

THE FINAL TALES OF
SHERLOCK HOLMES
VOLUME ONE

SHERLOCK
HOLMES
AND THE
MUSICAL MURDERS



JOHN A. LITTLE

The Final Tales of Sherlock Holmes

(Volume One)

Sherlock Holmes and the Musical Murders

By

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as edited by John A. Little

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Foreword.

No doubt the readers of this book will groan inwardly and mutter to themselves about yet another would-be writer pretending to be Watson and dreaming up more ‘undiscovered’ Holmes adventures in the hope of making a bob or two. While I have some sympathy with such a reaction, nothing could be further from the truth. For a start, I am not a writer, merely an editor. As you will soon discover.

The building known to all Holmes aficionados as 221B Baker Street had fallen into such disrepair by 1955 – thanks to the efforts of the German Luftwaffe, and many years after the detecting duo had passed on – that the local authorities deemed it unfit for habitation. It had to be knocked down. By my father, as it happens.

Ender Little had built up a successful business as a builder in London, having been forced to emigrate from Ireland after the lunatic DeValera’s disastrous economic policies of the 1930s. His company (Motto: ‘No Job Too Big For Little’) was granted the contract to demolish nos 220A, 220B, 221A, 221B, 222A, 222B, 223A and 223B Baker Street and rebuild a terrace of spanking new luxurious four-bedroomed town houses, complete with all modern conveniences.

Before the buildings were due to be levelled, he was examining the basement at 221B when he discovered a tall dust-covered office cabinet hidden in a corner behind a dilapidated kitchen dresser. Having no keys, my curious father grabbed his jemmy and cracked open the lock that controlled the four metal drawers. There was nothing but wrapping paper inside the top one, but the other three drawers revealed a series of packages of A4-sized spiral-back notebooks, each held together by two elastic bands in the shape of a cross. Never having read a book in his life apart from his annual accounts, he had no comprehension of his discovery. But he was a cautious man and decided to dump the lot into a cardboard box and take it home that night. And then promptly forgot all about them.

I became aware of this event only six months ago, when I was helping my mother and sister to clear out his effects the day after his funeral. He married late in life, and returned to live in Dublin towards the end of the 1970s with his wife and two small children.

I had climbed up a ladder into the attic and started handing down cartons of what was obviously rubbish – ancient account books from his building company, newspapers, magazines, old clothes, sporting equipment from his hockey and cricket-playing days – when I discovered a cardboard box covered by some spare fibreglass insulation. Its bottom was lodged firmly between two beams and pulling it out almost caused my foot to slip off the beam and crash through the bathroom ceiling.

A rapid inventory produced sixteen packages, each of which contained a varying (one to nine) number of A4 notebooks, dated from 1925–1930. Later, when we were sitting down, exhausted after our day’s work and with our shared grief, I asked my mother about them and she told me what little she could recall of their origin at 221B Baker Street. I pulled off the elastic band and opened the first notebook of a package marked February 1925, the earliest period. Intriguingly, it showed a faded red stamp with the tiny word ‘Strand’ repeated around the edges, and ‘REJECT’ in large letters diagonally across the middle. It was in surprisingly good condition, for a manuscript that had lain in its cardboard coffin for over eighty years.

I had only to finish a single chapter to realise what I held in my hand. All my life I had been a great fan of Holmes and Watson, and had read their exploits avidly, once when I was a teenager, and again when I had been hospitalised for a week while some varicose veins were being stripped. After a quick check of all the packages, it became clear that we had in our possession one novella-length and fifteen shorter adventures of the Baker Street detectives in the last years of their lives, all of which had been

rejected for publication by Strand Magazine for a variety of reasons. One of them pitted the pa against the evil witch of Clapham Junction. Others treated pornography, rape and necrophilia. They were dark subjects for their time, but it occurred to me that Conan Doyle's later pre-occupation with all things supernatural – caused by the loss of his wife and son – may have been a factor in the rejection of the final detective stories, which, as everybody knows, should always have a rational solution, with no hint of smoke and mirrors, magic acts or spiritualism.

As I read on through that dark night, I understood why the first story had never been published within their lifetime. It concerned a series of quite appalling serial murders that, in the London of 1925, would most certainly have caused public mayhem and a possible breakdown of society, had it been fully reported in the press, or if Holmes and Watson had not finally solved the case.

The next morning, a quick phone call to a publisher friend of mine was followed by an early lunch and her excited validation of the first manuscript's authenticity. She confirmed that it could be published as written, with just a little editing to smooth out Dr. Watson's rather archaic writing style and even though its contents were still bound to excite a scandal among today's sophisticated readers with their enlightened attitudes towards the story's central theme.

So here it is. Why not judge for yourselves?

John A. Little
Portobello
Dublin
Ireland
October 31st, 2011

Chapter I. The First Murder.

I had thought that I would never see my dear friend Sherlock Holmes again after he departed the London smog in the autumn of 1903 in order to study the habits of bees in Sussex, while I continued my medical practice and idyllic marriage with my second wife, Beatrice. Our sojourn apart was interrupted by a single adventure in 1914, which I have documented elsewhere as *His Last Bow*. I then re-entered the army as a surgeon, and served in that terrible conflict known as the Great War, while he returned to the safety of his cottage at Cuckmere Haven, on the southern slopes of the Sussex Downs. Or so I had imagined.

We lost touch with each other after that. When the war ended, I was forced to immediately enter a new war of a different kind, as assistant to my own sweet Bea in her desperate struggle against tuberculosis, a fight she was tragically to lose. This left me a twice-widowed doctor with a dwindling business and haunted by some increasingly distant memories of a time of high excitement and derring-do, when I had recorded my adventures with the best and wisest man whom I have ever known.

But this vale of tears has a habit of sneaking up behind us mere mortals and shaking us out of our grief. It was another tragedy that brought Holmes and I together again, one that led to those marvellous last years of our lives, complete with so many dangerous new adventures and difficult challenges. For a couple of pensioners, that is.

Mycroft Sinclair Holmes passed away in his chair at the Diogenes Club on Saturday, February 9th, 1925. Heart. His masterful brow had, in fact, been stilled for about ten hours, but nobody noticed, by this time his days were normally spent asleep in that same comfortable chair, his head covered by the latest periodical. His services to the government as a repository of knowledge were no longer required after the war.

Despite being a Knight of the Realm and the Chancellor of a well-known University, he had apparently collapsed into a complete stupor, sated by hedonistic pleasures of a culinary nature. He had been lazy when I knew him previously, but towards the end, even changing his clothes and performing his daily ablutions proved too much for his enormous girth.

Thus I was informed by McNeill, one of the elder Diogenes retainers whom I happened to be standing beside in the Chelsea All Saints Old Church. Of course, I had hoped that my friend might have appeared at the funeral of his own brother, but try as I may I could not see him anywhere.

As I gazed around the simple hall, I realised how few mourners there were – far too few for such a remarkable servant of the Crown as Mycroft. Most of them looked as though they might be retired Whitehall mandarins, ready for a similar service, and were simply paying their dues. Sherlock's brother must have been approaching eighty, and I supposed many of his colleagues had already left aboard the growler to that vast station in the sky.

