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Round-Robin Pastiche

by members of

THE PLEASANT PLACES of FLORIDA

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4408 Gulf Drive
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"The Curious Affair of the Witch's Brougham"

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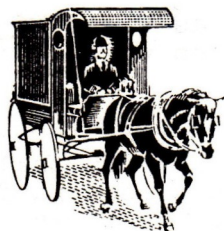
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The Curious Affair of
the Witch's Brougham

Introduction

Herman Herst, Jr.

"**W**e get dozens of crazy letters every week." Inspector Adam told Mr. Holmes, "and but for the fact that this one was signed 'Matthew Hopkins,' we simply would have filed it away after cross-filing the name."

"Matthew Hopkins?" I asked. "Don't believe I ever heard of the chap. There was a Hopkins who blackmailed Lord Alveston, I recall, but his Christian name was not Matthew."

"No, Dr. Watson," Inspector Adam said. "What worries me is that the writer of this letter suggests that he is the embodiment of the original Matthew Hopkins, the infamous 'Witch Finder General' of the seventeenth century."

"I can understand your concern, Mr. Adam," Holmes said. "Hopkins was the terror of East Anglia, despatching hundreds of witches to their doom on the testimony of children and neighbors."

"Yes," replied Adam, "at the height of his fury, he hanged nineteen innocent people in a

single day."

No one spoke as wisps of blue smoke rose to the ceiling. Holmes was deep in thought. Finally he spoke.

"But you had better let me see the letter. I guess what you fear is that your crank may imagine he is the reincarnation of Matthew Hopkins, and that of itself should hardly be a matter of concern."

Adam handed Holmes the letter. It was addressed to a Jane Wenham. It bore no salutary heading, and it came right to the point.

You escaped me in 1712, but this time you shall not escape me. You will be the first of many to die for your consorting with Satan. - - Matthew Hopkins

"I found the letter in the flat of a young woman who had been strangled to death. Because she lived alone, it was only after a few days that it was suspected she had met with foul play. We broke into the flat and found the body. The letter had been postmarked a few days before."

Holmes remarked that the name of the victim meant nothing to him.

"Nor to me," said Adam, "until I looked into the files on Matthew Hopkins. A Jane Wenham was one of those whom he had put on trial for witchcraft. She was, in fact, the only one of his victims who did not suffer death. She was so well thought of in Manningtree, the village in Essex whence she came, and the twonsfolk were so revolted by Hopkins' despicable deeds that she was acquitted, the only witch in England's history not to have suffered the supreme penalty."

I admit that the problem was a difficult

one. A nineteenth-century man believed himself to be the reincarnation of a seventeenth-century 'With Finder General' and was determined to finish the job that he could not accomplish earlier.

"Have you contacted Somerset House?" Holmes asked. Adam answered in the negative, asking at the same time why he should have done so.

"Jane Wenham is not a common name," Holmes replied, "but then it is not uncommon either. There is no way of knowing if Jane Wenham is a descendant of the Essex woman, but if this Hopkins, as he calls himself, found Jane Wenham, there is a strong possibility that he may be looking for others. I would suggest that you despatch some of your men to Somerset House immediately and inquire whether anyone has been inquiring of them for information of persons with that name."

"I never thought of that," replied Adam. "I am off to Somerset House myself. I will report my findings."

I wondered why Holmes appeared concerned. After all, the death under suspicious circumstances of a woman living alone in a flat was by no means unusual, and although Holmes willingly helped Scotland Yard, he seldom showed an interest in what are called 'street crimes.' I asked him what he thought about the Wenham murder.

"There will be more," he said " - - and not only Wenhams - - if they do not catch this scoundrel. Do you recall that the woman had been suffocated? No gun, no knife, no wounds? Hopkins knew what every witch-hunter two hundred years knew. When killing a witch, the skin must be left unbroken, lest the 'imps,' as they called them, escape from the body and infest another human being. Witches were burned, hanged, suffocated or pressed to death,

even drowned, but the executioners were always careful not to puncture the body. But come Watson, this affair intrihues me. Find out from Inspector Adam where Wenham lived. I should like to visit the premises tomorrow."

