

A **FreeSherlock!** Pocket Edition

SHERLOCK HOLMES

*AND
THE* Case of the
Inconstant
Burglar

by M. K. Wiseman

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FreeSherlock! pocket edition: April 2, 2022

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IT WAS a misty day in late March 1896, and the sitting room window at 221B Baker Street bathed our quarters in the eerie grey half-light that is ever so particular to an oncoming London fog. I had just returned from my morning ramble through some of the less reputable portions of town and sat myself down at my chemistry setup. Watson occupied the window-side desk, his pen hurriedly scratching away at some or other manuscript due in to one of the minor medical journals. A cheerful fire burned itself away in the hearth, and a pot of coffee slowly cooled upon our dining table. The former both my companion and I ignored save for its welcome warmth. The latter? I very nearly mistook the contents of my cup for the infusion of laurel-water which I had been subjecting to various analyses. Had such a disastrous switch found fruition, I am certain the doctor's paper would have found an easy new topic upon which to expound.

The dull afternoon passed over into dull twilight, and it was Watson who espied the day's sole client dithering in the street below. From the corner of my eye, I watched the doctor's attention shift from pen to pane. At length I ventured, "Are you able to deduce anything from their appearance and actions? Or, I should say, their inactions, yes?"

"She is an elderly woman, Holmes, but not frail. Clearly unfamiliar with our quarters in that she has taken

to peering at each number on the far end of the street, having accidentally passed us by on the outset,” Watson said, not bothering to look my way.

“Perhaps her destination lies elsewhere,” I offered.

“No, she is most certainly coming here. That troubled face . . . Ah! There. She’s found us.” Watson’s words were confirmed by the tremulous ringing of our front bell.

The prospect of a quiet evening shattered, both of us rose and readied ourselves as best we could in the time it took one elderly-but-not-frail woman to climb seventeen stairs. Watson opened the door to a kindly, aged face drawn taut under the weight of worry. With a startled look around, our prospective client said, “I’m not interrupting, am I? The woman downstairs, she said I could come up.”

“No, not at all. Please do have a seat,” I offered.

“I thought there was only one of you.” The woman peered shrewdly at me through heavy gold-rimmed glasses before sitting down upon the chair nearest the hearth. “A Mr. Holmes, it was. You’re him?”

“Yes, and this is my intimate friend and colleague, Dr. Watson. Anything you wish to say to me, you may safely disclose within his hearing.”

Nodding as though satisfying herself on several points, our visitor turned her gaze to the warming fire and asked, “Have you in all your days, Mr. Holmes, ever heard of a burglar stealing a fish from a sideboard table? The head and half of the tail from a lovely boiled turbot. Bones and brains and all, just gone.”

I raised my eyebrows to the unorthodox opening and

replied, "Perhaps you had better start at the beginning. Did this unusual occurrence happen under your own roof? And was this strange burglary within your quarters or those of your tenants?"

She smiled without looking my way, and the lines on her face, though further highlighted by the fire's glow, seemed to soften. "My own. If it were otherwise, I would not have come to you first."

Turning to me at last, she said, "You are correct, Mr. Holmes, in your presumption that I am a landlady. My name is Edith Taylor. Twenty-six years overseeing three apartments at No. 87 Bonnington Square; seventeen tenants during the course of that time. All respectable, though this is not my first burglary, understand. But it is so odd. So very, very odd. And I couldn't cast a shadow on poor Mr. Serrurier until I had seen you and you had settled my mind on the matter.

"As I say, I am careful who I let under my roof. I've three rooms let at present. Two students—strange hours and the occasional row, but each from good families. A spinster lady, also of impeccable reputation. And, finally, Mr. Charles Serrurier." She smiled at this last. "You'll think me a fool, Mr. Holmes, for both shielding and suspecting Mr. Serrurier. Before you ask, I believe it is his real name, yes. He had a rough youth, but he's as kind and honest a soul today as I've encountered in many a year."

I nodded to Watson absently, for he had arisen and already had my criminal index for 'S' in hand. Clearing his throat, he read what he found: "Mr. Charles Serrurier.

Arrested under suspicion as a garret thief accomplice. June 1865.”

His eyebrows raised in surprise. “Acquitted.”

