

"The ADVENTURE of the BOXING DAY MURDER"

- - plus some Holmesian Limericks



A Sherlockian Pastiche by Courtney Anderson of

The Pleasant Places of Florida



THE ADVENTURE OF THE BOXING DAY MURDER

an exciting Holmesian Pastiche

by Courtney Andersen

Resident Member of the Pleasant Places of Florida

1984

Next to our meeting in 1881, the year 1895 is the one I most associate with my friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. He was in the very of form that year, both mentally and physically. His increasing fame, due in no small measure to my chronicles of his cases, brought some hundred cases to his attention, eight of which were of capital importance. As I have noted in the past the most important were not necessarily the most interesting, nor did they always provide the widest scope for Holmes's amazing genius. Sherlock Holmes, like all great artists, believed in art for art's sake, and, save for a very few cases, never received any large reward for his services. He was known to refuse the cases of the wealthy on the grounds that they were no challenge to his intellect, while he would accept the case of some humble laborer which did challenge him.

One of the most memorable and repeatable - for some of the cases were of such delicacy that even now I am forbidden to relate them - was first brought to our attention during the month of December, 1895. The precise date, according to my notes, was the 26th of the aforementioned month and year. This case presented Holmes with scope, albeit limited, for his mind, but brought no pecuniary reward.

The entire city of London was tucked under a blanket of snow and glistened under the bright winter sun. The crisp air blew an occasional snow-flake past our windows. Even the dun-coloured buildings across the normally bustling Baker Street appeared cheerful. There were a few young lads selling the morning editions of the papers, crying out abridged descriptions of event recorded withing, as they wandered along.

I recall that I rose rather early, for me, on that Dickensian day. A fire was burning in the grate, thanks to our tireless landlady, Mrs. Hudson. I sat down to breakfast after wishing Sherlock Holmes a pleasant "good morning", and receiving a reply, began eating.

"I say, Holmes," I commented after a few moments of retrospection, "I wonder why the paper-boys are so late this morning. It's 9:30."

"Well, Watson," Holmes replied, "while we've been comfortably sleeping in our beds, London, along with most of England, has been hit by an unusually severe winter storm. The papers are delayed as a result of transportation difficulties. It seems that all of the railways are blocked, and, to make matters worse, there were sleet storms in some areas of England."

"What is the temperature, then?" I enquired.

"Approximately twenty degrees," he replied.

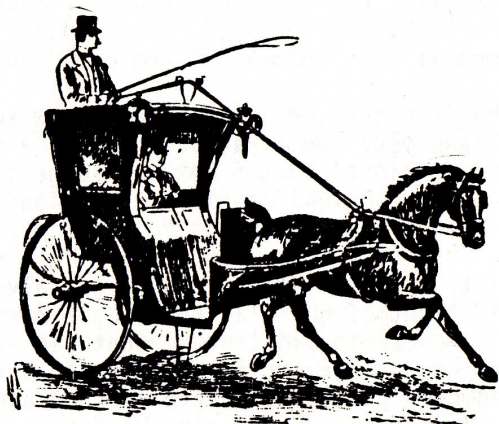
I turned back to eggs and rashers. Five minutes later a small boy came trudging up Baker Street through the snow, an envelope in hand, glancing occasionally

up at the numbers above the doors. He spotted ours, Number 221, and rang the bell. Mrs. Hudson opened the door.

"Telegram for a Mr. 'olmes, mum!" blurted out a scruffy looking urchin.

"Right on up those stairs, young man," directed the dutiful landlady.

I answered the door and turned to Holmes. "A telegram for you," I said, using my small powers of deduction.



Holmes raised his brows, got up and took the telegram giving the boy a copper, who, in turn, bounded down the 17 steps as quickly as he had come up just a few moments before. Holmes opened the envelope on his way back to his armchair. He glanced in my direction, and observing my quizzical expression, tossed it to me. I picked it up. It read:

"Mr. Holmes -

I think that this case of the Earl of Bramhall is rather in your line. Am having difficulty in finding anything to work upon.

*Come round if you have a day to spare. I
I would be very happy to see you.*

Lestrade - C.I.D.

The telegram was postmarked Reigate, Surrey, very early that morning.

