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*For
Olwen*

Front cover
The 'Pillar Portrait'
Branwell Brontë

Sherlock Holmes and the Missing Brontë

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Ashleigh Barrow Books

Ashleigh Barrow Books
Horwich
ashleigh.barrow@rocketmail.com
2024
isbn 9789403724126

The game's afoot . . .

Also by Laurie Darley:

Seawick-on-Solway

Solway's Secret Santa

Chapter One

Watson tottered into the room. He was wrapped in his Zulu wool dressing gown. His legs were like sticks of celery sprouting from his slippers. He was grumbling to himself.

“Holmes out. Fire out.”

He tottered to the head of the stairs and cocked an ear.

“Mrs Hudson out. No breakfast.”

There were eddies of smoke from the fire. Could he rescue it? No chance of bending down to the job with his back the way it was. He pulled up the threadbare footstool. Yesterday's Times was folded up on the hearth. He removed the first double page and positioned it to cover the fire opening, his arms outstretched. The brown tiles had a serpentine design and reminded him of the eels in the Buffalo River in Natal. Before he got lost in reminiscence, he made himself concentrate on the job in hand.

The trick was to leave the paper in place long enough for the fire to really get going, but remove it before it caught fire itself. It had always

been a sullen, smoky fire, especially with an east wind. At last the draught began to murmur and the paper was sucked inwards. He held it tight. There was a red glow now and the flicker of yellow flame.

The advert stood out as though illuminated. He could read the heading in bold. 'Consulting Detective Required', but without his glasses he couldn't read the rest, bright as it was. He guessed it said someone would be in attendance to interview applicants somewhere at some time or other.

Suddenly the whole sheet caught. Red and black embers danced around him. Sparks stung his hands and the flaming page was sucked up the chimney.

Holmes entered.

"Trying to set the place on fire Watson?"

"I might have set fire to the chimney. It's not been swept in a twelvemonth."

What hair Holmes still had was plastered to his skull and drips dropped from his great nose.

"Just seen Mrs Hudson bustling down the street."

"She'll be after eggs, or sausages, or bread. Anyway there's no breakfast."

Holmes had been shielding the Times under his tweed jacket. They could have had it delivered for a few coppers but Holmes said he liked to 'read' the street and get the latest from the old girl on the news-stand.

"Well we can have tea when that fire gets going," Holmes said.

"You never actually read that paper do you Holmes? You just sit behind it and doze."

"Of course I read it - 'The Thunderer'. It's essential reading."

"How come you missed that classified item seeking a consulting detective?"

"I didn't miss it. I don't need to chase clients."

"We haven't had one for weeks."

"Is there any water in the kettle?"

"Hand me the paper. I'll see if it's in today's issue."

Holmes shook the kettle.

"Dry as a bone."

"Yes here it is: 'Consulting detective urgently required. The Rev. Brontë will be in attendance at the Old Chapter Coffee House, Paternoster Square until the 17th inst.' That's today."

"The Old Chapter Coffee House used to be at the back of St Pauls. It's

not there now. Must be some sort of hoax.”

“Why would someone waste money requesting appointments there, if it's not there?”

“Not even sure about Paternoster Square even.”

“Well let's find out. At the very least we can get breakfast there. We're not going to get any here.”

“Well seeing as I'm wet already.”

“We'll take a cab.”

Nonsense. It's only just along Oxford St and Holborn.”

“We'll take a cab.”

It was a filthy July day. There was fine wet rain and a London peculiar. Visibility was down to a few yards, which meant it would have been hard for anyone to shadow them - keep their distance and they would lose them - get too close and they'd soon be spotted. That was to be set against the fact that the cabbie who picked them up was a garrulous fellow who would have said to anybody who'd listen, 'I had that Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson in the cab. They asked for the Chapter Coffee House. I told 'em it had burnt down years ago. Anyway I dropped 'em at St Pauls.'

They were right under the dome but could barely see it – a grey shape against a greater grey of London fog.

“Now what?” said Watson.

There were low, villainous buildings all around, but nothing to distinguish one from another.

“We'll ask,” Holmes said and bounded up the steps of the cathedral's great western entrance. It was as foggy within as without. They might have been in a vast limestone cave. Were there candles lit down there in the nave? Were prayers being uttered in St Dunstan's chapel?

“There's nobody about Holmes.”

No sooner were the words fully of his mouth than there was somebody there – a cowled figure. Holmes spoke. The figure nodded and led the way.

There were many stairs to descend. Holmes skipped down and stumbled. Watson held on to the rail and treated them with respect. They passed through gloomy vaults, a crypt, and an ossuary whence the skulls that peered forth could scarcely contain their glee at the folly of the living.