Mrs. Taylor nodded sagely. “That is exactly what Mr. Serrurier told me. ‘The follies of youth and bad companions,’ he said. He used his lucky break to never again step off the path of righteousness and truth.”

“And yet . . . ?” I pressed.

Mrs. Taylor’s twinkling eyes grew sad. “I discovered this morning that, in addition to the half of a turbot, my brooch had gone. It was my mother’s. Amethyst with a vine and leaf design done around the edge in rose gold and valuable enough that the police should be called in. I know, sure as I’m sitting here with you gentlemen, that the brooch was in its box at my bedside yesterday. There’s no mistaking that it was taken ’round about the same time as the fish.”

“Your suspicions of Mr. Serrurier are due his history and nothing else?” Watson spoke from his seat by the table.

Mrs. Taylor wagged a finger. “I have not yet completed my tale, Dr. Watson. There was a separate incident at our household last night. One involving Mr. Serrurier. He stepped out of a cab with a great, big bandage on his head and a story that a gang of roughs had accosted him on his walk home. I tended him through the evening as a matter of course, leaving my own supper on the sideboard to be pilfered and my jewel box to be rifled in my absence by this unknown thief. What’s more, one of the boys—I should say, one of the

student lodgers, Mr. Allen—happened upon me this morning mere moments after I made my second unfortunate discovery, and I was so upset that I disclosed my suspicions. My accusations were indirect, but he took my meaning and volunteered the information that he had seen Mr. Serrurier turn some mean-looking individual away from our doors but yesterday morning. So you see, it does not look well for him all around.”

“It certainly is a pretty little case,” I mused, thumbing my jaw. “There is, however, a good deal to be said of the first instincts in a practiced landlady with regards to judge of character. I myself have taxed our own Mrs. Hudson greatly these ten-odd years. You’ve said nothing to Mr. Serrurier?”

“Of the burglary? The entire household surely knows of it. But of my suspicions relating to him? No.”

“He will have concluded that he is under consideration, though, what with his history having been disclosed to you and with yesterday’s accident to himself. His actions now will speak volumes as to whether or not he is, indeed, involved in this curious little burglary.” I rose and went to the window. “The fog has deepened considerably, and as your street is fairly far off, I would recommend both a cab and that we continue this interview tomorrow morning. I have your address. Would 10 o’clock be amenable for us to come calling?”

Mrs. Taylor, too, stood. Her eyes shone as she said, “Oh, thank you, Mr. Holmes.”

And with that, she was gone, picking her way downstairs to where Mrs. Hudson called a cab for the woman.

“Surely this Mr. Serrurier is to blame, Holmes. It all seems rather simple to me.” Watson had moved to occupy the couch, a vantage from where he could better scrutinize my face. “As for the fish, you did not ask Mrs. Taylor whether or not she has a cat or dog or any other such opportunistic creature in her house.”

“Her eyes were watery. And she went thrice for her handkerchief while she sat there on that couch, Watson,” I explained. “And you saw the arch judgement she gave our own sitting area? That is the unconscious habit of a landlady. One who keeps an orderly house out of duty to others and necessity for herself. That woman does not easily withstand irritants within the domestic atmosphere. No cat or dog graces her home.”

Flinging myself into the cane chair opposite my friend, I eyed him moodily. “Surely such an easy conjecture would have been the first to come to mind for Mrs. Taylor if it were likely or even a tiny bit possible.”

Watson shifted uncomfortably, and he tried to make amends by going too far in the opposite direction, saying, “Tomorrow. Could that not be too late to see anything of importance? The brooch will undoubtedly have passed far from the hands of the thief. A trinket like that is easily pawned with nobody the wiser. Your Irregulars—”

“No. I would not send them out on a night such as this.” I waved a hand. “Too many incidental dangers lurking in the dark. Even Mrs. Taylor’s cabbie will have a hard time of it. My night will best be spent considering recent newspapers and consulting my commonplace books for any burglaries of a similar character. I seem to

recall at least one such incident some six weeks back and not too far off from Bonnington Square. Where Mrs. Taylor sees the connections available under her roof, we shall cast our net a fair bit wider. Perhaps there are more fish missing from these murky waters.”

Morning came, and the fog which had settled in over the previous day thinned but did not dissipate. A grey day saw us off for the promised appointment with Mrs. Taylor. But we proved not to be the first arrival at No. 87. A four-wheeler sat at the kerb out front, an impassive policeman waiting by.