'... ess you aynd keep you.

The Lord make his fayce to shine upon you, and be graycious unto you.

The Lord lift up his countenaynce upon you, and give you peace, both now aynd evermore.

Aymen.'

I have always found an Anglican service to be a certain cure for insomnia and had begun to nod off when I was struck by the tone of the clergyman's voice. Even with a faint Irish brogue, it sounded vaguely familiar to me, but for my life I could not place it.

He was a lean stooping figure with a fretwork of lines on a face that spoke of too many sleepless

nights spent worrying about the state of his flock and the dreadful plight of the English-speaking peoples after the war to end all wars. A few stray fingers of white hair fought a battle for containment around his ears as his head wagged backwards and forwards in enthusiasm for his jaded text. He looked at least ten years older than Mycroft, and seemed to be passing time himself.

I cast my mind back into the previous century, struggling to match that high-pitched croak with a suitable candidate from yesteryear. A fellow soldier from the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, with whom I had served in the Second Afghan War? Perhaps a client of ours when Holmes was in his exacting prime? Or an unlikely reformed villain? Had Stapleton sunk in the Grippen Mire? Were Professor Moriarty and Colonel Moran really dead? What about that revolting blackmailer, Charles Augustus Milverton? A customer of mine, whose bowel disorder I may have temporarily ordered? Or one of my two wives' many relatives? No. No. *No*. It just would not come. And so I decided to approach this fellow after the funeral service, and demand that he provide some explanation of those deep, frustrating echoes.

He was standing at the door to greet the mourners as they filed their way out into the freezing fog of a typical London February morning, a regular pea-souper that might have travelled all the way from Hades. I held back until the end deliberately, enjoying the scent of the fresh lilies, so that I could challenge him on our possible acquaintance.

'Thank you for coming,' he croaked as I shook his wrinkled hand.

'Not at all,' I replied. 'Mycroft helped me at a time when I worked with his younger brother, Sherlock, the famous consulting detective. I read about his passing in the Times. I had no idea Mycroft had such an illustrious career. He deserved a better attendance at his funeral.'

'Yays indeed, but it's a cauld, cauld day. And does it matter, when he hays no dowthgone to a better playce?'

'Perhaps not. My name is Watson, by the way. Doctor John Watson.'

'Aaaaagh, yays' he cackled. 'Are you that same hayck who inflicted on a long-suffering public a them complaytely romanticised cayses, pandhering to popular taystes and ignoring most of the scientific detail I had specifically asked you to include?'

His voice had changed pitch and accent from the word *ignoring* onwards. Gone was the brogue, most of the facial etching had faded away and a pair of familiar piercing grey eyes shone clearly in my mine with high amusement.

'I most certainly did no... Holmes!' I cried in complete bewilderment and joy. 'Is it really you?'

'Hushhh, hush,' he muttered, glancing around and taking my arm. 'Someone may be watching. You must come with me into my vestry and I shall endeavour to explain. These are dark days, Watson. Mycroft was murdered, by the way.'

'Murdered, you say? But McNeill told me...'

'Yes, yes,' Holmes said distractedly. 'The Diogenes Club would not want the truth to come out. There had to be some story, in case the dozy misanthropic members of the oddest club in London actually woke up and absconded in terror.'

He was sitting by a mirror, removing his scalp, with its few strands, to reveal a mat of healthy grey hair. This was followed by his make-up, and when he turned around to explain, I was staring at the hawklike features of my old friend, eleven years older admittedly, but extraordinarily healthy and definitely recognisable as he looked me up and down, grinning amiably.

'It would seem, Watson, that you have aged a bit over the past decade. That moustache of yours

as white as a full moon on a cloudless night. Why have you eschewed the excellent new motorised Beardmore taxi-cabs in favour of those filthy old horse-drawn growlers that used to delay us so much? Your practice seems to have dwindled somewhat. I notice you have started to read the Telegraph, a certain sign of aging. Oh, and surely you have not separated from your good wife?’

‘Ah, no,’ I said. ‘She... she died, actually.’

‘Watson, my dear old fellow, I am so sorry. Why didn’t you let me know? I had no idea.’ He gripped my shoulder in dismay, in what he probably considered a comforting manner. I was reminded of my old friend’s well-known deficiencies in human sympathy and his cold, unemotional nature. But then, how could someone who had never known the love of a good woman possibly share in the ongoing, palpable grief of a double widower? I exclude the inestimable Irene Adler, *the daintiest thing under a bonnet on this planet*, from my observation, of course.

‘Well, we *had* lost touch with each other. I imagined you as still wandering over the Sussex Downs harvesting honey and writing a complex monograph on the mating habits of different species of bumble bee. And just why are you disguised as an Irish clergyman at your brother’s funeral? Good God, Holmes, have you made a Faustian pact with the devil? Look at you! You seem so damn youthful and thin, while I’m falling to bits. You’re seventy-one years of age and you look fifty-one. I’m not going to ask how you knew about my hatred of those evil motor things, or about my work, but I’m sure it’s something really obvious.’

‘It is. You haven’t forgotten my method, have you? It is founded on the observation of trifles. Although your appearance accords with your customary neatness, I perceive that your overcoat needs replacing, suggesting a possible difficulty with filthy lucre. Your shoes lack that depth of shine one normally associates with a conscientious wife. Those old carriages are beginning to smell, and unfortunately you reek of one. The Telegraph crossword is sticking out of your pocket. By the way, Royal Jelly is what keeps me looking and feeling healthy. It has many fine vitamins and fights the aging process. I must get some for you.’

‘Yes. Well, that’s quite enough to be going on with.’ I said, nettled. ‘All perfectly simple, as usual. I see you haven’t changed that much.’

‘Where did this disaffection for the taxi-cab come from?’ asked Holmes. ‘I seem to remember you owning a car at the beginning of the war.’

‘I had a bad accident shortly after that. Knocked down some damned silly pedestrian, who sued me for a bucketful of money. Sold the thing, and never want to ride in one again. Enough of that. Tell me about Mycroft. How did he really die?’

Holmes moved swiftly to lock the vestry door. He placed a finger to his lips, as though afraid of being overheard.

‘What I have to tell you will come as a shock, Watson. Needless to say this conversation never happened and you must repeat it to no one. You can never write this story up.’

‘Holmes!’ I cried, incensed.

‘Sorry, old chap. But it has been a long time, hasn’t it? Eh, have you ever heard of the term music when applied to men?’

‘Of course. It means they can play an instrument, like you with a violin. Or a composer, I suppose. Singer?’

I was obviously on the wrong track, as Holmes kept shaking his head impatiently.

‘Let me put it another way. When you were in the army, did you notice any of your comrades who might be – ahem – interested in other... men?’

A light shone dimly from a recess within my brain.

‘Oh, you mean, nancy boys?’

‘Yes, I suppose.’

‘There were a few such people, but they weren’t tolerated much, and had a pretty miserable time of it. Not their scene really, fighting and wars. Felt a bit sorry for them, myself.’

‘Well, Mycroft was... musical.’

‘What?’

