

SHERLOCK HOLMES

CONSULTING DETECTIVE

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SHERLOCK HOLMES
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“The Affair of the
Wretched Flesh”

by
Joshua Reynolds

The sound of a Stradivarius in the night inevitably fills me with a sense of creeping dread. It was by the manic, mournful echo of that bow across those strings that I knew when my friend, Sherlock Holmes, had fallen afoul of the mundane.

Such was the case on the night of January 3rd, when the slithering strains of sound rose from the armchair near the window, Holmes hunched forward like some melancholy bird of prey. Pipe smoke wreathed his head like an off-kilter halo. It was a blustery, unpleasant night, and there was nowhere within the confines of 221B Baker Street that I could secret myself from the haunting melody.

Thus, with a sigh, I set aside my paper and rose to bait the dragon in its den.

“Holmes,” I said.

The music soared. Somewhere below us, I knew that Mrs. Hudson would be glaring upwards in disapproval.

“Holmes,” I said again, slightly louder.

The bow screeched across the strings with an evil hiss and Holmes sat back in his chair.

“Watson,” he said. “I grow weary.”

“Have you eaten?”

“Bread and water. No more sustenance was required.”

“Then I am not surprised that you are feeling faint, my friend.”

“It is not the pangs of the stomach which gnaw at me, Watson, but rather something infinitely more ethereal.” Holmes twisted his head, looking up at me. “How long has it been?”

“Since?”

“A case, Watson, a case!” Holmes barked, stabbing the air with his bow. “My mind reels beneath the weight of boredom. It sinks into a morass of despair-”



It was by the manic, mournful echo of that bow across those strings that I knew when my friend, Sherlock Holmes, had fallen afoul of the mundane.

“A trifle melodramatic, perhaps?”

Holmes sniffed, and turned back to the window, his reflection glaring sullenly at me.

“I have not had a case in weeks,” he said, finally.

“A week and four days, to be exact.”

“Precision does not suit you, Watson. You are singularly ill-equipped for it.”

Stung, I said nothing. Arguing with Holmes was rather like arguing with a badger. Right or wrong, you were guaranteed to get bitten.

Holmes must have seen my expression reflected in the window, for he gave one of his characteristic short, sharp barks.

“Don’t frown on my account, Watson.”

“I wasn’t-”

“Tut-tut, say no more! Say no more!” Holmes rose, face alight. “Things are always darkest before the dawn, Watson.”

“Holmes, I must say that this outburst of good cheer is uncharacteristic to say the least-”

“Uncharacteristic? Perhaps. But not undeserved. Hark, I hear a most queenly tread...” Holmes pointed at the door with his violin bow, extending it like a fencer’s foil.

The sound of knuckles rapping against the door caused me to start slightly.

“Come in, Mrs. Hudson! Come in!” Holmes said loudly.

“Mr. Holmes, Inspector Lestrade is-” our landlady said, as she opened the door and stepped aside.

“—here to see me, yes, yes, I am aware,” Holmes said, tucking his bow beneath his arm and reaching for his pipe and a box of matches.

“Oh, were you?” Lestrade said, sourly. A sallow, ferret-faced, dark-eyed fellow, Lestrade looked more akin to a criminal than one of Scotland Yard’s finest.

“Quite,” Holmes said, without elaborating further. He lit his pipe and puffed contentedly when it caught. He cocked an eye at Lestrade. “Well?”

“You’re not going to tell me, are you?” Lestrade said.

“I am not a mind reader, Lestrade,” Holmes said, lips quirking in a quick smile. His eyes flickered the length and breadth of the hapless inspector and Lestrade shifted uncomfortably.

It was warranted, that discomfort. Lestrade was ever uncomfortable with my friend and his keen intellect. Something about Holmes—dare I say, his personality?—simply rubbed the Inspector the wrong way in all ways

and Holmes took every opportunity to reinforce that feeling by playing with Lestrade mercilessly, the way a cat will with a mouse.

