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House of Silk

Written by Anthony Horowitz

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THE HOUSE OF SILK

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ONE

The Wimbledon Art Dealer

‘Influenza is unpleasant,’ Sherlock Holmes remarked, ‘but you are right in thinking that, with your wife’s help, the child will recover soon.’

‘I very much hope so,’ I replied, then stopped and gazed at him in wide-eyed astonishment. My tea had been halfway to my lips but I returned it to the table with such force that the cup and the saucer almost parted company. ‘But for Heaven’s sake, Holmes!’ I exclaimed. ‘You have taken the very thoughts from my head. I swear I have not uttered a word about the child nor his illness. You know that my wife is away – that much you might have deduced from my presence here. But I have not yet mentioned to you the reason for her absence and I am certain that there has been nothing in my behaviour that could have given you any clue.’

It was in the last days of November, the year 1890, when this exchange took place. London was in the grip of a merciless winter, the streets so cold that the very gas lamps seemed frozen solid and what little light they gave out subsumed by the endless fog. Outside, people drifted along the pavements like ghosts, with their heads bowed and their faces covered, while the growlers rattled past, their horses anxious to be home. And I was glad to be in, with a fire blazing in the hearth, the familiar smell of tobacco in the air and – for all the clutter and chaos with which my friend chose to surround himself – a sense that everything was in its right place.

I had telegraphed my intention to take up my old room and stay with Holmes for a short while, and I had been delighted to receive his acquiescence by return. My practice could manage without me. I was temporarily alone. And I had it in mind to watch over my friend until I was certain that he was fully restored to health. For Holmes had deliberately starved himself for three days and three nights, taking neither food nor water, in order to persuade a particularly cruel and vengeful adversary that he was close to death. The ruse had succeeded triumphantly, and the man was now in the capable hands of Inspector Morton of the Yard. But I was still concerned about the strain that Holmes had placed upon himself and thought it advisable to keep an eye on him until his metabolism was fully restored.

I was therefore glad to see him enjoying a large plate of scones with violet honey and cream, along with a pound cake and tea, all of which Mrs Hudson had carried in on a tray and served for the two of us. Holmes did seem to be on the mend, lying at ease in his big armchair, wearing his dressing gown and with his feet stretched out in front of the fire. He had always been of a distinctly lean and even cadaverous physique, those sharp eyes accentuated by his aquiline nose, but at least there was some colour in his skin and everything about his voice and manner pronounced him to be very much his old self.

He had greeted me warmly, and as I took my place opposite him, I felt the strange sensation that I was awakening from a dream. It was as if the last two years had never happened, that I had never met my beloved Mary, married her and moved to our home in Kensington, purchased with the proceeds of the Agra pearls. I could have still been a bachelor, living here with Holmes, sharing with him the excitement of the chase and the unravelling of yet another mystery.

And it occurred to me that he might well have preferred it thus. Holmes spoke seldom about my domestic arrangements. He had been abroad at the time of my wedding and it had occurred to me then that it might not have been entirely a coincidence. It would be unfair to say that the entire subject of my marriage was forbidden, but there was an unspoken agreement that we would not discuss it at any length. My happiness and contentment were evident to Holmes, and he was generous enough not to begrudge it. When I had first arrived, he had asked after Mrs Watson. But he had not requested any further information and I had certainly provided none, making his remarks all the more unfathomable.

‘You look at me as if I were a conjuror,’ Holmes remarked, with a laugh. ‘I take it you have given up on the works of Edgar Allen Poe?’

‘You mean his detective, Dupin?’ I said.

‘He used a method which he termed ratiocination. In his view, it was possible to read a person’s innermost thoughts without their even needing to speak. It could all be done from a simple study of their movements, by the very flicker of an eyebrow. The idea impressed me greatly at the time but I seem to recall that you were somewhat scornful—’

‘And doubtless I will pay for it now,’ I concurred. ‘But are you seriously telling me, Holmes, that you could deduce the sickness of a child you have never met, simply from my behaviour over a plate of scones?’

‘That and rather more,’ Holmes replied. ‘I can tell that you have just returned from Holborn Viaduct. That you left your house in a hurry, but even so missed the train. Perhaps the fact that you are currently without a servant girl is to blame.’

‘No, Holmes!’ I cried. ‘I will not have it!’

‘I am wrong?’

‘No. You are correct on every count. But how is it possible . . . ?’

‘It is a simple matter of observation and deduction, the one informing the other. Were I to explain it to you, it would all seem painfully childish.’

‘And yet I must insist that you do just that.’

‘Well, since you have been so good as to pay me this visit, I suppose I must oblige,’ returned Holmes with a yawn. ‘Let us begin with the circumstance that brings you here. If my memory serves, we are approaching the second anniversary of your marriage, are we not?’

