner. When it berthed at the Albert Dock on Monday, 3rd September, I was more than prepared for the encounter with Roger Morton.

He emerged from the dock office in the company of a porter who was pulling a hand trolley on which sat a large cabin trunk. Morton was well over six-feet tall and solidly built. He was dressed in

knee-length tweed frock coat, a white shirt and wide dark-red necktie. On his head sat a tall top hat. He looked every part the English aristocrat.

As I stepped forward, he pre-empted my challenge. "Dr Watson, I take it? I understand that you are here to collect this from me," said he, thrusting a large envelope into my hand. There was no warmth in his tone and his dark brown eyes fixed on mine with a degree of menace. Not to be intimidated, I continued to hold his stare and then turned my attention to the envelope. As I opened it, I could see that it contained the salacious image of the young Virginia Melrose.

"Our business is concluded then, Mr Morton," I said, turning briskly and walking away to the bemused looks of the porter.

It was clear that Morton felt he had to have the last word. "For what it's worth, you can tell her that she was never a great beauty!" His words echoed around the dock office. I carried on walking.

When I arrived back at Baker Street a couple of days later, Holmes was waiting for me with a stiff glass of brandy. "Warm yourself up with this, Watson, it is unseasonably cold today."

I could not resist chiding him for the unnecessary display. "Holmes, I have known you too long to be fooled by any of this. You knew full well that Morton could be persuaded to hand over the letter. When I met him at the docks he already knew who you was. So, how did you do it?"

Holmes smirked, knowing that I was more relieved than upset by his intervention. "My dear fellow, I could not send you into battle without providing you with reinforcements. A quick visit to my brother Mycroft was all that was required. Having heard the story, he travelled up to Liverpool ahead of you and arranged to be taken out by tug to the *Scotia* as the liner began its entry to the port. When he tracked Morton down on board the ship, he made it clear that if the rogue did not hand the photograph to you at the dockside, both he and his father, the Duke of Buckland, would be blackballed in every gentleman's club in London. Furthermore, the Duke's loans on the current refurbishment of his Highland estates would be called in, rendering the family bankrupt. I suspect that was sufficient to seal the matter."

I was warmed by the subterfuge. "Then that is an end to the matter, Holmes. A job well done - I have destroyed the photograph, Mrs Aston-Cowper can rest easy, and we can all enjoy the wedding. Let us drink to that!"

2. The Curious Matter of the Missing Pearmain

“Splendid!” exclaimed Holmes suddenly, looking over a piece that had caught his eye in the *Daily Telegraph*. It was a chilly, yet bright, early morning in December 1894. My colleague had asked me to call on him first thing, as he said he had a new case that required my assistance. On arriving at Baker Street, I had been offered one of Mrs Hudson’s marvellous cooked breakfasts and when seated upstairs beside my colleague, had eagerly partaken of the thickly-sliced bacon, fried egg, tomatoes and kedgeree that had been presented to me. In contrast, Holmes had contented himself with a single piece of toast and a strong black coffee and had remained largely uncommunicative beyond his initial greeting when I first entered the room.

He was dressed in a long crimson dressing gown, under which I could see that he was already prepared for a formal engagement of some kind. Beneath the open silk gown he was wearing some sharply-pleated grey pinstripe trousers, white cloth spats, a starched dress shirt and a black bow-tie. I had already noted the black frock-coat which Mrs Hudson had placed on a hanger to his left and the top hat which Holmes had positioned, somewhat incongruously, on the head of a plaster death mask which sat in pride of place on the mantelpiece.

“What is ‘splendid’, Holmes?” I queried, with obvious irritation, having waited for further words and some suitable explanation which had not been forthcoming.

Holmes seemed impervious to my agitation. “It seems that Inspector Lestrade has a rare murder mystery for us to consider, Watson. I apologise for not having explained matters more fully in my earlier telegram, but I need you to meet with the good inspector when he arrives here at nine o’clock this morning. This piece in the *Daily Telegraph* gives us some indication of the puzzle which Lestrade is faced with and the reason he is so keen to seek my assistance.”

I resisted the temptation to ask him about the newspaper article and went straight to the crux of the matter: “So, you’ve called me here to meet with Lestrade at the appointed time, so that you are free to swan off to some prior engagement. Well, I must say, Holmes, I find this most irregular. While my medical practice is quiet at the present time, you know that I am not without commitments, engagements and responsibilities of my own.”

