



SHERLOCK HOLMES

♣ AND THE ♣
KING OF CLUBS

Steve Hayes and David Whitehead

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ROBERT HALE · LONDON

For Robbin and Janet
This King for Two Queens

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POSTSCRIPT From the Journal of John H. Watson, M.D.

By the Same Author

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CHAPTER ONE



Unlucky for Some

THAT MORNING'S AUCTION had gone just like a thousand auctions before it, until it came to Lot Thirteen.

Then, knowing that this was what the overwhelming majority of his audience had been waiting for, the auctioneer allowed himself a dramatic pause, leaned forward over the podium and scanned his congregation through a pair of small, rolled-gold pince-nez.

More than a hundred expectant faces peered back at him, then turned almost as one when an elderly porter in a buttoned brown warehouse coat entered the room through a door in the left-hand wall. He shuffled to one of six polished-oak plan chests that stood side by side along the rear wall.

The room fell quiet but for the squeak of his boots on the parquet floor and the odd expectant turning of a catalogue page.

The porter pulled out the first large, shallow drawer and carefully set it down on one of three trestle tables in front of the auctioneer's podium. Heads immediately craned forward to get a close look at its dog-eared contents.

Eventually all six drawers from the first plan chest were placed almost reverently side-by-side.

The audience watched in respectful silence; the only movement among the predominantly male audience came from the pipe and cigarette smoke that curled slowly toward the ornate, nicotine-stained ceiling.

At last the auctioneer spoke, his cultured voice echoing around the wood-panelled room: 'Gentlemen—'

He broke off, almost immediately, in order to acknowledge the only female in the audience: a tall, slender spinster in a beige two-piece woollen walking suit. Though her face was hidden beneath the veil that hung from the brim of a torque hat adorned with two ostrich plumes, she inclined her head in thanks.

'*Lady and gentlemen,*' he continued with an indulgent smile, 'we now come to Lot Thirteen, the first of thirty such lots being auctioned here today on behalf of the widow of the late and much-respected architect, Sir Andrew Montefiore.'

'The architecture of the Habsburg Empire, with its eclectic mixture of baroque, Renaissance, neo-Gothic and Romanesque, is of course of tremendous interest to scholars, historians, architects and aesthetes alike. It was particularly fascinating to Sir Andrew, whose collection of ephemera upon the subject is considered by many to be among the finest in the world.'

'Like its subject, the Montefiore collection is also of a somewhat eclectic nature. It includes personal papers, monographs, sketches, prints, maps, plans and cyanotypes relating to a wide variety of building projects undertaken during the period in question. A conservative estimate suggests that, *in toto*, the collection contains some 75,000 separate items relating to the lives and works of such luminaries as Filiberto Luchese, Johann Lukas von Hildebrandt, Ludovico Burnacini, Joseph Emanuel Fischer von Erlach and, in particular, Joseph's father, Johann Bernhard Fischer von

Erlach.

~~‘As is well known, Fischer the elder began his architectural career in 1687, and during his lifetime undertook major commissions from Joseph I, Charles VI and the Archbishop of Salzburg among others. His instructions were not only to replace many of the buildings damaged during the Great Turkish War, but also to represent through the medium of architecture the absolute power of the monarch Leopold I, as well as that of the Roman Catholic clergy.~~

~~‘Thus, he was responsible for such buildings as the Sch6nenbrunn Palace, Schloss Klessheim, the Glam-Gallas Palace, the Dreifaltigkeitskirche, the Kollegienkirche, and the Winter Palace of Prince Eugene of Savoy. Additionally, he made a most notable contribution to the Imperial Palace of Hofburg in Vienna.~~

~~‘An original manuscript of Fischer’s book on architecture, *Entwurf einer Historischen Architektur*, dating back to 1721, is being offered separately in Lot Forty-Two of today’s proceedings. Lot Forty-Three consists of an additional 25,000 glass plate negatives produced by George Washington Wilson and Company which date from the 1860s.’~~

~~He gave his audience a moment to absorb his introduction, then said: ‘In Lot Thirteen, you will be bidding upon the cornerstone of the collection, a selection of—’~~

~~Before he could go any further, however, there was a sudden commotion at the rear of the room. Two men who had been seated in the back row sprang up, one of them pulling a handkerchief up over the lower half of his face as he shouted, ‘Don’t move, any of you!’~~

~~Naturally everyone moved. As the gathering turned in their seats, there were demands to know what was happening.~~

~~By then both men had stepped into the aisle. The taller, leaner of the two, his features also hidden behind a crude handkerchief mask, ran to the door, where he stood holding a Webley Mk IV revolver. The cries of protest quickly faded when the audience saw the gun.~~

~~The man’s shorter, fatter and older companion also produced a weapon – an ugly, angular, self-cocking Webley-Fosbury – and hurried to the front of the room, the glittering eyes above his mask seemingly looking everywhere at once.~~

~~‘What is the meaning of this, sir?’ the auctioneer demanded.~~

~~‘Shut up!’ the fat man hissed. He, like his companion, was dressed in a nondescript black suit, white shirt and black tie, and had donned the hat previously resting in his lap to make further identification more difficult. What the auctioneer could see of his face looked very pale, almost sickly. He wore glasses – small round lenses set in tortoiseshell frames – and the eyes behind them were cold and spiteful, the colour of chocolate.~~

~~‘Do as I say and you will live!’ he told everyone. ‘Cross me and you will regret it!’~~

~~His English was excellent, but the auctioneer sensed that it was not his first language. It was too clipped and precise, and allowed for no trace of the vernacular.~~

~~A strained, uneasy silence descended over the room. The auctioneer exchanged a helpless look with the scribe seated at a roll-top desk behind him, who had been faithfully recording the sales of the day. The elderly porter looked equally at a loss as to what to do.~~

~~Stuffing the revolver into his waistband, the fat man quickly rifled through the contents of the first of the six plan chest drawers. The dry, urgent crackle of old paper was now the only sound in the room.~~

~~Clearly he was searching for something specific.~~

~~When he did not find it in the first drawer, he went to the second and again searched it quickly but efficiently. Uneasy murmurs came from the trapped audience behind him.~~

When the fat man searched the third drawer he found what he was after. He took a folded sack from his pocket, opened it and began filling it with the contents of the drawer.

