

Sherlock Holmes' Lost Adventure:
The True Story of the Giant Rats of Sumatra

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CHAPTER 1

An Early Morning's Case

In a life marked by good fortune—earning my medical degree from the University of London, serving with the 5th Regiment of Foot in Afghanistan—I count among my supreme blessings the opportunity early on in my friendship with Mr. Sherlock Holmes to accompany him *en train* across the continent. Observing occurrences firsthand I should otherwise have found beyond my belief, I came to serve as the instrument of immortalizing the great detective's exploits, as I had for Holmes' first case of significance; that adventure I published as *A Study in Scarlet* six years after the fact.

Then there was the vile habit to which Holmes turned whenever matters went counter to his desires. As each day passed barren of the next memorable case, his dependence on the needle would grow along with my lingering concern for his welfare. I trusted that the trip to which I have alluded would distract his thoughts from any pharmacological inclinations.

So it was one fine morning in the year 1882 that I returned home from my constitutional. I ascended the steps within the Baker Street lodgings I shared with my singular friend when I encountered a portly, middle-aged woman painfully making her way down the staircase, tears streaming from reddened eyes, a sopping-wet kerchief draped around rotund fingers like uncooked sausages.

By necessity I descended backwards, careful footstep by footstep, whilst I declared, “Dear lady, I am Dr. Watson. May I be of assistance?”

“It’s Mr. Sherlock Holmes,” she blubbed as we reached the base of the stairs together. “He has no time for me nor my little Laura.”

“Laura?” I repeated.

“My little girl, sir, my Laura. She disappeared on an errand last night. She's a good little girl, always does as she's told. Come nightfall, she hadn't shown herself. By then I was worried sick, worried enough to find the costermonger to ask if my daughter ever stopped by for me. He said that she was there, rather late like. I asked him if he was sure who my Laura was, and he said he knew her right well, that he took note of her visits for her bright chatter and the little whittled wooden doll Laura always carries about.

“Here it is now, Doctor, a night and a morning after, and still no sign of my angel. And no help from Mr. Holmes, sir, no help t'all.”

I had come to learn that Holmes' reaction to such entreaties was wildly unpredictable. At times, he would rally to the aid of a member of the powerless and of the dispossessed. On these occasions he betrayed a deep-seated compassion for the underdog better suited to our brethren across the Atlantic. Alas, more often than not he displayed a chilling indifference to the plight or social station of the supplicant. Holmes so vacillated between these two states, I often imagined he carried a magical die to cast at such times, allowing the randomness of the toss to dictate his sentiment for the moment.

“And how came you to grace us with your problem, dear lady?” I asked.

“A gentleman I know, sir, with a dear, little dog. He tells me Mr. Holmes is a wonder with all manner of puzzles and the like. And with a heart of gold. Big as the channel, he says.”

“Ah, you live in Lambeth, then,” I remarked, “by Mr. Sherman.”

“Right, sir, but how on earth—?”

“Ah, well, dear lady, it is a skill called deduction, takes years to master.”

“Well, however you did it, you're right as rain, sir. We live near where the gentleman runs his trade. Mr. Holmes and him and his dog, Toby, I think is the name, work together, my friend says, at unraveling all sorts of dark goin's-on, and he puts great strength in Mr. Holmes finding my

little Laura.” With the soiled kerchief, the woman delicately dabbed at the corners of her eyes. “But Mr. Holmes, he takes no notice of me, sir.”

“Can you furnish me with a description?”

“Of my Laura? Oh, the face of an angel, Doctor! Long yellow hair like corn silk, blue eyes, three foot tall or thereabouts. I tell you straight away, I'm poor. I've no money, but I'll raise it. And hell along with it. Anything to see my little Laura back home safe. I'm beggin' you. Help a lonely old woman find her little girl.” The woman burst into tears, her legs giving beneath her. On bent knees, she grasped at my trousers and cried, “Help me! For God's sake, help me! My Laura, my poor Laura!”

