

The Adventure at St. James's Palace

Upon moving in at 221B Baker Street, our London residence, I accompanied Sherlock Holmes on a whirlwind of adventures. According to my yearbook, we went to Northumberland to find a missing curate, to Brighton to solve the case of the damning telegram and to Newmarket to discover who was lacing horse-feed with sedatives, among many others. These were all reported in the national press.

There was, however, a case that we were asked to keep secret. As we have lost two monarchs since the events I am about to relate, it will no longer be of any consequence if I break my silence, but it will be of great interest to my readers who study Holmes's methods.

Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock's brother, visited us at breakfast one morning. This may conjure a relaxed, domestic scene but Holmes had insisted I stand next to him so he could check the classifieds as I read the headlines. Occasionally, Sherlock would find one which, at face value, appeared to be an announcement, but, after several minutes of making jottings on the back of an envelope, he would find a message hidden therein. Thereby, Mycroft found us exercising our minds and our stomachs.



Sherlock Holmes & Dr Watson –

Illustration by Sidney Paget for *The Strand* magazine

“Please tell me you have an intriguing little problem for us,” asked Sherlock, having recognised his brother's footfalls on the stairs.

“A good morning to you too, brother,” said Mycroft. “And, a fine morning to you, Dr. Watson. I trust you are both well even if you have lacked occupation.” Without pausing for a response, he continued, “I am to escort you to St. James's Palace where the body of the late Frederick Decimus Kensington-Smythe was discovered in the early hours. He is a member of the Royal Household staff.”

Sherlock let his cutlery fall onto his plate with a clatter. In the blink of an eye he had crossed the room.

As I was taking the last mouthful of coffee, my world turned to darkness. Sherlock had thrown my coat at me without a word of warning.

"I've asked you repeatedly not to do that," I complained, removing it from my head.

"A surprise awaits," said Mycroft.

"You know I dislike surprises," said Sherlock, turning to face him. "You know I like to be given all the facts. If you are about to withhold important information from me, then I shall decline your invitation to attend."

"You do not have a choice. Your presence is required at the behest of the Queen's Private Secretary. And, there is such a thing as a pleasant surprise, brother. The firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. have been engaged by the Board of Works on behalf of her Majesty to redecorate the Grand Staircase, the Banqueting Room and other state rooms. Mr Harding has engaged Mr Reid and our acquaintance Nathaniel Willis to assist in the work. Speaking for myself, I will be delighted to see Willis again."

The news was met favourably as I saw Sherlock's face brighten.

"Come on, man!" he said to me. "The game's afoot!"

With that he headed off.

Mycroft shrugged an apology and handed me my hat.

We squeezed into Mycroft's hansom and it lurched into motion. It was a bright, cold day and I saw two mounts fight for purchase on the icy cobbles in quick succession.

Mycroft checked his pocket watch.

"Which department did Kensington-Smythe work for?" asked Sherlock.

"The Royal Wardrobe. Royal buildings, furnishings and expenditure all fall under its remit, not just clothes."

"Who heads the department? The Lord Chamberlain or the Lord Stewart?"

"I can never tell if you are just pretending to be ignorant so I can't insist you take up a Government position alongside me or you really don't know. The Lord Chamberlain is in charge of ceremonial occasions and the social and artistic life of the monarch and the royal court; and the Lord Stewart is responsible for the domestic side of the Royal Household, catering, the chapels Royal, grounds and gardens, making the Royal Wardrobe its own distinct department."

Mycroft checked his watch again.

"Why the urgency?" I asked.

“We need to get there before nine-fifty or else we will have to wait for the Changing of the Guard,” Sherlock answered for his brother.

“I’m pleased you seem to be on good form today,” said Mycroft.

“We should be fine,” added Sherlock. “It’s Sunday.”

The brothers were careful not to discuss the particulars of the case within earshot of the hansom driver so they debated how they might wriggle out of an invitation to dine at their former Cambridge college.

The hansom driver took the most direct route to the palace, taking in Grosvenor Square and Berkeley Square.

We alighted outside Friary Court just ahead of the Band of the Scots Guards and 1st Battalion of the Coldstream Guards and darted into the nearest entrance.