They came to a tiny door. The cowled one drew the bolts and tugged it open. His bony finger pointed the way. Watson felt some sort of acknowledgement was necessary, but having no small change, executed a

half bow, half genuflection and hurried out after Holmes.

They were in a mean alley, cobbled, gas-lit, with low buildings, but there it was, one as low and mean as all the rest – the Chapter Coffee House!

Within were low ceilings with lower beams and even Watson, short and stubby as he was, had to watch his head. The waiter, a miniature, pock-marked fellow exuded the air of someone who had a 1001 things to do and your requirements were the least of them. They explained their mission. He ushered them into a snug.

“Newspapers and fire in here gents. I'll get word to the Reverend Brontë that you're here.”

He was eager to be on his way.

“Any chance of breakfast?” Watson asked.

“Breakfast's finished.”

“Why? What time is it?”

“Gone ten sir. Dinner at twelve.”

“Bring me a whisky then.”

“Sorry sir, this is a temperance hotel.”

Watson was not impressed.

“Not even much of a fire,” he grumbled, indicating the sullen glow in the hearth

“It's the weather sir. Doesn't draw so well when it's damp.”

He made his escape at last.

“We'll get this thing going anyway,” Watson said. He separated the first page of the Times and drew a chair up to the fire.

“Do be careful Watson.”

Even with the application of that distinguished organ of record, the fire still didn't draw so well. Smoke eddied into the room and there were only fitful sparks.

The Rev. Brontë entered. He was an antique specimen, all in black with a high, grubby, white stock. It was as if a museum mannequin had jerked into life. His features were spare and bony. He wore quaint, violet-tinted spectacles.

“Gentlemen.” He essayed a stiff bow.

Holmes returned it. Watson didn't want to abandon the fire.

“I'm just trying to get it to go.”

“You're making a pother,” Brontë declared and wafted smoke away. He had an Irish accent.

“I think I'm getting there.”

There was indeed a glow behind the front page of the Times, but he was making more smoke than fire.

“It's too smoky,” Brontë said. “We'll find another room.” He withdrew.

Watson grumbled but gave in. He refolded the page and replaced it on the pile, not realising that he'd enfolded a fat spark within.

The fire in the next room wasn't even lit. Holmes and Watson were both already chilled by the damp weather.

“Cold in here,” Watson said.

“Not a bit of it sir,” Brontë replied. “I'd be opening windows at home. Pray be seated.”

He himself took a seat at the table by the window. Holmes sat opposite. Watson remained standing.

“Have you brought references?” Brontë asked.

“Sir!” Watson thundered, “if you read Strand magazine, every issue for the last several years would provide a handsome reference.”

“Well I don't read it.”

“This is Sherlock Holmes, the pre-eminent consulting detective in this country or any other.”

“I must take your word for it. Have you experience of tracing missing items, precious items, and persons still more precious.”

“Some,” said Holmes with a modest smile.

“Well I should insist on testimonials, but my time here is limited. I'll get straight to the point. My son has lately been in the employ of Lord Broomhead of Wildfell Hall as tutor to his boy. A priceless gem, the Star of Life has gone missing. My son too has disappeared and stands accused of having stolen the jewel. He did not do so. I can assure you of that. I need your help to recover the gem and clear the family name. I might add that my daughter Anne is still in his lordship's employment as governess to his daughter.” He broke off. “I can still smell smoke!”

Smoke was indeed billowing into the room, coming down the cold chimney. Brontë rose from his seat. He was much agitated.

“I have a fear of fire. My son set fire to his bed once and it was only the prompt action of my daughter Emily that saved us all.”

There was a commotion in the corridor. 'Fire!' 'Fire!.' Someone was shouting 'Fire!'

The door opened and the waiter shouted

“Fire gentlemen. Save yourselves.”

Reverend Brontë started up in alarm.

“I must gather my belongings.”

“Save yourself rather,” Watson urged.

Brontë ignored him and rushed out into the passage that was filling with smoke. Smoke eddied into the snug, caressing the oak beams lovingly.

“Every man for himself!” Watson yelled and plunged out. Holmes wasn't far behind. They made sure they were well clear of the building before they stopped for a breather.

What a different world. The fog was gone. The sun blazed in a blue sky. Watson leaned forward and supported himself with his hands on his knees, while he recovered his breath and his dizziness receded. Holmes was in no better condition and leaned with a hand against the wall.

“I can't see that Brontë chap,” Watson said.

“No matter. We have the bare bones of the case.”

“But we haven't his address, nor the location of Wildfell Hall.”

“Ten minutes in the British Library will remedy that. We need the Clergy List, Debretts and Bradshaws guide. Come Watson. The game's afoot.”

Chapter Two

Holmes emerged from his room.

“We must make quick work of tea, if we're to catch the 7.15 Leeds train.”