“Dear lady,” I declared, fumbling to release her hold on my pant legs and with some effort assisting her to her feet, “Holmes is simply preoccupied. I shall talk to him. I shall convince him. I assure you, he will find your little Laura.” As she gushed forth a profusion of “thank you’s,” I had her scribble her name and address on a notepad, then reasserted on our way to the door that I would do all in my power to have Holmes locate her child.

Finally, I approached the sitting-room upstairs only to hear a lilting voice issuing past the door. On entering, I beheld the radiant face of a young woman. In that instance I knew the searing power of lightning coursing through one's body; my legs buckled under my weight; my heart beat savagely in my chest, so powerful the emotion flooding my being. Never had I felt such incandescent passion. I struggled to regain my composure whilst Holmes, unaware of my state, peered through one of the windows facing Baker Street.

The young woman seemed fragile and diminutive, as of the finest bone china, and as she spoke her eyes radiated flickering bolts of the most intense cornflower blue. She was modestly but impeccably appointed, white-gloved, a choker of finest silk hugging her swan-like neck. I recall thinking to myself in most uncharacteristic fashion: Oh, to be one thread of that shimmering cloth!

I became aware of Holmes just saying, “Am I to understand you ask Sherlock Holmes to believe that your man servant was murdered for the theft of a mere typewriting machine?”

Still in a fog, I watched her faultless lips forming the words, “The typewriter was of some value, sir.”

Steadying my nerves, I cleared my throat and with trepidation directed a question to the young woman.

“A gift from a friend?”

Turning round, Holmes shot a disapproving glare my way. With knitted brow, he cocked his head in that manner of his that made one feel infinitely exposed as the subtlest demeanor of the body fell under his scrutiny.

I moved a few paces nearer the vision before me, and my legs turned once more to aspic. She gently shook the hand that I offered, gave me the slightest of smiles and answered, “No, sir, the machine was left to me by a dear relative, an uncle.”

With relief I eagerly volunteered, “Dr. John Watson,” though my voice quivered, and I smiled too broadly in retrospect. “At your service.”

Was it my imagination, or had I been favoured with a blush upon the young woman's cheeks?

“Who should wish, I wonder, to commit murder for so small a prize as a typewriting machine, Miss ...”

“Gates. Lucy Gates, Doctor.”

All this while, my profound interest in the young woman's dilemma seemed to puzzle Holmes. I had observed first-hand my friend's inestimable powers of observation concerning matters nefarious. But in matters of the heart I discovered soon after meeting him that he was hopelessly perplexed by man's baser drives and all the more by the rarified mysteries of the heart.

“If you please, Watson,” he testily interjected.

Holmes' attention turned back to Lucy Gates.

"I ask you again, young lady, what other items were stolen?"

"My answer remains the same, sir. None." Her spirited response did little to lessen my admiration for her.

To my annoyance, Holmes persisted, "You mean to imply no other items of value rest in your household?"

"I imply nothing of the sort, Mr. Holmes. I own a modest collection of Bavarian crystal, some silver, jewelry of limited value."

"And the other missing items?" Holmes brusquely pressed.

"Holmes," I interceded, "the young lady has answered you!"

"Nothing, save a typewriting machine?" he continued.

"Yes, sir." For the first time I heard a quaver in her otherwise melodious voice.

"Posh," Holmes countered. "If a client be not candid with me, I can offer no assistance."

"Holmes," I protested, uneasy to find myself in alliance with this beautiful stranger and in opposition to Holmes, "can you not tell that the young lady is being candid with you?"

"Is she?" Holmes pointedly questioned.

"Nevertheless, Miss Gates," he declared, "I am occupied. I direct you to any number of other investigative services in the City of London."

A disheartened look appeared upon the young woman's features, and her gaze fixed upon her gloved hands.

"Then there is no more to be said, Mr. Holmes?" she weakly pressed, a plaintive glance in my direction.

"Nothing."

Lucy Gates gathered the folds of her dress and stiffly rose, a tear welling in her eye, and silently brushed past me. I froze when she paused at the door, turned to direct a last glimpse at me,

then glided down the stairs. Instinctively, I took a step in her direction, so moved was I by whatever situation had compelled her to approach the stern presence of my friend.

