

SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE SIGN OF FOUR

A Play in Two Acts
Based on the stories by Arthur Conan Doyle

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ACT 1

Scene 1 – Dining Room, Holborn Hotel

(Dining room of the Holborn Hotel in London. Two tables are set upstage with patrons and a third table sits downstage center. A waiter goes in and out occasionally, filling drinks and taking orders. Dr. John Watson is seated at the center table by himself reading the London Times. He carries a cane and walks with a limp. Enter Stamford. He sees Watson and recognizes his old friend.)

STAMFORD: Watson, as I do live and breathe.

WATSON: *(Shaking his hand)* Stamford, why I haven't seen you since we were together at Bart's. I was just about to lunch. Why don't you join me?

STAMFORD: I do believe I will. *(Sitting)* Whatever have you been doing with yourself, Watson? Last I heard, you'd become an army doctor.

WATSON: True enough. Assistant surgeon - attached to the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers stationed in India.

STAMFORD: Congratulations. I always knew you'd make a good for yourself.

WATSON: Yes, well you may feel differently when I've finished.

STAMFORD: That sounds ominous. Do tell.

WATSON: We were dispatched to Kandahar when the Afghan War broke out.

STAMFORD: That doesn't sound too bad.

WATSON: When I arrived with the other new officers, I was removed from my brigade and attached to the Berkshires.

STAMFORD: (*Realizing the implications*) The Berkshires? Weren't they at the battle of Maiwand? I heard the entire brigade was annihilated.

WATSON: Yes, well during the fighting, I was struck on the shoulder and rendered senseless. My orderly, Murray, threw me over a packhorse and delivered me to British lines or I would have surely perished.

STAMFORD: Well that's a stroke of luck, at least. Was the wound really that terrible?

WATSON: Just as I was improving, I was struck down by enteric fever.

STAMFORD: Enteric fever, nasty stuff. Very common in India from what I hear.

WATSON: It is as nasty as they say. For months, I languished on the verge of death. When I recovered, I was so weak and emaciated that the medical board sent me straight back to England.

STAMFORD: Poor devil!

WATSON: Enough of my misfortune. What about you?

STAMFORD: I've taken a teaching job at the University.

WATSON: Congratulations.

STAMFORD: Thanks, old man. It's good to see you again. What are you up to now?

WATSON: Looking for lodgings. I've been relieved of duty and I'm on half-pay. So, I'm trying to solve the problem as to whether it is possible to get comfortable rooms at a reasonable price.

STAMFORD: That's a strange thing. You are the second man today that has used that expression to me.

WATSON: And who was the first?

STAMFORD: A fellow who is working at the chemical laboratory up at the university. He was bemoaning himself this morning because he could not get someone to go halves with him in some nice rooms.

WATSON: By Jove! If he really wants someone to share the rooms and expense, I am the very man. I should prefer having a partner to being alone.

STAMFORD: You don't know Sherlock Holmes yet. Perhaps you would not care for him as a constant companion.

WATSON: Why, what is there against him?

STAMFORD: Oh, I didn't say there was anything against him. He is a little peculiar in his ideas – an enthusiast in some branches of science. As far as I know he is a decent enough fellow.

WATSON: A medical student, I suppose?

STAMFORD: I believe he is well up in anatomy and he is a first class chemist; but as far as I know, he has never taken any medical classes. His studies are very eccentric.

WATSON: Did you ever ask him what he was going in for?

STAMFORD: No, he is not a man that is easy to draw out, though he can be communicative enough when the fancy seizes him.

WATSON: I should like to meet him. If I am to lodge with anyone, I should prefer a man of studious and quiet habits. I am not strong enough yet to stand much noise or excitement. I had enough of both in Afghanistan to last me for the remainder of my natural existence. How could I meet this friend of yours?

STAMFORD: He is sure to be at the laboratory. I'll stop by after luncheon and see if he would agree to meet us at his lodgings.

WATSON: Certainly.

STAMFORD: You mustn't blame me if you don't get on with him. I know nothing more of him than I have learned from meeting him occasionally at the University.

You proposed this arrangement, so you must not hold me responsible.

WATSON: If we don't get on, it will be easy to part company.

STAMFORD: True enough.

WATSON: It seems to me, Stamford, that you have some reason for washing your hands of the matter. Is this fellow's temper so formidable, or what is it? Don't be mealy-mouthed about it.

STAMFORD: It is not easy to express the inexpressible. (Laughs) Holmes is a little too scientific for my tastes. It approaches to cold-bloodedness. I could imagine his giving a friend a little pinch of poison, not out of malevolence, you understand, but simply out of a spirit of inquiry in order to have an accurate idea of the effects. To do him justice, I think that he would take it himself with the same readiness. He appears to have a passion for definite and exact knowledge.

WATSON: Very right too.

STAMFORD: Yes, but it may be pushed to excess. When it comes to beating the cadavers in the dissecting-rooms with a stick, it is certainly taking rather a bizarre shape.

WATSON: Beating the cadavers?

STAMFORD: To verify how far bruises may be produced after death.

WATSON: And yet you say he is not a medical student?

STAMFORD: Heaven knows what the objects of his studies are. You must make your own impressions about him. Now how about that lunch?