Watson was reading the evening paper.

“There's no hurry. We won't be going anywhere. The trains are on strike.”

“On strike!”

“Yes the blighters want putting up against a wall and shooting.”

Mrs Hudson was leaning in the archway to the kitchen, clasping her elbow with one hand and wafting a cigarette about with the other.

“I've put your tea out, but don't eat that chicken if it tastes funny. I didn't like the look of it.”

“It's mob rule. The whole country'll be run by socialists soon,” Watson grumbled. “Nothing in here about the fire at the coffee house.”

“How long's this strike going on for?” Holmes asked.

“Doesn't say. Until they get what they want I suppose. The railway companies should stand firm.”

“You need a motor carriage,” Mrs Hudson said. “Come and go as you

please then. Gentlemen in your line of business shouldn't be depending on trains and omnibuses. You need to get to the scene of the crime before the evidence is all gone. I bet that Moriarty's got a motor carriage."

"You may well be right Mrs Hudson," Holmes said, "but it doesn't help in our present case."

"That's just where you're wrong. My uncle happens to have a motor carriage he's thinking of selling."

"Very good but it doesn't help us now."

"It would if you'd get a telephone put in. He could have it here in half an hour. Trouble with you Mr Holmes, if you don't mind me saying, is you're not keeping up with the times. It's no wonder you never have any cases. You're always seeing the obstacles you two and not the way round them. Let me get word to my uncle."

"That's all very well," Watson said, "but how long would it take to drive north and how would we find the way?"

"As to that Watson, I have an infallible sense of direction."

"I've heard that one before."

Once Holmes realised Watson was against the idea, he was all for it.

"Make contact with your uncle Mrs Hudson. We'll have a look at this motor carriage."

In the event it was the following morning before Mrs Hudson's uncle, Major Skelton, brought the vehicle round. They stood on the pavement, a little in awe. It seemed to take up half of Baker St. It was dark green and sleek.

Major Skelton was a very parody of a retired cavalry major – thin as lavatory brush with a portly white moustache. He was kitted out in flying helmet, long leather driving coat and gauntlets. Holmes was bewitched.

"You're looking at the future gentlemen. Everybody'll have one of these; anybody of any consequence that is. As an ex-cavalry man I can see the military application. Armour plate it. Put cannon on it and you can blast your way through the enemy. I've been to the War Office but they just showed me the door. If I'd brought them the design for an improved saddle toggle they'd have been all over me. Been round Brooklands a few times that has – six litre engine."

It seemed a beast to Watson.

"Who's going to drive it?"

There was no doubt about that. Holmes didn't need asking twice to try it for size. He sat in the driving seat and ran his hands over the controls.

“You'll soon get the hang of it. Rose here has driven it, haven't you my dear?”

“Driven it to Brighton.”

“Didn't know you were called Rose?” Watson said, already losing interest in the car.

“You never asked.”

Major Skelton gave Holmes a trial run. Found a bit of quiet street in Primrose Hill and let him have a go.

“He's a natural he is,” the Major said when they got back. “Took to it like a duck to water.”

There was no haggling over the price; the Major wouldn't budge.

“Sorry old chap, can't take less than £300.”

There was some haggling between Holmes and Watson.

“It's your idea to get it.” Watson said. “Why should I pay?”

“You'll be happy enough to be driven everywhere.”

“To lend you assistance, yes.”

Holmes looked tempted to say he could do without that. In the end Watson raided his piggy bank and made a contribution.

Holmes bought the Major's driving outfit too. He tried it all on in front of the full length mirror - ankle-length brown leather driving coat; leather helmet; goggles and huge leather gauntlets.

“What do you look like?” Watson exclaimed.

“We will in effect be sitting in a 50 mile an hour gale for much of the way. I advise you to wear something similar.”

“I'm not going about looking like that! I'll make do with a muffler. Won't we need maps?”

Holmes tapped his right temple.

“Mind safe Watson. I've consulted my gazetteer. Have you not heard of the Great North Rd? It starts at St Pancras. We should reach the northern uplands well before nightfall.”

“Starts first time,” the Major had said. “Hardly ever need the starting handle.”

And it did start first time. It soon stopped again though, even before they reached the end of Baker St. All Holmes's efforts to fire it up again failed.

“What's the matter with the wretched thing?”

“Maybe you should pull that lever.”

“Don't meddle Watson.”

But Watson did meddle. He was half hoping he could sabotage the

venture, but it did the trick – the engine fired up again. They were away. They were off down Baker St, much to the alarm and fury of cab drivers; cart drivers; omnibus drivers; bicyclists and any pedestrians foolish enough to try crossing the road.

Holmes was so intent on his driving, he was quite oblivious of the chaos and mayhem they left in their wake.