Holmes seemed genuinely stunned by my rebuke and a look of concern crept over his pallid-white features. “My dear Watson, it seems I have been very thoughtless in taking your assistance for granted and presuming that you would be able to stand in for me. I meant no offence, but believe this will be an affair worthy of our attention, since it will be the first time that we have heard from Lestrade since April of this year, when we were involved in what you described, very commendably, in your published accounts as *The Adventure of the Empty House*.”

Ever susceptible to my colleague’s effortless flattery, I was determined to hold out a while longer. “That’s all well and good, Holmes, but you haven’t even told me what this other appointment is and why you cannot meet with Lestrade yourself.”

“It is a small distraction, I assure you. I would much rather meet with our police colleague and had planned to do so when I responded to his request yesterday evening. However, about nine o’clock last night, I received a hasty and unexpected visit from my brother Mycroft. He informed me, rather belatedly, that I am required to attend a lunch appointment at the Danish Embassy today, at which I will be awarded the *Order of the Dannebrog*. I was told about the honour some weeks ago and had asked for it to be posted to me. Mycroft explained that I was likely to cause offence - and something of a diplomatic incident - if I continued along that path and persuaded me instead to accept the award

in good faith from the King of Denmark, Christian IX, who is visiting London this week.”

I could scarcely believe that Holmes had not thought to mention this news earlier and expressed my astonishment at his reticence. He explained that Danish protocol had prevented him from talking about the matter until the award had been received. “In any case,” he added, “The honour was given for my very inconspicuous assistance in saving his youngest son, Valdemar, from some risk involving investment schemes which contributed to the collapse of a major commercial bank in Canada - an entanglement which would have resulted in considerable public scrutiny and financial ruin for the prince. The King has demanded that both the affair, and my role in resolving it, should be kept from the public gaze.”

“Understood, Holmes, but you know that I could have been relied upon to be discreet. There was no need to act so furtively.”

“I realise that now, but my primary concern was to ensure that Lestrade was not put off in coming to us with his case - he trusts and respects you as much as he does me. I need hardly tell you, that I would rather be presented with a single, intangible mental challenge to flatter and sustain my ego, than with a dozen knighthoods. I seek stimulation not adulation.”

Realising this to be the case and having no wish to continue to chastise my colleague, I turned my attention to the newspaper and asked Holmes to relay what had been printed in the *Daily Telegraph*. Having lit his favourite churchwarden and taken two or three puffs of the pipe, he read out the new item:

Mysterious Death at Ravensmere Towers

Detectives from Scotland Yard were called yesterday afternoon to the prestigious new office building of Ravensmere Towers near Hyde Park, following a report of a fatal shooting.

While details remain sketchy, our chief reporter understands that the incident is being treated as a potential case of murder, since no firearm was found near the body. The victim of the shooting was a Mr Edward J Flanagan, an Irish national, who occupied the first floor office of Ravensmere Towers, where he ran a successful business exporting English porcelain to the United States.

Detectives admit to being baffled by the circumstances of the death. The building is accessible only from the ground floor, the sealed entrance to which is controlled by a vigilant concierge. He has stated categorically that beyond those few personnel occupying the plush offices, no one entered or left the building during the time the shooting is believed to have taken place. However, when the Scotland Yard men, led by the very capable Inspector Lestrade, conducted a thorough search of the building, they were unable to find the illusive gunman.

The only other paying tenants of Ravensmere Towers are three brothers in their forties, who operate a depository for rare books on the second floor. They claim to have heard a single, very audible shot at around eleven o'clock yesterday morning. Some moments after this, Mr Chester Godbold - the eldest of the trio - ventured out of their rooms in order to determine the source of the noise. Having done so, he claims to have caught a glimpse of a man holding a revolver, running up the stairs

to the third floor. The man was said to be wearing a heavy grey overcoat and a large tweed hat which covered his head and the sides of his face and prevented Mr Godbold from seeing more of his features.

Inspector Lestrade was reluctant to say any more about the supposed crime at this juncture.

Readers may remember that Ravensmere Towers was opened at the start of this year to some fanfare. It is said to be one of the most impressive modern buildings in the capital. Its offices are fully-equipped with electric lighting and power and all upper floors are accessible via a hydraulic-powered lift, or elevator, in addition to a traditional stairwell. The owner and property developer, Mr Archibald Cartwright, occupies the third floor of the building, and was said to be 'deeply saddened' by the events and has pledged to do all he can to assist the police in bringing to justice the man responsible for the shooting.