‘Now see here...!’ protested the auctioneer.

The fat man silenced him with a warning glance. He continued filling the sack until he had everything he wanted, and then turned to the audience.

‘We are leaving now,’ he announced, his glasses reflecting the watery October daylight filtering in through the tall sash windows. ‘And lest one of you “gentlemen” get the urge to follow us or sound the alarm before we are safely gone, we shall be taking one of you with us as a hostage.’

Instantly there were cries of indignation. The fat man grabbed his Webley and aimed it at the audience, silencing everyone.

‘*You,*’ he said softly to the only woman in the room.

She looked around, as if thinking he was addressing her by mistake. Then, realizing that he wasn’t, her dark hazel eyes grew alarmed and she gave a tiny gasp of fear.

At once the elderly gentleman seated beside her stood up, saying, ‘*You cad!* How dare you intimidate this poor woman—’

The fat man sprang forward and struck him viciously on the head with the butt of his gun. The elderly gentleman collapsed in his seat, bleeding from his forehead.

Though horrified, the woman bravely turned to aid the injured gentleman.

‘Leave him!’ the fat man ordered. ‘Just get out here – *now.*’

She glared at him, her veiled expression a mixture of fear and defiance. Then, realizing she had no real choice in the matter, she stood up, clutched her tapestry purse more tightly, and with as much dignity as she could muster stepped into the aisle.

The fat man grabbed her by the arm and turned to the audience. ‘All of you, listen to me. No harm will come to this woman as long as you do as I say.’ He glanced at the old yellow-faced clock on the wall. The time was a minute past eleven. ‘If you have any concern for her welfare, you will make no attempt to raise the alarm until half-past the hour. I have men watching this building. If they see anything to suggest that you have not given us the time we require to make our getaway, I will shoot this woman, and her death will be upon the conscience of every man here. Do you understand me?’

There came a few grudging affirmatives.

‘*Do you understand me?*’ the fat man repeated loudly.

‘Yes, we understand,’ the auctioneer replied grimly. ‘I will make sure you have the time you need. But I promise you this: when you are brought to book it will be my great pleasure to testify against you.’

But the robbers and their hostage were already hurrying to the door through which the porter had entered, and all the audience could do was watch helplessly as one after the other they disappeared into the bowels of the building.

Impulsively the auctioneer called out, ‘Have courage, madam!’

The last he saw of her was the woman looking back at him, her expression one of abject terror.

It was the last time anyone would ever see the tall, slender spinster again.

CHAPTER TWO



Special Delivery

One week later

IT WAS A little after six o'clock in the evening when Dr John H. Watson saw the day's final patient out of his office. In her sixties, the poor woman wasn't much older than he, and yet there was a world of difference between them. Aside from his gammy leg and a modest thickening at the waist, Watson still retained his straight-backed, square-shouldered military bearing, and continued to enjoy almost rude good health. Mrs Levy, by contrast, was short and overweight, and suffered with recurring nausea and stomach pain, the pain predominantly over the right quarter of her considerable abdomen.

While Watson examined her, she explained nervously that she had put off visiting him for as long as she could in the hope that the problem, whatever it was, would clear up of its own accord. But when the pain grew worse instead of better ... well, she had gone to see the local apothecary who had recommended she seek the opinion of a physician. Beside herself with worry, she had done precisely that.

The woman's history, coupled with the yellow pigmentation that was visible in the whites of her eyes, was enough for Watson to make a preliminary diagnosis – that she had developed jaundice, probably due to one or more gallstones obstructing her bile duct. An X-ray would be required to confirm this – but such a prospect, when he mentioned it, had thoroughly alarmed his patient.

'Do I have to have one, doctor?' she asked fearfully.

'You don't *have* to,' he replied. He finished writing his referral and slipped it into an envelope which he then licked, sealed and addressed. 'I cannot *make* you attend your appointment, Mrs Levy. But I must impress upon you the need for clarity in this matter.'

She considered that, then enquired anxiously, 'Will it hurt?'

He smoothed his small, neatly-clipped moustache. The X-ray had been a vital diagnostic tool now for almost two decades, and yet still the so-called "ordinary man in the street" harboured a distinct sense of unease when subjected to it. 'No, Mrs Levy,' he assured her gently, 'I promise you it will not hurt.'

'But it *is* important, you say?'

'Vitality so. We have to know the exact nature of your ailment before we can address it, don't we?'

'Yes, I suppose so.... All right, doctor,' she agreed reluctantly. 'I suppose you know best. Is there anything I can do in the meantime? You know, just to feel better, like?'

'Firstly, I would advise you not to worry unduly.' He handed her the referral and helped her up. 'And for your own sake, I recommend that you try to reduce your weight.'

'Would that I could, doctor. But it ain't easy. Not after eighteen children, anyway.'

'Nevertheless you must try, Mrs Levy. You will feel a considerable benefit.'

‘I will, sir,’ she promised. ‘You’ve been so kind, settin’ me nerves at rest like this.’ She hesitated, then cocked her head and studied him for a moment. ‘I tell you what, sir. I’ll make you a bread puddin’ and drop it round. A special one, with currants and all sorts in it.’

‘There’s no need for that.’

‘It’ll be my pleasure, sir. Kindness given should see kindness returned.’

Watson didn’t press the point. She obviously wanted to show her appreciation ... and he was rather partial to bread pudding. ‘Well ... thank you.’