I could feel Watson wanting to say something. Man of action, he did not like what our delay had prompted. Judgement lived in his face. A judgement hastily reined when, a moment later, Mrs. Taylor herself opened the door, handkerchief in hand, her eyes wide and sorrowful behind her gold-rimmed glasses. She turned to say something to the men who crowded behind her in the dim foyer. It sounded like complaint.

“Good morning, Mrs. Taylor. Inspector Lestrade.” I confess my restraint was less than Watson’s. I could not keep the edged disappointment from my voice as I noted the all-too-familiar Yard detective who had been assigned the case.

“Mr. Sherlock Holmes.” He offered a hand. “Saving you the trouble on this one, I think. The particulars add up. Or will do, once we have everything laid out and our man tells all for us. Came for the bit of fish, have you?”

“February the 29th. Wilcox Road,” I countered.

“The pilfered fork, yes.” Lestrade laughed. “That alongside a bracelet of great value. Left us scratching our heads, it did. I’ll agree you’ve been on the right scent. You just happen to be one step behind this time.”

Mrs. Taylor observed the arrest with pursed lips and no more hard words for the officials sent to do their job. I managed a good look at Mr. Serrurier as he exited the home in the custody of the police. Beard and suit both neat and styled well. He was not old; I put him in his mid-40s. Pale from his injuries the day before. A large bandage encompassed most of his scalp and cocooned Mr. Serrurier’s left ear, and he winced in pain as he ducked to enter the cab.

Peering inside No. 87, I could see a young man lurking upon the stairs, watching the proceedings with that peculiar combination of idle interest and no small amount of guilt. Ah, a full picture. Mrs. Taylor hadn’t changed her mind on her tenant, then. It was his neighbour, Mr. Allen, who had informed on Mr. Serrurier to the police.

“Do come in, Mr. Holmes, Mr. Watson,” Mrs. Taylor’s quiet invitation cut in at last.

I bade Lestrade a good day, and we followed our host inside and away from the ever-curious public. The loafing Mr. Allen was nowhere to be seen.

“It would appear that one of your other tenants took your suspicions and acted upon them,” I said, looking about the simple but comfortably appointed room. “Our

task becomes one of exoneration rather than mere investigation.”

Bending, I took out my pocket lens, and still attuning to any reaction Mrs. Taylor might offer, I began my general establishing of the physical facts. Points of entry and egress. Scuffs and scratches and other such marks that an inexperienced burglar might leave behind. I was peering at the window latches when our client expressed her surprise. After all, there was nothing left for me to look into, now that the police had arrested their man and would press him for a full confession.

“Nevertheless.” I waved off her concerns and pointed. “The sideboard? May I?”

“I won’t have left any of it untouched, of course.”

“Of course.”

Lens in hand, I examined the surface as best I could, considering how, yes, the article had been cleaned of the supper that had sat there two nights past. Making a mental note of several suggestive marks, I moved on. Our next stop was our client’s bedroom.

“Where is Mr. Serrurier’s apartment in relation to your own, Mrs. Taylor?” Watson made use of himself via the human side of the puzzle. I smiled to myself. He could ask questions, and I could apply the answers to the minute discoveries which the wood and brass and plaster were telling me.

“His rooms are up that first landing and across the hall. The windows in his sitting room have a charming view and provide the most excellent lighting to the apartment. He really has been a good tenant.”

“And we hope to restore his reputation,” Watson reassured her. “Did you hear any noises the night that you attended him? Anything at all indicating someone in the hallway or the stairs?”

“No.” She shook her head. “Nothing of the sort. Then, my hearing isn’t as sharp as it once was. Could have been any number of soft-footed burglars, but how they got in—your guess would be as good as mine.”

“The roof, madam. Your burglar entered there,” I shouted down from the second landing, pointing through an open door to the small attic window in the ceiling high above.

“Surely you are joking, Mr. Holmes.” She gawked. “He would have to be an agile fellow.”

“They usually are. But really, it just takes a little bit of effort and . . .” Jumping, I applied my not inconsiderable reach and managed to touch the casing with my fingers. Under even such a gentle nudge, the window fell ajar.

“Latch has been forced,” I explained. “Now. The bedroom with its jewellery box?”

