

April 1891

Upon being summoned by the Great Detective, Nathaniel Willis went directly to 221b Baker Street. Mrs Hudson, Holmes's landlady, opened the door and led the way up the dimly lit stairs.

Willis hadn't seen Sherlock Holmes since their adventure at St. James's Palace, which had concluded in December 1880. His concerns for the solitary Holmes had been misplaced as Fortune had engineered for Holmes to be introduced to his collaborator Dr. Watson on 1st January 1881, thereupon, the two gentlemen had taken up residence at Baker Street together as a means of sharing the financial burden of renting accommodation in London.

Sherlock was wearing a thick dressing gown over his clothes. He was standing in front of a long window. As Willis drew nearer and more, and more, of the room was revealed, he could see it was one of an identical pair that looked out onto the street.

Whenever Willis had visited him in his student chambers there were piles of books and papers on every surface. First indications suggested Holmes's Baker Street rooms were no different.

Holmes was preoccupied with his pipe. He was in the process of filling the bowl with some pungent shag from a Persian slipper tucked under his arm.

He still cut an impressive figure. Like Willis, he had the advantage of being tall and long-limbed. Amusingly, their hairlines had receded at the same pace and in the same pattern. Furthermore, they both wore their hair slicked back as was proper for gentlemen of their age. Willis had an angular visage, like Holmes, but not his classic profile but, such was his regard for the Great Detective, he did not begrudge him one bit. They both sported the tell-tale signs that they had aged, but Willis could still see traces of the young Holmes, whom he had met in Cambridge.

If anything, Holmes looked troubled. The dark patches under his eyes suggested he hadn't slept and gave him a haunted appearance. He had gone through phases of insomnia as a student, typically, when he was working on a chemistry experiment or having been tasked by the Master of his college to solve a problem.

Despite having been asked by Holmes to become his collaborator, Willis had pursued (contentedly) the occupation of master decorator. He had travelled the length and breadth of the country, undertaking various commissions.

From Watson's published accounts of his and Holmes's adventures, they had often been required to travel, typically whenever Holmes had been invited to solve a mystery in another part of the country or

they were in hot pursuit of a criminal. Their peripatetic lives had ensured that they had rarely been in the capital at the same time. Holmes, by his own admission, wasn't one for maintaining friendships, thereby their acquaintance had lain dormant for a decade.

Willis was about to express his concern for Holmes's health when he noticed the wall on one side of the room was pockmarked with bullet holes forming the letters 'V' and 'R'.

He went and inspected the damage.

"Mr Holmes, that's quite an eyesore. Let me repair the damage. I've got experience of carrying out repair work such as this and matching colours. I do not require a fee, so you may as well agree here and now. I can fit the job in around my other work here in London."

"Mr Willis!" said Holmes, sounding delighted and amused. "It is kind of you to come." They shook hands. "The mark of respect to our Queen isn't why I summoned you."

Mrs Hudson, who was standing just inside the door, said, "Not so fast Mr Holmes!" She turned to Willis. "Sir, I'd be most grateful if you could return my property to how it was before Mr Holmes was seized by a fit of patriotism. It was an expensive wall covering. He has told me more than once he will see to it that the damage is repaired."

"Mrs Hudson, there are matters which I must discuss with Mr Willis. A pot of tea and some of your cake wouldn't go amiss," said Holmes.

"Well, I never!" retorted his landlady and left.

"Just throw your coat over the back of that chair over by the table and take a seat, Willis!" he said, pointing to an armchair next to the fire, the one positioned so its occupant faced the windows.

Willis remembered Holmes once insisting on having a chair he was set upon so he might face the door and monitor the comings and goings. He wondered what scores of enemies his old acquaintance must have acquired that he had to remain on his guard even at home.

As for the table, it looked like Holmes was engaged in one of his chemistry experiments and, as for the bookcases along the back wall, they were laden with books and, he supposed, relics. Willis took care not to disturb any of the chemical bottles as he laid his coat over the back of the nearest chair.

To reach his assigned chair, Willis had to step over the head of Holmes's bearskin hearthrug. He could imagine that, if the lights were dimmed and the fire was the only source of light, its staring, glass eyes would have the power to unnerve him.