‘Indeed so, Holmes. It is the day after tomorrow.’

‘An unusual time then, for you to separate from your wife. As you yourself said just now, the fact that you have chosen to stay with me, and for a prolonged period of time, would suggest that there was a compelling reason for her to part company with you. And what might that be? As I recall, Miss Mary Morston – as she once was – came to England from India and had no friends or family here. She was taken on as a governess, looking after the son of one Mrs Cecil Forrester, in Camberwell, which is of course where you met her. Mrs Forrester was very good to her, particularly in her time of need, and I would imagine that the two of them have remained close.’

‘That is indeed the case.’

‘And so, if anyone were likely to call your wife away from home, it might well be her. I wonder then what reason might lie behind such a summons, and in this cold weather the sickness of a child springs instantly to mind. It would, I am sure, be very comforting for the afflicted lad to have his old governess back.’

‘His name is Richard and he is nine years old,’ I concurred. ‘But how can you be so confident that it is influenza and not something altogether more serious?’

‘Were it more serious, you would surely have insisted upon attending yourself.’

‘Your reasoning has so far been utterly straightforward in every respect,’ I said. ‘But it does not explain how you knew that my thoughts had turned towards them at that precise moment.’

‘You will forgive me if I say that you are to me as an open book, my dear Watson, and that with every movement, you turn another page. As you sat there sipping your tea, I noticed your eye drift towards the newspaper on the table right beside you. You glanced at the headline and then reached out and turned it face down. Why? It was perhaps the report on the train crash at Norton Fitzwarren a few weeks ago that disturbed you. The first findings of the investigation into the deaths of ten passengers were published today and it was, of course, the last thing you would wish to read just after leaving your wife at a station.’

‘That did indeed remind me of her journey,’ I agreed. ‘But the sickness of the child?’

‘From the newspaper, your attention turned to the patch of carpet beside the desk and I distinctly saw you smile to yourself. It was there, of course, that you once kept your medicine bag and it was surely that association that reminded you of the reason for your wife’s visit.’

‘This is all guesswork, Holmes,’ I insisted. ‘You say Holborn Viaduct, for example. It could have been any station in London.’

‘You know that I deplore guesswork. It is sometimes necessary to connect points of evidence with the use of imagination, but that is not at all the same thing. Mrs Forrester lives in Camberwell. The London Chatham and Dover Railway has regular departures from Holborn Viaduct. I would have considered that the logical starting point, even if you had not obliged me by leaving your own suitcase by the door. From

where I am sitting, I can clearly see a label from the Holborn Viaduct Left Luggage Office attached to the handle.'

'And the rest of it?

'The fact that you have lost your maid and that you left the house in a hurry? The smudge of black polish on the side of your left cuff clearly indicates both. You cleaned your own shoes and you did so rather carelessly. Moreover, in your haste, you forgot your gloves—'

'Mrs Hudson took my coat from me. She could also have taken my gloves.'

'In which case, when we shook hands, why would yours have been so cold? No, Watson, your entire bearing speaks of disorganisation and disarray.'

'Everything you say is right,' I admitted. 'But one last mystery, Holmes. How can you be so sure that my wife missed her train?'

'As soon as you arrived, I noticed a strong scent of coffee on your clothes. Why would you be drinking coffee immediately before coming to me for tea? The inference is that you missed your train and were forced to stay with your wife for longer than you had intended. You stowed your case at the left luggage office and went with her to a coffee house. Might it have been Lockhart's? I'm told the coffee there is particularly good.'

There was a short silence and then I burst into laughter. 'Well, Holmes,' I said. 'I can see that I had no reason to worry about your health. You are as remarkable as ever.'

'It was quite elementary,' returned the detective with a languid gesture of one hand. 'But perhaps something of greater interest now approaches. Unless I am mistaken, that is the front door . . .'

Sure enough, Mrs Hudson came in once again, this time ushering in a man who walked into the room as if he were making an entrance on the London stage. He was formally

dressed in a dark tail coat, wing collar and white bow tie with a black cloak around his shoulders, waistcoat, gloves and patent leather shoes. In one hand he held a pair of white gloves and in the other a rosewood walking stick with a silver tip and handle. His dark hair was surprisingly long, sweeping back over a high forehead and he had neither beard nor moustache. His skin was pale, his face a little too elongated to be truly handsome. His age, I would have said, would have been in the mid-thirties and yet the seriousness of his demeanour, his evident discomfort at finding himself here, made him appear older. He reminded me at once of some of the patients who had consulted me; the ones who had refused to believe they were unwell until their symptoms persuaded them otherwise. They were always the most gravely ill. Our visitor stood before us with equal reluctance. He waited in the doorway, looking anxiously around him, while Mrs Hudson handed Holmes his card.