We were met by the Queen’s Private Secretary, the Head of Scotland Yard, a member of the Royal Household staff and Inspector Lestrade. I could see Sherlock raising himself onto the balls of his feet and lowering himself again. He repeated this action three times. This did not bode well. He needed freedom to work and to follow clues unimpeded. Fortunately, no one dared suggest his findings had to represent a pre-determined, sanitised solution, otherwise, even the Queen herself would not have prevented his leaving.

The Queen’s Private Secretary explained, “The guards conducted their routine sweep of the palace before the gates were locked for the night. They did not notice anything suspicious. I have a list, should you wish to consult it, of all personnel who were in the palace last night.”

“How often are sweeps carried out of the buildings?” asked Lestrade.

“Hourly, Inspector,” answered the Secretary. “Therefore, we can say with some certainty that Frederick Decimus Kensington-Smythe died between the hours of two and three this morning.”

“May we see the body?” asked Lestrade.

“Of course, you may,” said the Secretary. “The Head of Scotland Yard and I won’t be joining you. Mr Pemberton will be your escort. Direct any further questions you may have to him.”

It seemed Pemberton had been trained not to look at anyone directly but just above one’s head, which was most disconcerting.

As Pemberton guided us to the Grand Staircase, Lestrade continued to ask routine questions, such as whether Kensington-Smythe had made any enemies amongst his colleagues, how long he had been employed at the palace and so forth.

Pemberton said he didn’t know.

Upon reaching the first floor, we faced a pair of large doors guarded by two police officers.

“For your information, the room round to the left is the Guard Room. However, Kensington-Smythe was discovered in the Armoury,” said Pemberton.

The police officers opened the doors. I could make out the body in the centre of the floor. It was the body of a tall, well-made man, about forty-years of age and lying supine. Much to the Holmes brothers’ annoyance, it had been turned over by the doctor on duty. The red bloom on his chest indicated he had received a wound to the chest.

“Inspector Lestrade, may Dr Watson take a closer look?” asked Sherlock.

“I can’t see why not,” the inspector answered.

I immediately knelt by the body and pulled away his clothing, as the other doctor had done before me.

“It’s a small, circular wound. It goes without saying a proper post-mortem will determine how deep the weapon penetrated his body and which organs, if any, were pierced. I can feel that two of his ribs are broken, therefore, it went in with considerable force. In all probability it went into his heart and he died quickly but don’t hold me to that. Whilst it doesn’t have the hallmarks of a knife wound, I couldn’t tell you what weapon was used. It’s unlikely to have been the fire poker as it has a fat band only an inch or so along its shaft, therefore, it is much wider than the area of the wound,” I said, pointing to the fire place.

“Thank you, Watson,” said Sherlock. Turning to Pemberton, he asked, “Aside from the body, what else has been touched in the room?”

“Nothing as far as I can tell,” answered Pemberton.

“Are you sure?” asked Sherlock.

Without moving from his spot, Pemberton gave a cursory look round the room.

“It’s all as it should be,” he answered.

“Has a murder weapon been found?”

“No,” answered Pemberton.

“Can someone ask Mr Willis, the master decorator, if I can borrow an ‘A-frame’ ladder?” asked Sherlock.

“I’m sure it can be arranged,” said Pemberton.

The man didn’t move.

“I need the ladder now,” Sherlock insisted.

Still he did not move.

Lestrade walked to the door, opened it and issued instructions to the police officers standing guard.

Sherlock began to walk slowly round the room.

I went and stood next to his brother, Mycroft, thereby, giving Sherlock more room to work. I watched as his eyes scoured every surface and curtains were batted with his hand so that, if anything was tucked behind them, it might fall to the floor, then lifted and inspected from the other side.

As one might expect in a room designated as the Armoury, the walls were hung with weapons, mostly medieval, and shields. They ranged from pikes, swords, crossbows, bolts, daggers and fanned out bayonets separated from their rifles.

Mycroft must have noticed where my real interest in the room lay as he said under his breath, "Before Mr Harding was let loose in this room and imposed his decorative changes, the War Office had provided Maltese suits of armour and helmets. I suppose they must have been taken back to the Tower, but, this isn't a bad haul."

"Were the curtains drawn or the shutters pulled across?" Sherlock asked.