Lestrade was an Inspector for the Criminal Investigation Division of Scotland Yard. He was not above calling on my friend in an unofficial capacity for assistance from time to time.

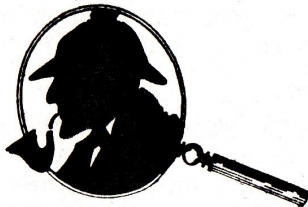
"Well, Watson, have you any plans for this wintery day?"

"None at all, Holmes," I replied.

"The it's settled. Hand me Bradshaw's Railway Guide. Thank you." He paused. "There is a train leaving for Reigate in the hour. I suggest you pack a Gladstone. We may, if weather conditions don't improve, have to stay the night."

Thirty minutes later we found ourselves on the street in front of our flat knee-deep in snow. Beacuse there was no cab in sight we hired three young lads to carry our baggage the five blocks to Oxford Street, which had been partially cleared of snow and ice. We hailed a convenient Hansom cab which took us, eventually to Waterloo Station, across the river.

When we arrived we were informed that the rails to Reigate were not yet cleared so we had an hour's wait before the train finally was allowed to depart. We boarded the train for what promised to be a very long ride.



"Holmes," I asked, "if the rails were blocked, how would Lestrade have gotten here ... to Reigate, I mean?"

"I daresay he was in the area already," he said after a moment's thought. "Yes - that is the only likely explanation. He could not have called down from London. The rails were iced over by midnight, and this problem concerning the Earl of Bramhall would have been in the papers, had it occurred before then."

I nodded in reply and turned my attention to the bleak landscape while Holmes amused himself with a book I had given him yesterday.

We pulled into the Reigate Station a few minutes after noon where we found a landau waiting for us with a Police Constable at the reins. With visible breath streaming behind him, the chestnut-bay pulled us through Reigate and on to a desolate, winding road which lead to Bramhall Manor.

We found the Inspector eating leftover plum pudding and pheasant appearing as sallow and ferret-like as ever. He greeted us warmly as we divested ourselves of our snow-covered travelling coats.

"Well, Mr. Holmes, Dr. Watson, 'tis a good thing you telegraphed. That would have been a very long walk."

"It was bad enough in the landau," I muttered.

Lestrade chuckled, "I'm sorry about the cold in here, but you know how these old ancestral houses are." He whipped out the ever-ready black notebook, thereby beginning the investigation. "I was summoned at five this morning from a neighboring town. It seems that was when the maid found the body."

"Is the body still here?" inquired Holmes.

"Yes. The Coroner was unable to come, as of yet, because of the storm," Lestrade replied.

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"Reigate doesn't have a coroner?" I asked, incredulously.

"It appears he is on holiday, so I asked for one from a town twenty miles away."

Lestrade led us up the ornate marble staircase to the Earl's bedroom. The double doors through which we entered were heavily panelled in dark mahogany. I noticed that the bed was turned down and had an impression in the middle with rumpled sheets indicating that it had been slept in. I looked at Holmes. His eyes are darting about the room. When he had satisfied himself, he nodded his lean visage briskly.

"It seems," Lestrade continued, moving us out of the room, "that the family, which consists of the Earl, his grandson, Edward, along with two sisters, Caitlin and Emily, had a Christmas party last night. This consisted of the usual plum-pudding, pheasant, wine, brandysnaps, with those little rum-soaked raisins."

"Snapdragons?" I offered.

"Yes, Doctor, that's it. The festivities continued until - let me see - until 9:30, at which time the Earl pronounced himself weary and retired for the evening. Now you must understand something. The Earl is - or rather was - in his nineties, so when he retired to his bedroom on the first floor two others were required to help him upstairs, which would leave one person to choose between staying downstairs alone or joining the rest. However, the others usually followed the Earl's example, and last night was no exception. All three went to their respective rooms after seeing the Earl to his own room.

"At four-thirty this morning the maid entered the Earl's bedroom to place his medication . . ."

"What was the medication for?" Holmes asked.

"Heart, rheumatism, and liver, along with arterial hardening," Lestrade slowly replied after searching through his notes.

"Good Lord!" I exclaimed. "How long had he to live?"