‘Yes, Watson. Mycroft confessed his true nature to me only a few years ago. He seemed a bit guilty about it, although his life was celibate by then. I reminded him that his younger brother was the world’s first consulting detective and had actually worked it out for himself. It didn’t bother me. He also mentioned that as a part of his active sexual life, he had once been a member of a group of free thinking bohemian types known as the Bloomsbury Group, a mutual admiration society that used to meet regularly in a smug ivory tower in Gordon Square, over by the British Museum. You know, that ghastly Woolf creature. Free love, and all that nonsense.’

I scratched my head, not knowing what else to do. Mycroft, a nancy boy! A musical man! In effect a criminal! As for free love? That sounded like an oxymoron to me. Love has to be expensive otherwise it wouldn’t be love, surely?

Holmes removed his dog collar and stood up to shake off the two cassocks which had covered his normal clothing.

‘Now. You remember George Lestrade, don’t you, Watson? Well, his son Jasper has followed his father’s footsteps into Scotland Yard. He had heard of my exploits, and of Mycroft’s, and managed to put two and two together when my poor brother’s body was found on the floor of the stranger’s room – the only room where members and guests are allowed to fraternise. The details are rather gruesome I’m afraid.’

‘Holmes. Have you forgotten how you greeted me when we first met? *I perceive you have been in Afghanistan*, I think it was. A doctor does get to see the worst of all things, especially in a war situation. Kindly continue.’

‘Very well. I’ll say this once, and never refer to it again, except as the *murder method*. He was emasculated.’

‘Good God! That’s terrible! Eh, what does that mean, exactly?’

‘He was blindfolded, tied up and his genitals were sliced off entirely and stuffed down his throat with a wraparound bandage. He died from loss of blood. Slowly.’

I stood up abruptly, almost knocking over his table in my anger.

‘Good grief! Such savagery!’ I spluttered. Then turning to my friend: ‘Mycroft did not deserve such an end, despite his predilection for other... men. This doesn’t bear thinking about! Holmes, we must find his killer and have him hanged by the neck until he is dead!’

‘Mmmm. I have different plans for him, when I find him. It was an amateurish and messy business so our friend is probably not a surgeon. Some form of knife was used, I suppose. Watson, the reason that I am in this unholy garb is not because I have suffered a late conversion to Anglicanism. The Reverend Thomas was happy enough to allow me to conduct my brother’s service, which required merely a basic reading skill, combined with a degree of gravitas, quite simple to fabricate. The real danger is that I believe my life to be in considerable danger. Here. Read this. It was found by the body. Young Lestrade sent it to me this morning. It can be handled, as both I and Scotland Yard have checked it for fingerprints without any luck.’

Holmes handed me a sheet of folded paper, which I duly opened to find the following words, part of which had been cut from some bible and pasted to it, and the remainder printed:

~~Even as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities about them in like manner, giving themselves over to fornication, and going after strange flesh, are set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.~~

Think on your sins, Sherlock Holmes, as you are on the list:

1. 'wttrdhhtaweoeeyhpipraosopntt'.

Love and bubbles, *The Goatslayer*.

I read the text through several times before I grasped one of its possible implications.

'Eh, Holmes. Surely you're not... not musical, are you?'

'Hah! Only when I play the violin, old boy. Or enjoy a concert. No. Although I simultaneously worship and distrust the devious opposite sex, the only love between men that I can understand is the one between David and Jonathan in the Book Of Samuel. You know, one soul in two bodies.'

I breathed a sigh of relief. 'Indeed. I concur. I fear, Holmes, that we are dealing here with what the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde referred to as *the love that dare not speak its name*'.

'Watson. Far be it for me to correct you in a matter of literature, but that quote is actually from a poem by Lord Alfred Douglas in 1894 called *Two Loves*. It was, however, mentioned at Wilde's trial for gross indecency:

*'But I am Love, and I was wont to be
Alone in this fair garden, till he came
Unmasked by night; I am true Love, I fill
The hearts of boy and girl with mutual flame'.
Then sighing, said the other, 'Have thy will,
I am the Love that dare not... etc., etc.,'*

'Holmes, you never cease to astonish me, even after all our years together. I never heard you quote poetry before. You really have changed greatly.'

'There was precious little to do in Sussex during the winter evenings, and so I overcame my natural aversion to all things literary, and started reading some serious books. About other subjects, too. For instance, I am now conscious of the fact that the earth revolves around the sun.'

'But does it have a bearing on this case?'

'Indeed it does, Watson. Indeed it does. As you know, I am more interested in the workings of the mind, rather than the body. I am a brain, Watson. The rest of me is a mere appendix. Apparently our murderer is unaware of such details. He is asking me to repent, and that sounds like a very real threat. Quite apart from such trivia, there are certain elements in this case that are not entirely devoid of interest. Notice the word *list*, Watson. There may be many more murders planned, not just mine. The killer of ours is a vain person, who imagines that he is smarter than Sherlock Holmes. We shall see about that. And what about those apparently meaningless letters:

wttrdhhtaweoeeyhpipraosopntt? It is most definitely a puzzle worth solving. We must find the Goatslayer before he kills again.'

My old war wound had begun to throb. All this talk of men with men was making my brain ache. Holmes couldn't understand it, how on earth could I? Then it made me think of my lovely Bea for some reason, and the black clouds descended. I paced listlessly around the tiny room to ease my aching leg, which still contained the remnants of a jezail bullet fired into it by an Afghan warrior at the Battle of Maiwand.

'I don't understand it either, Holmes. Why isn't it possible for two men to love each other without any notion of romance, or some sort of disgusting physical contact entering the equation? Then why wouldn't I have to worry about speaking its damn name at all. I'd like to think that is possible.'

‘My dear chap. Of course it is. It’s good to hear you haven’t lost that pawky humour of yours. You never know, Watson. Some day in the future, the love that dare not speak its name might be more acceptable to society. And deemed less disgusting. As it once was in ancient Rome. Perhaps our fables won’t seem so strange then. After all, the New Testament was written about nineteen centuries ago. Now. As I cannot risk attending Mycroft’s cremation, let us away to 221B Baker Street, with me in my standard counterfeit.’

Holmes picked up a red hair and beard piece, put it on, smoothed out the ruffles, shoved out his belly, bent his knees and transformed himself into a Somerset farmer.

‘Ooooh, arrrr. Oi bain bet Miss Hudson hath readied ’nough vittels for thee an’ me.’

I stared into his red face in wonder.

‘Miss Hudson? 221B Baker Street? Have you taken leave of your senses, Holmes? Or lost your memory?’

The accent disappeared.

‘Not at all. After our little adventure at the beginning of the war with Herr Von Bork, and while you were soldiering away, I was called upon by Mycroft to come out of retirement and help him with several petty war problems. I’ll tell you about these cases some other time, my Boswell, and you can write them up as *The Secret Adventures Of Sherlock Holmes*, or some such lurid title. Once I published my own *Practical Handbook of Bee Culture*, I decided that I’d had enough of bee-farming – there really is a limit to the knowledge to be derived from their behaviour – and sold my cottage. I needed a place to stay in London and was fortunate enough to find our old rooms vacant. Mrs Hudson recommended her niece Lily as a suitable cook and housekeeper. She really is very good, if a trifle too interested in the opposite sex. You’ll enjoy her cottage pie.’