"No," answered Pemberton, who had returned to his spot opposite the window.

He stood as straight as a soldier on parade and his eyes were fixed on a point somewhere in the distance.

"Which side do the windows face?"

"East, sir."

"So, the room is drenched in sunlight for the first few hours of the day?" asked Sherlock.

"It depends on the season. Certainly, in the summer months it can be very bright in here," answered Pemberton.

There was a flurry of activity as two officers entered the room carrying a ladder.

"Where do you want it, sir?" the one carrying the narrow end asked no one in particular.

"Right by that wall," answered Holmes, pointing to the far wall, which had a crossbow as its centre piece.

They spread the ladder's legs out and placed it in an upright position.

"Just let us know when you're done with it, sir, and we'll take it back," said the younger officer.

They left again in a rush, clearly rattled by the presence of the dead body, which hadn't been covered up.

Holmes put his hand inside his Ulster and pulled out his magnifying glass, then ascended the ladder.

"Just as I thought," he commented.

"The crossbow has been recently taken off this wall and put back again. Lestrade, see how it wasn't put back in the same position as before! There's a dark line where the fabric hasn't been bleached by sunlight.

It's a fraction of an inch away from its former position. Also, look at the third bolt from the right. You can see someone tried to wipe it clean of blood. They have done a good job, save for a few traces."

Lestrade joined Sherlock.

"Let's be having a look then," he said.

Holmes handed him his magnifying glass and they exchanged places.

"Well, I'll be damned," said Lestrade. "Right, no one is to touch a thing on this wall," he said, looking at Pemberton. "Mr Pemberton, is that understood?"

"Yes, sir. Perfectly," Pemberton answered without moving his head.

Just then there was a knock on the door.

"Come in!" said Pemberton.

"Mr Willis!" Sherlock called out. "It's good to see you, sir."

Sherlock introduced his old acquaintance.

"What is the matter?" asked Sherlock.

"I've come to inform you, gentlemen, that there's been a development. It's best if you see for yourselves," said Willis.

"Can't you give us some indication?" asked Lestrade.

"The water from the wallpaper paste I've been applying has collected as condensation on the large mirror in the banqueting room. It was too heavy to move it so it was left propped up against one of the pillars. Someone has written a message on the glass. I know for a fact it wasn't there yesterday."

"Spit it out, man! What does the message say?" asked Lestrade.

"'HER MAJESTY WILL DIE!' all in capital letters," said Willis.

Pemberton ran out of the room, shouting, "Guards! Guards!"

Sherlock chuckled.

"In the absence of our escort, we'd be obliged if you would show us the way, Mr Willis," Lestrade asked.

Willis took us back down the stairs, along a corridor and through two antechambers. Finally, we reached a vast room at the end. There were dust sheets everywhere and a trestle table had been erected in the middle of the room. Scattered in various places were off-cuts of wallpaper and brushes.

"What a delightful wallpaper," I said, admiring the interweaving stems and curving acanthus leaves, creating what I believed to be something akin to a Persian floral design.

"We don't have time for that now, Watson," said Sherlock, as he approached the large mirror, which dominated the scene.

"Gentlemen, if you stand on this side, you can see the writing more clearly," said Willis.

We joined him. Sure enough, just as Willis had described, 'HER MAJESTY WILL DIE!' was written on its surface, rather the residual grease from its author's finger had the power to repel the condensation in the room where it had touched the glass.

Sherlock declared, "It makes no sense."

"What do you mean, Mr Holmes?" asked Lestrade.

"If one meant to kill the Queen, why announce it? Her protection will now be stepped-up. Therefore, it is illogical."

"It is, indeed, an interesting development, but I need to work out the meaning behind it. Willis, have you got four scrap pieces of paper we can use to write on and some pens or pencils?"

"Whatever for?" asked Mycroft.

Sherlock ignored the question.

"Of course, Mr Holmes," his old acquaintance said and went to look in his tool kit.

He came back with some off-cuts of wallpaper and some pencils, which he had sharpened.

"Good man!" said Sherlock. "I knew I could count on you. Keep a pencil and a piece of paper for yourself. I want everyone to write down the letters in the message then see if they can be re-arranged to reveal a hidden message or name."

