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Sherlock Holmes and the Shadwell Shadows

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The Cthulhu Casebooks
Sherlock Holmes and the Shadwell Shadows

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This book and its sequels are dedicated to Miranda Jewess, who not only instigated them but edited the hell out of them – or should that be *into* them?

"THE MOST MERCIFUL THING IN THE WORLD, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents."

So has written another author, one H.P. Lovecraft, and it is a sentiment to which I, Dr John H. Watson, subscribe more wholeheartedly than most. Indeed, never was I so glad of being unable to make full sense of certain experiences as in the autumn of 1880 when I returned from Afghanistan to England sound in neither mind nor body. The physical injuries I had sustained during an expedition to a lost city in the Kandahar Province and an encounter with the dwellers therein were unpleasant enough. Worse, however, far worse, was the damage inflicted upon my psyche. Memories of the incident plagued me with the garish intensity of a nightmare. In order to dilute the power of those memories and preserve what was left of my sanity, I retreated into what I can only describe as a madness of self-denial. I swore blind to myself that the events of those days had never taken place, that I had succumbed to a delusion, some feverish aberration of the brain. None of it had been real.

The belief sustained me, and saved me from a spell at Netley, the very institution where I had trained as an army surgeon two years earlier. There is a certain ward at that military hospital in Hampshire, tucked away in a side wing, which is designated for those returning from warfare affected by no great bodily impairment but rather

by mental traumas brought on by the horrors of the battlefield. The beds are fitted with restraints and occupied by men who, when their sedation wears off, are apt to resort to incoherent babbling and sometimes screaming. I, but for my half-conscious, half-instinctive decision to refuse to accept the evidence of my own senses, might well have been amongst their number.

As it was, I could not always reconcile what I wanted to accept as the truth with the plain facts. No alternative scenario I might concoct, however logical I tried to make it, would account for the deaths of the half-dozen members of the Fifth Northumberlands whom I had accompanied into the remoter reaches of the Arghandab Valley, amongst them Captain Roderick Harrowby, instigator and first victim of the ill-fated excursion. Nor was it a simple matter for me to forget the anguished cries of the soldiers as they were beset by the inhabitants of that subterranean city, and the yet more hideous sibilant ululations of the inhabitants themselves as they went about the slaughter of an armed platoon with fiendish glee.

All I could do was maintain the pretence to all and sundry that I had been wounded by a bullet from a Jezail rifle during the Battle of Maiwand, a clash from which I was in fact one of the lucky minority of British combatants to emerge unscathed. This fabrication, first devised as I was recuperating at the base hospital at Peshawar, allowed me to escape any further probing from interlocutors, who hailed my service to my country and accorded to me a valour I hardly felt I warranted. In time, with repetition, I almost came to believe the story myself.

Nonetheless, in the weeks after I set foot back in London I remained a hollow shell of the man I had been. I bore the stoop and haggardness of the invalided campaigner, along with the miserly and temporary pension; I also carried a dark knowledge in my eyes, whose gaze I could seldom meet in the shaving mirror of a morning: a knowledge of things commonly unseen, things that should remain commonly unknown.

That same mirror would show me the other, more tangible mark I was doomed to carry for the rest of my days. It was an ugly gouge scooped out of the meat of my upper left shoulder, and in certain lights it might have passed for a rifle bullet wound. Equally, it could be taken for the result of a crooked talon raking my deltoid muscle, furrowing through the flesh clean to the bone. The injury ached more or less constantly and somewhat impaired my use of that arm. Still, I was aware that I had escaped lightly. During my sojourn at Peshawar the wound had become infected, and the surgeons had debated whether or not to amputate the limb. Luck had favoured me, and the sepsis had abated as rapidly as it had flared; but it was a close-run thing.

Time and again I would examine the puckered scar tissue, and would try not to think of the repugnant creature that had inflicted it. "A bullet," I would tell myself, in the manner of a chant. "A bullet from a Jezail. A bullet." Thus, like a mesmerist enthralling his subject, I endeavoured to implant one idea in my consciousness so that it superseded another.