"Well, what do you make of it, Watson?" queried Holmes, placing the open newspaper on the table in front of him.

"Quite remarkable. Lestrade and his men were unable to find any lone gunman, so unless the concierge is mistaken - or had, indeed, carried out the shooting himself - the assailant must have been one of those within the building at the time."

"A perfect summary, my friend. We will certainly need to ascertain whether the concierge can be trusted and whether he could have been mistaken about the apparent security of the building. Beyond that, it will be imperative to find out three things: firstly, some further information about the victim, this Mr Flanagan; secondly, full intelligence on the other occupants of the building and, crucially, where each was at the time of the shooting; and lastly, precise details of the layout and accessibility of the ground and five upper floors of Ravensmere Towers."

A large halo of grey smoke was caught momentarily in the sunlight that had begun to stream through the large window of the study. Holmes stood and placed the churchwarden on the mantelpiece and lifted the top hat from the death mask, before adding: "Not an insubstantial task, I grant you, but one that I am confident you can achieve during my absence today."

Within a few minutes he was fully dressed and ready to depart. A prompt ring on the doorbell some moments later indicated that his carriage had arrived and with a cheery smile and a snappy wave of the hand, Holmes was off down the stairs for his appointment at the embassy. I watched from the window as the Hansom cab departed and then returned to my chair to prepare a long list of questions for Inspector Lestrade.

The doughty inspector arrived some fifty minutes later and was visibly dejected and decidedly unimpressed when told that Holmes had departed for a hastily arranged appointment with a European royal. His pinched and drawn features and deep, hollow-set eyes took on a most unusual expression as he pondered how he might proceed in the light of the news. He then sat in the armchair that Holmes had vacated earlier.

"Well, I suppose I can convey to you the key facts as we know them, Dr Watson. You are familiar with Mr Holmes' methods I dare say, so you can prompt me if I fail to explain all of the finer details. He then glanced across at the *Daily Telegraph* which still sat on the table. "I see that you have already

read a little of the case.”

“Yes indeed, Inspector, but I would prefer to hear your first-hand account of what you discovered at Ravensmere Towers. Holmes was most insistent that I obtain all of the relevant particulars, so that I may assist you when he returns to Baker Street later this afternoon.”

Lestrade’s demeanour was transformed instantly on hearing this. His face brightened and he at once sat upright in the chair and started to recount what had occurred the previous day. For my part, I began to take copious notes of everything the inspector presented.

“Well, we arrived at Ravensmere Towers close to midday - my good self and two uniformed constables. The telegram requesting our assistance had been sent by the secretary of Archibald Cartwright, the owner of the building. He greeted us at the door and introduced us to the concierge, James Mount, who then escorted us around the building for the duration of our stay. I insisted that he lock the entrance at that point, to allow no one to leave the building.”

“And could you describe the layout of the ground floor, Inspector?”

“Fairly straightforward. The main entrance consists of two large doors. Anyone wishing to enter Ravensmere Towers must pull a cord outside the building to ring a large internal bell. They are then afforded an entrance by Mr Mount. He has a reception desk and small office just inside the doors with a window looking out onto the street. In that way, he is able to view any entrants before admitting them. During the day, one of the doors is kept on a latch. It is possible to open the latch from the inside and get out of the building, but it cannot be opened from the outside. During the night, both doors are securely locked with keys held by the concierge, who is always the last to leave the building.”

“The main part of the space is taken up with two washrooms which have been installed for all of the office workers - one for the ladies and the other for the gentlemen of the building. They contain toilet facilities and cloakrooms. The windows to these are covered in wrought-iron bars preventing any exit from the building. Outside of the washrooms, towards the centre of the lobby, is the main staircase which ascends to the five upper floors. At the heart of this, is the building’s lift, or elevator, system. And very impressive it is too, Dr Watson.”

“In what way?” I enquired, having little idea what the contraption consisted of.

“I was told by Mr Cartwright that this is the first office building in London to have such a machine. It is a square box, some eight or nine feet across. An iron gate at its entrance is slid across to allow the office workers to step into it. When the gate has been returned to its original position, those inside can operate a series of levers which then transport the box up to their desired floor.” He paused at this point and withdrew his black police notebook from an inside pocket, before continuing to provide further minutiae.

“The contrivance is powered by water under pressure, which comes from a nearby hydraulic power station, which is itself driven by coal-fired steam engines. The whole system is delivered by the London Hydraulic Power Company, which operates north of the Thames. I confess that the details of how it works escape me, but it certainly takes the legwork out of climbing stairs in such a tall building.”