The surgery occupied two lower-ground-floor rooms in a tall, narrow house that overlooked the south bank of the River Thames. Watson escorted Mrs Levy outside and across the stark waiting room to the curtained glass doors.

As she stepped outside into the chilly Deptford dusk, Mrs Levy looked at him once more. She gave him an appreciative smile that revealed two missing teeth and then struggled awkwardly up the worn cement steps toward the street.

Watson locked the door after her, switched off the gas mantels – electric lighting had yet to reach this impoverished part of the city – and returned to his office to finish making notes on the woman’s card.

He had been attending the Bacton Street surgery in the capacity of a locum for two weeks now, having more or less retired from medical practice upon his sixtieth birthday, the year before. Although medicine had become increasingly secondary to his career as a writer, he had happily accepted the request to stand in for a medical colleague who had been laid low with a viral illness.

He had enjoyed his return to practice, and Watson was surprised by just how much he had missed it.

The pleasure he derived from returning to work was especially heartening because some months earlier his life had been turned upside-down by the unexpected death of Grace, his wife of almost ten years. And in the dark months that followed, he had thought never to derive satisfaction from anything ever again.

But in all respects, Watson was recovering far better than he could have hoped. His life was getting back on an even keel – until, that was, he heard a soft, sibilant sound and looked up just as a folded sheet of paper was slipped beneath his closed office door.

Startled, he limped hurriedly across the room. Not bothering to pick up the note, he opened the door, determined to confront whoever had broken into the locked surgery to deliver it.

The dark waiting room was empty.

The room was lit only by the bluish glow of the streetlamps outside. It was sparsely furnished offering no place to hide, and Watson crossed the outer room and checked the front door. It was still locked.

Puzzled, he bolted the doors, top and bottom. Then, his sense of unease only increasing, he limped back to his office, stooping to pick up the note before closing the inner door behind him.

Unfolding the note, he held it up to the light and read:

MRS HASTINGS IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK SHE IS. IF YOU DO NOT BELIEVE ME, BE AT BECKWORTH PARK ROAD, NW, TONIGHT, NO LATER THAN NINE. THERE IS GOOD COVER DIRECTLY ACROSS FROM THE SHIELLS HOUSE FROM WHICH YOU MAY DISCOVER THE TRUTH FOR YOURSELF.

The note was not signed.

Angry now, for Irene Hastings – undoubtedly the Mrs Hastings of the anonymous note – was a dear personal friend, Watson went to his desk and set the note on his blotter so he could study it more closely. It yielded no clues. Of course, if Holmes had been there he would discover all manner of hints and indications during his first examination. But, though Watson had grown familiar with his companion's methods over their years together, he still lacked the expertise to use them to the fullest.

Though a casual observer might have found it hard to believe, Watson had once lived an adventurous life, first with the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, and later the Berkshires, as an assistant surgeon. He had served in the Second Afghan War and been wounded at the Battle of Maiwand. While recovering at a hospital in Peshawar he had contracted enteric fever and, severely weakened, been invalided out of the army and sent back to England.

It was during this unhappy period that his fortunes had turned. Unable to survive as comfortably as he would have liked on an army pension of eleven and sixpence a day, he had decided to seek a companion with whom to share the expenses of living in central London. It was then that a mutual friend named Stamford had introduced him to Sherlock Holmes.

That had been in 1881 – a little over three decades ago.

Their subsequent years together had been eventful, to say the least. But like all good things, they had finally come to an end. Watson had married for the third time in 1903, and though he and Holmes had continued to see each other regularly for the next year or so, they had finally gone their separate ways. Holmes had retired in 1909 to keep bees in his beloved Sussex, and written a highly regarded book upon the subject called *Practical Handbook of Bee Culture, with Some Observations upon the Segregation of the Queen*. Watson had seen him even less frequently thereafter. Indeed, the last time had been at the funeral of his beloved Grace.

His thoughts returned to Irene Hastings. How *dare* the writer of the note try to defame her! The woman had been a tower of strength to him in the months following Grace's death. Watson doubted that he could have survived that period without her.

They had met by chance at a restaurant where she was dining with her brother, Robert. He was a pleasant, jocular fellow, and Irene and Grace had got along famously until their friendship had been cut short by Grace's sudden death.

Irene and Robert had immediately offered Watson their support. Irene had been widowed for several years, and knew perhaps better than most how Grace's death had devastated him. It was inevitable, he supposed, that he should eventually develop certain ... *feelings* for her. Tall and willowy, with fair hair that hinted at Nordic ancestry and eyes as clear and bright as the finest diamonds, she turned heads wherever she went. Robert, sensing Watson's attraction for his sister – and the awkwardness of it coming so soon after his bereavement – had deliberately made himself scarce so that their relationship might flourish with some degree of privacy.

Watson now looked at the address on the note again: The Shiells Hotel, Beckworth Park Road NW. The address was not familiar to him and he wondered if the note was part of a plan to lure him into danger. He and Holmes had made no shortage of enemies during their years together. Yet somehow he did not think it likely. He and Holmes had not worked together for almost a decade and as far as Watson was aware, Holmes himself had not engaged in any professional cases since the murder of Fitzroy McPherson in 1907.

So what was the intention of the anonymous note-writer? A practical joke? If so, it was a decidedly unfunny one, as the perpetrator would soon discover. For if Watson did go to Beckworth Park Road, he would take his loaded service revolver with him.

But of course, there was no *if* about it. He *would* go, if only to satisfy his curiosity.

~~He scowled at the wall-clock. It was now twenty minutes past six. Time enough to return to his lodgings in Queen Anne Street and prepare for whatever events this dark autumn evening had in store.~~

CHAPTER THREE



Appearances are Deceptive

THE NIGHT WAS cold, and a biting wind brought with it a miserable, slanting drizzle. For a moment, as Watson peered out into the darkness, he was tempted to dismiss the note as a ridiculous prank and simply stay at home. He found himself wondering again, though, how the messenger had passed through a locked door in order to deliver it. And why he – or she – had chosen to libel Irene Hastings, of all people?