"Custom dictates I enquire as to your health and your family's health. I say we ditch custom for there are pressing matters to be discussed."

Willis nodded his consent.

“It has come to my attention that you are presently engaged in decorating an artist’s house near Holland Park.”

Again, Willis nodded.

“For several months I have been monitoring a large, well-organised operation so I might discover the identity of the puppetmaster at its heart. It is crucial I snare him so he can’t flee the country and avoid justice. Suffice to say their crimes are numerous and varied and include blackmail. Its insidious nature means it can go unnoticed for quite some time and can lead to terrible consequences. Lord Byron was a notable exception for not giving a fig about his reputation. His cavalier attitude resulted in him being driven from our shores. In most cases, people are prepared to pay large sums to avoid the same fate, rather than face the consequences for some past indiscretion or having a terrible secret made public. And, you, sir, spend many hours in the homes of the rich.”

“It’s an occupational hazard,” Willis quipped.

“Indeed, and long may it last. I’m sure you do not wish to repeat confidential conversations you’ve overheard but I would appreciate anything you are able to share which may provide an indication as to where I need to target my efforts. How about I reveal something of what I have managed to ascertain so that you do not feel as though you are breaking confidences?”

“As you wish,” said Willis.

“It became public knowledge that the artist Edward Burne-Jones had an affair with his muse, Maria Zambaco, but did you know of his attachment to William Graham’s daughter, Frances Horner?”

Willis shook his head.

“I know you spent several weeks painting the walls at George Howard’s property at Palace Green. Did you learn of Mr Howard’s affair with his sister-in-law?”

Willis shook his head.

Holmes continued, “I know that the wife of William Morris conducted an affair with his friend and business associate Dante Gabriel Rossetti. She is now at the mercy of the philanderer Wilfred Scawen Blunt after George Howard’s wife steered him into her path as a means of avoiding the same fate. Similarly, Rossetti was far from blameless on more than one count. He was unfaithful to his wife with the model Fanny Cornforth, and his exploits are matched by those of his neighbour, the artist James McNeill Whistler.

“I’m sure you’ve met Val Princep and you can’t have failed to have visited Frederick Leyland’s famous ‘Peacock Room’. Well, as you know, Princep married Frederick Leyland’s daughter, but that didn’t stop him

having an affair with one of Charles Dickens' daughters. As for the collapse of the Leyland's marriage, where to cast blame as both parties strayed? Frederick Leyland began to suspect his wife because Whistler had returned to the house repeatedly on the pretext of carrying out finishing touches on the 'Peacock Room'."

Willis put up a hand.

He said, "You have made your point well. I understand that amongst my employer's clients there is potential for a blackmailer to strike, not once, but many times. Indeed, there was talk of some anonymous letters amongst the Holland Park set. Seemingly, their contents were curiously repeated almost word for word. The author claimed to be a 'friend' and said that an incident had come to his attention which suggested that the recipient's life-drawing model couldn't be trusted. However, rather than just dismissing the model, the author recommended that the best way to proceed would be to leave a letter containing an invented outrage on a surface where it would be seen by the model. They were to do this three times, each time citing a different outrage, if the letters weren't taken by the model, then she had proved herself to be trustworthy after all.

"This transparent and crude attempt at getting hold of incriminating letters wasn't acted upon. As a precaution, the models were interviewed but none had been approached by anyone asking for damning correspondence or offering large sums to divulge secrets."

Mrs Hudson's return was heralded by the rattling of a tea tray. Willis must have looked hungrily at the cake as Mrs Hudson didn't ask if he wanted some but simply served him a generous slice.

When Mrs Hudson had done with her fussing and had left again, Holmes finally sat down and swapped his pipe for a cup of tea. He wasn't in want of conversation, which suggested the Great Detective was contemplating the curious events Willis had related.

Finally, Holmes sat back. He placed his elbows on the armrests and pressed the tips of his fingers together, these he brought up to his pursed lips. He held them there for a minute or two before he gave his verdict.