‘Mr Carstairs,’ Holmes said. ‘Please take a seat.’

‘You must forgive me arriving in this manner . . . unexpected and unannounced.’ He had a clipped, rather dry way of speaking. His eyes still did not quite meet our gaze. ‘In truth, I had no intention of coming here at all. I live in Wimbledon, close to the green, and have come into town for the opera – not that I’m in any mood for Wagner. I have just come from my club where I met with my accountant, a man I have known for many years and whom I now consider a friend. When I told him of the troubles I have been having, the sense of oppression that is making my life so damnably difficult, he mentioned your name and urged me to consult you. By coincidence, my club is not far from here and so I resolved to come straight from him to you.’

‘I am happy to give you my full attention,’ Holmes said.

‘And this gentleman?’ Our visitor turned to me.

‘Dr John Watson. He is my closest adviser, and I can

assure you that anything you have to say to me can be uttered in his presence.'

'Very well. My name, as you see, is Edmund Carstairs and I am, by profession, a dealer in fine art. I have a gallery, Carstairs and Finch on Albemarle Street, which has been in business now for six years. We specialise in the works of the great masters, mainly from the end of last century and the early years of this present one: Gainsborough, Reynolds, Constable and Turner. Their paintings will be familiar to you, I am sure, and they command the very highest prices. Only this week I sold two Van Dyke portraits to a private client for the sum of £25,000. Our business is a successful one and we have flourished, even with so many new and – I might say, inferior – galleries sprouting in all the streets around us. Over the years we have built for ourselves a reputation for sobriety and reliability. Our clients include many members of the aristocracy and we have seen our works hung in some of the finest mansions in the country.'

'Your partner, Mr Finch?'

'Tobias Finch is rather older than myself, although we are equal partners. If there is one disagreement between us it is that he is more cautious and conservative than I. For example, I have a strong interest in some of the new work coming in from the continent. I refer to the painters who have become known as the *impressionistes*, such artists as Monet and Degas. Only a week ago I was offered a seaside scene by Pissaro which I thought to be quite delightful and full of colour. My partner, alas, took the opposite view. He insists that such works are little more than a blur, and although it is indeed the case that some of the shapes are indistinguishable at short range, I cannot persuade him that he is missing the point. However, I will not tire you gentlemen with a lecture on art. We are a traditional gallery and that, for now, is what we shall remain.'

Holmes nodded. 'Pray continue.'

'Mr Holmes, two weeks ago I realised that I was being watched. Ridgeway Hall, which is the name of my home, stands on one side of a narrow lane, with a cluster of almshouses some distance away at the end. These are our closest neighbours. We are surrounded by common land, and from my dressing room I have a view of the village green. It was here, on a Tuesday morning, that I became aware of a man standing with his legs apart and his arms folded – and I was struck at once by his extraordinary stillness. He was too far away for me to be able to see him clearly, but I would have said that he was a foreigner. He was wearing a long frock coat with padded shoulders of a cut that was most certainly not English. Indeed, I was in America last year and if I were to guess I would say it was from this country that he had originated. What struck me most forcefully, however, for reasons that I will shortly explain, was that he was also wearing a hat, a flat cap of the sort that is sometimes called a cheesecutter.

'It was this and the way that he stood there that first attracted my attention and so unnerved me. If he had been a scarecrow, I swear he could not have been more static. There was a light rain falling, swept by the breeze across the common, but he didn't seem to notice it. His eyes were fixed on my window. I can tell you that they were very dark and that they seemed to be boring into me. I gazed at him for at least a minute, perhaps longer, then went down to breakfast. However, before I ate, I sent the scullery boy out to see if the man was still there. He was not. The boy reported back that the green was empty.'

'A singular occurrence,' Holmes remarked. 'But Ridgeway Hall is, I am sure, a fine building. And a visitor to this country might well have found it merited his examination.'

'And so I told myself. But a few days later, I saw him a

second time. On this occasion, I was in London. My wife and I had just come out of the theatre – we'd been to the Savoy – and there he was, on the other side of the road, wearing the same coat, again with the flat cap. I might not have noticed him, Mr Holmes, but, as before, he was unmoving and with the crowds passing round on either side of him; he could have been a solid rock in a fast-flowing river. I'm afraid I was unable to see him clearly, however, for although he had chosen a position in the full glow of a street lamp, it had thrown a shadow across his face and acted like a veil. Though perhaps that was his intent.'

'But you were sure it was the same man?'

'There could be no doubt of it.'

'Did your wife see him?'