These questions required answers and Watson knew he could not rest until he had them.

He turned from the window, checked his Webley Mk II, and tucked the gun into his Chesterfield overcoat. After buttoning the garment, he tugged his grey herringbone cap down over his thinning sandy hair and went outside to hail a cab.

The hansom took him north across London, past the dark, countrified sprawl of Regent's Park and on through the urban maze of Chalk Hill until it reached Belsize Park. Here the driver stopped as directed, at the corner of Beckworth Park Road. Watson climbed down into the wintry night, hooked his cane over one arm and paid the driver.

As the coach drove off, Watson surveyed his surroundings. The street was largely residential. A row of stuccoed terraced houses curved away from him. The front door of each house was flanked by whitewashed Doric columns. Each had a cast-iron balcony on the second floor, but over the years the neighbourhood had fallen into decay and was now nowhere near as grand nor fashionable as it had once been.

Watson took out his pocket watch and saw that it was just after 8.30. Good. He had deliberately planned to arrive early. Squaring his shoulders, he limped along Beckworth Park Road, keeping to the shadows between the streetlamps lest he already be under observation. The sound of his footsteps and the click of his cane on the pavement mingled with the noise of the wind and pattering rain.

One of the houses ahead of him had been converted into a dismal bed-and-breakfast establishment. The sign hanging above the entrance identified the place as THE SHIELLS HOUSE. Lamplight showed in its white-framed windows and a lantern swung over the closed front door causing flickering shadows in the puddles on the pavement.

Watson took one final look around, then ducked into the darkness under the trees bordering the park. There he realized that the note-writer had been right about one thing – his present vantage offered him an excellent view of the hotel while he himself was practically invisible to anyone on the street.

Various emotions warred within him: unease, anxiety, indignation for Irene and a concern that he had been the victim of a practical joke after all.

It was the longest half-hour Watson had ever spent. Cold and uncomfortable, he had decided to wait for ten more minutes when he heard the distinctive sound of a motorized taxicab approaching.

Moments later a green Panhard Levassor appeared, its yellow wheels splashing through puddles

its oil lamps casting a mustard glow in the rainy darkness ahead.

Immediately, Watson ducked further behind a tree.

The cab came closer, slowing as it neared the hotel. He held his breath as he waited to see who would alight.

A man in his late fifties stepped down first, wearing a top hat and carrying a stick. The fellow did not look familiar. He had a thin face and a grey pencil moustache – otherwise, he was quite unremarkable. Watson was certain he had never seen him before.

The man made to help his companion from the cab. Watson felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as he sensed who this would be yet was loath to believe it.

Sure enough, a woman climbed out of the cab, and she was without any doubt Irene Hastings.

She stumbled against her companion. Her laughter carried across the street to Watson; it was a delightful sound, one he had enjoyed many times during their meetings. Yet he hated it now as it implied an intimacy between the two from which he was excluded.

Immediately Watson chastized himself. He had no right to feel jealous. He and Mrs Hastings were friends – *good* friends – but he had no claim upon her. And yet he had believed there existed between them an unspoken agreement. She had done nothing to disabuse him of that belief.

Now, though, he realized that he had been mistaken.

The man in the top hat paid the driver. He seemed in good humour, for Watson heard the driver thank him profusely for what he assumed was a generous tip.

The cabbie then turned his vehicle slowly to return the way he had come. As the headlamps swept across the park, Watson moved back even further so that he was quite hidden behind the trees. A moment later, once more covered by the darkness, Watson peered around the trunk in time to see Irene Hastings and her ... her *gentleman friend* ... entering the hotel.

Watson's heart sank. He realized there was only one possible interpretation. Irene Hastings had given him the distinct impression that their friendship would ultimately lead to a more permanent state of affairs. She had indicated that they had an understanding and with such sincerity that he had almost convinced himself that he was falling in love with her.

Still, he had maintained a discreet distance, unwilling to commit himself to another relationship so soon after Grace's death. But he had always enjoyed the company of women and had never been happier than when married. And when her brother's business ran into financial difficulties, Watson had been only too willing to loan him money....

An alarming thought occurred to him and, suddenly the phrase used in the note rang in his ears.

MRS HASTINGS IS NOT WHAT YOU THINK SHE IS.

Were his fledgling suspicions right, then? That her only interest in him had been his money? He didn't want to acknowledge the possibility, but now that he thought about it there had been numerous occasions when he had offered to help Irene and Robert financially. There were the shares he had bought in the Dartford Shipping Company. Robert, claiming insider knowledge, had assured him that its stock would rise within six months to double its present worth, and so Watson had invested heavily – or rather, Robert had taken his money and invested it upon his behalf.

Then there had been the solicitor's fees to pay for the transaction, and a loan to pay one of Robert's more pressing business debts.

Suddenly Watson saw that he had been played for a fool and his usually mild temper flared. There was only one way to settle this thing, and that was to go over there now and confront her.

But even as he stepped out from behind the tree, the curved handle of another walking stick hooked and his arm a familiar voice said, 'Hold hard, Watson. Not so fast.'

Stunned, Watson turned and faced a tall, spare silhouette.

‘H-Holmes...?’

The figure stepped forward and unhooked his cane from Watson’s arm. ‘Forgive the somewhat dramatic nature of my entrance, old friend,’ he said, removing a kid glove in order to shake Watson’s hand. ‘I am sorry that we should meet again under these circumstances.’

Watson, confused, shook his head. ‘What circumstances, Holmes?’ And then: ‘By God, it was *your* note that brought me here, wasn’t it?’

Holmes’s silence confirmed that it was.