The Queen's Private Secretary and Pemberton rushed into the room.

"I explicitly said that you were not to go wandering about the palace without an escort," said the Secretary. The men ignored them. "What are you up to? I trust you are not fiddling while Rome burns," he said. "I demand to know what you are doing?"

"Do you have a William H. Jester-Dye working at the palace?" asked Sherlock.

"No."

"How about Wilhelm I. Jester-Day? Or, Jeremy Wilheld-Last? Or, James H. I. Tyler-Wilde?"

"No, no and no," answered the Secretary.

"I applaud your attempts, brother," said Mycroft.

"But?" asked Sherlock.

"Does a James Théry work at the palace?"

"Yes, a gentleman by the name of James Théry works for the Lord Chamberlain," answered the Secretary. "His office is in the stable yard here at the palace. His role has something to do with accounting."

“In that case, brother, the message on the mirror should, in fact, read ‘James Théry will die’,” Mycroft said, holding up his piece of wallpaper.

“Lestrade,” said Sherlock, “If my brother’s hunch is correct, then it was Kensington-Smythe who wrote the message, not his killer. He may have suspected that I would be summoned to investigate any murders at the palace and hoped that his warning would be found. You need to find Théry and ask him if he knows who wanted Kensington-Smythe dead and who might want him dead. If he’s at a loss, ask him if they attended the same school or university? Did they grow up in the same place?”

“Alright, alright,” said Lestrade, “this isn’t my first murder case. I’ll take it from here.”

“Thank you, sirs,” said the Queen’s Private Secretary.

“The investigation isn’t over yet,” said Sherlock.

“It isn’t?” said the official.

“If you and Lestrade would care to follow me, I’ll explain on the way,” said Sherlock. “Mycroft, if you wouldn’t mind staying with Pemberton and Willis. We’ll be back presently.”

This was an interesting turn of events. Moreover, I was pleased that I had been favoured over Mycroft and Willis as Sherlock’s collaborator on this adventure. If anything, because one likes to learn how an adventure was concluded first-hand.

When we were well out of earshot of the others, Lestrade asked, “What’s going on, Holmes?”

“Whoever used the crossbow was well acquainted with the Armoury, even so, I’m certain the killer tried the weapon out first to ensure it hadn’t been decommissioned and to find out what the pull on it was and whether it fired straight. I found a couple of fresh dents in the panelling behind one of the curtains, not deep ones, but they corresponded to the size of a bolt. The murder had taken the precaution of lifting the curtains first, then hoped no one look behind them when they were done. However, I suspect the person didn’t aim at the panelling but at a cabbage or some such and the force of the shot drove the bolt into the wood.

“Mr Secretary, we need to find out if anyone was seen by the receptacles for the palace waste in the last few days, or if anyone in the palace kitchens was asked about any discarded fruit or vegetables going spare.”

“I’ll assign a couple of kitchen staff to trawl through the waste,” offered the official.

Within the half hour, two pineapples had been found with suspicious finger-sized holes through them. What’s more, Pemberton had been seen in the kitchens rummaging through the waste receptacle.

“Does he fit the bill?” asked Lestrade.

“When we were introduced and shook hands, I noticed his index finger had a red, sickle-shaped mark as one might expect if one has squeezed a resistant trigger and there’s a dark stain down the edge of his finger as if grime from the mechanism got into the cracks in his skin. One might assume the killer applied oil and gave the crossbow a bit of a clean.

“If you ask around, you may find Pemberton visited a club associated with archery and crossbows in order to practice.

“And, have Pemberton’s pockets, his desk, his fireplace, his coal scuttle, his waste basket, anything and everything checked to see if he removed a note from Kensington-Smyth’s body. Pemberton may have invited him in writing to meet him on the first floor of the palace. Naturally, he would have removed it from his victim.

“What would secure his conviction would be to find his bloodied clothes. They have to be here somewhere at the palace. Don’t forget to look inside any ceiling spaces! He too may have taken advantage of Mr Reid and his master decorators being at the palace and having easy access to ladders.”

As it turned out, the slaying of Kensington-Smyth’s had coincided with a large banquet held in honour of a visiting dignitary. The Queen wasn’t in attendance, but His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had represented her. Pineapples had been used as part of the table decoration, but the kitchen staff confirmed they had not had to pierce the fruit in anyway to make them sit upright.