"He had been doing well until this past year." Lestrade replied as he continued his chronology. "When the maid saw that he was not in his bed she, quite naturally, assumed that he was in the .. er.. the loo." He cleared his throat and continued. "When he did not appear she began a search for him and finally found him the the library," Lestrade said as he dramatically threw open the double doors of that room, "where he was wont to go when unable to sleep."

My eye was immediately attracted to the object in the centre of the floor. The late Earl was in his dressing-gown, lying in a pool of blood.

Holmes bent down to examine the body, then motioned me over. "Watson, as a medical man, how long would you say he's been dead?" Holmes enquired.

I felt some of the dead man's joints and calculated the temperature with the hardness of the body. "About ten hours, Holmes. See here how the blood has caked? The corpse is still very hard, indicating that it has not yet reached room temperature. It was due to the cold that rigor mortis set in almost immediately, which is fortuitous for the heirs. No one could have gone near this room for weeks."



Holmes surprised Lestrade and me by springing up with a small cry, grabbing a book off one of the many shelves which lined the room, and cried: "I've been looking for a copy of this book! ... And here's another!"

"Mr. Holmes!" Lestrade fairly shouted. "This is no time to pursue your literary habit! A man is dead!"

"Yes. The Earl was cossed on the back of the skull with his own walking-stick ... " Holmes paused. "And then his throat was cut from left to right," he concluded slowly.

Just then there was a knock on the door, followed by the entrance of a P.C., who announced that Lestrade was wanted at Police Headquarters in Reigate. Lestrade took his departure with a meaningful glance in Holmes' direction.

But Holmes paid no attention to him. He flapped a hand in his direction - that was all. I have previously compared Sherlock Holmes on a case to a hunting-dog with its prey in sight. Once involved in a problem, he attacked it from all sides, changing his theories to suit all the facts. A favourite axiom of his was: "Eliminate the impossible, and whatever remains, however improbably, must be the truth".

Holmes briskly walked down the stairs while I followed. He asked the constable placed at his disposal to usher in Lady Caitlin. A few moments later the woman was brought in. She had long, raven-black hair which matched her mourning dress. She had quite obviously been crying, although now she was subdued. After the usual condolences, Holmes got down to business.

"Lady Caitlin, I realize what a shock this must be to you, but did you hear any strange noises between the time your father went to bed and the time you arose this morning?"

"I understand perfectly, Mr. Holmes, and I appreciate your concern." She spoke in wonderful soft tones, and I could see that Holmes was taken in by her ability to set her emotions aside for the moment. "Yes, I believe I heard water running at about three o'clock this morning."

"Lady Caitlin, are you feeling well?" I noticed shee looked very pale all of a sudden.

"Yes, Doctor. I think I ate too much last night. It will subside, I am certain."

Holmes had paid not attention to our conversation, beyond making certain she was not going to faint. His gaze had been attracted by a table cluttered with small picture frames containing faded photographs amidst a litter of magazines, dishes, and pens, along with a deck

of playing cards. "Those playing -cards are well worn. Do you play often?" asked Holmes.

"All our family does. My grandfather taught us at a very early age. Edward and Emily are especially fond of playing. Grandfather was a gambler at heart, although he got most of his money from diamonds. But I suppose one could call that a form of gambling." Her eyes widened. "But I've gotten you off the track, sorry."

"Not at all. It is a pleasure to speak to someone so closely involved in a tragedy and yet able to speak calmly and objectively," Holmes said in that winning way of his.

"You say the Earl was your grandfather," Holmes commented. "What happened to his son or daughter - your father or mother?"


"They were killed in a train accident..four years ago." She paused and swallowed a few times. She was rapidly winning Holmes over with her self-control."My brother, sister, and I then came here to live with our grandfather." She rose from the chasm of the past mentally, then arose physically from her chair as we did. "I'm sorry that I cannot tell you more."

Holmes took her proffered hand and kissed it. Lady Caitlin favoured me with a bright smile, then left. When she was out of the room, I gave a sidelong glance at Holmes, who chuckled.

"I admire her mind. Anything that is emotional is contrary to pure logic and reason."

"But this Lady Caitlin is rather nice, eh,Holmes?" I pressed.

"My dear Casanova, the second most winning woman I have ever met murdered her children for their insurance money. The first is a different matter entirely," he added.