The empty box had little to tell, it being empty and all. And as Mrs. Taylor was unaccustomed to locking it, my lens had even less to disclose for my questing brain. After giving the small room the same once-over the sitting room had received, I turned and asked, “Are there any vacant properties on this street?”

“Two doors down. Why?”

“I wish to access the roof and would prefer to do it the easy way. It is also the likeliest route your garret thief took on their way to your attic window.”

“And your thoughts on Mr. Serrurier?”

I pressed my lips together and said nothing. “The empty house, if I may.”

Here I was glad for our brief encounter with Lestrade. For now I could at least pretend to having gained the proper permissions for my next trespass. I found my way up and onto the rooftops overlooking Bonnington with ease.

I had just completed my admittedly fruitless examination when a “Hullo!” assailed me from the street below. It was Lestrade.

“Hullo, Holmes! Saving me the trouble of going up myself, are you?” He grinned.

I came down to meet him. “Surely your felon’s full confession would save you that.”

“Fellow is sticking to the story that his grievous injury kept him in his rooms for all of the night in question, and he has a witness in Mrs. Taylor who, as you know, was the victim of this particular burglary.”

“And what of the person at the door with whom he had spoken earlier in the day? The man Mr. Allen saw?”

“There I feel we do have something. But Mr. Serrurier has been less than forthcoming on that point.” Lestrade’s gaze narrowed, and the Yard man peered at me shrewdly. “You were ready enough with a mention of the Wilcox Road burglary.”

“But I had tact enough not to also mention the one on February 27th on nearby Wyvil.”

“You believe them connected.”

“And you do not?” I raised my eyebrows. “Tut, tut.

Inspector Lestrade on the case of a petty burglary involving a small-time former child-thief.”

“Oh, all right,” he caved. “We’ve a handful of burglaries from back in early autumn and a theory that— Well, I suppose I could come ’round to Baker Street later?”

“So as to compare our notes, yes.” I chuckled and then bid him farewell, returning to Watson and Mrs. Taylor to take our leave of Bonnington, though not without first re-expressing my hopes that her case would find satisfying conclusion after all.

Watson whistled for a hansom, and back northward towards Baker Street we progressed. But I required one more stop along the way. “No. 3 Pinchin Lane, if you would.”

Settling back onto the bench, I smiled when Watson gave a small cry of recognition as we neared the place. “Your naturalist. The gentleman with the dog, Toby. Clearly you saw more than I in Mrs. Taylor’s apartments, but then I had my hopes when I saw you exchange words with Lestrade.”

“We have agreed to work together on this one, Watson,” I drawled, jumping from the cab. “I won’t be but a moment if you would like to wait here?”

He saw my conciliatory glance to our driver and remained in place. “Give my regards, Holmes. I’ll be here.”

Mr. Sherman was a bird-stuffer who lived in the shadows of Westminster with a menagerie both exotic and strange. Though the only outward hint at what lived

behind those bland brick walls was a glass-eyed weasel in the window, Sherman had proven helpful to me on more than one occasion in the past, namely, as Watson had said, in the lending of Toby. This morning, however, my query was of a different sort.

I knocked, and the door opened to reveal a thin, older man with stooped shoulders who said, “Mr. Sherlock! You’ll be wanting the mongrel, then.”

“Not today, Mr. Sherman,” I answered. “You are looking well.”

He waved off the pleasantries. “For a man who sees everything, you’re fair wrong on that count. Only one ’round these parts who doesn’t seem to age is Cyril there.”

I followed Sherman’s gaze to a slow-worm who flopped lazily in the corner of the room.

“I am looking for information regarding any person who might have in, say, the last year or two consulted with you on the matter of trained birds,” I said. “Larger fowl, but not for sport.”

“Pigeons?”

“Crows and their cousins,” I corrected.

Sherman blinked behind his glasses and frowned. “I can recall two men in recent times who had asked over the training of such birds. One said he was a magician. The other? Well now, he just seemed a funny sort. Rather like yourself. A man interested in the out of the ordinary. Wanted a magpie who could be taught to talk. I had him figured as just lonely. Can’t remember names, of course.”

I waited, and he scratched his neck, contemplative.

“The magician, he was young like you’n. Forty years? Maybe younger.”

