

SEASON of MADNESS

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(A Doctor Watson Adventure)

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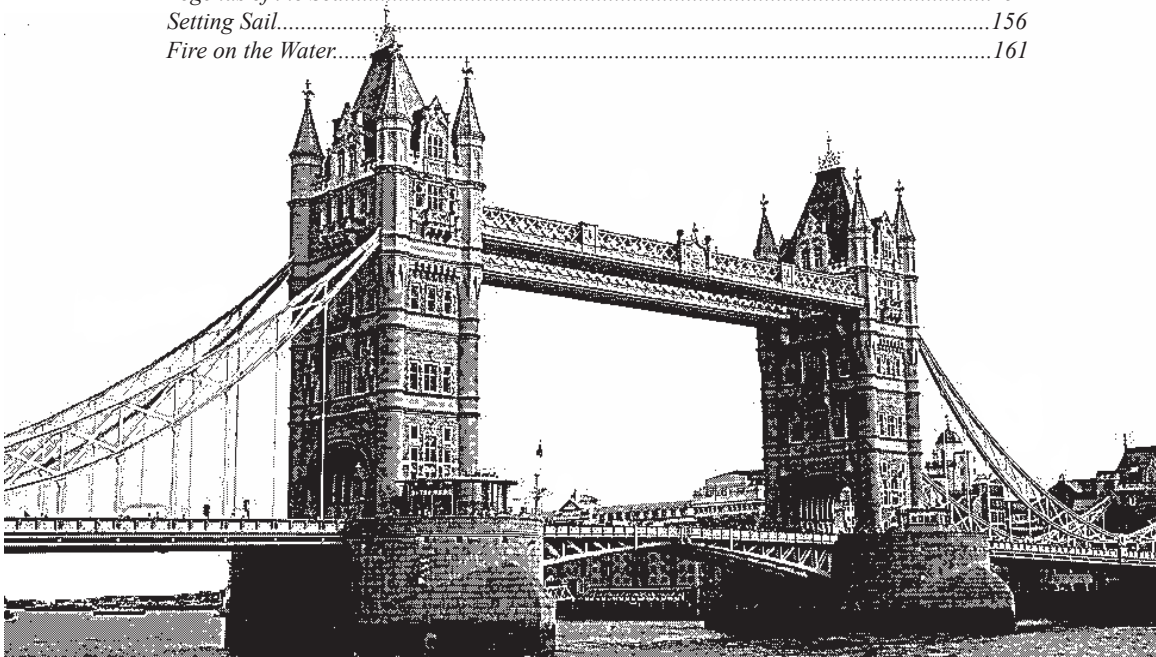
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“Attack of the Electric Shark”

(A Hound Dog Harker Adventure)

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Chapter I: Madness Gathers 'Round

It was a fairly typical mid-morning in the autumn in London when the first sign of the scattered madness first caught the attention of the people. The streets were busy, as they always were in that part of the city; people bustling back and forth, some on their way to or from the places at which they were employed, others shopping or otherwise going about their business.

The crowd moved along the streets, some intermittent rudeness punctuating the flow of foot traffic, but the people were, as usual, moderately polite and mostly concerned only with their own comings and goings. Then came the voice, louder than all the others, booming from somewhere among the mass of pedestrians, audible over even the clapping of the horses' hooves and the harsh rolling sound of the hansom wheels.

“Get moving, people! Move! Move along!”

The man in the top hat began to shove his way through the crowd, first startling an older gentleman with a rude passing jostle. He came bursting through the crowd, his movements growing cruder and more violent with each step.

Some of the people turned to see who was causing all the commotion. They were greeted by the sight of a tall man in his thirties, built like a

boxer, with thick bushy sideburns. His face was a purposeful scowl and he barked like a guard dog as he pushed and shoved.

“Outta the way, you bloody fool! Imbeciles, all of you! Make way! Some of us have plans of great importance to carry out! Move, you bloody idiots!”

Another man, younger, and well dressed, stepped into the path of the rude, hurried man. He put up his hands as if to signal the rude one to stop his obnoxious behavior.

“Please, sir,” he asked, “There is no reason to act in such a manner. You, sir, are in the presence of gentlemen and ladies. A bit of discretion and a gentler tone of voice would serve just as well.”

The man in the top hat punched him square in the face. Shock was apparent on the younger man’s face as blood spurted from his nose. A woman standing nearby began to scream.