 Lord Edward, now Earl of Branhall, came in next. He sat in the chair vacated by his sister. It was clear

that the death of his grandfather had affected him deeply. He was very pale and appeared rather despondent. Holmes again offered his condolences and repeated his first question.

"Noises? No, sir, Mr. Holmes. Sir, I would appreciate it if I might be allowed to go upstairs. I'm not feeling very well. The shock, on top of the food... ." His voice trailed off.

"Certainly. I think that is all, Lord Edward. No - - you would be the Earl now, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," Edward said quietly, then walked up the marble staircase.



Lady Emily was shown into the cold sitting-room. She and her brother were very much alike - blond hair, blue eyes, and pale complexion. Yet there was something cruel about her mouth which was absent in her brother or sister. Whereas Edward was repressed, Emily was vociferant.

"Lady Emily," Holmes said. "Please do sit down. This is a terrible occurrence for you." She replied in the affirmative.

"Lady Emily, did you hear any odd noises last night?"

"No, I didn't," she replied in a curt manner. "This is all rather bourgeois. What concern is it of yours? You aren't the police, are you? Who are you, anyway? ... Well, I'd rather not talk about it. Good day, Mr. Holmes!" She strode out of the room.

Holmes just shook his head and remained silent .

"I simply cannot believe that such a monstrous crime could happen on Christmas," I said, breaking the quietude.

"Believe it, Watson, it occurs, and not infrequently in a wealthy family. With holidays comes joy and festivities and eating. In fact, over-eating brings indigestion, then irritability and anger," Holmes explained.

"What a ridiculous theory, Holmes!" I retorted. "Besides, the Earl had gone to bed before he was murdered."

"The theory has been proved many times in the past, and, my dear Watson, I have often said that some individuals can stimulate genius without possessing it themselves!"

"Oh, dear. What have I said this time, Holmes?"

"You said, 'The Earl had gone to bed first.' Watson, I beg of you, leave me alone for half an hour. I have a train of thought I don't want derailed," Holmes replied.

"But what about Lady Emily's strange behavior?", I inquired.

Holmes did not answer. He had gotten his pipe started and was pacing back and forth, with smoke trailing behind him much in the fashion of a steam engine.

I left to walk down to the police station and fetch Lestrade. The day was warming slightly with the ice and snow beginning to melt. I began worrying about the body.

Lestrade and I took a landau back to the Manor. There we discovered Holmes pacing with impatience.

"Ah, Watson - you've brought Lestrade, Good! The coroner came and took the body away fifteen minutes ago." He paused. "I think I can name the murderer!"

"What!" Lestrade's jaw dropped.

"Yes, Tell your Constable to bring the new Earl down."

"He is the murderer?" I asked.

"Yes, Watson," Holmes said sternly.

However, the new Earl was never to be brought to trial, for he had committed suicide that very afternoon, as we found from the white-faced Constable.

We rushed up to the new Earl's room where we found him hanging by the neck from a rafter on the high ceiling, his limp feet dangling two feet off the rug-covered floor. A writing desk stood about three feet away from where he was hanging, indicating that he had jumped off the top of it.

Upon the desk was a letter dated an hour earlier. It read:

"Inspector Lestrade:

I killed my grandfather last night in a fit of passion. Mr. Holmes knows that I did it, why I did it, and how I did it. Please tell my sisters I am sorry and that I chose to give my own life as punishment for what I have done.

With deep regrets,

Edward

The next day Holmes invited Inspector Lestrade to come over to our room on Baker Street where he said he would explain the entire story.

"Well, Mr. Holmes, I hope you've got a good explanation," Lestrade said while sipping coffee.

"It's really quite simple. The Earl was a rare book collector. Almost all of the books on his shelves were 1st Editions. I say almost, because there were three that were definitely out of place. These three

were at least 8th Printings, and were done in the past year. Any true collector, which the Earl most certainly was, would never have those three volumes on his shelf.

