

Return to Sherlock Holmes

A Case of Identity

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"MY DEAR WATSON," said Sherlock Holmes, "as we sat on either side of the fire in his lodgings at Baker street, 'life is infinitely stranger than anything which the mind can invent. We would not dare to conceive the things which are really mere commonplace of existence. If we could but see that window hand in hand, hover over this great city, gently remove the roofs and peep in at the queer things which are going on, the strange coincidences, the unaccountable, the wonderful chain of events, working through generations, and leading to the most outrageous and unforeseen conclusions, most stale and unprofitable."

"And yet I am not convinced of it," I answered. "The cases which come to light in the papers are, as a rule, bald enough and vulgar enough. We have in our police reports pushed to its extreme limits, and yet the result is, it must be confessed, neither fascinating nor artistic."

"A certain selection and discretion must be used in producing a realistic effect," remarked Holmes. "This is wanting in the police report, where more stress is laid, perhaps, upon the platitudes of the magistrate than upon the details, which to an observer contain the vital essence of the whole matter. If you open it, there is nothing so unnatural as the commonplace."

I smiled and shook my head. "I can quite understand your thinking so," I said. "Of course, in your position of unofficial adviser and helper to everybody who is absolutely puzzled, throughout three continents, you are brought in contact with all that is strange and bizarre. But here I picked up the morning paper from the ground, and I found a practical test. Here is the first heading upon which I come. 'A husband's cruelty to his wife.' There is half a column of print, but I know without reading it that it is all perfectly uninteresting to me. There is, of course, the other woman, the drink, the push, the blow, the bruise, the sympathetic doctor or landlady. The crudest of writers could invent nothing more crude."

"Indeed, your example is an unfortunate one for your argument," said Holmes, taking the paper and glancing at the heading. "This is the Dundas separation case, and, as it happens, I was engaged in clearing up some small points in connection with it. The husband was a testifier, there was no other woman, and the conduct, as far as the law is concerned, was of a very ordinary character. He had drifted into the habit of winding up every meal by taking out his false teeth and hurling them at his wife, which, you will allow, is not an action likely to excite the attention of a lawyer. There is a great emphasis in the center of the lid. Its splendor was in such contrast to his homely ways and simple life that it could not help commanding upon it."

"Oh," said I, "forget that I had not seen you for some weeks. It is a little souvenir from the King of Bohemia in return for his assistance in the case of the Irene Adler matter. I found it a remarkable brilliant which sparkled upon his finger."

"And the ring?" I asked, glancing at the diamond from the reigning family in Holland, through the matter in which I served them of such delicacy that I cannot confide it even to you, who have been good enough to chronicle one or two of my little peccadilloes."

"And have you any on hand just now?" I asked, with interest. "Some ten or twelve, but none which present any feature of interest. They are important, you understand, without being interesting. Indeed, I have found that it is usually in unimportant matters that there is a field for the observation, and for the quick analysis of causes, and the fact which gives the charm to an investigation. The larger crimes are apt to be the simpler, for the bigger the crime, the more obvious, as a rule, is the motive. In these cases, save for one rather intricate matter which has been referred to me from Marseilles, there is nothing which presents any features of interest. It is possible, however, that I may find something better before very many minutes are over, for this is one of my clients, or I am much mistaken."

"I did at first," she answered, "but now I know where the letters are without looking." Then, suddenly realizing the full purport of his words, she gave a violent start and looked up, with fear and astonishment upon her broad, good-humored face. "You've heard how Mr. Holmes," she cried, "is how could you come to consult me?"



Oh, Mr. Holmes, I wish you would do as much for me as you do for other people. I have a hundred a year in my own right, besides the little that I make by the machine, and I would give it all to know what you are doing. I have a letter from you in a hurry? asked Sherlock Holmes, with his finger-tips together, and his eyes to the ceiling.