‘What do you know about Mrs Hastings?’ Watson demanded. ‘And why did you have to be so damnably mysterious about it?’

Holmes glanced across the road at the hotel. Dressed in an immaculate, double-breasted frock coat and a beaver top hat, he looked as tall and gaunt as ever, with his high, pale forehead and oiled backswept hair that was now the colour of steel. ‘Come,’ Holmes said briskly. ‘We have some letters to post.’

‘Letters? What the deuce are you talking about?’

Holmes didn’t reply. He stepped out of the trees, onto the pavement, and walked quickly back along the street until he reached the postbox on the corner. It was all Watson could do to keep pace with him.

Upon reaching the box, Holmes took out a thin stack of envelopes and stuffed them into the slot. As Watson studied his friend’s profile he was momentarily transported back in time, for it seemed just then that the years had hardly touched Holmes. Age had done nothing to reduce his more than six feet; his grey eyes appeared as incisive as ever; his nose still as thin and hawk-like; his chin as square and prominent as it had ever been.

Then Holmes started across the road. Watson hurried after him, realizing that time had left something else about Holmes unchanged – his ability to be as insufferably cryptic as ever.

They climbed the steps to the Shiells House. Without pausing, Holmes pushed open the door and entered a hallway with a counter along the left-hand wall. Behind it sat a scruffy-looking clerk of about thirty, dressed in a white shirt, maroon tie and a food-stained navy waistcoat. Looking up from the paper he’d been reading, he greeted Holmes and Watson.

‘Evenin’, sirs. ’Ow can I help you?’

Holmes glanced at the register. Reading the most recent entry, he said to Watson, ‘Mr and Mrs Haslemere, Room Seven.’ Then, fixing the clerk with a penetrating stare he snapped, ‘The pass-key if you will.’

‘P-pass-key?’

‘I have yet to meet the lock I cannot master,’ Holmes replied, ‘but the pass-key will make my job here tonight considerably easier.’

‘You’re talking in riddles, mate. Are you drunk? You’d better ’op it.’

Holmes stood his ground. ‘As an accomplice in blackmail, you presently occupy a very precarious legal position. Were I you, I should look to distance myself from the prime movers in this sordid enterprise and cooperate before the authorities get involved.’

Watson watched the blood drain from the clerk’s face. ‘I dunno ...’ he began.

‘Then I suggest you summon a policeman at once, for part of your premises is presently being used for a highly immoral purpose.’

The clerk grew surly. ‘I know nothing ’bout that, guv.’

‘Then give me the pass-key and don’t interfere,’ ordered Holmes.

Grudgingly the clerk obeyed. 'Remember now, I don't want no trouble.'

~~Ignoring him, Holmes climbed the stairs to the first floor. Labouring behind him, Watson said,~~
'B-blackmail? Holmes – what is this all about?'

'Very soon now,' Holmes replied grimly, 'you will see for yourself.'

CHAPTER FOUR



The Badger Game

AT THE HEAD of the stairs, Holmes looked firstly left, then right. The narrow hallway was lit by a single, flickering gaslight. Spying room seven, he went to the door and swiftly unlocked it. With a still-baffled Watson at his heels, he entered a spacious gaslit room that was furnished with a double bed, a chest of drawers and two armchairs. A six-fold Coromandel lacquered screen stood in the far corner, presumably masking an area where one might make one's ablutions, or use the chamber set.

Though clothed, Irene Hastings and her companion sat, embracing, on the edge of the bed. On seeing Holmes, they sprang apart, shocked by his sudden entrance. The man looked horrified to have been caught in such a compromising situation and immediately began to bluster.

Irene, astonished to see Watson at Holmes's elbow, managed a hasty but undeniably hollow-sounding, 'John! Thank goodness you're here! This man—'

Holmes cut her off, saying, '— has just had a very narrow escape ... *Mrs Channing.*'

Struggling to straighten his tie, the man frowned, confused. 'Chan —? What the deuce do you mean...?'

'It is quite elementary, sir,' said Holmes bluntly. 'You have been seduced by your companion, as have many others before you. And having allowed your vanity to get the better of you, you have left yourself open to blackmail.'

The man gaped. '*What?*'

'You have been the mark in what is known as the badger game,' said Holmes. 'A curious expression, I grant you, but one that hails from Wisconsin, the so-called Badger State, wherein the "trick" itself originated.

'Put simply, the idea was to lure you into a compromising position, after which a witness — the desk clerk, perhaps, or the woman's "brother" — would have burst in and caught you *in flagrante delicto*. If you refused to pay for their silence they would have threatened to expose your infidelity unless their demands for cash were met.'

The man paled at the suggestion. 'You can't mean that!'

'I'm afraid I do, sir. Of course, you could always have called their bluff, informed them that it was merely their word against yours. That might have made them back down. But in this modern age, with such impressive advances in photography ...'

Without warning he suddenly struck the lacquered screen with his cane. It teetered and then toppled forward onto the carpet, revealing—

'Robert!' croaked Watson.

For the man standing beside a Triple Victo camera on a wood-and-brass tripod was the person he believed to be Irene Hastings's — or rather Mrs Channing's — brother.

'... the results would have been undeniable,' Holmes concluded.

Recovering himself, Robert dropped the magnesium-filled flashpan he was holding and

clambered forward over the fallen screens, fists clenched, his expression contorted with pure hatred. For an instant Watson feared for Holmes, knowing that he was no longer a young man. But he had forgotten that Holmes was a master of the Japanese martial art *baritsu*.

Crouching, Holmes used his cane like a billiard cue, using his right hand to thrust it up through the fingers of his left, slamming it into his attacker's solar plexus.

Winded, Robert fell back against the camera. The tripod and camera crashed to the floor. Its glass photographic plate popped out and shattered into pieces.

As Robert tried to extricate himself from the broken tripod, Holmes barked: 'Stay where you are!'