Our visit to the palace kitchens was followed by a mad dash back. Lestrade gathered police officers along the way and everyone ran to the Banqueting Room to apprehend Pemberton.

We were astonished to find Pemberton tied to a pillar with leather luggage straps.

“Would you credit it our escort tried to abscond without putting anyone else in charge to mind us,” said Mycroft. “That was all the proof I needed that we had our man but I’m sure my brother has found evidence to convict him of his heinous crime.”

“Thank you, gentlemen,” said the Queen’s Private Secretary.

“No need to thank us, but I believe Mr Willis should be given a decent lunch for having alerted us so promptly to the message and for working on a Sunday in order to meet a deadline that, no doubt, the Head of the Royal Wardrobe imposed.”

The official turned to Willis, “It would be my pleasure to join you in the guards’ refectory for Sunday lunch. I will get a message to them to lay two extra places at the head table.”

“In that case, Willis,” said Sherlock, “I insist you call in on Dr Watson and I while you are in London. We will be delighted to see you.

“That leaves Inspector Lestrade. I’m sure we will see each all too soon.”

Mycroft, Sherlock and I were escorted from the palace. At the last door, the head of the kitchens was waiting for us.

“We all liked Kensington-Smythe. He was a good and honourable man. We’re so pleased you fingered his killer.”

“Sir, having identified our man is one thing and having enough evidence to support a conviction is another,” said Sherlock. “There’s still some work Scotland Yard need to do.”

The man’s face fell.

Sherlock patted his arm as he continued past him.

“So, it’s just a matter of time,” he called after us.

We stopped in our tracks.

“If they do their job, then yes,” confirmed Sherlock.

The man’s face brightened again. He extended his arms, which were holding a cake tin.

“In that case, gentlemen, I baked this Sachertorte for Princess Louise but I’d like you to have it instead. No one liked Pemberton. Kensington-Smythe stood up to him when he tried to bully other members of staff. But, sadly, that did for him.”

I was torn. On one hand, I had never tried a slice of the famous Viennese chocolate and apricot sponge and wanted to see if it was as delicious as it was claimed. On the other, I was concerned that the man may lose his job if it were discovered that he had given it away without seeking permission.

“What about the Princess?” I asked.

“I mean to tell her, but she’ll agree we did the right thing. She won’t mind in the least. She is very understanding. Don’t tell the other royals but she’s everyone’s favourite.”

At around teatime, which in early January coincided with dusk, Lestrade came round and brought Willis with him.

“Do you bring glad tidings, Lestrade?” asked Sherlock, ushering for Willis to take a seat.

Willis didn’t move. I looked about the room and realised all our spare chairs had piles of books on them, so, as Sherlock was engaged in conversation, I went round and moved his things.

“I do indeed,” said Lestrade. “One of my officers was particularly thorough and found Pemberton’s bloodied clothes stuffed inside an Ottoman.”

“This will amuse you. Mr Harding was summoned to the palace and I happened to be there when he

inspected the state rooms for any damage. He offered to make good the holes left by the bolts from the crossbow in the Armoury and to re-cover the offending Ottoman with some Utrecht velvet as a gesture of good will. I have to hand it to him he's a canny salesman. Of course, if he makes a new cover for one, then all the others will look even more shabby and will need new covers too. I got to admit the fabric sample Harding brought with him was very handsome. Before you could say 'Where's Aunt Edna's bonnet?' he'd secured another commission. With Mr Harding touting for business, Mr Reid and Mr Willis need never worry about having enough work.

The quickest way to get Mrs Hudson to rustle up a pot of tea was to invite her to partake of our royal delicacy. She was naturally thrilled and it was all she could talk about for the next week, making us regret having extended the invitation.

Just as she appeared with a rattling tea tray, Mycroft turned up. He had found out the good news too. He wasn't to know that Lestrade would make a point of telling us himself. Not that it mattered. The successful conclusion to the case and the Sachertorte made for a jolly get-together and it was one of the rare occasions that even Holmes really enjoyed himself. Despite all the numerous cases we had worked on, the summons from the palace had given him the validation he needed to feel that he had truly established himself as a consulting detective.