The next day Holmes and Watson, accompanied by a policeman, unlocked the door of an undistinguished rooming house in Hammersmith. It was just as it had been when the Wenham girl's body was removed. Holmes quickly glanced around the room after he had stared fixedly for at least a minute on a handwritten paper in the center of the room.

"Hello," he said, "that paper could not have been here when Inspector Adam was here. Someone has been here since." He picked up the paper and read it to me. It was brief:

Exodus 22:18 - - Matthew Hopkins

A religious man, I thought to myself, yet given to the worst crime on the books.

"What is the quote?" I asked Holmes.

"That is not important now," he replied, "you can look it up later. But let us see if we can discover who has been in this room since the police locked it. Let us visit the landlady."

"No visitors, to my knowledge," the landlady replied to Holmes' query. "But the next day there was a most singular occurrence. Seldom does this street in Hammersmith get a visit from folks of quality, so when I heard a team of four horses approaching I peered out the window to see a black brougham, with curtains drawn, approach and stop just across the way. A gentleman emerged, spoke a few words to the man at the reins, and proceeded to walk east, away from this house. Since he did not seem to

to be visiting us, I soon tired of watching and did not think of him again until this moment."

"You did not get a good look at the man?"

The lady had not.

"How about the brougham?" Holmes continued.

"The four horses made me wonder. We have many carriages on our street with one, even with two horses, but not with four. But there was something about the brougham that I now recall, for it struck me as odd."

"Ah - what was that?", Holmes inquired.



Continuation I
by Svend Petersen

"**S**imply this." she replied. "The brougham was pulled by horses, each of a different color, and it had the word "Apocalypse" painted on the left front door in script."

"Are you sure it wasn't painted in Scriptural letters?" Holmes asked, but the landlady ignored his pawky humour.

Bidding her "Good morning!" we wended our way down Easy Street to Fluid Drive, where we turned into Rotten Row; the smell of dead fish almost nauseated me. We passed the board-schools, from which the bored school children were emerging

for morning recess.

"Holmes!" I suddenly cried, "there is a madman in front of us! See how he alternatively grins and grimaces as he watches the Fords go by. What do you make of it?"

"Beyond the fact that he is a Conservative, has been married about a year, kissed his wife when he left the house a short time ago, is ambidextrous, and an ardent devotee of Automobile Rummy, there is little to interest me," replied my friend.

"How did you deduce all that?" I asked.

"It is obvious that he is a Conservative, as anyone with normal eyesight can see the Standard protruding out of his pocket. The fact that he is ambidextrous became apparent when he used his right hand to light his pipe and his left hand to copy the license numbers of the automobiles. You may have noted that the number 1-2-4-5-7-8-0 cause him to grit his teeth, while 3-6-3-6-6-3-6 brought smiles to his face."

"But what about his having been married about a year and having kissed his wife when he left home?"

"A slight tear in the back of his coat told me that he had backed out of the house, which explains his wife's failure to notice the rip. He backed out the door because he kissed his wife and picked up their baby and hugged it."

"But how in the world did you deduce that there was a baby?" I asked in astonishment.

"Alimentary, my dear Watson!" Holmes replied. "When he picked up the baby and squeezed it, the infant, unbeknownst to the proud father, deposited part of its breakfast on the back of his coat, the smell of which still lingers, along with the visible evidence."

"Holmes, this is really amazing," I said. "You would certainly have been the subject of a witch hunt had you lived during the Middle Ages."

"It was childishly simple," he retorted. "My brother Mycroft could have told us whether the baby had had the mother's milk, bottled milk, or goat's milk. Speaking of witch hunts, we are on the trail of a fanatical member of the True Believers."

I had never heard of the sect and my face must have proclaimed as much, for my companion went on to explain. "They are followers of Howe True, a fanatic who, for the past several years, has devoted his not inconsiderable energies to the extirpation of witches. A considerable number of perfectly harmless women have been done away with by True and his adherents."