"I believe the letters are just a precursor to the main event. In my experience, you have the blackmailer who is a chancer, for example the poorly paid servant who sees a document and snatches the opportunity to procure monies to leave their employment. They are often assisted by someone else in order to maintain the pretence of innocence. And, you have the blackmailer who plays the long game. They target rich victims, whom they befriend to win their confidence, and either take incriminating material or, failing that, steal from them. This type of blackmailer demands large sums to compensate them for their efforts

and for having had to suffer people they abhor.

“In the case you have described, they have targeted their victims widely. The blackmailer must have known such a close-knit group of artists would talk to one another and the ruse would come to light, so the question is: ‘How will exposure of the scheme be to the blackmailer’s advantage?’. “One can only surmise that the next time the blackmailer strikes, he wants his victims to understand the credibility of the threat. I suspect the blackmailer will meet with success more than once before enough clues are gathered to identify them.

“Who amongst the Holland Park set might yield the most money, who might be suspected of leading a secret scandalous life, who might go to extreme lengths to maintain the appearance of respectability?”

Willis answered, “Sir Frederick Leighton.”

“My thoughts exactly,” agreed Holmes. “As President of the Royal Academy and having been Knighted, Leighton has the furthest to fall from grace. And what of the man? We know he is rich. We know he is unmarried and sleeps in a single bed. He puts on a good show of propriety. Yet, he regularly places himself in the path of temptation by inviting both young male and female life models to his studio.”

“You yourself are unmarried and sleep in a single bed,” retorted Willis. “Are you not visited at home by a whole host of people in the hope that you will take them on as clients?”

Holmes laughed.

“Indeed, Mr Willis. It pleases me that you still leap to the defence of the righteous.

After a telling pause, Holmes continued, “I trust you will forgive me. I have not been entirely honest with you. I have already made some progress in respect of this case, the results of which must remain a closely guarded secret. Sir Leighton has at least one illegitimate child from a liaison with one of his models and an understanding with another. His financial transactions tell the whole story. As far as I have been able to ascertain, he has been honourable and is supporting them albeit discreetly.

“Interestingly, Leighton spent his formative years in Frankfurt, the city where Goethe, the great man of letters and dabbler in science, also spent his childhood. Leighton may have followed Goethe’s example when it comes to matters of the heart by flouting convention.

“I fear that, if I have seen into Leighton’s private affairs, so might someone else who is equally determined. It wouldn’t be impossible to discover which bank he uses and apply for a position in order to gain access to his financial information.”

“His bank gave you access to his records?” asked Willis.

“No, not I. If you recall, my brother, Mycroft, is the government.”

"It had slipped my mind that your brother has rights to unprecedented access," said Willis, picking up his cup. "I've only met Mycroft two or three times, since he was a student at Cambridge."

Willis thought back to the last time he had met Mycroft Holmes. Sherlock's brother had struggled to get in and out of chairs with his considerable bulk.

They both took a sip of tea, then Holmes said, "I enquired if I might visit Sir Leighton's famed Arab Hall and he gave me a personal tour of his house. He took the opportunity of showing me the blackmail letter he had received and asked me what I could make of it."

Willis said, "I shall forgive you for tricking me into revealing my true opinion of Sir Leighton and for taking precautions not to influence my response before revealing your hand. Pray tell, what light have you been able to cast on the matter?" asked Willis.

"That the blackmailer means to taunt us."

Willis let out an involuntary groan.

"That's hardly a distinguishing feature," complained Willis.

"The postmark on the envelope shows the letter was posted in Pity Me near Durham, as were all the others."

"I see now I was a little rash," conceded Willis.

"As for the white, unlined, writing paper, the watermark contained the words 'J. Allen's Extra Super'. Sir Leighton commented that this was the brand and paper type preferred by the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti."

"But Rossetti died in 1882."

"All will become clear," said Holmes, casting a glance at his pipe. "As I argued in my monograph on cigar ash, smokers cast evidence of their habit as widely as a plant its seeds, so, naturally, I looked inside the envelope. I only found a few tiny flakes, but they sufficed. With the aid of a microscope, I recognised the traces of a De Olifant cigar. As we might suppose our blackmailer has no more connection to Pity Me as you or I, I obtained the names of gentlemen who buy the Dutch brand from London stockists. The list was long, but the majority were quickly eliminated. Of the nineteen names remaining one stood out, a Mr Proot. The gentleman was in Rossetti's employ for a few years. According to Rossetti's brother William, Dante and his circle were divided as to whether he was motivated by malice. Some found him highly entertaining, even in the knowledge that he issued, in Rossetti's words, 'a tornado of lies. If he had, in fact, been dangerous to know, then the rumour that he was involved in the plot to assassinate Napoleon III is rather troubling."