I disapproved, of course, but despite my intentions—and actions, at times—I was not Holmes’ keeper, merely his chronicler. And, to hear him tell it, a poor one at that.

“Well, the reason I’m calling is—”

“A theft?” Holmes said, idly.

Lestrade frowned. I was unable to stop myself from giving a snort, and the Inspector’s glare shifted from Holmes to me. I held up my hands, indicating that I had had nothing to do with Holmes’ question.

“It was a theft, was it not?” Holmes said, pipe smoke wreathing his features. He took his pipe from his mouth and gestured with the end. “Animals, if I’m not mistaken.”

Lestrade took off his hat and sucked on his teeth. He sighed. “No getting around it. Yes, blast you, there was a theft—”

“Of animals?”

“Yes! Yes, animals,” Lestrade ground out. I took pity on the Inspector and said, “Do take a seat, Lestrade. Would you like some tea?” I gestured to the still warm pot Mrs. Hudson had brought up earlier. “It’s a cold night out, and I’m sure you could use something warm in your system.”

“No thank you, Doctor. I’ll say my bit and be off, I think,” Lestrade said stiffly. Holmes made a sound half-way between a chuckle and a grunt. He turned his chair from the window and plopped down, legs extended, posture abominable. He fluttered a hand.

“Speak,” he said.

And Lestrade did, in clipped tones. “A ship bound from Capetown came into Royal Albert Dock last night. Carrying a cargo of exotic animals for the Royal Zoo. Breeding stock, I gather, though I don’t know much about such things—”

Holmes made another sound, but composed himself quickly, before Lestrade could do much more than furrow his brow. “Go on, go on,” Holmes said.

“It seems that at some point between the unloading and the delivery, several of the creatures disappeared, cages and all.”

“Ah,” Holmes said, sucking on his pipe. His eyes closed. “And?”

“And? They disappeared!” Lestrade said. “That’s it!”

“Yes, Lestrade, but why come to me?” Holmes said, eyes still closed. Lestrade’s face went tight and his nostrils flared. I could tell that he was dangerously close to exploding. There were times when I admired

the Inspector's iron control of his emotions, especially when it came to Holmes. He had yet to resort to physical violence, though Holmes prodded him mercilessly. "I'm sure even a blind child could see why the beasts were stolen."

I could, at least. Exotic pets were a fashionable accessory from the lowest stratum of society to the highest. The more exotic, the better. I myself had debated the peculiarities of purchasing an ill looking monkey in the East End only a few days before, if only to get it the proper treatment.

"Of course," Lestrade said. "We did check, you know. We have had experience with this sort of thing, you know." Lestrade let out a breath. "We've checked the usual spots where that sort of trade one might find. Nothing. No one has heard nothing about these beasts..."

After a moment of silence, Holmes cracked one eyelid. "Ah."

"No sign of them. Except the cages."

"The cages?" I said. Holmes smirked. Lestrade nodded.

"We found them all asunder not a few alleys away from the docks. Just ripped apart..." he said, trailing off. "Not dismantled, you understand, but completely destroyed."

Holmes eyes were closed again. "No sign of the animals, I assume? No sightings of a lion in Piccadilly?"

"How did you know one of them was a lion?" Lestrade said. Holmes snorted.

"As with anything, the thieves obviously stole the most important items. The shipment, if I recall correctly, consisted of a pair of young male lions, the same again of leopards, a female elephant, a bevy of wild dogs, and an eight strong troop of baboons. The lions, one can assume, would have been the first cage stolen. Plenty of buyers there, in the lofty reaches of the aristocracy—" Holmes stopped. He took out his pipe and pointed at Lestrade. "The apes?"

"Gone."

"Vivisection," Holmes said. My flesh crawled. "The lions will bring a tidy profit from an individual looking for an unusual pet. The apes are in high demand for medical studies, as well as the odd medicinal quackery. Do you recall the affair of the Creeping Man, Watson?"