“Height? Build? Mannerisms? Did he appear to be who he said he was?” I pressed.

“Gentlemanly, but with a way of shifting his eyes that made a man second guess that breeding. Well-in, though. I do not believe he was local to here,” Sherman concluded.

“And the other?”

He chuckled. “That fellow is from just down the lane. See him every so often. Likes to talk to himself, so it may be he did not get his bird. Walks with a pronounced limp. Come to think, I haven’t seen him of late.”

“Ah, well, thank you very much for your recollections.” I was disappointed and he could tell. I turned to go. “My regards to Toby.”

“I’ll tell ’im, Mr. Sherlock,” he promised and led me to the door. He paused, hand on the handle. “There was a fellow. Stopped in early October. Asked about splinting wings. Don’t know what came of him either.”

“Local?”

“Can’t say for sure, but I had the impression he was, else he would not have come to me to ask. Small fellow. Articulate and with a small trim black beard. I remember he had very bad hands. Arthritic, I mean. Noted it because, well—” He held up his own reddened, knobby fingers. “As I say, only Cyril stays young ’round these parts.”

“Thank you, Mr. Sherman,” I said. “You’ve done me a service time and again. Stay well, and farewell.”

. . .

Watson and I arrived home to find a telegram from Lestrade. He expressed his regrets. He would have to come by tomorrow.

“Fine. Fine.” I crumpled the note and threw it into the grate. “You could, at the least, have given me your dates, Lestrade. Now I wait. I wait while you have the wrong man languishing in your custody.”

“Toby’s keeper had news to tell?” I had not yet given Watson the details of the visit.

Ignoring him, I escaped to my room, whereupon a wrinkled, hard-on-his-luck dock labourer soon emerged. “I’m going out, Watson.”

The same haunts that we had shirked on our trek back to Baker Street now played host to one Jefferson P. Bennett. Here the fog aided me, for the elements which persuade honest folks into deferring their plans and staying indoors have a way of, conversely, drawing out the criminal element. A swirling, sooty mist is a pickpocket’s jubilee, and the various thieving multitudes were stirring. Me, I knew some of the more active hives known to buzz with the boasts of the ever-ignoble attic thief and so chose to probe those nearest the scenes of the recent wave of inexact and as-yet-unsolved burglaries.

But all of this proved to be a foolish waste of time and energy. An outlet for exercise and nervous energy and little more. I returned home in a black humour.

Watson sat before the fire. He took one glance at me and wisely held his tongue save to point out what suste-

nance our own lovely landlady had laid out for us in my absence. I removed what *maquillage* had made Mr. Sherlock Holmes into Mr. J. P. Bennett and sat myself at the table.

“I have looked down upon all of Lambeth and have nothing to show for it except a damp jacket and a piercing hunger!” I complained. Watson sat in patient, accommodating silence while I addressed these two most pressing annoyances. A third awaited me when I discovered that my scrapbooks were missing half of September and all of August due to our having been on the Continent at that time. At last, with a noise of utmost disgust, I flung myself onto the couch, and there I stewed.

“Holmes,” Watson began. “What is it you are needing to know, and how may I be of assistance in that matter?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I know everything and nothing!” I cried. “I have four burglaries within a span of two months, possibly—likely—perpetrated by the same individuals. Lestrade has the rest. I’ve at least eight men who could be responsible, but I haven’t time or energy enough to track them all. Leastways all at once.”

Watson, my ever-steady voice of reason, waited to ensure I had wound down and then spoke. “Lestrade will come by tomorrow. You have your Baker Street force to send out on your behest on a night that the weather is cooperative. Nobody has died, Holmes. The case will keep.”

I shot him a glance and then, sighing, sank further into my moody choice of perch. “You are, as always, correct, my dear fellow.”

Rising, I threw on my overcoat and, with a handful of shillings, left the room.

I returned long minutes later and announced to Watson, “I am going to bed.”

The next day dawned bright and clear, with a freshening wind dissipating the lingering fog. I met the morning with eagerness, startling my companion enough with my change of mood that he commented on it over breakfast.

“I know you have not had news since last night, as I have been here all the while. But, Holmes, with that air about you, I should think that you and Inspector Lestrade are becoming fast friends.”

“You are my first and only, my dear Watson.” I smiled reassuringly. “It is simply that I have a fresh perspective on the case after a good night’s rest.”

