



### The Case of the Reed in the Breeze

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It was a dark November day, which at times would depress me, but my present surroundings raised my spirits. My wife, whom I dearly missed, had gone off for two weeks to visit her family in Dorset. My old regimental surgeon's assistant, who served with me in Afghanistan and had just completed medical school, took over my practice for a few weeks. I had unexpectedly come into a few hundred pounds with an old investment so I could afford to pay a substitute. Holmes, on several occasions, had kindly asked me back to my old digs, so I took advantage of this respite and was now back with the welter of test tubes and notebooks, and with the noisome aroma of Holmes' latest tobacco. I was brought out of my reverie by a sharp remark from Holmes, "Watson, I wouldn't waste my money on that." I never have become used to these intrusions on my thoughts. I sputtered, "On what should I not waste my money?" "On an expensive bespoke suit you have been thinking about contracting. It does not suit your image as a humble family practitioner." "Really, Holmes, you infuriate me and amaze me at the same time. You must have spoken to my wife." Holmes shook his head, "No, I did not, but the deduction was elementary. One, you told me you dined with Thompson a week ago. Two, Thompson has all his suits bespoke in Saville Row. Three, you told me that you recently had an unexpected windfall of a few hundred pounds. Four, I noted that you were gazing at your worn cuffs on your trousers. Hence, you decided to spend your money on a new, bespoke suit."

"My wife will be sorely disappointed if I do not," I said.

"That is a factor with which you will have to deal. I cannot account for the thinking of a woman," Holmes said and then gazed off in the distance.

I instantly said, "Irene Adler."

Holmes turned and looked at me, "What did you say?"

I said, "Irene Adler; isn't that what was in your thoughts after your assessment, may I say benighted assessment, of the enigmatic tastes of women?" Irene Adler is the only one who ever evenly matched wits with Holmes, and whom he always referred to thereafter as "THE woman."

Holmes laughed, "Watson, you have bested me at my own game."

My victory was short-lived, for there was a knock on the door. I opened it, and Mrs. Hudson appeared.

"Oh, Dr. Watson, it is so good to see you again. I

hate to interrupt, but there is an anxious young woman to see Mr. Holmes. May I show her up?"

Holmes said, "Please do, Mrs. Hudson. Watson, I need something to interrupt my intellectual drought with no new cases to test me for the past month."

The young woman was very anxious, indeed. She was well, but not expensively, dressed. She sat down in a proffered chair and immediately bent her head forward and sobbed, "We are ruined, we are ruined."

"Watson, some brandy for our young friend." Then, turning to the sobbing woman, "Please take some brandy, gather your thoughts, and tell us about the troubling matter."

In a few minutes she collected her wits and came forward with this story: "I am Mrs. Barbara Caruthers, and my husband Stanley is the chief clerk at the law firm of Rich Brothers, which is located in Middle Temple. They are a well-known firm of solicitors noted for their preparation of contracts for clients. Yesterday morning, Stanley was charged with transporting an important contract to a large shipping company. There were details in the contract that would be devastating to the company if the terms became public. Stanley as head clerk was always selected for the important deliveries.

"He put the contract along with his lunch in his new leather case, which I had given him as a present. It is a lovely case, and it is the envy of all the other clerks in the office. He had taken a short-cut behind the Billingsgate fish market. All of the drivers of the fish carts come there in the morning to pick up a supply of fish to take to fish stores and restaurants. They are a rough bunch, and Stanley was glad to get past them. Suddenly, he was hit on the head from behind and did not come to his senses for several minutes. His lovely case was missing, and he had no glimpse of who might have hit him. He was certain that whoever it was, he wanted the expensive case and would not have known about the importance of the contents. That is our sad story. Stanley reported it to his office immediately, and they are furious with him, giving him only a few days to find it. I must tell you, Mr. Holmes, we want to start a family, and if Stanley is discharged we are in very poor straits. He has been up night and day trying to find the case. That is why I am here. He had only one piece of information, but it does not seem very helpful."