He rubbed his hands together in glee and his eyes flashed with excited anticipation.

‘Come, Watson, come. The game, it doth be afoot. Ooooh, arrrr.’

Devil, but I had missed him.

Chapter II. The First Puzzle.

It is difficult for me to adequately convey my feelings as I limped after Holmes up the seventeen steps of our old hunting-ground, following a bone-rattling drive in one of his new-fangled motorised cabs with their infernal combustion engines. There was conflict, right enough, as I recalled the bad old days as well as the good old days. Days when he was under the influence of a seven-per-cent solution of cocaine, and dead to all around him. Days when his violin spewed out a discordant, depressive wail. Days when he never rose from his bed. I wondered if his boredom threshold was as narrow nowadays.

‘Here we are, Watson. Well. What do you think, old man?’

If I had been expecting something similar to the room that we had shared for so many years, with his chemistry projects bubbling away in a corner, the jack-knife holding down the unopened mail on the mantelpiece and a small rectangular box containing that damned solution, I was surely surprised.

‘But it’s so bright and clean. The air is so fresh. Oh, I do beg your pardon, Holmes. How rude of me.’

He had straightened up and was removing his false toupee and beard.

‘Nothing to do with me. It is the fault of Miss Hudson. She moved my chemistry bench up into your old room, and arranged for the gas lighting to be replaced by electricity. Although it didn’t want for painting to my mind, she had the decorators in last year. The rug did need replacing, I must admit. Do you know, she’s almost as fussy as her poor aunt.’

While Holmes hung up our coats, I completed my audit of the room and realised with a pang that the only remaining differences were caused by the absence of my chair, desk and bookcase. The files, indexes, scrapbooks and bound newspapers remained in their usual places. His Stradivarius was still beside the telephone, his cigars and the gasogene. The Order Of The Legion Of Honour hung upon one wall, which also contained his numerous scientific charts. But the redecoration had removed all traces of the bullet holes which had initialled her Most Gracious Majesty, VR, from his efforts to relieve his intense boredom years ago.

‘Don’t look so downcast, Watson. At least the tyrant allows us to smoke in the room. Pull up the cane chair and share some of Bradley’s finest black shag with me.’

He picked up his familiar cherrywood pipe from the coal-scuttle and his old Persian slipper from the mantel above the roaring fire and eased himself into his armchair.

‘I think I’ll stick to my birds eye, thanks all the same.’

Holmes was silent as we enjoyed our smoking. His brow took on its familiar furrow, indicating a train of intense concentration that must be pursued to its logical destination at all costs. He steeped his hands beneath his lower lip. I believe he forgot I was present for a while, until the rattan chair squealed in my efforts to get comfortable.

‘Watson. There you are. We must find your old chair. I’m sure it’s around here somewhere. I’ve just recalled a detail from my childhood, which might have a bearing on this case. But first, let’s have some tea. Or would you prefer something stronger, to salute my elder brother’s departure?’

‘Tea is fine, thank you.’

‘Miss Hudson! MISS HUDSON!!!’

A door clanged to in the basement. This was followed by the thump, thump, thump of heavy clodhoppers upon wooden stairs and a continuous drone that I could only identify as the muttered complaints of a young woman as she flung open the door and entered the room.

‘’ow many toimes ’ave oi asked yer to use the bleedin’ bell we ’ad instawllled fer yer, Mr. ’Olmes

There's noffink oi like less than yer voyce screamin' moi naime for awll o'London to 'ear. O', 'ell deary. Who migh' yer be?'

Miss Lily Hudson could not have been less like her aunt if she had been picked at random from newspaper advertisement. To my tired eyes she looked more like a model than a housekeeper. Small and neat in stature, she had jet-black curly hair, bobbed in the fashion of the day, above an oval-shaped face with mauve lips that reminded me of the actress Louise Brooks. She had an ample bosom and wore breeches and boots, almost military-style. Holmes and I both stood up before we could stop ourselves. It's a wonder we didn't stand to attention.

'Miss Hudson, may I introduce my old friend and colleague, Dr John Watson?'

'Charmed, oi'm sure. Ye're the gent wot wrote all them detective stories, ain't ja? Oi read them in the Strand Mag. My auntie Martha told me all abaht yer. She said yer was quihe a one for the goil an' oi were to watch moi step if oi ever meh yer. So oi'm watching moi step, Watsey. Oi've got mo' eye on yer.'

I'm not sure whether Holmes was laughing at the colour of my face, which was either a bright crimson or deep purple, but he certainly seemed to be enjoying himself at my expense. I decided that elderly dignity would be my safest response to this spirited young woman, who must have been at least forty years my junior, if not fifty.

'Eh, delighted to meet you, Miss Hudson. Those stories were not made up by me, you know. They were accurate renditions of Mr Holmes' cases. They were not fiction, but fact.'

She dangled a hand at me flirtatiously. Yes, flirtatiously!

'O', ge' away. Were there really awll them orange pips an' the six nappyoleons? Yer could 'ave fooled me. An' did 'e die at the Rykenback Wowterfall, oi arsk yer? Anyways, if Mr. 'Olmes is detective, then oi wanna'be in on 'is nex' case. Oi'd be ableidin' good sniffer, oi would. An' oi'd do for free. Well, almos' free. Noffink oi'd like behher than a bi' of action. Wot ja wan'?'

'Tea for two, please, Miss Hudson.'

'Righ'. See this ov'r 'ere?'

She had moved to the fireplace and was pointing to a press-button bell in the wall.

'This 'ere's a bell. If yer push it, oi'll hear it dahn in the slave quawters, an' yer won' 'ave to shout moi name awll the bleedin' time. Bell. B.E.L.L. Two teas comin' up. Will Watsey be stayin' for lunch?'

'He will,' replied Holmes.

As she passed by me, she stopped to straighten my tie, looking me in the eyes as she said, 'Oi use to 'ave a teddy bear loike yer when oi were lihhle.'

The room seemed to shrink after she'd left. I sighed with relief. There was a time, I thought, but sadly that time was long gone. Did she know I was seventy-two, I wondered? Then: there's no fool like an old fool.

Once Holmes had finally recovered his customary gravitas and settled himself on his armchair, was back to the business of Mycroft's murder.

'Now, Watsey,' he said. 'I am expecting young Lestrade at any moment. I need to know the details of Mycroft's autopsy. He should also have a list of all the Diogenes Club members and guests for the previous week, although I doubt if the Goatslayer has been considerate enough to lend us his real signature. While we wait for him, I suggest we examine this note in more detail. I haven't had time to do so, what with my clerical duties. I'll get my lens and we should go over to the table.'

'Yes, Holmes, all right. Provided you stop calling me Watsey.'

His reply was a warm smile, raised eyebrows and a gesture with his pipe that promised nothing but

further baiting down through eternity.

‘First, what can the paper tell us,’ he said, holding it up to the light and turning it around. There was nothing on the other side. To my mind, all we had to work with was the bible quote, and the handwritten scrawl, signed by The Goatslayer. But I had forgotten about my friend’s knowledge of all things trivial and his capacity for abductive reasoning, wherein he would use existing facts to generate an hypothesis about unknown events.