Watson’s arch look told me that he did not fully believe my words. Were I him, neither would I believe such a claim. Yet it was true. Every once and again, I found that a refreshed brain worked as well—or better—than a neglected one. Sharp without the hunger. To that end, we were still at table when the bell rang. Lestrade had kept his appointment.

“Do come in and have a seat, Inspector,” I bade. The three of us sat ourselves by the fire, Watson at the ready with his little book of notes, the Yard official looking keen but tired.

I began the interview. “I have the aforementioned Wyvil and Wilcox. Respectively, February the 27th, the

29th. Of course Bonnington, March 26th—three nights back. I have my suspicions on an incident in Auckland Street on January 31st as well.”

“And I’ve the three from early autumn. Two at the very beginning of August and one at the outset of September.”

“Dates, if you please.” I rose and went to the bookshelf.

“August the 4th and 5th. And September the 5th.”

“Localized?”

“Osborne Terrace, Dorset Road, and Albert Square.” Lestrade dutifully rattled off the information. “From each of the first two a missing necklace, the former of great value. At the third? Another oddity in that the thief came away with nothing save for an old bracelet with a broken clasp. Not worthless, but an odd choice considering the other jewels went untouched.”

“Ha! Full moons on August the 5th and September the 4th. Trusty old Almanac.” I waved the book and returned to my seat. “But we’ll have to presume clear weather unless you can recall . . . ?”

“They were clear,” Lestrade confirmed. “So our sweep is particular with conditions.”

Back on my feet and trembling with excitement, I asked, “Sweeps. Why sweeps in particular, Inspector?”

A knock on the door drew our attention. Mrs. Hudson entered with an apologetic smile. “Mr. Holmes. One of your boys to see you. I told him to wait downstairs but—”

A small head poked around from behind 221’s landlady. I bade him enter and dutifully dug for his guinea.

His dark eyes lit as he said, “Good legs and bad hands. Just like you said, Mr. Holmes.”

“Thank you.” I dismissed my youthful informant. “Oh! If you can, when you call off your troops, have one of your lieutenants send me up a copy of the *Standard*?”

I handed off the additional penny, and he was gone.

“Now. Sweeps, Lestrade.” I turned. “They are not the only men to claim ownership to the rooftops of London, and if we were to rely upon so thin a leap, they would never be out of the Yard’s eyes.”

He nodded. “Indeed, Mr. Holmes. Actually, it was the soot.”

He had my attention now. Rapt, I sat and said, “Yes. The soot. Oh, how I hoped you would say something of the sort. You noted it at Bonnington, then?”

“And we’ve a similar circumstance from the Albert Square job in September. Mess all around the front of the fireplace but not enough to indicate a man or boy had gone up. Found part of the broken bracelet in the ashes, in fact.”

Gleefully, I rubbed my hands together. “And this is not suggestive to you of anything other than some organized gang of opportunistic chimney sweeps with a tenuous, unproven connection to a man long gone out of the game?”

Lestrade narrowed his eyes at me. “We’re the ones with a man in custody, Mr. Holmes. An actual criminal.”

I reined in my excitement. “Yes, of course. And if I had more to tell than I have at this very moment—

threads and theories and little else—you would be the first to know of it. But I do hope . . .”

I paused. More steps on the stairs. Yes, it was my man returned with the paper.

The boy entered, thrust the *Standard* in my direction and turned to leave.

“One moment,” I cried, thumbing through to the page in question, dropping the rest in a hurried heap. I fished for another round of wages and, bending close, gave my instructions to the lad.

Lestrade had risen to his feet. His hat was back on his head, and he was eyeing me with frank annoyance.

I repeated my apologies, adding, “I do believe we could have conclusive results as soon as tomorrow morning, Inspector.”

“And why is that?” He inclined his head in challenge.

“The fog has lifted, indeed. And we’re to have a clear night, if the paper is to be believed. Good day, Lestrade. Good day.”

HOW DID YOU KNOW?

Lestrade’s early morning telegram lay across my bread and butter. Me, I merely sipped at my coffee and tried to ignore Watson’s frowning chastisement.

“We should meet him there. Before his men walk roughshod over every bit of evidence on the scene,” he said. He paused and then, unable to contain himself at last, asked, “And how did you know the burglar would

strike last night? I did not believe Mr. Serrurier guilty, of course. But how, Holmes?"