“Summon the police! Summon the police!” she cried.

The rude man flung his top hat to the ground in a display of further anger.

“This is intolerable! Let me be on my way!”

Two of London’s police appeared on the scene, attracted by the noise and confusion.

“You, stop there, halt!” shouted the blue-coated officers of the law, grabbing hold of the large, rude man. They were quickly flung aside like small cloth dolls.

The residence of Alexander Bird and his family sat on the outskirts of London. It was a moderately sized, well kept home, one which passersby would correctly assume belonged to a well off, but not excessively affluent, family.

Night had come to London and those citizens who kept normal hours were mostly asleep for the evening. Alexander Bird had not been ready to retire for the night yet, so he had gone to his study for a few quiet hours with a book and a drink. The rest of the household, as far as he knew, were soundly sleeping, each in their respective quarters.

One floor above Alexander’s study, his seventeen year old daughter, Clarice, suddenly awoke. She sat up in bed, feeling a sudden, irresistible urge to do something she had never done before. She pushed aside the blankets and sat up in bed. Her long, black hair fell around her shoulders as she stood. She did not reach for her robe, nor did she bother to stop for her slippers. She took a lamp from her bedside table and lit its wick.

She went to her door, opened it, and stepped out into the hallway in her nightgown and bare feet.

She walked to the end of the hall and descended the staircase, not making any extraneous noise, but not being particularly careful to maintain quiet either. She had things on her mind other than consideration for her sleeping family members.

Within minutes she had reached the parlor. She entered and looked around, the room illuminated only by her lamplight. The parlor was typical of that of houses of the Bird residence's size in that part of London. The room contained several chairs, a couch, bookshelves along the walls, and a piano with its accompanying bench.

Clarice Bird placed the lamp atop the piano and sat down on the bench. Her slim fingers began to dance upon the keys and music, perfectly executed, began to stream forth from the instrument.

Upstairs in her own bedroom, Clarice's mother was stirred from sleep by the sound of those piano keys. The music was breathtakingly beautiful, ethereal and enchanting. She had never heard such music. She rose from her bed, threw on a robe and slippers and followed the trail of exquisite sounds, down the steps and into the parlor. Mrs. Bird gasped as she saw that her daughter was the source of the wondrous sound.

"Clarice, is that you? How are you doing that?" she said, amazed.

Clarice turned to look at her mother. She continued to play as she glanced over. The music did not stop.

"How am I doing what, Mother?"

"Clarice...the music," said her stunned mother. "You've never played like that before; not once!"

Clarice smiled, but it was not the charming smile that her mother was used to seeing from her daughter. It was a strange, serene, but oddly trance-like smile, like the expression of one who has been hypnotized.

"Mother...sometimes people change."

Mrs. Bird went pale. She was shocked by the emotionless way her daughter had just spoken to her.

"But you've never even been interested in that piano, Clarice," she said.

Clarice offered no further response. She turned back to the piano and kept playing, the music growing louder, stranger, but also more beautiful.

Mrs. Bird opened her mouth and screamed out her husband's name.

"Alexander! Alexander!"

In his study, Alexander Bird nearly fell out of his chair. He had been

engrossed in a book of poems, blocking out all noise in the background, mesmerized by the beauty of the passages he had been reading. The solidly built gentleman with the neat graying beard spilled half of his drink and stood up quickly, surprised and worried by the panic in his wife's voice.

He ran to the parlor to find his wife standing in the doorway trembling and his daughter seated at the piano, still playing. The music caught Alexander's attention now and he stopped moving and just listened. His wife spoke.

"How is this happening? What does it mean?"

Alexander was too entranced to even attempt to answer his wife's question.

"Listen to her. It's beautiful," was all he could manage to say.

"What does it mean?" his wife demanded.

Alexander moved closer to the piano and his wife followed. They stood behind Clarice, the music still flowing from the piano as her fingers danced flawlessly across the keys. Alexander Bird finally uttered a response to his wife's repeated question.

"It means that we are witnessing either a miracle...or the work of the devil!"