"The man whom Miss Wenham's landlady mentioned is one of True's henchmen," Holmes continued. "He tries to justify his actions by directing attention to Biblical texts. Incidentally, the eighteenth verse of the twenty-second chapter of Exodus reads: 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.'"

Holmes had been walking rather rapidly as we conversed, making it difficult for one with a game leg to keep apace. Suddenly he stooped, stomped his foot on the pavement and clenched his fist.

"What a fool I have been!" he exclaimed. "The worthy landlady unwittingly told us all we need to know. The word "Apocalypse" I instantly recognized as the Roman Catholic name for the last book of the Bible. The King James version entitles it "The Revelation of Saint John the Divine."

"But what is the significance, my dear Holmes?" I asked.

"The significance, my dear Watson, lies in the fact that somewhere in that book is a reference to four horses, the first of which was white, the second red, the third black, and the fourth pale. The rider of the pale horse was death. My Biblical knowledge is not as rusty as I had feared."

"The mystery which we started out to solve becomes more complicated when you introduce the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse into something that was already rather involved," I observed.

"My dear Watson, the mystery is stratospherical in height, abysmal in depth, infinitesimal in width, and cosmic in scope."



Continuation II
by Paul Gunning

"**A**bove all, however, it is not as it appears to be on the surface, as is usually the case when a true mastermind is at the bottom of things," Holmes continued.

"Holmes, you don't mean that...."

"Quite possibly, Watson. He's one of the few I could think of who could so successfully pursue his diabolical ends, and at the same time introduce these bizarre occurrences for the express purpose of confusing everyone involved."

"But what does it all mean?" I asked. "And what is his purpose?"

"I believe his purpose, Watson, is murder. I'm also sure that when we check back with Inspector Adam he will have found there is at least one additional Jane Wenham listed as living in the area. As I said before, there will be more murders connected with this case, including one Jane Wenham and possibly more, if more exist. Unless, of course, we can unravel this mystery in time."

At this point, Holmes became silent and remained so until we reached our lodgings at Baker Street. After we had complete an excellent high tea prepared for us by Mrs. Hudson, Holmes lit his pipe and resumed his discussion of the case.

"I believe, Watson, that there is one particular person who is the intended victim of our nefarious protagonist. Tomorrow I should like you to see Inspector Adam and obtain the results of his research at Somerset House. I should also like the complete background information of any Jane Wenham he may have unearthed. When we obtain this information, Watson, unless I'm badly mistaken, I believe we shall have the name of Moriarty's next victim. And if I know the Professor as well as I believe I do, I think we'll find that the intended victim is an old friend of ours. This, thanks to what may have been a cunning hint left in the original letter addressed to the late Jane Wenham."

"I must say, Holmes, I've been with you on this case from the onset and have seen and heard the same things you have, yet how you can arrive at these conclusions is beyond me. To me it is a simple case of a group of fanatics led by a madman bent on a twisted, demented vengeance. Oh well, I know you well enough

to know you're closer to the explanation than I am. I think I'd better retire now as it appears tomorrow will be a most busy day."



Continuation III

by Wanda Butts

It seemed that I had just fallen asleep when I was jarred awake by a thin hand that could only be Holmes'. Such previous awakenings had taught me to remain silent, so I hurried into my clothes as my companion in adventure calmly waited in the corner. I reached into the nightstand drawer where I kept my revolver, and at an affirmative nod from Holmes, placed the firearm in my pocket.

"Can you draw it quickly from there?" Holmes whispered.

As I did so, I could hear his amused chuckle. Just as suddenly as I had been awakened, his mood changed into one of tenseness and he lowered his voice even more. "Quickly, Watson! No more time to lose!"

"But where are we going, Holmes?" I asked, following him out the door. My curiosity could stand no more.

"To Hammersmith, of course!"

We seemed to reach the place of Jane Wenham's death much faster by dodging through the back alleys that Holmes knew so well. As we approached the end of the narrow street which

led out onto Hammersmith Road, Holmes' hand held me back. I leaned around his lean figure to see onto the street and was surprised to see the Apocalypse Brougham parked across the street in full view under a street lamp. The driver seemed asleep as he awaited his master's orders to drive on.