“I can imagine, Inspector. It sounds like an incredible device. And can this lifting box be accessed from each floor of the building?”

“Yes, although it appears that Mr Cartwright makes the greatest use of it. The concierge accompanies any visitors to the building and also assists the secretary, Miss Trelawney, who travels in the lift each morning to get to her room on the third floor. The concierge told me that the noise of the mechanism terrifies the Godbold brothers on the second floor and the dead man, Mr Flanagan, preferred to use the stairs to get to his first floor office, as the lift is very slow to operate.”

“I see. So that accounts for the ground floor. What about the rest of the building and its inhabitants?” I then asked.

“The body was found on the first floor. You will know something of Mr Flanagan from the newspaper account. The floor consists of two linked rooms which serve as one rented office. Access to both is through a single door which faces the stairwell and lift. The first room is windowless and contains a desk and some other office furniture. A further door at the rear leads to the second room which the Irishman used as a storeroom for his valuable porcelain pieces.”

“Two questions, Inspector. Firstly, was Flanagan in the habit of locking the door to his office when at work? And secondly, does the storeroom contain windows that can be opened?”

“The answers to both questions is ‘No’, Doctor. Flanagan locked the door each evening when he left the office. The concierge suggested that this was usually around five-thirty. But during the day, he kept the door unlocked and rarely left his rooms. The windows are a modern design and permanently fixed. They cannot be opened.”

“Thank you, Lestrade. That is most clear. And what can you tell me about the body?”

“Flanagan appears to have been shot at close range, which suggests a handgun of some kind. But there was no weapon in the vicinity. The local doctor who arrived later to remove the body, said the death was most likely instantaneous and the result of the substantial blood loss from a single, fatal shot to the heart. He has agreed to let me know if his *post mortem* examination throws up any further information. Acting on the statement given by Chester Godbold, we searched all floors of the building but were unable to find the gunman.”

“How odd,” I suggested, “And you are inclined to trust the judgement of Mr Mount, that no one could have entered or left the building without his knowledge?”

Lestrade did not hesitate in his response: “I am, Doctor. James Mount could be said to have hidden his light under a bushel. While serving now as a very conscientious concierge, he was formerly in the Royal Horse Guards and has an exemplary military service record.”

“And did he share with you any useful observations on the shooting or the character of Edward Flanagan?”

At this point, the Inspector paused, sat back in the armchair and took a deep breath before answering. “Now, it’s strange that you should ask me that, because he did say something that struck me as irregular. He claimed that no one in the building actually liked Flanagan, whom he described as abrupt, obtuse and argumentative. Flanagan was the first tenant to take an office in Ravensmead Towers and acted like he owned the place. He had apparently fallen out with Chester, Arthur and Frederick Godbold when they first moved in, some two months ago - claiming that they were making too much noise moving around on the floor above him. Mount also said that Flanagan was a few months behind on his rent and had heard Cartwright threatening to evict him on more than one occasion. Only two days ago, Flanagan had also upset Miss Trelawney, the secretary, shouting at her when she refused to allow him in to see Cartwright to discuss the rent situation. All in all, Mount believed him to be a bit of a trouble maker.”

Reflecting on the characters discussed thus far, I then sought some further clarification. “Inspector, you have mentioned Flanagan, the concierge, the Godbolds on floor two and Cartwright and his secretary on floor three. But were there any other tenants or visitors in the building that day?”

The answer was again simple and direct. “No, Doctor. That is our entire cast, with the exception of the missing assassin. And if you want my view on how he could have escaped, I would say that it must have been during those first few minutes when the concierge ran up the stairs in response to the shouting of Chester Godbold. Mount told me that when the shot was fired he was in his office and

heard only a muffled bang. At first, he believed it had come from the street, but stepped outside the office to listen further. ~~He thought he could hear someone running on the stairs, but could not tell~~ they were ascending or descending. And as he strained to hear more, was suddenly aware of the cries for help and ran up the stairs to be greeted by the three Godbold brothers in some distress. If a mystery assailant was hidden in one of the washrooms at that time, he could have made his exit from the building shortly afterwards, out of sight of the concierge, and pulling the latch to behind him.”

From what I had heard, I could only concur with the meticulous detective. And seeing that Lestrade looked to be flagging somewhat, I suggested that we take a short break and enjoy a pot of tea and a slice of fruit cake which Mrs Hudson had very kindly prepared for us. For a short while, Lestrade chatted amiably about life at Scotland Yard and some of the other cases he was working on, but within fifteen minutes he had returned to the events at Ravensmere Towers.