The Carpathian Mountains stood, dark and foreboding, like a landscape from some subconscious memory, common to all members of the human race; the kind of place that would tend to spring up in nightmares. Snow was falling, joining the arrival of nightfall in those dreadful mountains. The gypsy-driven, horse-pulled cart had come to a halt. The wagon was surrounded and its attending Romanian gypsies defended themselves against those who stood against them and their master. Jonathan and Mina Harker, Abraham Van Helsing, Quincy Morris, Arthur Holmwood, and Dr. John Seward were all prepared to fight to the death against the thing in the coffin atop the carriage and its servants. Seward and Holmwood, armed with guns, held some of the gypsies in place with threats of bullets. Jonathan Harker and Quincy Morris battled their way through the remaining gypsies, surging towards the wagon and finally climbing atop the stilled vehicle. Morris was wounded, but his American fortitude would not be stopped. The lid was torn from the coffin. Inside laid the soon-to-awaken target of their crusade...Dracula, the wretched thing that had come to London and made their lives into a series of nightmares. Now they had pursued the vampire lord back there, to his homeland, and they intended to destroy him.

As the lid was torn away, the sun descended below the horizon. The vampire's eyes opened! His face turned into a malicious expression of pure hate and his pursuers knew that they had to strike swiftly and decisively. Harker's dagger sliced across Dracula's throat, while Morris's big Bowie knife plunged into the count's undead heart. Dracula's reign of terror and bloodshed was finally, mercifully, ended!

Dr. John Seward woke up. He could feel the hard surface of his desk under his forehead and he knew he had fallen asleep in his office again. Trying to wade through piles of reports had exhausted him and he had dozed off, only to relive that night in the Carpathians yet again. He stood and walked to his phonograph recording machine, which it was his habit to use to keep his diaries of both cases and personal thoughts. He started the recording process and began to speak.

"Being a doctor, particularly one of my specialties, I am fully aware of what dreams really are. Dreams are composed of bits of the mind's mysterious workings; a potent mosaic of memory, fantasy, thought, desire, fear, and whatever other debris accumulates in the head of a man. I know, with absolute intellectual certainty, that the events I keep reliving in my dreams are events of the past...gone by and never to be repeated in my lifetime, but they keep returning to haunt almost every night's rest, lingering as if I may never be rid of these horrible visions. We won our battle! The evil we sought out was indeed destroyed! But I wonder if that bloodthirsty monster has not gained some victory by taking up residence in our minds, never to be fully driven out."

The recording of his thoughts usually served to calm Seward's mind after such episodes and he retired to his bed and found himself able to sleep soundly for the rest of the night.

Morning arrived sooner than Seward would have liked. He felt rested, but not nearly as rested as would have restored him to the full vitality of the young man that he was. The lack of sleep since the Dracula ordeal had been wearing on him of late. He woke and soon returned to his office, where he added a few words to the previous night's phonographic journal entry.

"I have even gone so far as to write Professor Van Helsing, my mentor and friend, for advice. I thought perhaps his skill with hypnosis might bring me some rest...but he cannot come. He has gone to America on some business. Will there be no end to these damned dreams, no respite from the torment of recollection?"

Having just finished speaking his thoughts aloud to the machine, Seward was startled by a sudden knocking on his office door. The voice of his assistant and chief orderly, Sullivan, rang out.

“Doctor, Doctor Seward, are ye’ in there?”

“Come in, Sullivan,” Seward responded. “What is it?”

Sullivan walked into the office. He was a short, stocky man in his mid-forties. He had a look of urgent excitement on his swarthy face.

“Coppers just brought us a live one, Sir! Bloody mess ‘e is, this one, Sir, a hell of a bloody mess!”

Seward stood up. He suddenly felt awake again, as if the news of a new patient had broken his tired, hopeless mood. He was already headed to the door as he replied to Sullivan’s statement.

“What do you mean, ‘a bloody mess,’? Explain, Sullivan, or better yet... take me to the man!”

As Seward was about to bolt through the door, Sullivan raised a hand to signal for him to wait.

“Just a minute, Sir, one o’ the coppers insisted on speakin’ to ya before you see the patient,” Sullivan informed him. The orderly turned to the door and called out, “C’mon in, Inspector!”

The policeman entered, nodding to Sullivan and walking over to where Seward stood. He was a thin, ferret-like man of forty or so, in a typical non-uniformed policeman’s overcoat, holding his derby in his left hand. He extended his right hand to greet Seward.

“Inspector Lestrade, Scotland Yard.”