"That is a sad story," Holmes agreed. "But we

The use of character and place names was granted by the estate of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

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must follow every lead, no matter how tenuous. Please go on."

The distraught young lady continued, "One of the carters saw a man running off with the case. He gave chase, but soon lost him in one of the dark alleys that radiate out from the fish market. His name was Obadiah Jones. He was questioned by the police constable, but he could give no good description as he saw him only from the back and at a distance. The thief was likely one of the carters, for they are the only ones around early in the morning. The problem is there are, perhaps, fifty or sixty of them."

Holmes said, "Is it possible to speak with this Mr. Jones?"

"Stanley wanted to speak further with him, so he arranged to meet him when he picked up an afternoon delivery at three," said Mrs. Carruthers.

"We must leave immediately," said Holmes. "Watson, would you go down and hail a hansom? Mrs. Carruthers and I will join you."

The hansom ride was made in silence, punctuated by occasional sobs from the distressed woman.

Mrs. Carruthers, Holmes, and I ended up on the loading dock behind the busy fish market, dodging men carrying huge baskets. True to his word, Stanley Carruthers and Obadiah Jones were standing on the dock. Mrs. Carruthers embraced her haggard-looking husband and then introduced us to him. Stanley Carruthers said, "I am so delighted to see you. Barbara has told you about our terrible loss?"

Holmes replied, "she has, and I assume this is Mr. Obadiah Jones?"

Carruthers made the introduction to a disheveled, portly man.

Holmes turned to him. "Mr. Jones, it would be very helpful if you could tell us about the chase. We would like every detail you can remember."

"Well, gov'nor, it was just as I told this young gentlemen. I saw the man running with the case, and I saw our young friend lying on the pavement. I put two and two together and figured the man had snatched the case and took off. Gov'nor, I am no runner as you can see by the size of my middle. The thief was no speeder either. But he went into that dark alley there, and I lost him. It is almost as black as night in there. Several doors open into the alley, and he must have nipped into one of them. There are some desperate men behind some of those doors, and I wasn't going exploring, if you catch my drift."

Holmes said, "So you never got a good look at him?"

"No, gov'nor, I did not," Jones said, "but he must have had a few pints."

Holmes inquired, "And why do you say that?"

"Well, I didn't notice much until I got in that dark alley. I could just make out his body, and he was stumbling and swaying like my old lady on Saturday night. Once he stopped, and he swayed like a reed in the breeze. Then I lost him."

Holmes said, "Ah, that is a most helpful description and suggests a possible solution. Thank you, my

good man. You have been of great help. Watson, with your newly acquired wealth, a few crowns would not go amiss to compensate Mr. Jones for his time. Then, Watson, I must excuse myself, for I have a long-standing dinner engagement with my brother Mycroft at his club. As you know, he is a bit of a recluse, and invitations are few, and the club chef is a genius with his sauces. Mr. and Mrs. Carruthers, I will give great thought to this problem, and I will be in touch with you shortly."

I wished him good-bye, and I went back to Baker Street, where Mrs. Hudson had prepared an excellent shepherd's pie and I availed myself of a lovely claret out of Holmes' wine collection.

I saw Holmes the next morning, and he was in a high state of excitement. He was reading a tome that looked familiar to me.

"I trust you had a good evening with Mycroft," I said.

"Capital, Watson, capital. As you know the club is a collection of eccentric, but highly competent men. Mycroft had arranged a dinner with two other members, a Dr. Hughlings Jackson and Sir William Gowers, both eccentric in their own way, but very personable. Perhaps you have heard of them?"

I gasped, "They are two of the foremost neurologists in our profession. Jackson is the leading figure at Queen Square. Gowers has written the standard text on the subject, and was knighted by our dear Queen in her Diamond Jubilee year. Holmes, you were in heady company."

Holmes replied, "I gathered as much. We talked of many things. Dr. Jackson is a great devotee of Herbert Spencer, and he dwelt at some length on the theories of the evolution and dissolution of society. But it was a most fortuitous gathering, for during the course of the evening, I mentioned the facts of the purloined leather case. They confirmed a suspicion I had after talking to Obadiah Jones. They were both quite helpful, and Gowers directed me to a copy of his book, which was in the club library. Mycroft, as a member, borrowed it for me."