"The letter which came over the somewhat vacuous face of Miss Mary Sutherland. 'Yes, I did bang out of the house,' she said, 'for it made me angry to see that my single lady came to bank that is my father-took it all. He would not go to the police, and he would not go to you, and so at last, as he would do nothing, and keep on saying that there was no harm done, I took it into my own hands, and I just on with me things and came right away to you.'"

"Your father," said Holmes, "your stepfather, surely, since the name is different."

"Yes, my stepfather. I call him father, though it sounds funny, too, for he is only five years and two months older than I am."

"And you mother is alive?" "Oh, yes, mother is alive and well. I wasn't best pleased, Mr. Holmes, when she married again, and my father's death, and a man who was nearly 15 years younger than herself. Father was a plumber in the Tottenham Court Road, and he had a tidy business between him, which mother carried on with Mr. Hardy, the foreman, but when Mr. Windbank came he made her sell the business, for he was very superior, being a traveler in London. He had a very good salary, and interest, which wasn't near as much as father could have got if he had been alive."

"I had expected to see Sherlock Holmes impatient under this rambling and inconsequential narrative, but, on the contrary, he had listened with the greatest concentration of attention."

"Does it come out of the business?" "Oh, no, sir. It is quite separate, and was left me by my Uncle Ned in Auckland, and he was a very good stock, paying 4 1/2 per cent. Two thousand five hundred pounds was the amount, but I can only touch the interest."

"You interest me extremely," said Holmes, "and you are very good to tell me a sum as a hundred a year, with what you earn into the bargain, you do not draw a little, and I would be very glad to get on very nicely upon an income of about 400."

But when they were typewritten he always felt that the machine had come between us. That will show you just how fond he was of me, Mr. Holmes, and the little things that he would think of."

"It was most suggestive," said Holmes. "It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important. Can you remember any other little things about Mr. Hosmer Angel?"

"He was a very shy man, Mr. Holmes. He would rather walk with me in the evening than in the daylight, for he said that he hated to be conspicuous. Very retiring and gentlemanly he was. Even his voice was gentle. He had the quincy and swollen glands when he was young, he told me, and it had left him with a weak throat and a hesitating, whispering fashion of speech. He was always well dressed, very neat and plain, but his eyes were weak, just as mine are, and he wore tinted glasses against the glare."

"Well, and what happened when Mr. Windbank, your stepfather, returned to France?"

"Mr. Hosmer Angel came to the house again, and proposed that he should marry before father came back. He was in dreadful earnest, and made me swear, with my hands on the Testament, that whatever happened I would always be true to him. Mother said that it was quite right to make me swear, and that it was a sign of his passion. Mother was all in his favor from the first, and was ever fonder of him than I was. Then, when they talked of marrying within the week, I began to ask about father; but both said never to mind about father, but just to tell him afterwards, and mother said she would make it all right with him. I didn't quite like that, Mr. Holmes. It seemed funny that I should ask his leave, as he was only a few years older than me, but I didn't want to do anything on the sly, so I wrote to father at Bordeaux, where the company has a book case. Now, what did father come back to me on the very morning of the wedding."

"I missed him then?" "Well, he had a slate-colored, broad-brimmed straw hat, with a feather of a bristled red. Her jacket was black, with black beads sewn upon it, and a fringe of little black jet ornaments. Her dress was brown rather darker than coffee color, with a little purple plush at the neck and sleeves. Her gloves were grayish, and were worn through at the right forefinger. And she had a most useful material, round, hanging gold earrings, and a general air of being fairly well-to-do, in a vulgar, comfortable, easy-going way."

"Sherlock Holmes clasped his hands softly together and chuckled. "'Pon my word, Watson, you are coming along wonderfully. You are really doing very well, indeed. It is surprising to me that you should be so good at this, but you have hit upon the method, and you have a quick eye for color. Never trust to general impressions, my boy, but concentrate yourself upon details. My first glance is always at a woman's sleeve. In a man it is perhaps better first to take the knee of the trouser. As you observe, this woman had plush upon her gloves, which is a most useful material for showing traces. The double line a little above the wrist, where the typewritten presses against the table, was beautifully defined. The left hand she placed upon the typewriter, leaves a similar mark, but only on the left arm, and on the side of it farthest from the thumb, instead of being right across the broad part, as this was."