"Yes," I said, feeling my face twist in revulsion. "But surely the other animals would be of equal value—"

"Hmm. No, the elephant was simply too large to steal. The wild dogs, despite their odd appearance, would be considered no more special by a

thief than any alley mutt. *Dogs is dogs is dogs, innit?*” Holmes said the last in a Cockney accent, eliciting a grunt of humor from Lestrade.

“And the leopards?” I pressed.

“Too vicious. Male lions are notoriously lazy creatures. Quite fierce in the right circumstances, but these had been hand-reared by a dealer in Capetown. Thus, little threat to a careful man. But the leopards, ah,” Holmes shook his head. “Leopards are uncontrollable, even when raised by man. And these were wild. No, no, even the most ignorant of men recognizes a dangerous animal when it glares at him, whether it be through leaves or the bars of a cage.”

“How did you know all of this? About the animals?” Lestrade demanded. Holmes waved a hand towards the stack of newspapers sitting on the floor near the window.

“I read, Lestrade. If you have not done so, I encourage you to pick up the habit. It will serve a man in your line well.” Holmes sucked on his pipe.

“Well,” Lestrade said. I could tell that he was insulted, but, thankfully, not overly much. Indeed, he even smiled slightly as he caught my eye. He snapped his fingers. “Then how do you explain the cages?”

“Why, that is the simplest of all,” Holmes said. He leaned back in his chair. “The cages undoubtedly have some form of identification etched into them. Thus, to cover their tracks, the thieves dispensed with them.” He spread his hands.

“That simple, then?” Lestrade said.

“That simple.”

“Well, my superiors will be pleased, I suppose,” Lestrade said. He sniffed. “Though I believe they were hoping you’d lend that mind of yours to helping us track down the Crown’s property, as you’ve done so many times before.”

“No, no, I simply have too much to do at this moment, Lestrade.” Holmes flicked his fingers. “Quite busy, you see. Besides, this is hardly a test of a man’s cranial matter, Inspector. You should have the thieves in custody within days, if not hours.”

Lestrade and I shared a look, then I rose and walked the Inspector to the door. As I opened it, he said, “I suppose I’ll see you tomorrow then, Doctor?”

I looked back at Holmes, sitting hunched in his chair, basking in his cleverness. I looked back at Lestrade. “Almost certainly.”

When Lestrade had left, I sat back down across from Holmes, lit my

own pipe, and waited. When his eyes opened once again, I said, "How did you know?"

"How do you think I knew?"

"I presume you saw Lestrade approaching from your position near the window."

A smile flickered across Holmes' features for a moment. "And?"

"I also presume that you knew he had been down to the docks because of what he tracked in on his shoes," I said. Holmes nodded.

"We'll have to have clean that before Mrs. Hudson sees it, by the way," he said. "And the animals?"

"Animal hairs on his coat?"

"Lestrade owns a dog," Holmes said, simply. "You rely on your eyes overmuch, my friend." Holmes tapped his aquiline nose. "Lestrade bears about himself the faintest perfume of captive animals. Moldy straw, dung and the particular sun-baked odour which permeates the flesh of the inhabitants of Africa, be they man or beast."

"And the theft?"

"Simplicity." Holmes stood, abruptly. "Lestrade displayed little urgency and little inclination to be here."

"How is that any different from any other time?" I asked, before I could stop myself. Holmes laughed.

"Lestrade only comes bearing two gifts, my friend," Holmes said, holding up two fingers. "Murder and theft. Or some combination of the two. In the case of the former, Lestrade displays the urgency of a hound on the hunt. Despite his flaws, he attributes the greater sin to be the taking of a life. He displayed none of his customary urgency in that regard, thus I deduced it was a theft." Holmes shrugged. "Simplicity, as I said."

The next morning, Holmes awoke me with a sharp jab from his walking stick. I fumbled to a waking state, my vision blurred.

"What? What is it?"

"Will you sleep the day away, Watson?" Holmes said. "I weep for your patients."

"I weep for my *patience* as well," I snarled. Holmes turned and left my room without replying. He was dressed and ready for an excursion. I took my time readying myself, listening to Holmes stalking up and down through the sitting room, his cane tap-tapping. It was still dim outside,