Several minutes had passed before he spoke again.

‘I spent some time studying the different types of paper once,’ he murmured. ‘I may even have written a short monologue on the subject. I can’t remember. Brain cells too damaged by all those years of cocaine abuse, I suppose. You’ll be glad to know, Watson, that I have not yielded to the temptation of the needle for several years now. I am self-rehabilitated.’

So it wasn’t just Royal Jelly that gave him his energy. Noted.

He continued. ‘This is a common form of book text paper, used by the publishing industry. No watermark. The serrated edge on one long side tells us that it was obviously torn from a book itself. Which book, it is impossible to tell, although the other, shorter torn edge at the top suggests either self-publication on a hand press, or a book that has been published in uncut royal octavo form, sixteen pages to a sheet. The size is, let me see...’

Holmes pulled a wooden rule from a drawer in the table and set about measuring the paper.

‘I thought so. Ten inches by six and a quarter. This is the conventional royal octavo size. The paper does not have the same texture as the extract from the bible, which is thin, opaque and heavily loaded. So. A bookworm, bookshop owner, writer, publisher? Perhaps. Now for the Bible extract. What does it tell us about our killer?’

‘Well, it’s definitely from the King James Version, as the others are slightly different. As you have already observed, it’s the New Testament, the Epistle Of Jude, Chapter One, Verse Seven. God rained down fire on Sodom and Gomorrah because of the depravity of their inhabitants and He didn’t want the Jews to be infected by it.’

‘Watson. I’m impressed. Don’t tell me you’ve got religion in your old age.’

‘No, Holmes. Just a misspent childhood studying the Bible closely, before abandoning it for a life of science.’

‘So our pal might be of the Anglican persuasion. But the extract could be from any King James bible. There must be a few of them around. The message is clear. Musical men must fear the Almighty, as they are destined for Hell and eternal damnation. Usual psychological intimidation. It might be a religious freak.’

‘Or it might be someone pretending to be a religious freak, with other motives entirely,’ I pointed out.

‘Good, Watson. Presumably relationships between musical men are subject to the same nauseating complications as those between dissonant men and the fair sex. If it were not for the ‘murder method’ that is. It suggests a hatred of the tribe, and their practices. Let’s remove the gum, examine it, and see what’s on the other side.’

Just then the door banged open and Lily clumped in with a huge tray, which she deposited on the end of the table.

‘Tea fer two, an’ two fer tea, me fer yer an’ yer fer me alown,’ she sang, winking at me. ‘Wo’ ja goin’ there?’

Holmes immediately folded over the sheet of paper.

‘Thank you, Miss Hudson. That will be all.’

There was no possible way that either Holmes or myself would have involved this innocent young girl in such a sordid affair. She finally left the room in high dudgeon when we made it clear that her assistance was not required on this particular case.

'Yer jes' wai' an' see,' she said. 'The day'll come when the pair of yer'll need the 'elp of Lil' 'Udson. An' maybes she won' be aroun' then. So there!'

The door slammed shut, to be followed by a cacophony of hurried clumpings down the stairs.

Holmes took the lid off the teapot, held the paper over the aperture and waited while the paste melted. Then he lifted a pair of tweezers from the drawer and proceeded to pick delicately at the Biblical quotation. Once it had been removed, he laid it upside down on the table and bent over to sniff the paste on the upper side.

'Gum arabic. Used in lithography, printing, paint, cosmetics and ink control. Edible, too.'

Holmes licked the glue and made a face.

'But not particularly tasty.'

'Printing and ink connects to the idea of the paper being used by a publishing company, doesn't it?'

'Watson, you haven't lost it, you know.'

'Yes, well. What about the quote and the Goatslayer signature?'

'Think on your sins. The word sin suggests Roman Catholicism, rather than the Church Of England, which doesn't know the meaning of the word. His message is carefully printed, even his signature, so we can't analyse his handwriting in any way. Now for the string of letters *wtttrdhhtaweoeeyhpipraosopntt*.'

Holmes stared vacantly into space, as though the meaning of the letters lay somewhere over my shoulder, on a wall chart. Now it really did seem like old times, and I felt a sudden surge of energy at the prospect of adventure and danger. The thrill of the chase. My friend seemed to have got himself a new lease of life. Why couldn't I?

He held the paper up to the light. 'There are no needle marks to indicate a pinprick cipher. As you know, Watson, I am an expert in all branches of cryptography. My trifling monograph on the subject, which analyses one hundred and sixty separate ciphers – *On Secret Writings* – has garnered considerable plaudits from around the world. Because of this, I was involved briefly in breaking a rather special grid cipher for the government towards the end of the war, concerning a certain shipment of arms to the enemy. Indeed, it may be that our work was instrumental in ending the conflict. That is not for me to say. What if this is something similar?'

'What on earth is a grid cipher, Holmes?'

'Well, it's nothing to do with dancing men, you will be pleased to know. We have thirty letters, so the grid might be 5×6. I'll create a simple matrix of the letters. Here.'

His nib scratched noisily over the paper. 'That's not quite it, but I think we're on the right track. We'll try 6×5 next.'

Holmes handed the sheet of paper back to me, with the letters from the message looking like this:

W	T	T	R	D
H	H	H	T	A
W	E	O	E	E
Y	H	P	I	P
R	A	O	O	S
O	P	N	T	T

‘I understand, Holmes. It’s really quite simple. This one reads ‘whwyrothelhaphthoponrteiotdaepst’, if you work from top to bottom on each column.’

‘Precisely.’ Holmes created a second matrix and handed it back to me with a smile of satisfaction on his face. ‘Now what have we got, Watson?’

This time the grid read as follows:

W	T	T	R	D	H
H	H	T	A	W	E
O	E	E	Y	H	P
I	P	R	A	O	O
S	O	P	N	T	T

‘So now we have the letters:

‘*whoisthepotterprayandwhothepot*’. This just sounds equally meaningless to me.’

Holmes wrote the letters out again and handed the paper back to me.

‘Now what does it read?’

‘Who is the potter, pray, and who the pot? Well, that makes for better English, but it’s still doubly Dutch to me. Although there is something in the Book of Isaiah about pots and clay.’

‘It is a quote from Edward Fitzgerald’s translation of Omar Khayyam’s Rubaiyat: *Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?* The wine bowls come alive and ask: Did God invent man, or did man invent God? A fascinating question, Watson. Is he giving us a hint as to who he is? A sculptor perhaps? Is it simply a clue? Does he want to be caught? Does he think that he is God? Talking of God, Watson. The quote is questioning the existence of a Supreme Being. What about it? Do you believe in the existence of a benign God?’

‘Holmes, how could you possibly ask me that? Of course I believe in God! Don’t you?’

‘I have to admit, old man, that my childhood faith was thrown into disarray by that war of war. What kind of God could have tolerated such slaughter on both sides? And then there’s that Darwin chappie, with his theory that man is descended from the ape. He claims to have proof. It might well be true. I’ve always found it hard to believe that God damned us all because some woman ate an apple. Everything connects, Watson. And nothing has meaning. Our ideas must be as broad as Nature if we are to interpret Nature. Don’t tell me that you have faith in an afterlife?’