Intimidated by Holmes's tone, Robert grudgingly obeyed.

Watson saw it all then – a tiny peephole artfully worked into the flowers painted on the lacquered screen and done in such a way as to be almost invisible. Behind the peephole the camera had been set up to photograph the couple on the bed, providing irrefutable proof as to the man's infidelity. Irene's victim would have had no idea what was about to befall him until the flashpan ignited and the damning picture was taken.

Her present victim saw as much for himself, and cried, 'Oh dear God, I am ruined!'

'On the contrary,' Holmes said. 'You have been given a second chance and one I hope you will take to its full advantage.'

The man who had signed the register as 'Mr Haslemere' nodded. 'I will,' he assured Holmes earnestly. 'This shall serve as a ... a sobering lesson.'

'Then I suggest you leave now as a wiser man than when you arrived.'

'But what about ...' the man gestured toward Irene, who had crossed the room to help the still-seething Robert get to his feet.

'Never fear,' said Holmes. 'This woman and her companion are finished.'

The man needed no second urging. Greatly relieved, he grabbed his scarf and topper and ran from the room.

After the sound of his departing steps had faded, silence again filled the room. The woman Watson knew as Irene Hastings said, 'John, this isn't what it looks like.'

Watson almost laughed. 'Then please explain it to my satisfaction. That, I think, would be quite a feat.'

Before she could answer, Robert, having finally extricated himself from the broken tripod, grabbed her by the arm and pushed her toward the door. 'We're leaving,' he snarled at Holmes. 'And you'd better not try and stop us!'

Instinctively, Watson moved to bar their escape. But Holmes shook his head. 'Let them go, old friend. We have done our bit.'

Watson disagreed, but he trusted Holmes and if he said the matter was finished, then he must have a good reason for doing so.

Irene Hastings – Watson still couldn't think of her as anyone else – and her brother brushed past him. At the door she gave Watson one final look, and then she was gone.

CHAPTER FIVE



A Second Chance

THE DISAPPOINTMENT OF it all suddenly caught up with Watson and he sagged. ‘I have been a fool haven’t I?’ he said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

‘You have been *human*, old friend, and heir to all the failings of that species,’ Holmes replied. ‘And if you *have* been a fool, then so have a great many other men of similar station before you. But in your case ...’

Watson looked up sharply. ‘What?’

‘Well, let us say there were ... extenuating circumstances ... where you were concerned. At the outset, Mrs Channing and her husband – the man you were led to believe was her brother – identified you as a mark for the badger game. After your wife died so unexpectedly, however, they realized there was no one to whom they could expose you.

‘But they are of agile intellect, those two, and it soon occurred to them that no man is easier to manipulate and beguile than one thoroughly preoccupied by his grief. You were lonely and the attention of “Mrs Hastings”, as she called herself, was a soothing balm, a pleasant comfort. But all the time it was just a pretence to take more and more of your money. And she did, didn’t she?’

Watson nodded, ashamed. ‘But why did you not come to me directly, and sooner?’ he asked.

‘Would you have believed me, Watson? Or more correctly, would your *heart* have allowed you to believe me? No, my friend, it was better for you to see the truth with your own eyes. Besides, I had to make absolutely sure of my facts first.’

‘But how did you know? I mean ... what first put you onto her?’

‘That, my dear fellow, was simple,’ Holmes said, idly inspecting the shattered remains of the camera. ‘As you know, I have an excellent eye for detail and a keen memory for faces. And even though I am now retired, I still continue to read the *Police Gazette* with great interest.

‘You will remember that I met Mrs Hastings when I attended your wife’s funeral. She was and indeed remains a handsome woman, but I noticed at the time that she overuses her rice make-up in two places, one at the left corner of her mouth, the other on her forehead, between her eyebrows up to her hairline. I confess I did not make much of it at the time, and of course there was no reason why I should. But I am afraid I have lost none of my mistrust of women. It was only upon reading a report in the *Police Gazette* about a certain Mrs Violet Channing that I connected the two events.’

He paused and regarded Watson keenly. ‘I need hardly explain the term *naevus flammeus* to you.’

Watson scowled. ‘A port-wine stain?’

‘Indeed. As you know, they are much less common than the so-called “salmon patches” which usually occur in newborns and fade with time. The *naevus flammeus* remains and as the years progress the mark or marks tend to become somewhat uneven. This is what Mrs Channing was attempting to disguise with the overuse of powder.’

‘There is no crime in that.’

‘None at all. Indeed, for what it is worth, the poor woman has my sympathy for the condition. But Mrs Channing was reported to have the self-same affliction, Watson. And so I took it upon myself to investigate her a little more closely.’

‘Ever the detective, eh, Holmes?’ Watson said with a hint of bitterness.

Holmes smiled wryly. ‘Let us say that, even if there was the faintest chance that your Mrs Hastings was in reality the larcenous Mrs Channing, I could not allow you to be taken in, as had so many men before you. And I dearly wish I had been mistaken, Watson, but unfortunately I was not. The facts I was able to unearth regarding “Mrs Hastings” were suspiciously few. Indeed, as near as I could ascertain, she seemed to have appeared out of thin air, some months after Mrs Channing, on the run from the police, went to ground. From there it was a small matter to keep the woman under observance until her own actions condemned her.’

‘Then we must report her, Holmes! We cannot allow her to continue with such an abhorrent business!’

‘There is, I believe, no need for that. To bring them to book now might only cause the very embarrassment and exposure that their victims were hoping to avoid. Besides, after tonight’s little encounter, I fancy they will go to ground once more.’

‘Then they will have got away with it.’

‘Perhaps,’ Holmes replied enigmatically.

‘What does that mean?’

