

A Holiday Pastiche

By Tracy Revels, PhD

An associate professor of history at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, Dr. Tracy Revels has been a fan of Sherlock Holmes since discovering "The Speckled Band" in a 7th grade textbook. She began writing Sherlockian essays while in graduate school at Florida State University. After eight years in the howling wilderness of Carolina, she finally connected with the Survivors of the Gloria Scott, the scion society of Greenville---all thanks to the matchmaking skills of the Senters, who sent her the scion's address. A group of most noble Sherlockians, the Survivors are her constant inspiration for pastiches and parodies, several of which have appeared in their newsletter, THE GASLIGHT GAZETTE. She has also picked up a few ideas from her students, since she teaches classes in Sherlock Holmes and Victorian England. Last but not least, she is the proud owner of "Sherlock Hares and Dr. Wabbit," original stuffed rabbits dressed in full regalia, created by her very talented mother!

I have left this case unrecorded, due to its brevity, but now I feel I should record it, for it gives insight not only into the brilliant mind, but the hidden heart, of Sherlock Holmes.

It was a bitter Christmas Eve, the year that Holmes returned to London.

While I had abandoned my practice to once again reside in Baker Street, I sometimes received summons from old patients, and I tried to accommodate them whenever practical.

Lady Hildaborne was one such, a chronic invalid (at least in her own mind) who would admit no one but me to her bedchamber.

I had just emerged from her mansion in Mayfair, when I sighted Holmes idling near her carriage stop.

"Holmes, what a strange coincidence!"

"It is not a coincidence, Watson. I trailed you here."

"But how?" I demanded, "I received the note from Lady Hildaborne and

left before you were even out of bed! And I have the note still here in my pocket."

Holmes smiled. "When my friend Watson is roused from his slumber at six in the morning, shaves carelessly, and dashes off with his medical bag, I know he is destined for this fine address. I heard you clatter down the stairs, I noted that there was blood on your razor and in the basin, as well as--I see now--a bit of plaster on your chin, and your bag was missing. As you are not in active practice, what other emergency could cause you to hurry so--a speed brought on, of course, not by the nature of her illness, but by her princely payments."

I laughed and nodded towards the cab Holmes had waiting. "You make everything so absurdly simple."

"Life is simple, for those with sharp eyes and sharper brains," he replied, without a trace of modesty.

He climbed in with me and directed the driver to Oxford Street.

"You plan to do some shopping?"

"Rather I plan to do some watching. The combination of holy days and heathen capitalism is always amusing, and on occasions, instructional. Or would you rather return home?"

"No, I'll accompany you. I'm certain I can find something to spend this 'princely payment' on."

We were only halfway to our destination.

I will not give the street, nor the exact name of the sanctuary for fear that this event might yet cause scandal amid the congregation.

However, we were staffed in something of a traffic snarl when, suddenly, a black robed vicar burst forth from his church, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"Help! Robbers-thieves! Police, somebody call the police!"

Like a hound that hears the hunting call, Holmes sprang from the cab, leaving me to pay the driver.

When I caught up with him, Holmes had the pastor in his grip, shaking him none too gently.

"Courage, man. Tell us what has happened."

The vicar's lean wrinkled face twitched, his watery blue eyes peering back and forth between us.

"You are detectives?"

"Something of the sort," Holmes replied.

The man swallowed and motioned for us to come inside.

We entered the candle lit sanctuary.

The church's furnishing and embellishments were rich, a testament (I later learned) to a wealthy patron in the textile business.

The pastor, who quickly introduced himself as the Reverend Arnson, led us to the far right hand corner of his church, behind the altar rail.

There we beheld what was surely one of the most remarkable sights of the holiday season, a nativity scene created with nearly life size figures.

The dolls themselves were amazing for their realistic features and poses.

Even more breathtaking was the twinkling and glittering of the ornaments on their costumes.

The three kings wore robes stitched in silver and gold, the angels' wings sparkled as if dusted with diamonds, and even the humble shepherds sported glistening headgear and mahogany staffs.

I was so amazed by the display that for a moment I missed the central problem it posed.

The manger was empty.

"Our patron gave us this tableau just last week," the pastor was babbling. "Of course, I allow no one back here but myself, and someone is watching it at all times. Bulcher, my assistant, asked permission to visit a relative this morning, and I sent him on his way, thinking I would keep watch over the scene. There have been few visitors to the church, and-"

"You left it alone," Holmes said, walking gingerly among the figures, inspecting the scattered straw around the wooden trough. "For how long?"

The old man turned several shades of red. "Only for long enough to visit the WC. But no one was here, of that I will swear. I looked down the aisles before I went through that door over there, into my office. I could not have been away for more than five minutes."

Holmes frowned, fingering the solid gold beads that decorated an angel's mantle.

"What is unique about the figure of the Christ Child?"

The reverend shuddered. "Its eyes, sir--oh, they are beauties. The two most beautiful sapphires you've ever seen. Two real gems they are, not just bits of paste."