“I ought to furnish you with some further information about the two remaining floors at Ravensmere Towers - I know that Mr Holmes is a stickler for detail. The first four upper floors are of a similar layout and design, with the two adjoining rooms being accessed from the main door facing the stairwell and lift area. All contain the same basic items of furniture and are let as furnished offices. The commonality of design extends to the large, potted plants which adorn each office and run down the walls to the left of each of the main office doors.

“Floor four also has a short corridor running from the back room - the one with windows - to a second door, which provides an alternative exit to the lift and stairwell. It sits to the left of the main office door, obscured by the line of potted plants. The top floor is different again, being but a single open office which runs around the lift and stairwell. Mr Cartwright explained that it was designed to be a large storage area for a business venture which needs only to make the most of the space available without any sort of reception area or desk. The room contains just two small filing cabinets.

“Well, that all seems straightforward, Lestrade. And is there anything further you can tell me about the Godbolds, Mr Cartwright and Miss Trelawney and where they all were when the fatal shot was fired?”

“The Godbolds are strange, but likeable enough. The book business seems to suit them, being studious, academic types. I would be surprised if any of them knew how to hold a handgun. They were petrified when I first questioned them - concerned that the killer was still at large in the building. They claim that when the shot was fired, all three of them were in the back room of their office. Chester Godbold was prevailed upon to go out onto the stairwell and ascertain what had caused the explosion. And when he stepped outside the door, he saw the alleged gunman heading up the stairs. He called for help and was joined shortly afterwards by both his brothers and the concierge. When questioned him later, he was unable to provide any details beyond the short description of the man you will have read in the newspaper.

“According to his account, James Mount then took charge of the proceedings. He told the Godbolds to stay where they were on the second floor while he ran down to the floor below. Having done so, he discovered Flanagan’s body and realised that the porcelain dealer had been shot. As he could see no sign of a gun, he guessed that the shooter must still be in the building and searched the back room of Flanagan’s office and then did a thorough search of the ground floor. But assuming my earlier theory to be correct, I imagine our killer had by then already left the building. Mount returned once more to the Godbolds and encouraged them to follow him down to the ground floor, where he felt they would all be safer. When they had assembled in the entrance lobby, they were concerned to hear that the lift had suddenly started to operate. The Godbolds were told to lock themselves in one of the washrooms while Mount ran to his office and retrieved his old service revolver from a desk drawer. He was

prepared for an encounter with the gunman, but when the lift had descended to the ground floor, I was relieved to see that it was occupied by Mr Cartwright and Miss Trelawney, who had left the office to find out why there was such a commotion elsewhere in the building.”

I interrupted at this point. “So, Cartwright and Trelawney were in their third floor office when the shot was fired?”

“Yes, that would appear to be the case. When I spoke to her later, Miss Trelawney said that she had heard a bang, but the sound had been some way off and had not given her much cause for concern. It was only when Cartwright emerged from the back room some minutes later, expressing some anxiety about the noise that she began to view it more seriously. Cartwright suggested that they make the way down to the ground floor to consult with the concierge. He picked up her work tray on the way and the pair then headed for the lift in order to reach the ground floor, where they were greeted by the sight of James Mount armed with his revolver. He apologised as they emerged from the lift and explained that Flanagan had been shot and it was his firm belief that the killer was still somewhere in the building. Cartwright insisted that they all stay together on the ground floor with the exception of Miss Trelawney, who was instructed to walk to the nearest post office in order to despatch a telegram to Scotland Yard requesting immediate assistance.”

A small detail in Lestrade’s account piqued my interest. “Why did Cartwright insist on picking up Miss Trelawney’s work tray, Inspector? Did he elaborate at all?”

“Yes. He said that she had been working on some of his monthly accounts and the papers in the tray were highly confidential. He indicated that he didn’t like the idea of leaving them behind in an unlocked office and thought it was easier and quicker to pick up the tray and take it with him, rather than spend time locking doors behind him.”

“I see. And what have you found out about Cartwright and Trelawney - anything that might shed light on this curious incident?”

“Cartwright made no secret of the fact that he had been chasing Flanagan for his unpaid rent, but aside from that suggested that the two of them got along well enough. The businessman made his fortune buying and selling commercial properties and has invested a considerable amount of capital in Ravensmere Towers. He strikes me as a determined and direct fellow who usually gets what he wants. He had no clear idea about who may have wished to shoot Flanagan, but admitted that the man had not been popular with the other office workers.