Setting down my cup, I raised an eyebrow. "You haven't put any of it together yet? Tut, tut, Watson. As to your concerns, Lestrade will see to it that things are left unsullied. We are waiting on Wiggins and Co. With luck, their information will be sufficient that we can act today."

Grumbling, Watson returned his attentions to his own plate and the morning's paper. We hadn't long to wait before a ring at the bell and youthful steps upon our stairs signalled a return of one of my young informants, members of the Baker Street force or, as Watson had termed them, my "Irregulars."

It was Wiggins himself who accepted his guinea with solemnity, reporting, "Watched all night and it was just as you said. Thomas is fairly certain he had the address correct. The street, anyhow. And you've the description of the man already."

"Thank you, Wiggins."

"And thank you, Mr. Holmes!"

He left, and I turned back to find that Watson had already attired himself in hat and coat. He stood by his desk, question in his eyes.

"Ha! Excellent," I said, noting his preparations. I added, "No, no danger today, Doctor."

We met Lestrade at the scene of the latest burglary. The family had been out visiting, and during their absence and without the household staff realizing, someone had gained access and made off with a necklace of fairly substantial value.

“No soot today, Holmes.” Lestrade watched me make my brief examination of the rooms. “Perhaps they have guessed at the line we’re taking.”

Peering through my lens at the box from which the necklace had been taken, I gave a low whistle. “You’ve had your look, Lestrade?”

He nodded.

“And?”

“It’s a poor thief who can’t pick a lock without leaving scratches all ’round.”

“And on the table itself.” I pointed absently. “You’ll have noted those, I presume.”

As with Bonnington, the burglar had entered via the attic window. Our trip to the rooftop, by this time, felt superfluous, but I used the opportunity to gaze out southward over the neighbourhood, imagining my thief’s hasty retreat homeward under the bright moonlight of the night before.

“And now . . .” I paused to consult the address which I had scribbled on my cuff. “We might intercept this newest missing article before it changes hands and becomes very likely beyond our reach.”

Returning to the pavement, I gave our cabbie this new destination, and with Watson and Lestrade filing in behind me, we were off. Scant minutes later, we had arrived in Cobbett Street. Most garret thieves live outwardly respectable lives, and our man was no different.

“We’ll need to watch and ensure no servant escapes out the back with the evidence, but I am fairly certain our

man and his accomplice are the only two in residence here." I eyed the quiet, bland home.

Our knock at the door was met with a long silence. Lestrade tried again. "It's no good. We'll have to come back with a warrant, if we don't— Ah, good morning, sir."

A smiling, clean-shaven face peered out at us from behind the door. "And good morning to you, sirs. May I help you?"

"I should say so." Lestrade tried to look around the man. "We've some questions to put to you regarding a burglary which happened yesterday evening."

"Burglary? No burglary here." The man appeared confused.

With a jerk of his head, two of Lestrade's men stepped forward.

"Oh, I see. Yes, I see. Come in, gentlemen. If you'll please. I can tell all I know, but I ought to warn you, I've no idea what you're talking of. Not in the least. I keep quite to myself, you'll find." He beckoned and we entered.

Seating ourselves in the man's front room, we waited as Lestrade's men made their cursory examination of the home. Our host introduced himself as Henry Barton, and he waited through the incursion with nary a turn of a hair nor tremor of guilt. While we sat, we talked idly of the weather. And then one of Lestrade's men returned with a grin upon his face and shaking his head.

"Well, what is it, man?" Lestrade asked.

"Nothing, Inspector." The man reined in his mirth. "Well, nothing save for some big old black bird in one of

the upper rooms who speaks in language that would make a woman blush.”

“And did you get its name?” I drawled my question. At their blank stare, I repeated my question. “Its name. Did you get the burglar's name?”

With a wild yell, Henry Barton was on his feet and halfway to the door. “Fly, Jasper. Fly!”

“Watson!” Leaping into action, I collared our man—our human half of the thieving duo. It took another of Lestrade’s men to subdue him.

Alas, my shouted directive to my partner was to lead him into peril. Watson and Lestrade and the second policeman returned downstairs a moment later, and the doctor was bleeding heavily from a frightful wound on his right hand.