'No. And I did not wish to alarm her by making any mention of it. We had a hansom waiting and we left at once.'

'This is most interesting,' Holmes remarked. 'The behaviour of this man makes no sense at all. He stands in the middle of a village green and beneath a street lamp. On the one hand, it's as if he is making every effort to be seen. And yet he makes no attempt to approach you.'

'He did approach me,' Carstairs replied. 'The very next day, in fact, when I returned early to the house. My friend, Finch, was in the gallery, cataloguing a collection of drawings and etchings by Samuel Scott. He had no need of me and I was still uneasy after the two sightings. I arrived back at Ridgeway Hall shortly before three o'clock – and it was just as well that I did, for there was the rogue, approaching my front door. I called out to him and he turned and saw me. At once, he began to run towards me and I was sure that he was about to strike me and even lifted my walking stick to protect myself. But his mission was not one of violence. He came straight up to me and for the first time I saw his face: thin lips, dark brown eyes and a livid scar on his right cheek, the

result of a recent bullet wound. He had been drinking spirits – I could smell them on his breath. He didn't utter a word to me but instead lifted a note into the air and pressed it into my hand. Then, before I could stop him, he ran off.'

'And the note?' Holmes asked.

'I have it here.'

The art dealer produced a square of paper, folded into four, and handed it to Holmes. Holmes opened it carefully. 'My glass, if you please, Watson.' As I handed him the magnifying glass, he turned to Carstairs. 'There was no envelope?'

'No.'

'I find that of the greatest significance. But let us see . . .'

There were just six words written in block capitals on the page.

ST MARY'S CHURCH. TOMORROW. MID-DAY.

'The paper is English,' Holmes remarked. 'Even if the visitor was not. You notice that he writes in capitals, Watson. What do you suggest his purpose might be?'

'To disguise his handwriting,' I said.

'It is possible. Although since the man had never written to Mr Carstairs, and is perhaps unlikely to write to him again, you would have thought his handwriting would have been of no consequence. Was the message folded when it was handed to you, Mr Carstairs?'

'No. I think not. I folded it myself later.'

'The picture becomes clearer by the minute. This church that he refers to, St Mary's. I assume it is in Wimbledon?'

'It is on Hothouse Lane,' Carstairs replied. 'Just a few minutes' walk from my home.'

'This behaviour is also lacking in logic, do you not think? The man wishes to speak with you. He places a message to that effect in your hand. But he does not speak. He does not utter a word.'

'My guess was that he wished to talk to me alone. And as

it happened, my wife, Catherine, emerged from the house a few moments later. She had been standing in the dining room which looks out onto the drive and she had seen what had just occurred. "Who was that?" she asked.

"I have no idea," I replied.

"What did he want?"

'I showed her the note. "It's someone wanting money," she said. "I saw him out of the window just now – a rough-looking fellow. There were gypsies on the common last week. He must have been one of them. Edmund, you mustn't go."

"You need not concern yourself, my dear," I replied. "I have no intention of meeting with him."

'You reassured your wife,' Holmes murmured. 'But you went to the church at the appointed time.'

'I did exactly that – and carried a revolver with me. He wasn't there. The church is not well attended and it was unpleasantly cold. I paced the flagstones for an hour and then I came home. I have heard no more from him since, and I have not seen him again, but I have been unable to get him out of my mind.'

'The man is known to you,' Holmes said.

'Yes, Mr Holmes. You go right to the heart of it. I do believe I know the identity of this individual, although I confess I do not quite see the reasoning that has brought you to that conclusion.'

'It strikes me as self-evident,' Holmes replied. 'You have seen him only three times. He has asked for a meeting but failed to show up. Nothing that you have described would suggest that this man is any threat to you, but you began by telling us of the sense of trouble and oppression that has brought you here and would not even meet him without carrying a gun. And you still have not told us the significance of the flat cap.'

‘I know who he is. I know what he wants. I am appalled that he has followed me to England.’

‘From America?’

‘Yes.’

‘Mr Carstairs, your story is full of interest and if you have time before your opera begins, or perhaps if you will agree to forgo the overture, I think you should give us the complete history of this affair. You mentioned that you were in America a year ago. Was this when you met the man in the flat cap?’

‘I never met him. But it was on his account that I was there.’

‘Then you will not object if I fill my pipe? No? So take us back with you and tell us of your business on the other side of the Atlantic. An art dealer is not the sort of man to make enemies, I would have thought. But you seem to have done just that.’

‘Indeed so. My foeman is called Keelan O’Donaghue and I wish to Heaven that I had never heard the name.’

Holmes reached for the Persian slipper where he kept his tobacco and began to fill his pipe. Meanwhile, Edmund Carstairs drew a breath and this is the tale that he told.