After all the haste we had made to get to this destination, I was surprised to see my partner settle back against the alley wall.

"But Holmes!" I whispered. "Are we not going to rush at him?"

"Nonesense, Watson," he sighed, "There is no one in the brougham."

"But how..?"

"The weight is such on the springs that the brougham is not pushed down enough on the axles to warrant a passenger, unless it were a child, of course."

I shook my head in amazement of his keen eyesight, and also leaned against the wall.

It was not long afterward that we were rewarded by the appearance of the gentleman to whom the coach belonged. He had in tow a young woman, hastily dressed, who was obviously not pleased at this rendezvous.

When he forced the young woman into the brougham, I could stand no more, and dashed from the alley, forgetting Holmes entirely.

"You there! Unhand that woman!"

"Watson! No!" Holmes called out pursuing me.

The man only glanced in our direction and then summoned the driver to make haste.

"Stop! Stop, I say! In the name of the Queen, stop!"

All my commands only served to make the four horses speed away faster.

"Watson, you buffoon!" Holmes grasped my shoulder in a vice-like grip and swirled me around to face his anger. "I almost would have had the answer tonight if it had not been for your foolish gallantry!"

"But Holmes!" I was aghast at his ire. "He was obviously kidnapping that girl!"

"Correct," he agreed.

I felt foolish indeed under his icy stare. Of course he had known what was about to happen, and he had planned ahead what avenues to take. I had spoiled it all.

"We can follow,,,,," I offered.

"He suspects that." He shook his head, "He will be waiting for us. No, the only thing to do is return to our lodgings as await Inspector Adam's information. He should be arriving in a few hours and will give me the missing details to explain all this reasonably to the police."

"Then you know....?"

"I believe I have most of it, but there are still a few lacunae. Come along, Watson, before we are noticed." I followed him, more bewildered than before.



When we had settled in front of a warm fire in our rooms in Baker Street, Holmes said somewhat condescendingly, "Now let's take stock, Watson. What do we know? First a young woman is murdered, and beside the body is found a note indicating that she is the victim of a person who, for one reason or another, is pursuing women with the name of Jane Wenham. Perhaps our murderer is sane, perhaps not; he is at least very methodical.

"Secondly, a mysterious brougham is seen on two occasions outside the house in Hammersmith where the victim was found. It is a large black carriage, with drawn curtains, pulled by four horses, a veritable witch's brougham! Now tell me, Watson, do you believe in witches?" I replied surely not, or words to that effect. "Very well," continued Holmes, "let us suppose that you are typical of the enlightened Londoner of today. For what purpose does one bring a black brougham into a small street in Hammersmith, a mysterious-looking carriage which can only attract attention, and in daylight, too! Are these facts related? What has the presence of the brougham to do with the death of Jane Wenham at the hand of a purported witch hunter? Ah, here is Inspector Adam with perhaps one answer to our questions."

The jangle of the bell was followed by a firm step on the stairs, and in a moment the Inspector was ushered into the room.

"Bad luck, Mr. Holmes," said the Inspector. "We have checked every town and village within fifty miles round without finding a Jane Wenham. We checked for Matthew Hopkins, too, but found only one. He could not be involved, and in fact is vouched for by his cousin Stanley Hopkins, a young inspector of the Yard."

"Of course," interjected Holmes. "I remember young Hopkins. I worked with him in the death of Willoughby Smith of Yoxley Old Place, and also the murder of Peter Carey, the harpooner. Well, that is no concern, Inspector. I had suspected from the beginning that we were dealing with pseudonyms assumed for the purpose of intimidation. What I was not aware of was the seriousness of the plot we have stumbled upon."

"Why Holmes, " I said, "what on earth can you mean?"

"How many times have I told you, Watson, that nothing evil happens in this great city without the permission and probably the instigation of our dear friend Professor Moriarty! Even those events which happen without his knowledge are quickly turned to his purpose. I could explain, but perhaps that will be accomplished better by our visitor, whose step, I believe, I hear on the stairs at this moment."