“This is a bit odd, Inspector,” said Seward as the two men shook hands. “We’re not used to having patients brought in by the police with no prior notice at all. Such an event can be made easier on all parties if a bit of preparation is made...”

Lestrade interrupted.

“I’m sorry, Doctor, but this isn’t exactly an ordinary patient...if there’s any such thing in a place such as this one!”

Seward could feel himself growing impatient with Lestrade’s roundabout way of getting to the meat of the matter.

“Then explain, Inspector. Please.”

Lestrade stepped around Seward and plopped himself down into a chair to the side of the desk.

“We got word of some commotion about two hours ago. It seems a shop clerk had gone runnin’ out into the streets screamin’ and cryin’ for the police. One of our patrol constables, a fellow called Paddington, went to

see what all the fuss was about.”

As he spoke, Lestrade wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Whatever had occurred that evening had clearly upset the inspector.

“When I got there,” Lestrade continued, “I found poor Paddington sittin’ on the front stoop, paler than a ghost and sick as an old hound dog. When I went through that shop door, I saw just why!”

Lestrade pulled a small notebook from his pocket and flipped it open. Seward, an avid observer of human behavior, knew that Lestrade had no real need to consult his notes, but was fumbling with the book to conceal the nervousness that this conversation was causing him. Seward let him do as he was doing and kept listening.

“The shop was run by a Mister...umm...here it is...Abner Cromwell, aged thirty-seven. I found him sitting in the shop, looking up and smiling a big smile when I walked in. There didn’t seem to be anything wrong at first.”

“Then I saw it; right in front of him on a little dinner plate. He asked if I was hungry...and he pointed at a plate of human fingers! He said he made them himself. Then I saw the condition of his right hand...and I knew just how he’d made them!”

“Dr. Seward, I’ve seen some horrible sights in my life; murder victims, all sorts of atrocities, and I’m not a weak man. This was different! It wasn’t the sight of the blood and the fingers that got to me, Sir. It was the strange, weird joy in the man’s eyes!”

“The whole time we had him there and at the stationhouse, he was smiling, singing, full of happiness. He’s got to be insane, Doctor. There’s no other way for a man to do a thing like that, is there? So...we called for a surgeon to stitch the poor loony up...and we brought him here to you.”

Three days later, Dr. Seward once again turned on his phonograph machine to record his findings on the case of his newest patient, Abner Cromwell. After activating the machine, he sat at the desk to speak aloud to the recorder. As he sat, scraps of newspapers fell from the desk. It had been a strange few days for Seward and he was beginning to wonder if he might not be ready to join his patients in their little cells. He had been eagerly looking through each day’s newspaper after first meeting Cromwell...and he was growing somewhat concerned about what he was finding in those papers.

“Patient: Abner Cromwell, aged thirty-seven; Dr. John Seward recording.”

“I am beginning to fully agree with Inspector Lestrade’s assessment. Perhaps Cromwell is, as Lestrade put it, quite loony. I have now spent several hours in interviews with the patient, Cromwell. I have never observed a happier individual...and it frightens me. I have not been this disturbed, but intrigued nevertheless, by a patient since the unfortunate Mister Renfield.”

“It has been three days since Cromwell was admitted to my care. His behavior continues to bewilder me. He remains overjoyed by nearly everything; the confining nature of his chambers, the self-inflicted mutilation of his hand, the drugs I’ve administered to him, and the tasteless food we’ve forced him to consume! These things, which would try the patience of any sane man, make Cromwell happy!”

As he spoke, Seward once again began to browse through all the scraps of newspaper he had clipped from the daily pages over the last seventy-two hours.

“I wonder if it is my own paranoia, which has increased markedly since the strange affair with the Harkers, or if I might be correct when I seem to be detecting an unusual pattern in the recent newspapers. There seem to be a great number of people in London who are suddenly and inexplicably acting in very unusual ways. Cromwell is one example, but there are others, some in terrible ways, and some in more benign ways.”

Seward completed his spoken diary entry just in time. A knocking sound came from the other side of his door. He called out for the knocker to enter.

Inspector Lestrade came shuffling in. He looked tired, unshaven, not well rested at all.

“Sorry to barge in, Doctor, but I had to know. Have you made any progress with that Cromwell bloke...the grinning one? I’ve scarcely been able to think of anything else since we brought him in.”

Lestrade sat down in the chair by the desk, opposite Seward’s chair and continued talking.