The cold, wet winter of that year set in, and my funds

were running perilously low, when I bumped into an old acquaintance, Stamford. As I have stated in the novel *A Study in Scarlet*, this fellow had been a dresser under me at Barts. Everything else that I have said about the meeting, and its repercussions, is false, and I present the accurate version herewith.

Stamford and I did not chance upon each other in the respectable, opulent environs of the Long Bar at the Criterion Restaurant just off Piccadilly Circus. Rather, the location was a much less salubrious drinking establishment, a pub in a back alley somewhere amid the labyrinth of rookeries off the Commercial Road. I shall not dignify its name by giving it in these pages. Suffice to say it was the type of tavern where those with little money find ways of spending it on the many vices that life has to offer and will encounter no few individuals of low morality and even lower standards to engage in facilitating those vices. Games of dice, dominoes and cards were conducted in the saloon, cock-fighting in the back room, bare-knuckle boxing in the basement, and more besides. Everywhere within, the dregs of society could be seen swilling the dregs of their ale, and the songs that every so often burst forth spontaneously from this assembly were of the lewdest sort.

I fetched up there mostly because of the light and noise emanating from its windows and doorways. To one traipsing the chilly byways of the capital on the first day of December, ankle-deep in slush from the previous day's snowfall, it seemed a haven of warmth and life. Once inside, I was drawn to a table where Nap was being played, close by a roaring fire. I was – am – an inveterate

gambler, fond of a flutter at the bookmakers', only too ready to chance my arm when a deck of cards is in sight. It is my one abiding vice. As I watched the game unfold, the lure of money to be won worked its irresistible wiles on me, and soon I had joined in and was betting with what little remained of my pension. I fared relatively well, too, at least to begin with. In one memorable hand I bid a Wellington and managed to take all five tricks as declared, leading with my lowest value non-trump. That is no mean feat. But alas, subsequent hands were less propitious, and an hour or so later I had squandered all my winnings and was a couple of pounds the poorer. It dawned on me that my fellow players might be conspiring against me, but since they were a rather rough-hewn lot – full of Cockney menace, their language pure Billingsgate – I refrained from voicing my suspicions. I merely made my excuses and rose from the table, preparing to leave the premises.

I might not have noticed Stamford at all in the midst of that fuggy, overcrowded space were it not for the fact that, just as I was making for the door, he became embroiled in an argument with a pair of Lascars over the price of a girl whose services he wished to procure for the evening. The Lascars were acting as the girl's agents, so to speak, and what had started as a negotiation escalated into an altercation.

Heated exchanges of opinion were evidently far from unusual in this pub, for the other patrons displayed little or no interest in the goings-on. Even the publican, a thick-necked, lavishly mutton-chopped cove with a world-weary face that had seen all the less savoury behaviours of men,

was content to polish glasses with a bar cloth and pay no heed. Everyone seemed to think that the row would surely blow over, and if it did not, then they could weather it by keeping their heads down and their involvement minimal.

Stamford averred angrily that two shillings was his final offer, a generous one, and the Lascars could take it or leave it. They demanded five, not a penny less.

"I do not like your attitude," Stamford declared. "Your sort should really mind their manners. Did you learn nothing at sea? When a white man orders, you obey him, with all the respect he is due."

The larger and swarthier of the Lascars responded with a grin that was equal parts amusement and contempt. "Oh, we learn how to take orders all right," he replied in a thick subcontinental accent. "We take them up to here." He held his hand level with his nose. "And then we don't take them no more."

"The bosun's whip teach us respect," the other chimed in. Two of his upper incisors were capped with gold. "So do the first mate's fists, and everyone else's boots. Lascar is dog of the ship. Captains trade Lascar from ship to ship like barrel of grog. Lascar is nothing. We know how white man treats us, so now we treat him the same. Fair play."

The first Lascar raised five fingers. "Five for her. Pay up or go."

The "her" under discussion was a pallid, frightened-looking waif dressed in clothes that were one step up from rags, although with their flounces and frills they aimed at coquettishness. I estimated her age to be thirteen at the most. Her pinched face was smudged with dirt and her

eyes bore dark rings around them, whilst knock-knees and a slight curvature of the spine suggested she had suffered a bout of rickets during infancy. Life and her fellow human beings had, it was clear, maltreated this girl from the very start. She was a pitiful sight even in such shabby, sawdust-floored surroundings, a stunted rose surely destined never to grow to full bloom.