‘It means that upon reaching their lodgings in Tooting, the Channings will pack their bags and leave the city for pastures new. But as they gather their belongings, they will discover three curious things. One – the notebooks in which they recorded all the sordid details of their victims will have mysteriously disappeared. Two – so will the vile collection of photographs they used in their demands for payment. And three – all the paperwork relating to their several well-stocked bank accounts will have been destroyed, rendering them all but penniless; for to make any attempt to reclaim those accounts may well invite close scrutiny of their somewhat questionable finances – firstly from the banks themselves, and then, in due course, from the police.’

‘You have well and truly ruined them, then?’

‘Let us just say that I have lost none of my skill at breaking and entering.’

Watson snapped his fingers as something else suddenly became clear to him. ‘And those letters you posted earlier this evening ...?’

‘Were all addressed to those same victims, informing them – anonymously, of course – that they have nothing further to fear from their blackmailer, and suggesting they learn a salutary lesson from the experience.’

‘So there *is* some justice, then.’

‘There is nearly always *some* justice, old friend,’ Holmes agreed softly.

‘And there is no fool like an old fool,’ Watson grumbled. ‘And I will be perfectly honest with you, Holmes: I doubt that I have ever felt so old or so foolish.’

Unexpectedly Holmes smiled, and the light of good humour entered his grey eyes. ‘Then allow me to give you a second chance to recapture your salad days.’

‘Salad? You’ve lost me, Holmes.’

‘I must confess, as much as I enjoy my life in Sussex and my study of bees, it falls far short of the adventurous life you and I once enjoyed in Baker Street. It is, as Browning would have it, “That’s the wise thrush; he sings each song twice over, lest you should think he never could recapture the first fine careless rapture!”’

‘You are, as usual, speaking in riddles and displaying a knowledge of verse that I never before suspected.’

‘Then I will say it plainly,’ Holmes replied. ‘We cannot go back, Watson. But we may go forward. I have recently been thinking of travel ... but where is the pleasure in travelling alone?’

‘Where were you thinking of going?’

‘Austria,’ came the startling reply.

‘Austria!’

‘Yes. For some time now I have been corresponding with the neurologist, Dr Freud. He appears to be a most fascinating man and one I will enjoy meeting, for I am keen to discuss at greater length a diagnostic technique he calls *psychoanalysis*. What do you say, old friend?’

‘I am hardly enamoured of Freud’s theories,’ Watson said. ‘Indeed, I heartily disapprove of some.’

‘But *Vienna*, man!’

Watson could hardly deny the temptation. But still he hesitated. ‘When do you plan to leave Holmes? I mean, I have my duties as a locum to consider....’

‘Then first thing tomorrow morning,’ Holmes said, clapping him on the arm, ‘arrange for a replacement, and I will take care of everything else. Within forty-eight hours, my friend, we will be on our way – and who knows? Once again, if we are lucky, the game may well be afoot!’

CHAPTER SIX



There Is No Trick To It

THE FOLLOWING DAY Watson dutifully arranged for a locum to take over the practice in Deptford. Holmes, meanwhile, who was staying at the Goring, less than two miles from their old stamping ground in Baker Street, began arranging every detail of their trip. Thus it was that they departed from Charing Cross aboard the Ostend-Vienna Express promptly at ten o'clock two mornings later.

Watson had mixed feelings about the trip – and with good cause. The Summer Olympics, held in Sweden earlier in the year, had brought together competitors from almost thirty countries and encouraged overseas travel as never before. Austria, though, was still a suspect destination for most. Although four years had passed since Emperor Franz Joseph I had annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, there still lingered considerable ill-feeling among the three million Serbs who, quite rightly, objected to Austria's bullish attempt at empire-building.

The Serbs were not alone in these objections. For some time now, Italy had been threatening military action against Austria as a consequence; while Russia, taking advantage of the unrest, had been inciting a revolution throughout the Balkan states. The situation had become so dire that the leader of the German Catholic Centre Party had warned that any Austrian retaliation against Serbia would inevitably draw Russia even further into the conflict, and that in turn could lead to a European war.

When Watson mentioned his misgivings, however, Holmes only filled his favourite clay pipe with his usual acerbic blend of shag and replied that, with Vienna presently such a hotbed of intrigue, there was little chance of their having a boring holiday.

An hour and forty minutes after leaving Charing Cross, they reached Dover, where they caught a steamer to Ostend. From this Belgian municipality they made their next connection easily and continued their train journey through Brussels, Aix-le-Chapelle, Cologne and Bonn.

In all, the thirty-two-hour trek proved to be a pleasant one, although Watson was not sorry when they'd left Passau behind them; and the train steamed into Vienna three hours later.

A fifth set of tracks was being added to the terminus. More building work was being carried out to the two towers that flanked the station entrance and the roof. In consequence the din was tremendous and so – as they climbed down from their carriage and Watson tried to shake some life back into his gammy leg – they were startled to hear a brass band suddenly break into the Austro-Hungarian national anthem, *Land der Berge, Land am Strome*.

Watson turned toward the far end of the platform where the band was playing and could see a group of dignitaries as well as several journalists from the Austrian press.

'Good Lord,' he said above the noise. 'They must have found out you were coming, Holmes.'

Holmes gave a sardonic chuckle. 'I fear the greeting is not for me.'

'Really? You mean, they greet *all* their new arrivals this way?'

'I doubt it. No, my friend, this is in honour of someone *else*.'

He paused as a number of the passengers broke into spontaneous applause.

He and Watson turned just as a short, stocky man in his mid-thirties led his entourage off the train and began to work his way up the platform, waving and smiling as the crowd parted to make way for him.

Watson squinted at him. He was well dressed in a suit of grey serge, with a heavy winter overcoat slung over one arm. He looked vaguely familiar, but Watson couldn't put a name to the fellow. Finally he gave up and asked, 'Who is that man, Holmes?'

'That, my friend, is Mr Erik Weisz.'

Watson sniffed. 'Never heard of him.'