I leapt to the window in hope of catching a glimpse of Lucy Gates on the street below. As luck had it, she was just slipping a comely foot into a brougham. The cab pulled swiftly away into the bustling street, but I caught the number 195; I knew I would remember it forever. My heart began to sink with despair that I might never lay eyes upon the young woman again. She was everything in womanhood of which I had ever dreamt: The comely shape of her face, the sparkle in her eyes, how her flaxen hair fell and framed her loveliness. In the pain of that moment, I recalled an assignment I had written during my first year at university, revealing the feminine characteristics I most admired. I felt moved to revisit those innocent sentiments on paper, but I had long ago mislaid that early, awkward attempt at the art of writing.

“Not that it matters one whit, Holmes,” I suggested on returning to my arm-chair and adopting a hopelessly inept air of nonchalance, “what was your objection to the young lady's inquiry?”

“The banality of it all, Watson!” Holmes blared. “All cats up trees and lost waifs! This is the situation to which Sherlock Holmes is reduced.”

“But the murder of the man servant has, as you would put it, an air of the *outré*.”

“Listen, my boy, we recently shared a great adventure, did we not?”

“You know I intend to publish it.”

“Then you, more than any other living soul, must appreciate that my powers have been tested to the extreme and that I exceeded my wildest expectations of myself. Now, I yearn for greater challenges. I ask you, Watson, am I to succumb to cases of petty theft and lost waifs?”

“I understand,” I said, slightly alarmed at how full Holmes was of himself at present. However, he *was* young. Thinking of him as such was difficult at times, his manner generally so severe and stilted that one's initial impression of him was of an individual of far greater age. In a

metaphysical frame of mind one might even have said that he was “an old soul” in the body of a young man. It was the rare occurrence when an impulsive or inappropriate action betrayed that youthfulness.

Attempting to lighten the mood, I remarked, “Miss Gates certainly possessed a beauty of some rare dimension.”

“I had not noticed,” Holmes curtly replied.

I could not but contrast his indifference to the charms of the young woman who had graced our rooms with my frenzied desire to be once more in her presence.

“I know, Holmes,” said I, picturing her features before me. “To you, the precision of a Euclidean problem is of far greater beauty than that of any oval face of creamiest complexion.”

With index finger stabbing at the air, Holmes replied, “I *am* encouraged. You are beginning to understand the proper relationship of women to the world.”

Holmes had moved to the sofa and was now shifting shag tobacco from the toe-end of the oriental slipper to the blackened bowl of his pipe whilst whistling a favorite piece by Mendelsohn. I saw no point in continuing to champion the young woman's cause. Instead, my thoughts turned to the sorry woman I had met halfway up the stairs.

“As to that missing little girl,” I proffered, clearing my throat.

“Please, Watson,” Holmes snapped back.

“Could we not set the irregulars on this matter, Holmes?”

“If I accepted that woman's case, I would soon be following errant spouses down grimy alleyways, Watson. One thing leads to another in this world. I cannot risk my reputation for one grubby little girl. She shall show up, Watson, I assure you.”

Lost in feelings of hopelessness, I turned my thoughts to Lucy Gates: Her slender, nervous fingers, the natural, aristocratic tilt of the head. How I longed to spend a moment more with her!

“Holmes,” I abruptly announced, “I must take my leave. An urgent matter!”

“But Watson!” Holmes exclaimed, “I was about to query you upon a point.”

“Surely,” I rebuffed moving to the door, “the matter can wait till my return.”

“As you wish,” Holmes grimly replied with a shrug.

No sooner had he uttered these words than an image arose in my mind's eye: The nickel-plated syringe gleaming in mid-air, a seven percent solution lapping at the piston and a drop, like dew, welling at the slanted tip of the vicious needle. I spun round, momentarily reigning in thoughts of Lucy Gates, and approached Holmes, saying, “Forgive my thoughtlessness. Had you something on your mind?”

Holmes moved to the closet, pulled on his tweed overcoat and donned a favorite cap.

“For now,” Holmes declared, “I starve. I'm off to the Cat and Pudding for an overdue breakfast. Join me if you like.”