"For the whole night," Stamford said, "three shillings."

The Lascars, however, held out resolutely for five.

It was at this point that I elected to intervene. I remembered Stamford as a jolly, exuberant sort, an exponent of the macabre humour that is often the recourse of the medical man, especially in the operating theatre where blood and offal are part and parcel of the daily grind. He did not seem of a cheerful disposition any longer. He seemed, rather, to be under considerable nervous strain, sweating, sallow-cheeked and bleary of eye. I feared he was making a spectacle of himself. I was loath, too, to see the unfortunate girl hired out to anyone, but least of all to a fellow of whom I had affectionate memories and who ought not to be stooping to this lowly practice.

"By Jove!" I exclaimed, as though I had only just entered the pub and noticed him. "It's Stamford, isn't it?"

Stamford twitched, then turned round and peered at me. "Do I know you, sir?"

"You may not recall me well, but know me you do. John Watson. We were students at Barts together."

His eyes evinced a flicker of recognition, and a trace of evasiveness which I took to be born of shame. "No," he lied. "Sorry. You are mistaken. We are strangers, you and I."

"Yes, you go, sir," said the larger Lascar to me, sounding almost polite. "The gentleman and we do business. Business that is none of your business."

"Come, come, Stamford," I persisted, ignoring the Lascar. "Don't be silly. Stop joking about. Depart with me. We'll find somewhere pleasanter to share a pint or two and a few reminiscences."

I yoked an arm round his shoulders. In hindsight, this was a tactical blunder. Not only did it make Stamford stiffen with resentment, it gave the Lascars a clear signal that I was laying claim to their client. If they lost the transaction, I would be to blame, not he. In retrospect I should have handled the situation with more finesse. But, as I have already made plain, I was not at that time in the rightest of minds. Recent history had bred a recklessness in me, a sense that civilisation was a fragile, essentially meaningless construct, forever at the mercy of hostile undercurrents. Why else would I have been in that dingy pub with its no less dingy denizens in the first place? Humanity was brutish, I had come to believe, a mere step away from its animal ancestry. Here, one could see that fact in all its grimy splendour, and revel in it.

Yet I could not bear to watch Stamford descend irredeemably into degradation. Perhaps, in attempting to save him from his baser urges, I was hoping to save myself.

Be that as it may, Stamford had no wish to be rescued, and shook off my arm. The Lascars, meanwhile, were affronted by my temerity in interfering in their affairs. The gold-toothed one, from a pocket of his naval pea coat, produced a sailor's jack-knife, the kind that is five inches

long when closed and nearly double that when opened, and which as well as a cutting blade sports a marlinspike for ropework. In a swift, well-practised motion he clicked open the blade and aimed the point at me.

"Back away, friend," he advised – and seldom can the word "friend" have sounded quite so bereft of its meaning. "Now. While you still can. Otherwise things not go well for you."

"I might say the same for you," I answered, balling my hands into fists.

I realised that this, or something like it, was what I had been after all along, the reason I had been out wandering in such dismal conditions. I had not been looking for respite in drink and gambling but for a confrontation of some sort, a way of venting the anxiety and anger that had taken hold of my life and made it nigh on unbearable. My earlier pusillanimity at the Nap table seemed a distant memory. That I was unarmed and the Lascar was not, that he and his companion outnumbered me and, in the case of the larger, outweighed me by a good thirty pounds, did not trouble me. I could fight. Perhaps I might even win.

Then the old man appeared.

He emerged from a far corner, having sat concealed in a snug nursing a bottle of gin. Said bottle was now in his hand, held by the neck, its contents sloshing merrily as he staggered across to us, weaving from side to side in the classic manner of the heavily inebriated.

His age I reckoned at sixty. He was hunched of shoulder, grey-headed, thickly and wirily bearded, and clothed in a threadbare tweed jacket and a flat cap with a collarless

shirt and a grubby blue neckerchief. He looked for all the world like a man from whom the tide of early promise had receded, leaving him stranded in regret, forever down on his luck. The red webs of broken capillaries on his cheeks attested to a fondness for alcohol even more than did his unsteady gait; likewise the bulbous, dimple-textured nose he sported, the badge of the veteran imbiber.