END OF SCENE

Scene 2 – 221 B Baker Street

(The sitting rooms at Holmes' lodgings at 221B Baker Street on the second floor of the building. The main entrance to the flat is upstage center. There is a window upstage overlooking the street outside. There is a fireplace upstage right where Holmes keeps his correspondences stuck to the mantelpiece with a jackknife. Also found on the mantle is his pipe and a Persian slipper containing shag tobacco and a cigar box containing cigars. Beside the fireplace is a low bookshelf loaded with books. A tray with whiskey, tonic and glasses sits on the top of the bookshelf. A violin in a case is resting on a chair stage upstage left in the corner. There is a couch and chair center stage around a coffee table. A cart cluttered with chemistry equipment sits downstage right. Holmes is at the cart experimenting with his back to the door. He is completely drawn into his experiment and does not notice Watson and Stamford enter with Mrs. Hudson.)

MRS HUDSON: The gentlemen you were expecting, Mr. Holmes.

(Holmes waves her off without taking his attention from his experiment.)

MRS HUDSON: He's been at that table all day, Mr. Stamford, sir. I doubt you'll get much more out of him than a few grunts and a wave of his 'and.

STAMFORD: We'll just have to risk it.

MRS HUDSON: If he talks to you, tell him he better eat something. I already took away his breakfast untouched and he hardly glanced at the luncheon tray I left. Mark my words, gentlemen, he'll waste away to nothin' if he don't eat.

STAMFORD: Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. I'm sure we can take it from here.

(Mrs. Hudson exits. Holmes has finally achieved the reaction he wants from his experiment)

HOLMES: *(with a cry of pleasure)* I've found it! I've found it!

(Holmes runs over to Stamford and Watson with exuberance)

HOLMES: I have found a re-agent which is precipitated by hemoglobin, and by nothing else.

STAMFORD: Dr. John Watson, Mr. Sherlock Holmes.

HOLMES: How are you?

(Gripping his hand, Watson grimaces slightly)

You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive.

WATSON: How on earth did you know that?

HOLMES: Never mind *(chuckling to himself)*, the question now is about hemoglobin. No doubt you see the significance of this discovery of mine?

WATSON: It is interesting, chemically, no doubt, but practically...

HOLMES: Why, man, it is the most practical medical-legal discovery for years. Don't you see that it gives us an infallible test for blood stains? Come over here now!

(Holmes seizes Watson by the sleeve and drags him over to the table where he was experimenting.)

Let us have some fresh blood.

(Holmes grabs Watson's finger and pricks it with a lancet he takes from the table and squeezes some blood into a pipette. Watson is too shocked to resist.)

Now I add this small quantity of blood to a liter of water. The resulting mixture has the appearance of pure water and the proportion of blood cannot be more than one in a million. I have no doubt, however, that we shall be able to obtain the characteristic reaction.

(Holmes drops pours some of the water/blood mixture into a flask and then adds the contents of a test tube. In an instant, the contents turn red...See appendix for experiment tips)

Ha! Ha! What do you think of that?

WATSON: *(sucking his finger)* It seems to be a very delicate test.

HOLMES: Beautiful, beautiful! The old test was very clumsy and uncertain and valueless if the stains are a few hours old. Had this test been invented, there are hundreds of men now walking the earth who would long ago have paid the penalty for their crimes.

WATSON: Indeed.

HOLMES: Criminal cases are continually hinging upon that one point. A man is suspected of a crime months after it has been committed. Brownish stains are discovered. Are they blood stains, or mud stains, or rust stains or fruit stains or what are they? That is a question that has puzzled many an expert... and why? Because there was no reliable test. Now we have the Sherlock Holmes test and there will no longer be difficulty.

(Holmes places his hand over his heart and bows as if to some applauding crowd.)

WATSON: You are to be congratulated.

STAMFORD: We came here on business.

(Stamford sits down and motions for Holmes and Watson to join him.)

My friend here wants to take diggings and as you were complaining that you could get no one to go halves with you, I thought that I had better bring you together.

HOLMES: There's plenty of room here on Baker Street and this should suit two down to the ground. My bedroom is through there and yours would be there. You don't mind the smell of strong tobacco, I hope?

WATSON: I always smoke ship's myself.

HOLMES: That's good enough. I generally have chemicals about and occasionally do experiments. *(Waving at his equipment)* Would that annoy you?

WATSON: By no means.

HOLMES: Let me see... what are my other shortcomings? I get in the dumps at times and don't open my mouth for days on end. You must not think I am sulky when I do that. Just let me alone and I'll soon be alright. What have you to confess now? It's just as well for two fellows to know the worst of one another before they begin to live together.

WATSON: *(Laughing)* I keep a bull pup and I object to rows because my nerves are shaken and I get up at all sorts of ungodly hours and I am extremely lazy. I have another set of vices when I am well, but those are the principal ones at present.

HOLMES: Do you include playing the violin in your category of rows?

WATSON: Depends on the player. A well-played violin is a treat for the gods. A badly played one...

HOLMES: (*Laughing*) Oh that's all right. I think we may consider the thing as settled, that is if the rooms are agreeable to you.

WATSON: They are.

HOLMES: Excellent. I shall fetch the landlady for the arrangements.

(Holmes leaves.)

WATSON: How the deuce did he know that I had come from Afghanistan?

STAMFORD: That's just his little peculiarity. A good many people have wanted to know how he finds things out.

WATSON: Oh, a mystery is it? This is very piquant. I am much obliged to you for bringing us together. The proper study of mankind is man, you know.

STAMFORD: You must study him then. You'll find him a mystifying problem, though. I'll wager he learns more about you than you about him.

END OF SCENE

End of Sample

And that is all of the sample. If you liked what you were reading and would care to produce this play at your Theatre, please contact the author to discuss rights and royalties. Email is preferable but you may also contact the author via phone or postal service.

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