"Lady Caitlin said that Edward and Emily were both fond of cards. That narrowed the field quite a bit. And, since I can't imagine Lady Emily gambling, I set my sights on Lord Edward. Since he was a gambler, it is not unreasonable to suppose that he was out of money occasionally. He would not have gone to his grandfather, for the Earl was successful and strict, and the son would not have wanted the Earl to think less of him, to say nothing of his wrath. So he proceeded to sell a few obscure, little-noticed 1st Editions. But, alas, as often happens, gambling fever had Edward in its grasp. This led to taking, and selling, yet another and another, always being careful to replace the empty space on the shelf with a newer, yet similar volume.

"The night before last, the Earl, I surmise, heard Edward walking past his bedchamber, and he arose and followed him to the library. The Earl caught his grandson substituting books. I daresay an argument ensued - Watson, remember my little theory? - and the Earl said he would disinherit the boy. Edward hit the Earl with his own stick, then, in an act of passion, cut the Earl's throat. I imagine he intended to leave the country today, but when he saw that he was snowed in by the storm, he knew the game was over - and - he killed himself."

At this point our landlady, Mrs. Hudson, brought in our dinner. We invited Lestrade to join us in our repast, which he accepted heartily. When then partook of Mrs. Hudson's sumptuous fare and wished one and all the 'compliments of the season' in celebration of the close of another successful case.

-fini-

A LIMERICK SALUTE TO BILL WARD

(On the occasion of P.P. of F's Bill Ward's
Investiture as Maj. Prendergast in The Baker
Street Irregulars - January 6, 1984.)

1. Here's to the card-sharping Major!
Never one to discourage a wager;
With his Tankerville crony,
Col. Sebastian Mar-ony -
Of the two, guess whom Holmes thought the sager!
(Caroline Everett)
2. Wood is bought by the cord;
The pen's mightier than the sword;
This could be the basis
For our own Pleasant Places,
To honor a a guy named Bill Ward.
("Pat" Herst)
3. There was a young man named Bill,
Who lately was put through the mill;
In New York of 12th Night
'Twas a Sherlockian delight,
And he said, "Oh my, what a thrill!"
(Marsha Pollak)
4. Now Mrs. 'udson is over her ague;
To give our Bill Ward his just due;
Lift your glasses on high -
Here's 'mud in your eye',
'Tis a day I am sure he won't rue.
(Joan Wood)
5. Bill Ward is a man from St. Pete,
Whose ken of Sherlock is complete;
To New York he flew fast
And came back Prendergast,
All hail, Bill, for this "Major" feat!
(anonymous)

6. 'Tis Major Prendergast, you say?
 Commissioned 12th Night holiday?
 As Julian Wolff gave the call
 I had to catch Bill lest he fall;
 Now P.P. of Fers say PIP, PIP, HOORAY!

(Ben Wood)

7. It would've been the usual decadence,
 But your presence gave Dinner significance;
 The entire B. S. I.
 Thought you quite a guy;
 Yes, you made a MAJOR difference!

(Wanda Butts)

8. Our BILL, a.k.a., Prendergast,
 In B.S.I. he's indeed well-cast;
 He's earned Sherlock's favour,
 'Tis a night he'll always savour,
 A just re-WARD for his service of past.

(Helen Swift)

+ + + + + + + + + + +
 ...and another, just for fun!

Said Watson at Stoke Moran Station
 To the Master in a mood of elation,
 "But just how did you grasp
 that the thing was an asp?"
 "Elementary, dear sir! Speckulation!"

(Caroline Everett)





-- P.P.oF. logo
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Other Publications of
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"The Case of the Foreign Cabman (1975)

"The Adventure of the Lost f's" (1976)

"The Adventure of the Second Stein" (1977)

"The Adventure of the Solitary Balloonist" (1977)

"The Curious Affair of the Witch's Brougham" (1978)

"The Adventure of the Florid Ians" (1979)

"The Adventure of the Bar's Clue Bungle" (1982)

- also -

"Exercises in Ratiocination & Mental Gymnastics"
 (A booklet of mind-jogging conundrums for the Sherlockian brain.) (1977)

"A Tribute to Leslie Marshall, B.S.I." (1979)
 (A fitting tribute to the Founder of the PPoF,
 and Chaplain to The Baker Street Irregulars. Also
 contains reprints of the first 2 pastiches.)

"Holmesian Limericks & A Sherlock Sing-A-Long" (1981)

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