“But Proot was found this time last year with his throat slit and a sovereign in his mouth,” said Willis.

“We know he died that is all. I can confirm that many carefully filed letters were found amongst his effects. How he had come by them and for what purpose he had kept them one can only speculate. Interestingly, he also had a stash of white, unlined, ‘J.Allen/Extra Super’ writing paper.”

Holmes moved forward in his chair, removed the tea cosy and picked up the tea pot.

“The coincidence of the cigar ash and the writing paper doesn’t constitute conclusive proof but, I’m confident I have identified our man. Before you ask, the handwriting was disguised and I couldn’t compare the ink used to the one he owned as Proot’s effects have been dispersed, but, as he took the precaution of using his former employer’s writing paper, who’s to say he didn’t use someone else’s ink too.”

“If it was Proot, then the case is solved,” said Willis, holding up his cup, allowing Holmes to pour.

Holmes laughed.

“As I said at the start of our conversation, the letters are the precursor to the main event.

“Years of shady dealings and financial irregularities ensured that Proot’s reputation preceded him, thereby, he attracted the more sophisticated criminal, one with wicked intent, who lured him into a scheme to extract money. Indications strongly suggest that Proot’s associate had factored in the possibility that I might be engaged to investigate the letters. As he had no further use for Proot, he made it appear, for the time being, as though the blackmailing scheme had died along with the author of the letters.

“Yet, he has not acted, why? It suggests that he’s waiting for the right moment to strike, for a time when, presumably, his plan will produce the desired effect and greater gains may be reaped.”

“Do you know who the someone is?” asked Willis.

“The factotum of a devilish fiend and my arch-opponent.”

A thought struck Willis. He got up and strode across the room to his coat.

“I must return to Sir Leighton’s residence.”

“Why? Can’t it wait until tomorrow?” asked Holmes. “I haven’t had the chance to ask you if you’ve noticed anything queer while working at his property.”

As Willis felt for his coat pocket, he answered, “I can’t say I have.

“When Leighton learnt that I was working on a commission for an acquaintance near-by, he asked if I could pop round with my ladder to re-arrange some things in his studio. A carpenter, who had fixed a sky light, had left his fingerprints on the glass, which he also wanted removing. You know how exacting the Holland Park set are.”

As he spoke, Willis pulled out a lady’s slipper fit for Scheherazade from his coat pocket. It was

embroidered with gold thread. Holmes stared at it, looking baffled.

Willis continued, "I have wanted to see Leighton's famed Arab Hall for a long time. The opportunity presented itself on the back of Sir Leighton opening his studio every April, so the public can see the paintings he intends to submit to the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition. This is followed by an evening of music for a select group of friends. Naturally, he wants his property to be shipshape. If you ask me, Leighton revels in the adulation and isn't in the least concerned that Holland Park Road becomes blocked by carriages, even though he professes to the contrary.

"Suffice to say, he's asked me to call at his home every day this last week."

"Willis, old friend, you should have said you were in want of tobacco. I would have given you some of mine," quipped Holmes.

"Leighton doesn't share your habit of keeping pipe tobacco in a Persian slipper. This is one of his props." Holmes raised an eyebrow. Willis continued, "His paintings are mostly of classical subjects set in hot climes, necessitating him to buy lengths of exotic fabric, items of jewellery, clothing and so forth on his travels. His models wear them for authenticity, allowing him to make preparatory sketches of them for his paintings."

Willis noted the vacant expression in Holmes's eyes. It tickled him that, despite all the hours Holmes spent reading widely, there were areas he knew little or nothing about. Holmes knew astonishing details about paintings around which a case had revolved, but, it seemed, he knew nothing about the painting process.

Still staring at the slipper, Holmes asked, "Shouldn't there be two of them? Where's the other slipper?"