“It’s nothing, Holmes,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Jasper got ye? Yeah, he’ll do that when he’s frightened,” Henry Barton sneered at us.

“I am fine. Really,” Watson reassured me. “I’ll just need a good, stout bandage. The bird is likely trapped, though. I shut the damper.”

“That bird is not above opening window latches, but I thank you.” I smiled, adding, “So you did understand my interest in the soot.”

“Halfway.” He smiled back.

Our arrest of Henry Barton and confrontation with his accomplice drew a confession from the man. His cooperation went so far as to help us in securing his partner, Jasper, and I am told that the bird now lives out a careful retirement within Mr. Sherman’s keeping. The

stolen items—those that had not yet passed from Barton’s keeping—were discovered behind the fireplace damper in Mr. Barton’s bedroom. Thus, Watson initially had unwittingly come closer than I in discovering the more valuable of our burglars’ secrets. Sadly, Mrs. Taylor’s brooch had already found its way into a pawnbroker’s hands. I have every confidence that an application of energy and time will bring this, and a majority of the other items, back into the proper hands before long.

But, having returned to Baker Street, I had my own confession to divulge: the answer to Lestrade’s short telegram from that morning.

“How did I know?” Toying with a large black feather—my souvenir from the case—I considered my words. “From the first I suspected an attic burglar. The timing, methods . . . it seemed the most likely premise from which to work. But from Mrs. Taylor’s singular report and the paper’s notice from the Wilcox burglary, I had a double oddity to consider. The less tantalizing portion of a bit of boiled fish and a solitary serving fork? Peculiar, yes. But many a man has quirks and predilections that are beyond you or me to judge.

“Why take just the one thing? If you are going through the effort of breaking into a home, why not lift the entire cache? The punishment is not lessened by taking but one item at a time, and the risk is the same.”

“Your parting shot to me about the weather,” Lestrade groaned. “Clear nights.”

“Clear moonlit nights.” I wagged a finger. “A trusty Almanac is occasionally as useful as a man on the street.”

“I should have, myself, been halfway there when we stopped at Mr. Sherman’s. But really. Why did Barton bother with it at all?” Watson cried at long last. “As you say, the risk and punishment were not lessened by his unorthodox methods. He could not have been gaining much by it all, what with the tendency of Jasper to pick the baubles more likely to catch a crow’s eye than a man’s.”

“ ‘Good legs and bad hands.’ ” I let my remark settle between us. “Age besets the best of us at one point or another. I do believe that Mr. Barton did not wish to leave his profession behind even though rheumatism had begun to put such fine work as lock picking out of reach.”

“And likely would not have even had the hand strength to pull himself in and out of an attic window, yes,” Watson marvelled.

“Well, it’s certainly an oddity that won’t easily be eclipsed by any other sort of thieving gang’s tactics.” Lestrade slapped his knees and moved to rise. “As always, I thank you for your help, Mr. Holmes. Though I do wish you would work with us than merely alongside us, for once. Would save some of us a bit of trouble.”

With a pointed glance to Watson’s bandaged hand and shaking mine, Lestrade took his leave.

“ *‘Dat veniam corvis, vexat censura columbas,’* ” I quoted. I turned and, myself, acknowledged my role in Watson’s having met the savaging. “I really am sorry for that, old man.”

From his fireside chair, Watson waved off the concern. “All is forgiven, so long as you draw up the case notes on

this one. It would be a shame to leave this one unchronicled.”

I dutifully sat myself at the desk and, taking up both pen and paper, paused, uncertain in how I ought to begin. He waited, as amused by my mystification as I so often was with his in my work. With a smile, I said, “What about ‘The Case of the Clever Corvid’?”

He groaned. “Certainly. If you want a reader to know all from the very moment you’ve caught their eye. I lead the reader, Holmes. You must have suspense; mystery. Draw them out until the moment that all is revealed. You know, pretend you’re talking to the likes of Lestrade. Or me.”

I snorted. “Reader. Bah. I’m merely holding the pen until you are able. These are notes and little more. Surely you’ll add your touches.”

He held up his bandaged hand, and I winced, guilt setting me back upon my task. Still, I had to ask, “Where is it you even begin, Watson?”

It was Watson’s turn to raise an arch eyebrow. “You know my methods, Holmes. Apply them.”

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