“Cartwright’s secretary, Violet Trelawney, is twenty-two years of age and was taken on only recently. In fact, she has worked at Ravensmere Towers for less than a week. She was on the books of a secretarial agency before that, and was chosen by Cartwright from a shortlist of five candidates. He claims that she came with first rate credentials as a clerical worker and her references spoke highly of her character and, in particular, her integrity and reliability.”

“You mentioned earlier that she had been upset by one of Flanagan’s recent outbursts. Do you think that may have had some bearing on the events yesterday?” I queried.

“I don’t think so. Miss Trelawney came across as a hard-working and honest young woman. She was upset by his abrupt manner, but said that she would not have wished him harm. There was, however, one small discrepancy in the statement that she gave to one of my constables.”

I raised an eyebrow on hearing this. “And what was that?”

“Well, it is such a small and inconsequential matter that I am loath to make anything of it, but know how Mr Holmes insists on scrutinising the smallest of details. Asked if she could remember anything unusual about the events that morning, she told PC Clarke that when she had first sat down at her desk she had removed a Worcester Pearmain apple from her bag and placed it in the top drawer of her desk.”

She had intended to eat it later that morning and put it in the drawer, out of sight, as Mr Cartwright had made it clear from her first day in the office that he did not wish to see any personal belongings left on the desk. She claimed it was a particular obsession of his and that any work she had been given was always placed in a simple wooden tray on the desk, for he would not allow her to have any other items on display.”

I could see no particular mystery in this or, indeed, any obvious discrepancy with anything I had just heard. Lestrade could see the concern on my face and went on to explain.

“Of itself, this does not sound very odd, I grant you. But the point I am getting to, is what Miss Trelawney went on to say. She claimed that when she returned to her desk later that afternoon - after we had completed a full search of the building and found no killer - the apple had disappeared from the desk. By my reckoning, there are only two possible explanations for that. Firstly, that she had been mistaken about the apple in the drawer, or, alternatively, that someone had taken it. And if the latter were the case, it could only have been taken by Cartwright or the killer. When I questioned him, Cartwright said he knew nothing about any apple and expressed some annoyance that my investigations should focus on such a triviality.”

“Most strange,” I replied, trying to hide my own feeling that this was indeed a piece of frippery in the overall scheme of events. Nevertheless, I recorded the relevant facts in my notes to share with Holmes later that day.

For the remainder of our time together, Lestrade explained how the case had been left. Having taken statements from all of the office staff, the police officers had allowed everyone to leave Ravensmere Towers and Lestrade had taken possession of all of the keys to the building. Cartwright had apparently voiced his opposition to this, but the inspector had been insistent. He said that his officers would complete their work the following day and the keys would then be returned to the owner the day after. A constable had been left in the office of the concierge to ensure that no one entered the building without permission. In this way, Lestrade believed he had done all he could to preserve for Holmes whatever clues might still remain to be found. He ended by saying that he hoped my colleague would be able to get across to Ravensmere Towers in the late afternoon or early evening to assist with the investigation. I agreed to send a telegram to Lestrade when Holmes had returned and the inspector then departed, looking noticeably more chipper than when he had first arrived at Baker Street.

It was a little beyond four o'clock that afternoon when Holmes returned to Baker Street. For a man who had just been awarded a knighthood, he looked remarkably sombre and grumbled about the length of time it had taken to complete the ceremonial luncheon. It was all I could do to get him to open the small presentation box and show me the elaborate enamelled white cross he had been given by the king. With little further thought he placed it on the mantelpiece and picked up his pipe.

Having relit the churchman, Holmes sat in his favourite armchair and insisted that I run through the notes I had taken of my discussions with Lestrade. In a fog of tobacco smoke, I spent the next twenty minutes recounting all of the relevant facts while he sat cross-legged, listening intently to every word. When I had finished the recitation, Holmes was glowing in his praise for my note-taking.

“An excellent job, Watson! You have painted a very comprehensive picture of the events yesterday and given me a clear understanding of the facts as they stand. I have no doubt that we can assist Lestrade in resolving this matter later today. But there is no time to lose - I suggest you despatch your telegram immediately and inform the inspector that we will meet him at Ravensmere Towers around five-fifteen. And I would be grateful if you could ask him to request that Archibald Cartwright, Viol

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