"It's a mystery that has had Leighton much occupied. He asked me to hang an antique wall hanging he had acquired and wanted to display. The very next day he asked me to take it down again, having decided its colours didn't accentuate his finished paintings – these he had placed on easels at the far end of the room, nowhere near the wall hanging.

"Now for the curious part of my tale. When I took down the wall hanging, we found the slipper wedged behind it. Leighton interviewed his butler, who knew nothing about it. We searched for evidence of an intruder, following your methods. We looked for footprints, signs of broken stems, ash dropped by a smoker and so forth, but he had had so many tradesmen visiting the week before, myself included, that we couldn't say with any certainty how long ago any impressions had been made. Our assessment was made more difficult by the April showers that swept across London.

"Leighton searched for the other slipper, but it appears to have been taken. It makes no sense. Why

take one slipper and hide the other? Leighton showed me a painting he was working on. The subject of the painting can be seen to be wearing the slippers. In desperation, Leighton had the model fetched. She said she nothing about the matter.”

“Was she telling the truth, do you think?” asked Holmes.

“She thought that, by implication, she was being accused of trickery and was distraught. It was most unfortunate. The incident had the power to unsettle Leighton’s equanimity.”

“So, how did the remaining slipper end up in your coat pocket?”

Wallis laughed and said, “Oh, that’s easy to explain. Sir Leighton is acquainted with the Prince of Wales. His Highness called unexpectedly at his house as I was about to depart. Leighton threw the shoe for me to catch because he looked ridiculous holding it and I quickly stashed it in my coat pocket.”

As Willis talked, Holmes dug his elbows into the arm rests, brought his fingertips together and placed them against his pursed lips, once again adopting his favoured position for promoting deep thought. Willis wondered what he had said that had triggered Holmes to sink into contemplation rather than reach for his pipe.

Even when Willis fell silent, Holmes did not speak or move.

Finally, Holmes emitted a strange but telling laugh. It suggested to Willis that Holmes had hit upon quite how clever his adversary had been when masterminding his seemingly ingenious plan. Then again, the laugh could also be interpreted as a measure of how close Proot’s likely killer had come to succeeding. Too close it would seem.

“Mr Holmes, what is troubling you?” asked Willis.

Holmes sprang up and began loosening the cord fastening around his dressing gown.

“I believe our adversary means to have Leighton arrested for murder during his music recital. Such public humiliation, even if he is proved innocent, is hard, if not impossible, to shake off as nothing is more adhesive than an accusation no matter how false. If his illustrious neighbours are then blackmailed, their coffers will become colanders.”

“Why the golden slippers?” Willis asked.

“I suspect the blackmailer means to murder one of Leighton’s models. Her beautiful corpse will be found wearing the stolen slipper. As Leighton is sure to be the primary suspect, the police will want to search his studio. They will find the unfinished painting but not the slipper. The two together would have presented strong evidence of Leighton’s assumed guilt. Whether the picture on its own will be considered incriminating is harder to say.

“Let us not delay further, there’s a young lady who needs saving! Call a hansom while I get my things! We need to speak with Leighton and his model,” said Holmes.

It was dusk when a man appeared. He was carrying a cane and wearing his hat low down on his forehead, casting a shadow over his eyes, making them impossible to make out. He had taken the footpath which led from the icehouse in Holland Park.

He spotted the lady dressed in mourning clothes, who was seated, with her back perfectly straight, on a stone bench. She was clutching a reticule with her gloved hands. A long, black veil hung like a curtain in front of her face.

The man asked, “Would you be Miss Ridley?”

The lady in black nodded.

“Don’t be coy, Miss! Lift your veil so I can make certain,” the man demanded.

The lady didn’t respond but turned her upper body away from him.

“Why won’t you show yourself?” demanded the man.

Still the lady did not answer.

“Right then,” said the man, extracting a thin sword from his walking stick, revealing that it had doubled as a sheath. “Let us not stand on ceremony. Lift your veil or I shall be obliged to do it for you!”

Holmes, who had been observing them, was hiding in the bushes behind the lady. He was confident the man couldn’t see him as the bushes still had the previous summer’s growth and were shaded by tall trees.

He let go of his sword stick, alerting the man to his presence, and quickly reached into his pocket. He pulled out a catapult and a small bag, like a bean bag, which was almost the size of his palm and filled with sand. In a swift, practised move, he placed the bag into the catapult’s pouch, pulled it back, and let go. He only succeeded in taking the man’s hat off.