"Most certainly it does. Your own opinion is, then, that some unforeseen catastrophe has occurred to him?" "Yes, sir. I believe, I think, that he foresaw some danger, or else he would not have talked so. And then I think that what he foresaw happened."

"But how?" "I was always to remember that I was pledged to him, and that he would claim his pledge sooner or later. It seemed strange talk for a wedding morning, but what has happened since gives a meaning to it."

"Thank you. You have made your statement very clearly. You will leave the papers here, and remember the advice which I have given you. Let the whole incident be a sealed book, and do not allow it to affect your life."

"You are very kind, Mr. Holmes, but I cannot do that. I shall be true to Hosmer. He shall find me ready when he comes back."

"For all the preposterous hat and the vacuous face, there was something noble in the simple faith of our visitor which compelled our respect. She said her little bundle of papers upon the table, and went her way, with a promise to come again whenever she might be summoned."

Sherlock Holmes sat silent for a few minutes with his finger-tips still pressed together, his legs stretched out in front of him, and his gaze directed upward to the ceiling. Then he took down from the rack the old and oily clay pipe, which was to him as a counsellor, and, having lit it, he leaned back in his chair, with the thick blue cloud-wreaths snipping up from him, and a look of infinite languor in his eyes."

"Quite an interesting study, that maiden," he observed. "I found her more interesting than her little problem, which, by the way, is rather a trite one. You will find parallel cases, if you consult my index, in Anderson in '71, and there was something of the sort at the Hague last year. And as in the idea, however there were one or two details which were new to me. But the maiden herself was most instructive."

"You appeared to read a good deal upon her which was quite invisible to me," I remarked. "Not invisible, but unnoticed, Watson. You did not know where to look, and so you missed what was important. It can never bring you to realize the importance of sleeves, the suggestiveness of thumb-nails, or the great issues that may hang from a book case. Now, what did you gather from that woman's appearance?"

"Well, she had a slate-colored, broad-brimmed straw hat, with a feather of a bristled red. Her jacket was black, with black beads sewn upon it, and a fringe of little black jet ornaments. Her dress was brown rather darker than coffee color, with a little purple plush at the neck and sleeves. Her gloves were grayish, and were worn through at the right forefinger. And she had a most useful material, round, hanging gold earrings, and a general air of being fairly well-to-do, in a vulgar, comfortable, easy-going way."

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Leadenhall street. Anybody bringing," etc. etc.

"That will do," said Holmes. "As to the letters," he continued, glancing over them, "they are very commonplace. Absolutely no clue in them to Mrs. Angel, save that she quotes Balaam's. There is one remarkable point, however, which will no doubt strike you."

"They are typewritten," I remarked. "Not only that, but the signature is typewritten. Look at the neat little 'Hosmer Angel' at the bottom. There is a date, you see, but no superscription except Leadenhall street, which is rather vague. The point about the signature is very suggestive—in fact, we may call it conclusive."

"Of what?" "My dear fellow, is it possible you do not see how strongly it bears upon the case?"

"I cannot say that I do, unless it were that he wished to be able to deny this signature if an action for breach of promise were instituted."

"No, that was not the point. However, I shall write two letters, which should settle the matter. One is to a firm in the city, the other is to the young lady's stepfather, Mr. Windbank, asking him whether he could meet us here at six o'clock tomorrow evening. It is just as well that we should do business with the male relatives. And now, doctor, we can do nothing until the answers to those letters come, so we may put our little problem upon the shelf for the interim."

"I had had so many reasons to believe in my friend's subtle powers of reasoning, and extraordinary energy in action, that I felt that he must have some solid grounds for the assured and easy demeanor with which he treated the singular mystery which he had been called upon to fathom. Once

only had I known him to fall in the case of the King of Bohemia and of the Irene Adler photograph; but when I looked back to the weird business of the Sign of the Four, and the extraordinary circumstances connected with the Study in Scarlet, I felt that it would be a strange tangle, indeed, which he could not unravel."