“I’ve seen some things in my time, I tell you, but this one’s been keepin’ me up all hours. Have you anything to tell me about him?”

Seward thought for a moment. He considered whether or not to tell Lestrade of his notice of the newspaper articles and his theory that there might be some connections present. He finally decided to speak his mind. The inspector couldn’t arrest him for a theory.

“Inspector, I suspect there’s more going on here than just Cromwell’s state of mind...but I don’t know how it all may be related. To be honest, I

was thinking of sending for you. It seems you've saved me the messenger's tip!"

He picked up an assortment of the newspaper clippings from the desk, waving them at the Inspector, almost crushing them in his fist as he gestured.

"Have you been following the newspapers? Some of these incidents involve your department. People all over London seem to be suddenly acting in, shall we say, unexpected ways, much like our poor Mr. Cromwell. Now there's no obvious connection that I can see, but it makes me wonder, Inspector. It really makes me wonder."

Lestrade scratched his head. He seemed bewildered.

"So you can truly find no reason behind Cromwell's sudden madness?" the inspector asked. "No hint of a cause?"

Seward just shook his head, confirming that he indeed had no explanation.

"His peculiar happiness is genuine, so far as I can determine. He's been thoroughly examined. It's not drunkenness or syphilis or injury to the head. It's obviously not the dementia of old age as he's only thirty-seven. I see no noticeable defect that might cause such a thing, but I fear for the safety of all these others, if indeed it is a sort of pattern of unusual behavior that is emerging here in London!"

Seward's voice grew almost panicked as he thought more about the strange events as he spoke to Lestrade.

"And I can't seem to think of a way to determine if these fits of madness, if that is indeed what they are, are related. Is there any way, Inspector, that your department might look into this theoretical connection?"

Lestrade put down the newspaper clipping he had been glancing over. He shook his head.

"Doctor, my superiors would laugh in my face if I was to suggest such a thing, but I'll give you an idea. Were I in your position, I might think of consulting Mr. Sherlock Holmes."

Seward recognized the name.

"Holmes? Yes, I've heard the name," said the doctor, "but I've always thought his reputation to be somewhat exaggerated. He seems more of a character taken advantage of to sell sensational stories than a true investigator of matters as delicate as this one might be."

Lestrade's face grew deadly serious. He looked Seward straight in the eyes, like a man who wanted to make his point strongly and unmistakably.

“Oh no, Dr. Seward, though it wounds my pride to say so, Mr. Sherlock Holmes is the best you’re likely to find at doing what it is that he does. If you truly believe in your suspicions in these matters, the only thing you should be doing now is speaking to him.”

He picked up a scrap of paper and a pencil from Seward’s desk and scrawled something across it.

“Here’s where you’re likely to find the man,” he said as he handed the paper to Seward. “And Doctor, don’t tell ‘im I sent you.”

Inspector Lestrade walked out of the office. Seward looked down at the paper in his hand to see what the police detective had written.

“221 B Baker St.”

Seward put the address in his pocket. He left his office and went down to the level of the hospital where the patients were kept. He approached Abner Cromwell’s cell and looked in through the little porthole in the door. There sat Cromwell on the bed. He was an average sized man with bushy brown hair and the stubble that resulted from several days without shaving. He was clad in the gray, pajama-like clothes typical of asylum patients. His right hand was wrapped in a rounded clump of bandages. The most striking thing about his appearance was the wide, wild grin on his face, far too happy for a man who was confined to a small cell with a grievous injury inflicted upon him. Seward shook his head at the sight of the man. He made up his mind. He would go to see this Holmes person immediately.

Within an hour, a hired cab had deposited Seward on Baker Street. He quickly found the correct building and walked up to the front door. He knocked.

Moments later, the door opened from the inside and Seward found himself facing a short, somewhat portly woman of about sixty.

“Can I help you, Sir?” she asked.

“Good day,” said the doctor. “My name is John Seward. I’m looking for Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Would you perhaps be Mrs. Holmes?”

To Seward’s surprise, the woman burst out laughing!

“Ha! Why I should hope not! I’m much too old for him...and far too sane! Why any woman in her proper mind would want to put up with that man’s eccentricities is beyond my understanding! I’m Mrs. Hudson, the landlady.”

She caught hold of herself and stopped laughing, looking slightly embarrassed about how she had reacted to Seward’s question.