The book, somewhat familiar to me, was *Diseases of the Nervous System*, the standard text of the day. Holmes had inserted a bookmark in the passage pointed out to him by Gowers.

Holmes said, with some degree of satisfaction, "Ah, here in the third edition on page 449 of Volume 1, under the heading of Locomotor Ataxy, is the following: 'The characteristic inco-ordination of movement develops gradually. It is usually increased (as Romberg pointed out) by closure of the eyes, and at first may only exist when the guiding influence of vision is thus withdrawn. Before it causes ataxy of movement it may render difficult the maintenance of equilibrium when the base of support is narrowed by the feet being placed closely together, toes and heels; if then the eyes are closed the patient sways, and tends to fall. The effect of closure of the eyes is greatest when sensation in the soles of the feet is defective, but does not depend on this defect; it may

be marked when sensation on the soles of the feet is perfect. The early defect in co-ordination may be discovered by the patient when he walks in the dark or backwards, or, not uncommonly, when he shuts his eyes when washing the face.”

I said, “I can well remember the demonstration of such a case in medical school. As you know, Holmes, this is likely due to syphilis. I fear our culprit added other vices to go with that of thievery.”

Holmes looked up, closed the book, and said, “Watson, I think we have the thief. Last evening I sent a message to my friend, Inspector Lestrade, to assemble all the carters on the loading dock when they call for their morning deliveries. Lestrade may bumble at times, but he is absolutely reliable when the task is clear. The market has a list of all the delivery men so that we should have a full complement. I also summoned our young friend Carruthers to be present. I have ordered a hansom. So, Watson, the game is afoot.”

An early-morning ride through a misty and cold London brought them to their destination.

The loading dock was filled with a motley collection of the delivery men, grumbling that they would be late for their delivery rounds. Lestrade shouted to them to be quiet, and the presence of doughty group of police constables buttressed his words.

Lestrade turned to Holmes, “Now, Mr. Holmes, I understand you suspect one of these men of thievery, and the object of that theft may be hidden in one of their carts. As you can see, we have about fifty men here, and it will take some time to accomplish that. Not to say that it will be a stinking job as I can smell those carts from here.”

Holmes replied, “Lestrade, I think my good friend Dr. Watson can expedite the proceedings. Watson, please take over.”

I turned to Lestrade, “Inspector, if you would have your constables line up the carters in three or four

rows, and if one of your men could accompany me we could proceed.”

Lestrade looked skeptical, but quickly followed my request, and then with one of the constables I started down the rows, having each man standing to attention and then closing their eyes. The presence of the burly constable ensured that the orders were carried out. We checked each man and when I got to the third man in the second row, the driver, after closing his eyes, lurched back and forth and nearly fell. I turned and triumphantly said, “This is your man, Holmes.”

Lestrade gasped, “I never saw the like of that.”

Holmes commented, “As our friend Jones said, ‘He swayed like a reed in the breeze.’”

Holmes ordered the constable to bring the man forward. Lestrade and the constable proceeded with the culprit to his cart. A quick search through the empty baskets revealed the leather case.

Carruthers had accompanied the search party, and, exultant, he waved the case at Holmes.

“Please examine the contents,” Holmes requested.

Out came the valuable papers. Carruthers shouted out, “Everything is here, except my lunch.”

“A small price to pay. Be on your way and inform your employer,” Holmes said.

Carruthers grasped Holmes’ arm, “How can I ever repay you?”

“Your gratitude is payment enough, but as a further recompense would you remove that noisome leather case downwind of us? I fear it will remind you of this unfortunate incident for many weeks to come,” said Holmes.

In the hansom cab on their way back to Baker Street, Holmes turned to me and said, “Watson, for your invaluable help in expediting that search, I have purchased two tickets tonight for a performance of some of Scarlatti’s works, where we can unburden ourselves from some of the sights, sounds, and smells of the day.”

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