"I left him then, still puffing at his black clay pipe, with the conviction that when I came again on the next evening I would find that he held in his hands all the clues which would lead to the identity of the disappearing bridegroom of Miss Mary Sutherland."

"Mr. Windbank gave a violent start, and dropped his gloves. 'I am delighted to hear it,' he said. 'It is a curious thing,' remarked Holmes, 'that a typewriter should be quite as much individually as a man's handwriting. Unless they are quite new, no two of them write exactly alike. Some letters get more worn than others, and some words only on the sides. Now, you remark in this note of yours, Mr. Windbank, that in every case there is some little slurring over the 'e,' and a slight defect in the tail of the 'r.' There are 14 other characteristics, but those are the most obvious."

"We do all our correspondence with this machine at the office, and no doubt it is a little worn," our visitor answered, glancing keenly at Holmes with his bright little eyes. "And now I will show you what is really a very interesting study, Mr. Windbank," Holmes continued. "I think of writing another little monograph some of these days on the typewriter and its relation to crime. It is a subject to which I have devoted some little attention. I have here four letters which appear to come from the missing man. They are all typewritten. In each case, not only are the 'e's' slurred and the 'r's' tallies, but you will observe, if you care to use my magnifying glass, that the 't's' other characteristics to which I have alluded are there as well."

"Mr. Windbank sprang out of his chair and picked up his hat. 'I cannot waste time over this sort of fantastic talk, Mr. Holmes,' he said. 'If you can catch the man, catch him, and let me know when you have done it.'"

"Certainly," said Holmes, stepping over and turning the key in the door. "Let me see that letter which you have caught him. 'What! where?' shouted Mr. Windbank, turning white to his lips and glancing about him like a rat in a trap."

"Oh, it won't do—really it won't," said Holmes, surveying the letter. "It is possible getting out of it, Mr. Windbank. It is quite too transparent, and it was a very bad compliment when you said that it was impossible for me to solve so simple a question as that 'right' sit down and let us talk it over."

"Your visitor collapsed into a chair, with a ghastly face, and a glitter of moisture on his brow. 'It—it's not actionable,' he stammered. "I am very much afraid that it is not. But between ourselves, Windbank, it was as cruel and selfish and heartless a trick in a petty way as ever came before me. Now, the first run over the course of events, and you will contradict me if I go wrong."

The man sat huddled up in his chair, with his head sunk upon his breast, like a wretched creature who has been struck by lightning. He was leaning back with his hands in his pockets, began talking, rather to himself, as it seemed, than to us. "I have been a widower for many years, much older than myself for my money," said he, "and he enjoyed the use of the money of the daughter as long as she lived with them. It was a considerable sum, for people like her mother. He was a very good man, and he would have been a very good father. It would have made a serious difference, it was worth an effort to preserve it. The daughter was of a good, amiable disposition, but unfortunately and warm-hearted, so that it was very difficult with her fair personal advantages and her little income she would not be allowed to remain single long. Now, her marriage would mean, of course, the loss of a hundred a year, so what does her stepfather do to prevent it? He takes the obvious course of keeping her at home, and forbidding her to seek the company of people of her own age. But soon he found that this would not answer forever. She became restive, insisted upon her rights, and finally announced her positive intention of going to a certain ball. What does her clever stepfather do then? He catches an idea more creditable to his head than to his heart. With the complicity and assistance of his wife he disguises himself, covered those keen eyes with tinted glasses, masked the face of his whiskers, and took the form of a bushy whisker, and clear voice into an insinuating whisper, and doubly secure on account of the girl's short sight, he appears as Mr. Hosmer Angel, and keeps off other lovers."