‘Of course I do. My Mary and Bea are waiting for me there!’

‘Yes, of course they are,’ he sighed patiently. ‘You’re a lucky man, Watson. Let’s forget about such unknowable ideas for the time being, and focus on the quote. What does it tell us? Is it a cipher itself? In other words, a cipher within a cipher? What kind? Or is it a form of substitution code? He needs to work a bit harder on his simple-minded grids if he wishes to flummox me. And that word – Goatslayer? What religion prohibits homosexuality more than any other?’

‘Islam? And they kill and eat goats in the Middle East,’ I suggested.

‘Precisely. And with a certain kind of slaughter knife, too. Might be a clue, might not. Omar Khayyam was a 12th century Persian astronomer and poet, so that’s another link. Let me see if my indices have any more data on him or his translator.’

Holmes retrieved a thick volume from his book shelves.

‘Here we are. Edward Fitzgerald – born in Suffolk of a wealthy family – never needed to work for a living – preoccupied with flowers, music and literature – de-da, de-da, de-da – marriage to Lucy Barton lasted only a few months – very close to some male friends. Hah! There we have it, Watson. Reading between the lines, I think we may assume that the translator of the Rubayait was like Mycroft. A musical man. Is it a clue, perhaps? A clue within a cipher, rather than a cipher within a cipher?’

Holmes sat down abruptly and flung the paper impatiently down the table.

‘Oh, I don’t think we can get any more out of this note just now. More data is needed, Watson. We can’t make bricks without clay. Now, unless I’m much mistaken, the musical door-bell has sounded signalling the arrival of young Lestrade. Let us drink our tea while we await the unfortunate spawn of the bulldog George, who incidentally passed away last year. May his soul rest in eternal peace, as his life was a continual irritation to his betters.’

‘Holmes!’ I protested.

Chapter III. Jasper Lestrade.

‘Mr. Lesteraday to see yer, Mr. Houlmes.’ Lily, complete with faux-gentry accent, attempted a curtsy and failed, staggering back as she ushered a lean ferret-faced young man into the room. She recovered to close the door delicately behind him.

Jasper Lestrade sported a pencil moustache and twirled a homberg nervously in his hands. A visible wave of relief seemed to come over him when Lily shut the door. For myself, I felt that I was entering one of Mr. Herbert Wells’ time-warps, as his clothing and general demeanour were carbon copies of his father’s. A much younger version, of course, and without the sallowness of his father. For some reason he assumed that I was Sherlock Holmes and ventured towards me, hand outstretched.

‘I am very pleased to meet you at last, Mr. Holmes. Most sorry to hear about your esteemed brother.’

I shook his hand cordially.

‘How do you do, Detective Lestrade. I am Dr. Watson, Mr. Holmes’ biographer. This is Sherlock Holmes,’ I said, inviting him to meet my friend.

He switched tack immediately to shake the hand of his father’s old enemy.

‘My father told me so much about you, Mr. Holmes. Especially towards the end. All of it good. None of it bad. Well, he may have tried to match you once or twice, and complained about it to the family when he lost out, but I’m here to tell you that any assistance you can give me on the cases I have, would be much appreciated. I need help on this horrible one, sir, and that’s a fact. I’m clear on my depth. We all are, at the Yard. None of us can make head nor tail of it.’

Holmes cast a sideways glance at me, as if this were too good to be true. Either Jasper Lestrade was a genuinely humble policeman – a contradiction in terms, in my opinion – or else he was a masterful manipulator of egos. And he appeared to be rather better educated than his father, which I imagined might be an advantage to us.

‘Lestrade. Please. Sit. Your father was definitely the best of the professionals,’ oozed Holmes. ‘He was a dedicated policeman, and a practical man who lacked imagination, but who knew his limitations all too well.’

Lestrade seated himself at the table, but kept his coat and scarf on. He seemed unaware of any insult to his father’s memory.

‘Yes. Thank you for your kind note on his demise. It was much appreciated by my mother and I. I’ve put my cards on the table, Mr. Holmes. I am more ambitious than my father, and I believe that you and Doctor Watson can assist my career. I was raised on your exploits, and have studied your exciting cases in some detail. The manner in which you arrived at the solution that forced Mr. Jonas Oldacre to expose himself in the matter of the Norwood Builder, I found especially admirable. My father saw himself in competition with you, and was heavily prejudiced against what he called the interference of ‘those Baker Street amateurs’. However, I feel that certain crimes necessitate a more circuitous route to their solution than are provided by professionals. Provided no laws are broken, of course. Might I repeat my sincere commiserations at the loss of your brother, sir? This business must be very trying for you.’

‘Yes, well. Grief has a way of disappearing over time, and during that time I shall be focussing on the capture, arrest and indeed, punishment of his murderer, this Goatslayer. Hopefully before he can get his hands on me. Any ideas on that?’

Lestrade pulled a slip of paper from his coat pocket and handed it to Holmes. ‘This is the list

members and their guests who had frequented the club on the two days before Mycroft's murder. The Diogenes employees are written on the back. The autopsy report has been delayed, I'm afraid.'

'Thank you,' said Holmes, spreading the sheet out on the table. 'Why the delay?'

'Well, sir. The toxicologist discovered certain... drugs... in Mr Mycroft's system, and wanted to carry out further tests as to the presence of other... substances.'

'Really? Most interesting. Do you box?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You look like a very fit young man. What is your sport?'

'Not boxing. But I do play some football for the police team. Association football. When I have time, that is.'

'Good. We must work closely together from now on, young Lestrade. You may have noticed that Watson and I are no longer in what is fondly known as the first flush of youth. We will need your legs.'

Lestrade looked pleased. 'I'll do my best,' he murmured. 'Long as it doesn't interfere with my duties at the Yard.'

'Excellent. We make a formidable threesome. And you will go far in your profession, I assure you.'

I felt a momentary qualm at being included in Holmes' plans without being asked, and somewhat nettled by his blithe assumption that I was free to join him on his cases. But he had observed all too accurately the paucity of my medical practice, and so my nature was swift to resurrect the loyalty which had kept me by his side all those years ago. If he needed me now, I would be ready again. And for my part I was happy to have some time away from those few patients of mine, with their dreary problems.

'Do you have any data on the type of weapon used in the... method, Lestrade?' asked Holmes.

'None whatsoever. It could be anything. All we can presume is that it is more blunt than sharp because of the mess.'

'But it might be sharp, and in the hands of an incompetent?'

'I suppose so.'

'Good. And can you keep this murder out of the newspapers for the time being?'

'Yes.'

'Excellent. Are you familiar with the terms of reference of the Diogenes Club, Lestrade?'

'Eh, no, Mr. Holmes. Can't say that I am.'

'It is for the convenience of the most unsociable and unclubable men about town. There are many men in London who have no wish for the company of their fellows or their women. Yet they are not averse to comfortable chairs and the latest periodicals, printed on unrustling paper. It is for these that the Diogenes Club was formed. No member is permitted to take the least notice of any other. Only in the Stranger's Room is talking allowed. Three offences, if brought to the committee's notice, render the talker liable to expulsion. Someone who coughs three times can be expelled. My brother was one of the founders, and I have myself on occasion found it to have a very soothing atmosphere. Before he was expelled, that is. Can you tell us the time of death, Lestrade?'