'Then perhaps you will know him better by his stage name,' said Holmes. 'For he is none other than the escapologist Harry Houdini.'

The name, of course, was instantly recognizable. And how could it be otherwise? Houdini was a legend. The son of a rabbi, he was a Hungarian Jew whose family had emigrated to the United States when Houdini himself was four years old. Moving to New York from Wisconsin – the home of the Badger Game, Watson reminded himself sourly – the young Weisz had eventually changed his name in tribute to Jean-Eugène Robert-Houdin, the French magician he so admired, and went into showbusiness.

From vaudeville, where he had mostly performed card tricks, he had gone on to tour the world as an escapologist extraordinaire. No gaol could hold him, no straitjacket restrain him, no set of shackles bind him. He had escaped from all manner of prisons, was an accomplished safe-cracker, and a year earlier had astounded audiences with what he called his Chinese Water-Torture Cell, escaping from chains and padlocks whilst being suspended upside-down in a glass case filled with water.

It seemed impossible to believe that this man, who stood five feet, five inches on bowed legs, was the person who had performed so many wondrous acts. At a distance he seemed almost nondescript. And yet here was someone who could walk a tightrope; untie knots with his toes; dislocate his shoulders at will; climb skyscrapers; and hold his breath for more than three minutes at a time. He was an inventor, businessman, a scientist of sorts, philanthropist, magazine publisher, newspaper columnist and author.

As Houdini passed Holmes and Watson he happened to glance in their direction. The next time he looked at them it was with a frown. He took two more steps, then suddenly turned and came back. His entourage stopped at a respectful distance to watch, but the two women flanking him continued to accompany him as he approached Holmes and Watson.

'It's Holmes, isn't it?' Houdini asked as he came up. 'Sherlock Holmes?'

'You are, I perceive, a reader of the American edition of the *Strand*,' Holmes replied.

Houdini looked surprised. He had dark, wiry hair that was parted in the middle, angular features, sharp cheekbones, and vivid blue eyes.

'I am indeed,' he replied with a boyish grin. 'But how did you know that? Do I have some distinctive type of printer's ink on my fingertips? Or a myopic squint that indicates that I've spent more than my fair share of time poring over the *Strand*'s small type?'

'Far simpler than that,' said Holmes, shaking Houdini's outstretched hand. 'Since I make it a practice to keep as low a profile as possible, it is highly unlikely that you have seen a photograph of me. The late Mr Sidney Paget popularized a spurious version of my appearance as an Inverness wearing pipe-smoker in a deerstalker. He did, however, capture my physiognomy reasonably accurately. Subsequent artists employed by the *Strand*, such as H. M. Brock and Joseph Simpson have maintained it.'

Houdini chuckled. ‘Well, I’m sure glad we cleared *that* up.’ Suddenly remembering his companions, he added: ‘Oh, say, let me present my wife, Bess, and my assistant, Miss Frances Lane.’

A petite woman with dark, curly hair and an impish tilt to her nose stood forward; Bess Houdini was of a similar age to her husband and though homely, she had fine, dark brows, large, well-spaced eyes that showed a sense of humour, a strong chin and a smooth complexion.

Frances Lane was her complete opposite. She was taller by several inches, slimmer and more elegant-looking in a well-tailored, military-style grey coat with a fur hem. Beneath her fetching purple velvet hat, her copper-coloured hair shone richly. Her eyes were sea-green, with a curious upward slant at the corners, and beneath them her cheekbones were high and well defined.

‘How do you do, gentlemen,’ she said, her voice deep and confident.

With introductions out of the way, Houdini – seemingly unaware that he was keeping his welcoming committee waiting – said, ‘So, what brings you to Austria, Mr Holmes?’

‘We are here on holiday.’

‘Not business, then?’

‘I no longer practise as a consulting detective, Mr Houdini.’

‘Too bad. It might have been fun to watch you in action.’

‘Alas, sir, my skills are not meant to entertain, merely to clarify and resolve. But you, I see, are here in your capacity as an entertainer.’

‘Uh-huh. I’ve toured Europe before, of course, but that was years ago. And now I’ve got a whole new set of wonders to show the folks.’

‘I hope we may be able to come and see you, Mr Houdini,’ said Watson. ‘Where are you performing?’

‘The, ah ... what-you-call-it, the—’

‘The Theater an der Burg,’ Frances Lane said with a smile.

‘That’s it.’ Houdini turned to her, adding, ‘Say, Frankie, can we get some tickets for Mr Holmes and Dr Watson? Best seats in the house, naturally.’

‘I believe we can manage that,’ she said. ‘Where are you staying, gentlemen?’

‘At the Grand,’ Holmes replied. ‘On the Kaerntnerring.’

‘I’ll have opening-night tickets delivered to you first thing tomorrow morning,’ she promised.

‘That is most generous of you.’

‘Generous, shmenerous,’ said Houdini dismissively. ‘You being the Great Detective and all, I’m surprised you haven’t already guessed my ulterior motive.’

‘I confess, sir, it appears to have escaped me.’

‘Well, I’ve read Dr Watson’s stories for years now, never miss ’em. And my gut feeling is that you have some sort of *schtick*, Mr Holmes, but for the life of me I’ve never yet managed to figure out how it is that you do what you do.’

Embarrassed, Bess squeezed her husband’s arm. ‘Harry!’

Ignoring her, Houdini continued, ‘After tomorrow night’s performance maybe we can have a late supper, and I can pick your brains.’

‘There is no trick to it, I assure you,’ Holmes said stiffly. ‘It is all based upon simple observation.’

‘OK,’ said Houdini. ‘So tell me something about myself. Right here, right now.’

‘Please, Mr Holmes, pay him no mind,’ Bess apologised. Her voice was gentle, her manner somewhat retiring. ‘I’m afraid Harry’s notorious when it comes to challenging those who question

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