"'Ey up, what's all this then?" he slurred in broad Yorkshire tones. "You lads should calm thissen. Nowt to be gained by skrikin' and fratchin'. No call for any of thee to bray any of thee either, if us can just settle down and be nice. What dus't tha reckon?"

The gold-toothed Lascar turned his knife on the new arrival. "What that language you talking? That English?"

"English as she is proper spoke," said the Yorkshireman.

"So you say. You better do like I just told this other one." By which he meant me. "Back away. This nothing to do with you."

"Mebbe so, mebbe not. But do thissen a kindness and put that knife away. 'Appen as there's nowt I like less than some lairy tyke brandishin' steel in my face."

The Lascar, apparently provoked beyond endurance and preferring to use his weapon rather than sheathe it, made to stab the old man.

What happened next was breath-taking both in its execution and its unexpectedness. The Yorkshireman ducked the blow, and at the same time, with a speed and agility that belied his age and drunkenness, launched a counter-attack. The hand clutching the gin bottle swung up and round, smashing it hard against the gold-toothed

Lascar's temple. Glass shattered, gin sprayed, blood spurted, and the Lascar reeled. The other hand caught the wrist of the hand in which the Lascar was holding the knife and twisted it sharply sideways, so that the Indian had no choice but to let the knife go. Thus, in the space of a few heartbeats, the Lascar was both disarmed and disabled, for as the knife dropped to the floor, so did he, semi-concussed, with blood pouring from a deep gash in his scalp.

His bulkier companion lunged for the old man with an infuriated, tigerish growl, and promptly found himself with his right arm wrenched up behind him and rotated from the shoulder at such an angle that he was bent double and could scarcely move. The Yorkshireman, having deftly sidestepped the assault, now had the Lascar fully under his control, like a lassoed bull. However much the Lascar struggled, he could not turn around or break free. He swore as saltily and lustily as only a sailor knows how, both in English and his native Bengali, but his invective had no more effect than his bodily straining.

The Yorkshireman then dealt a savage punch to the Lascar's midriff. His fingers were half bent and rigid, so that his fist was less like a pugilist's, more like a blunt-edged axe. The blow landed on the right-hand side of his opponent's ribcage, just above the liver, and I could tell that this was no accident. He had struck precisely at the point for which he had been aiming, and the resultant shock to that organ left the Lascar breathless, sickened and helpless. He swooned, collapsing to his knees beside his associate. Both men were ashen-faced and close to insensibility. The fight had definitely gone out of them.

"Well," said the victor of the brief contest, straightening up. "That's those two dealt with." He no longer sounded like a native of Yorkshire; rather, his voice had the crisp, clipped resonance of a well-educated product of the Home Counties. "And you, my girl," he said to the Lascars' unfortunate living merchandise. Around us the pub patrons, briefly diverted by the fracas, had returned to their pursuits. "Quick now. While your abusers are incapacitated. You will never get a better opportunity than this to escape. There is a Salvation Army shelter on Hanbury Street in Whitechapel. Seek refuge there. Young as you are, you may yet put your miserable formative years behind you and make something of yourself. Here." He slipped a half-crown into her hand. "That ought to see you on your way."

The girl secreted the coin in a pocket of her skirt. "Bless you, sir."

"Don't thank me. Just go."

She turned and made for the door. One of the Lascars grabbed feebly at her heel, but she skipped past him, and then was gone.

"As for you," the Yorkshireman said, turning and fixing me with a pair of grey eyes whose glittering brightness was in stark contrast to the ruin of the rest of his face, "you too can redeem yourself by helping me pursue your friend Stamford. It's your fault that I've lost him, so you owe me the courtesy of joining me in the act of recovering him."

"Lost…?"

I looked around. Stamford was nowhere to be seen. He must have fled while the old man – who was clearly

much more than he seemed – had been giving the Lascars a drubbing.

"Yes, lost. Dr Stamford is the reason I am in this den of iniquity, passing myself off as a ne'er-do-well. If not for you, I would still be observing his activities, unseen, and he none the wiser. Now, come. We must hurry if we are to pick up the scent again."

And that, in all honesty, was how I first met Sherlock Holmes.