'To the nearest hour, it was four o'clock, Mr. Holmes. A.M., that is.'

'Indeed. So my brother was murdered at night. Is the Diogenes Club open then?'

'No. But all the members have their own key, and can come and go as they like. It is possible that Mr. Mycroft fell asleep after dinner, and simply remained in his chair – as had apparently become his habit – until the arrival of the murderer. I have talked to Joseph, the doorman. He found the body at seven, shortly after coming on duty. He claims no other members were present then.'

‘So it could be anybody who managed to get a copy of one of the keys. Not necessarily one of the members or staff.’

‘Yes, Mr. Holmes.’

‘I see. Now, the list.’

Homes smoked his foul shag tobacco intently as he perused the list.

‘This is splendid work, Lestrade. You’ve managed to gather details about each member, such as age, occupation, marital status, duration of membership, address. I notice that two thirds of them are over eighty years of age, and the balance over fifty. The Diogenes Club should really start a membership drive, or else it will fold within a decade or two. Have you interrogated anybody?’

‘Yes, sir. All of them, and the staff also. We spent the first two days of our investigation establishing their whereabouts during the night. All members are married or widowed, and their wives or butlers have provided solid alibis. Of the staff, only Joseph is not married, and the others have similar alibis. It would seem that the club is a bolt hole during the day only, Mr. Holmes.’

I noted with favour that young Lestrade was capable of irony, something his father had lacked entirely.

‘Would it be possible for a day guest to remain there and hide somewhere in the club overnight?’ Lestrade suggested.

‘I checked that, Doctor Watson. Each member must sign a guest in and out, with the guest’s signature included, in the Visitor’s Book. None were missing. Joseph also keeps a record of arrivals and departures, and confirms this.’

‘Right. Well, I don’t think we can get any more out of the members than you, Lestrade. But we must have a look at the Stranger’s Room, at least. I shall have to disguise myself as a senior policeman, a no mean task. Watson can be my sergeant-in arms. Can you arrange that for this afternoon, Lestrade?’

‘Yes, sir.’

I coughed gently.

‘Holmes?’

‘Yes, Watson?’

‘Why would Mycroft enter the Stranger’s Room with his murderer? Might he have known him?’

‘Yes. I suspect that it is very likely that Mycroft knew his murderer. Now, the employee list,’ replied Holmes, turning over the sheet of paper. ‘Hmm. O’Neill is the only name I recognise. Perhaps their staff has turned over since my time there. I’d like to talk to Joseph, at least.’

‘Eh, Mr. Holmes, that might not get you very far. Joseph is rather... simple. His history is that of an orphan who was adopted by a pair of wealthy philanthropists, who secured this position for him. He has been well trained at what he does, but I doubt if he can help us in any way. And although his parents were black, he suffers from albinism. He has no pigment in his skin and he looks white.’

Holmes placed his head in his hands. It was a gesture that I recalled from our previous life together. It usually meant that he was getting bored and losing interest.

‘Gentlemen,’ he cried. ‘Without facts, we have no case. It is a capital mistake to theorise before we have all the evidence. We need... information!’

‘What about the note left by the murderer?’ enquired Lestrade. ‘Have you made any progress with it?’

Holmes indicated with his pipe that I should explain our findings to the young policeman, which I duly did. When I had finished, I noticed that my old friend had descended into the sort of silent reverie that used to indicate a profound concentration, but I rather fancied from the shade of sadness on his fine aquiline features, that he might be contemplating his dead brother and their childhood together.

The only sound in the room was the steady ticking of the clock, until I became aware of a familiar clumping from the direction of the stairs.

Like clockwork, at one o'clock a grunting Lily Hudson banged open the door with her backside and entered the room carrying a sizeable tray with a steaming bowl and several dishes. She slammed it pointedly onto the table beside Lestrade, who leapt out of his seat in alarm.

Holmes chuckled.

'Won't you stay for lunch, Lestrade?'

'Thank you, Mr. Holmes, but I must be getting back to the station. I'll see you both this afternoon at the club. Three o'clock alright?'

'Excellent,' replied Holmes.

'There's 'nough fodder fer three, sur,' cackled Lily wildly.

Lestrade grabbed his hat and backed out of the room hastily. It occurred to me later that he might have gone all the way down the stairs backwards, just to keep an eye on Lily as she chased after him.

Holmes seated himself at the table, flicked his napkin over his trousers, and picked up his knife and fork.

'Hmmm. This smells delicious. I must remember to award Lily the fulsome praise she will no doubt be expecting. Tuck in, Watson. What do you make of young Lestrade?'

'He seems genuine enough, and a lot brighter than his father,' I replied, a forkful of pie pausing on its way to my mouth.

'Hhmm. *Seems* being the operative word. There's nothing wrong with being a careerist. Or a diplomat. I shall reserve judgement also, until we see how much help he can give us. Eat up, old fellow. After our lunch we must away to the scene of the crime. By Beardmore taxi-cab, of course.'

I groaned.

Chapter IV. The Stranger's Room.

'Did you know, Watson, that Diogenes was a Cynic, who believed that personal happiness was satisfied by meeting one's natural needs and that what was natural could never be shameful or indecent? He was determined to follow his own inclinations and not adhere to the conventions of society. Living a life of extreme simplicity, he slept in a tub on the street and survived on a diet of onions. He became notorious for his philosophical stunts, such as carrying a lamp around Athens during the day, claiming to be looking for an honest man. The story is that he held his breath in order to commit suicide. When asked how he wished to be buried, he left instructions to be thrown outside the city wall so that wild animals could feast upon his body.'

'No.'

'What's the matter, old man?'

As if he didn't know.

'If you expect me to work with you on this case, we will have to find a different mode of travelling, Holmes. This hackney rattletrap is intolerable. And if you think the old broughams were odorous, then I rather think your exposure to Royal Jelly has destroyed your own sense of smell. For petrol and oil anyway. And they go so *fast*. There are bound to be serious crashes in this incessant London fog. We could be killed!'

'I believe you've become a bit of a grump during our separation, Watson.'

'But Holmes, don't you miss the musical clatter of hooves and the screech of the carriage wheels?'

'No. Not at all. But I accept that you do, Watson. You are, after all, the one fixed point in my changing age. Ah, here we are. Thank you, Mr. Rees.'

He leaned forward and pushed some coins through a window to the cab driver. I caught a glimpse of a shiny, bald head above an angelic cherub-like face that looked far too young to be driving a murder weapon like the Beardmore through the dense fog of wintery London.

'My pleasure, Mr. Holmes.' The voice was a sing-song Welsh accent.

'Holmes, before we alight from this fireball, can you satisfy my idle curiosity on one subject?' I asked.

'I'll certainly try.'

'Why were you expelled from the Diogenes Club?'

'Hah! For talking to other members, of course. Three times. I grew bored and suggested to one fellow that he could sleep much more soundly at home, as he was obviously single and without family. Another objected to my assertion that his wife might not appreciate his intense perusal of the pearls of wisdom in the Times agony columns. The third was snoring so loudly that I simply said, *shush*. They finished it. Mycroft was on the committee that made the decision, poor chap. He never forgave me.'