The man began to charge in the direction from which the projectile had been launched. He held his sword thrust forward. Holmes was in no doubt he meant to pierce him straight through. He held his nerve. With the speed of a pickpocket, Holmes took out another bag, placed it in the leather pouch, pulled it back and let go. The projectile struck the man in the centre of his forehead with a dull thud, as if struck by a mallet, and he fell like a sack of potatoes.

Sherlock pulled up the long chain about his neck on which a police whistle was attached and called for assistance.

A few moments later, he heard men calling and, between the trees, he could make out several lighted

lanterns, which shone brightly in the fading light.

They were joined by Inspector Lestrade and his men.

Holmes and Lestrade approached the lady, who had remained rooted to the bench. "Are you alright, Miss?" inquired the inspector.

"I am now that the danger has passed, Inspector Lestrade," replied the lady in a man's voice.

Inspector Lestrade looked at her askance.

She lifted her veil.

"Inspector Lestrade," said Holmes, "you remember Mr Willis who assisted me at St. James's Palace, don't you?"

"I'll be damned! Mr Willis, it's good to see you again," Lestrade said offering his hand.

"Likewise, Inspector," said Willis.

Holmes said to Lestrade, "Why not take advantage of having plenty of witnesses and see if the man has a golden slipper on his person before your officers take him away?"

The man had been put into handcuffs, but his officers were struggling to get him to stay upright. They looked like a vaudeville act.

Lestrade walked up to them and patted the man's jacket. He must have detected a lump as he reached in and pulled out the golden slipper without any real searching required. He held it up and wagged it for Holmes and Willis to see.

Willis stood back from Holmes's living room wall and admired his repair work. Just as he had promised, the letters 'V' and 'R' had disappeared behind filler and carefully applied paint.

He turned to look at Holmes, who was sitting by the fire and hadn't moved or said anything in hours. Willis thought he looked gaunt and the dark patches under his eyes were more pronounced than ever. Mrs Hudson had brought in a tea tray at three o'clock, but Holmes hadn't touched his slice of cake or his cup of tea.

Willis knew how much Holmes had depended on the police being able to extract the identity of the mastermind he wanted to snare from the man they had caught in Holland Park, but it had come to nought.

"Can you ring for Mrs Hudson? Get her to bring a fresh pot of tea. I insist you have one more cup before you head off to Cambridge," Holmes said, in a quiet voice. "I apologise for not being good company today. At least we were able to take up Sir Leighton's invite and hear the magnificent Joseph Joachim playing Brahms yesterday evening. As you know, I don't give a fig for society no matter how splendid or

whether royalty are in attendance, but I can't tell you how much it pleased me that you had kept my father's dinner suit and were able to attend. It would have pained me if you had missed out on Joachim playing the violin."

Willis said, "The pleasure was all mine. Sir Leighton gave me a private tour of his house this morning. He apologised for assuming that I wouldn't be interested in his Arab Hall or his paintings. I will carry the memory of yesterday evening and this morning's tour for as long as I live."

A week or so later, Inspector Lestrade turned up at the property where Willis was engaged to execute another detailed decorative scheme.

Lestrade removed his hat but did not make to speak.

The fate of Holmes was written across his face.

Willis understood that he did not want to utter that the Great Detective was dead lest it could still be undone.

"I've not seen any reports in the newspapers," Willis said, hoping Lestrade had made a mistake.

His visitor nodded his confirmation.

Finally, Lestrade said, "I wanted you to hear it from me before the story breaks. I know that Holmes appreciated your assistance. He spoke highly of you."

Willis asked, "How was he taken from us?"

"Holmes and Moriarty tumbled to their deaths at the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland."

Willis suspected that the last time he had seen Holmes had coincided with Holmes realising that there was only one way to bring Moriarty out into the open again, but, given Moriarty's threats, it would almost inevitably lead to his death. Those last few hours at 221b Baker Street, when Holmes must have invited Death, was not how he wanted to remember the best and wisest man he had ever known, rather as they had sat in Leighton's house the evening before and were held in rapture by Joachim's violin playing.