"It was only a joke at first," groaned our visitor. "We never thought that she would have been so carried away. 'Very likely not,' Holmes then said, "but she, the young lady, was very decidedly carried away, and, having quite made up her mind that her stepfather was in France, the suspicion of treachery, which she had for an instant entered her mind, she was flattered by the gentleman's attentions, and the effect was increased by the loudly expressed admiration of her mother. Then Mr. Angel began to call, for it was obvious that the matter should be pushed as far as it would go, if a real effect were to be produced. There were meetings, and an engagement, which would finally

to secure the girl's affections from turning towards anyone else. But the deception could not be kept up forever. These pretended journeys to France were rather cumbersome. The thing to do was clearly to bring the business to an end in such a dramatic manner that she would leave a permanent impression upon the young lady's mind and prevent her from looking upon any other suitor for some time to come. Hence those vows of fidelity exacted upon a Testament, and hence also the allusions to a possibility of something happening on the very morning of the wedding. James Windbank wished Mr. Sutherland to be bound to Hosmer Angel, and so uncertain as to his fate, that for 10 years to come, at any rate, she would not listen to another man. As far as the church door he brought her, and then, as he could go no further, he conveniently vanished away by the old trick of stepping in at one door of a four-wheeled cab and out at the other. I think that that was the chain of events, Mr. Windbank."

"Our visitor had recovered something of his assurance while Holmes had been talking, and he rose from his chair now with a cold sneer upon his pale face. "You may be so, or it may not, Mr. Holmes," said he, "but if you are so very sharp you ought to be sharp enough to know that it is you who are evading the law, and not I. I have done nothing actionable from the first, but as long as you keep that door locked you lay yourself open to an action for assault and illegal constraint. The law cannot, as you say, touch you," said Holmes, unlocking and throwing open the door, "yet there you are, standing in my study, and I am ashamed more. If the young lady has a brother or a friend, he ought to lay a whip across your shoulders. By the way, I have just been thinking of the sight of the bitter sneer upon the man's face, 'it is not part of my duties to my client, but here's a hunting crop handy, and I think I shall just treat you to the whip, but before he could grasp it there was a wild clatter of steps upon the stairs, the heavy hall door banged, and from the window he could see Mr. James Windbank running at the top of his speed down the road. "There's a cold-blooded scoundrel!" said Holmes, laughing as he threw himself down into his chair once more. "That fellow will rise from crime to crime until he does something very bad, and ends on a gallows. The case has in some respects been not entirely devoid of interest."

"I cannot now entirely see all the steps of your reasoning," I remarked. "With all respect, I am obliged to you for the first, that this Mr. Hosmer Angel must have some strong object for his curious conduct, and it was equally clear that the only man who really profited by it was the stepfather. We could see, was the stepfather. Then the fact that the two men were never together, but that the one always appeared when the other was absent, is suggestive. So were the tinted spectacles and the curious voice, which both hinted at a disguise, as did the bushy whiskers, which were also confirmed by his peculiar action in typewriting his signature, which, of course, inferred that his handwriting was so familiar to her that she would recognize even the smallest sample of it. You see all these isolated facts, together with many minor ones, all pointed in the same direction."

"And how?" "I have once spotted my man. It was easy to get corroboration. I knew the firm for which this man worked. Having taken the printed description, I eliminated every name for which there could be the result of a disguise—the whiskers, the glasses, the voice, and I sent it to the firm, with a request that they would let me know if they answered to the description of any of their travelers. I had already noticed the peculiarities of the typewriter, and I wrote to the man in charge of his business address, asking him if he would come here. As I expected, his reply was typewritten, and revealed the same trivial characteristics which I had noted in the letter from Westhouse & Marbank of Fenchurch street, in every respect with that of their employee, James Windbank. 'Volla tout!'"

"And Miss Sutherland?" "I tell her she will not believe me. Yes, I may be wrong, but I am not certain. There is danger for him who taketh the tiger cub, and danger also for who snatches a delusion from a woman." There is as much sense in this as in Horace, and as much knowledge of the world."

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