Once we had managed to find it through the gloomy swirl, number 15 Pall Mall proved to be nothing more than an innocuous plain wooden door lodged between the more grandiose Atheneum and Reform Clubs. Neither plaque nor notice existed to identify the Diogenes Club. Far too exclusive for ex-army surgeons, I decided.

And Holmes seemed nothing less than a senior policeman, with his stove-pipe hat, black Inverness cape, bushy eyebrows and fine spread of bristling mutton-chop whiskers. He hammered his cane authoritatively upon the door, which was opened by a liveried doorman, dressed exotically in broadcloth, linen and silk stockings and with long, plaited blonde hair, like someone straight out of Harriet Beecher Stowe. Except that his features were purely white. His eyes shifted rapidly from side

to side before focusing on us. When Holmes asked for Detective Lestrade, this throwback to another time and country, who was obviously Joseph, grinned continually as he ushered us into a narrow colonnaded hall, wherein Jasper Lestrade paced up and down, as though we were late. Which we were not.

‘Mr. Watson. There you are. And Mr. Holmes?’

‘Inspector Holmes to you, Lestrade,’ said my friend sternly.

‘Ah... yes, indeed. I hardly recognised you, sir. Well. We can sign the Visitor’s Book over here, Inspector.’

Once signed in, we deposited our cloaks and were asked to place socks over our shoes. Then Lestrade led us up a flight of stairs to a richly-carpeted balcony that jutted out in a semi oval shape from an elongated glass panelling, with a door at either side. I peered through this window at the strangest sight. It was like a monastery. Men were sitting alone in tiny cubby-holes, reading newspapers or sleeping. They were like wax dummies in a motionless ballet by Diaghilev, set to the gentle music of... snoring.

‘This is the main room, Inspector. I must ask you not to make any noise when we move through it to the Stranger’s Room, as all conversation is frowned upon.’ Lestrade actually placed a finger to his lips.

We threaded our way carefully through the silent members, some of whom turned away from the intruders, until we reached a single door to the rear. This led to a small passage, like that between the two carriages of a train, and through to another door.

The Stranger’s Room showed few signs of the recent murder. It was comfortably furnished, with book-cases lining the walls and a huge log fire that roared hospitably from within a wide fireplace. Comfortable chairs ranged in front of it, with periodicals spread across them. Two luxurious aspidistras spanned the doorway. A long case grandfather clock ticked away beside a wide bay window that looked out over Pall Mall. The bottom half of this window was delicately engraved with items of fruit and different family crests on each pane, against a background of fluted glass, which prevented anyone seeing into the room from the outside. It was flanked by a pair of step-ladders, presumably for use against the book-cases.

‘Where was Mycroft’s body found?’ demanded Holmes, whipping out his pocket lens.

‘Over here,’ replied Lestrade, pointing to a small area beside the fire. ‘He was bent over forward with his head between his knees. He... he was undressed. He had no clothes on. Oh, and he was tied up.’

Holmes appeared disinterested in this news. I tried to imagine the scene, but without luck. My life with Beatrice had been a happy one, but I doubt if we had ever disclosed our naked bodies to each other. True, there were attempts to have children – several, actually – but they came to nothing, and after a lot of giggling, we decided to leave well enough alone. Nevertheless, I still missed our nights together, when we could snuggle up to one another for warmth on a cold winter’s night. Enough. My leg was giving me gyp again.

‘I see. And was he definitely killed here?’

‘Yes, Mr. Holmes. There is no sign of blood anywhere else. We have checked.’

Holmes knelt down to explore the carpet with his lens. It was heavily stained with black blood while the hearth and wainscoting were sprinkled with crimson splashes. Lestrade and I wandered about the room, trying to picture what might have happened there four nights ago. I was at a complete loss even to imagine Mycroft without his customary illustrious garb, and so I sat down and waited for Holmes to do his thing.

‘Most interesting,’ he said, standing up. ‘The weapon, Lestrade, is a conventional farming implement, used for killing animals. A well sharpened slaughter knife with a straight blade twice the neck width is outlined within the blood marks on the carpet. The killer wiped the blade on it.’

He looked around the room. ‘It seems we came through the only door. There are also the two doors on the landing, one of which leads to a bathroom and the other to the Main Room. What else is on the ground floor, Lestrade? Is there a basement?’

‘Just the kitchen and restaurant, Mr. Holmes, with more toilet facilities. And a single guest apartment behind them which is rarely used, apparently. There’s no basement. A double garage at the rear of the garden opens unto Carlton House Terrace.’

‘And no secret doors into this room either, eh?’

‘Not that we know of, sir.’ Lestrade smiled at the idea.

Holmes walked slowly around the room, tapping each oak wall panel with his lens, checking, imagined, for any variation of sound that might indicate a hollowness, behind which there could lie a magical passage to the street. But there were none.

‘Hmmm. I’ll check the other rooms on the way out. Now, the window’.

To my eyes, there was no certain way of opening it, or climbing through it into the room. The only aperture was a ventilation fan in the middle, with a long string attachment. Having examined it closely, Holmes climbed onto one of the ladders and peered through the clear glass at the top. First to the left, then to the right.

‘A busy day in the Mall. Lots of Beardmore Mark Ones, Watson, choking their filthy fumes up into the atmosphere. And many nags on old hansoms, spreading their heavenly ordure onto the road. And that musical squish, squash! There goes Joseph into Huggett’s shop. He must have a sweet tooth. Quite a queue outside the butchers. Fresh meat today! Oh, well. If one wished to study mankind, this might be the spot. But no one could have come through here, unless they were invisible or disguised as a whiff of smoke,’ he declared as he turned to step down.

Just then I heard a loud cracking sound, followed by the splintering of glass, and Holmes’ body was falling to the ground off the step-ladder. I rushed over to him.

‘Holmes, are you hurt? Holmes!’

My old friend lay still on the carpet while Lestrade ran from the room, presumably to chase after the person who had fired the bullet through the window. My only agonised thought was for Sherlock Holmes.

There was a significant amount of blood, but a swift examination of his body proved that only his left ear had been grazed. His pulse was steady and his pupils seemed normal in size. I concluded that he had knocked himself out when he had fallen to the ground. I sacrificed my handkerchief to staunch the impressive flow of blood from his ear, and waited patiently for him to come round.

Lestrade had returned by the time Holmes opened his eyes and stared up at me.

‘Watson, we must find that chair of yours. Mycroft is dead, you know. Aaaaaagh, Moriarty, get away, get away! You evil genius! MRS. HUDSON!’ He smiled weakly at me and closed his eyes again. It took him another minute or so to recover properly and realise where he was. His momentary hysteria had vanished.

‘What happened? Why am I on this damn floor?’

‘Steady, Holmes. Someone tried to kill you, and the bullet nicked your ear.’

He grimaced. ‘Ah, yes. Our potter friend from the Rubayait, no doubt. He must be losing his touch. He sat up and I helped him over to a couch in front of the fire, keeping his ear covered.’

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