Undeed, as he spoke the bell jangles from a forceful pull, and in a moment Mrs. Hudson had conducted a gentleman into the room. He was of Latin origin, with that precise manner of speech which the English never use with their native language. His words were relaxed, but his manner and especially his eyes indicated a certain tension and sense of danger.

"Sr. Francisco Esperanza, I believe?" said Holmes. "My associate, Dr. Watson, and Inspector Adam of Scotland Yard." If that information brought any additional apprehension to him, there was no visible sign. "I presume you have come in response to my message." The gentleman gave a nod of assent.

"I will be brief, sir. You desire the safety of your wife and a quick exit from this country. I want the return of the Great Ruby of Cawnpore. Let us conclude our business quickly, for other parties may be interested in other arrangements."

"Perhaps I have made a mistake in coming here," said our visitor. "If you will excuse me, I shall...." At a nod from Holmes, Inspector Adam barred the way to the door. Holmes rushed towards Esperanza. "Use your head, man! We are trying to help you. You have no other choice. If you do not believe me, look out the window!" As he looked out, so did I, to see in the street below the brougham, the witch's brougham drawn by four horses, and on the box a formidable-looking character dressed entirely in black.

"Ah, it is hopeless!" exclaimed our Latin visitor, and suddenly brushed his chin with the end of his sleeve. At the same moment Holmes cried, "Stop him!" but it was too late. Even before I could reach for my stethoscope he had collapsed, and before I had an emetic in hand the poison was too far advanced for remedy. Holmes was over him in a flash. "Tell us, where is the Ruby?" he made an attempt to speak, but it was futile; after a feeble effort he sank back and expired.

Holmes quickly dispatched the Inspector to an address close by us, just off the Edgeware Road. In a short time he returned with a young woman in the company of two constables.

"Well, gentlemen," said Holmes when we were all assembled again, "I think you are entitled to a little explanation. The lamented gentleman lying there under our window is not Francisco Esperanza, but Renato Luca, also known as Vittorio Nono. This lady is his wife, of Italian birth, but now a British subject. Luca had an international reputation as a thief and a spy, and is, I believe, a half-brother of the late Eduardo Lucas, whom Watson will doubtless remember. At some point in his career he dropped the final "s" from his name, probably to emphasize his Italian heritage.

"Just last week I was informed by the Chief of the Sûreté that the Great Ruby of Cawnpore

had been stolen from the Naples Museum and that Luca was believed to be coming to London with the gem and might try to contact his wife. She had moved here several year ago when Luca was sent to a French prison, and Scotland Yard has been keeping a close watch on her movements.

"Moriarty was determined to get his hands on such a valuable gem, and set out to find Luca through his female friends. He felt that a series of murders might be necessary to achieve his purpose; therefore some rationale for them must be devised. The witch-hunting scheme with its attendant ominous brougham was Moriarty's way of drawing attention of the police away from his real purpose. He doubtless felt that any procedure which was so sensational in its aspects would never be ascribed to one whose operations were normally almost invisible.

"Our early morning sortie to Hammersmith might have netted Luca and all those involved, Watson, if you had not intervened pre-emptorily. The young woman whom we saw was a decoy, and the intention was to force Luca to reveal himself. When this did not work, either for Moriarty or myself, I decided to try to lure him to Baker Street. Perhaps my message is on his person. Aha, here it is indeed!" Holmes handed me a slip of paper with our address and the words: Proverbs 30:10.

"I will spare you the task of finding it, Watson. It reads: 'Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above rubies.' Luca came, but I underestimated his nerve. You know my flair for the theatrical, Watson. I thought that a view of Moriarty's witch's brougham (but in this case one that I had contrived for the occasion) would frighten him into cooperation with us; instead, it frightened him to suicide.

"Well, Inspector, the rest is in your hands. Perhaps the Great Ruby is lost forever. We may

be confident it has not fallen into the hands of Professor Moriarty, at least not yet. But lest he think that Mrs. Luca has it, I would recommend some police protection for her.

Since my rented brougham is still at the door, you may as well use it, Inspector, to convey your party to Scotland Yard. It has never carried a witch, but it may now have the dubious honor of carrying a wizard of crime for his last ride."

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