"Anything else?"

"No. Except for the eyes, it is merely a doll wrapped in a silk cloth. Its head is porcelain, but the

body is like these others, stuffed with sawdust and fragrant herbs."

I nodded, then inhaled deeply. "I thought there was a rather pungent scent here."

Holmes dropped to his knees, whipping out his lenses.

The vicar frowned, and I imagined he was beginning to wonder if he had pulled a lunatic in to help him. Holmes looked up.

"We are very fortunate. The babe has sprung a leak."

"What!"

"See here--traces of sawdust, and wisps of the herbs. The materials with which the figure was stuffed. Watson, would you be so kind as to hail a cab and pay a visit to my old friend on Pinchin Lane."

"Shall I ask for Toby?"

"No, I fear Toby's best days are past. Insist on Paddy instead."

The trip took some time, as the streets were horribly congested, but as I rode along I tried to recreate the crime.

A thief, cleverly hidden beneath the pews, was determined to steal the two most precious objects in the tableau.

How long had he waited to get his chance?

Was he part of Moriarty's old gang, now forced to fend for himself?

What danger might lurk in this chase?

I found myself wishing that I had my revolver, rather than my stethoscope, in my coat pocket.

Reverend Arnson made a serious protest when I returned with Paddy (who turned out to be a huge bloodhound) on a leash.

Holmes, however, insisted that the dogs be allowed to smell the stable, and pick up the strong trail formed by the scattered herbs.

Paddy lifted his head, made an unholy braying, and we were off.

Respectable Londoners quickly cleared a path as we sped down the street, Paddy struggling at his lead.

Holmes was pushed to keep up with the dog, and I could barely keep pace with Holmes.

Paddy veered around a corner, dipping down a dark alley, and suddenly we were no longer in a cheerful street decorated for the holidays, but in a grim, cheerless, dirty lane.

Tenement houses rose on either side of us.

Children sat hunched on the steps or gathered around small fires set in cans.

Paddy started up the stairs of one of the buildings.

Holmes pulled back on the leash, just as a boy emerged from the front door.

"Excuse me, young man," Holmes said, in that tone that always seemed to work wonders on children. "Have you seen a girl enter this house only a short time

before, carrying a rather large doll?"

"That I have. That's Betsy, up on the third floor."

The boy grinned, revealing a row of blackened teeth. "Is she in trouble?"

"I do not believe so."

The boy's face fell.

Holmes held out the leash and fished a sovereign from his pocket. "We must speak with her, however. Would you be kind enough to watch my dog while we do?"

The boy's face lit up once again as he ruffled Paddy's wrinkled hide.

We stepped past, ascending a narrow flight of stairs in nearly total darkness.

"Holmes," I asked, "How did you know it was a girl?"

"There were some indications of a small, feminine boot on the carpet in the sanctuary," he replied. "But even before I saw them, I speculated that it was a young lady who was the culprit."

He turned and smiled at me as we drew up to the door. "Who else would impulsively steal a doll?"

Holmes knocked, and a moment later the door was opened by a child of no more than ten.

Her pale face and hollow cheeks spoke of a life of desperate struggle.

Her hair, long and golden, was knotted, and her stockings were

frayed, with great holes at the knees.

"Yes?" she asked, her eyes darting warily between us.

Holmes took off his hat.

"Miss Betsy. We have come because there seems to have been a mistake made. You took something from the church that did not belong to you, and the good pastor insists that it be returned."

The girl gasped, but made no attempt to deny her theft.

"I only got it for Ellen!" she defended. "That's all she wanted, was for Father Christmas to bring her a dolly. And she's so sick, and there's no money and - and - I was sure that the real Christ Child wouldn't mind. Ellen is so sick"

She looked up at us with tear-filled eyes expressing almost hallowed innocence.

"Your sister is ill?"

The girl sniffled, nodding but staring down at her worn out shoes. "Yes, very sick."

"My friend here is a doctor. With your permission, he will treat her."

The girl's head snapped up, but then she wavered. "We haven't got any money."

"My dear child," I said, borrowing a phrase from Holmes, "my work is its own reward."

At that, she grabbed my hand and lead me to the rear of her miserable flat.

A small bed was wedged into the corner, and on it was the wasted figure of another girl, this one no more than five.

She clung to the stuffed doll but had not the strength to resist as Betsy eased it from her grasp and passed it to Holmes.

"Here you are, sir. I went to the church thinking maybe I could ask Reverend Arnson to help us. He knew my father before he died, and my mother before she left us . . . but he told me to go away, that he didn't want to see the dirty likes of me in his church. He thought I left, but I lay down on the pew. When he went away, I couldn't help myself. It was such a pretty dolly, and I love my sister. I only wanted her to have something for Christmas."

Though I was busily examining the girl, who was feverish and deeply congested, I managed to glance at Holmes.

His face bore an expression I had never seen before in all our adventures.

He put the Christ Child doll on a rickety table, then turned to me.

"Watson, I won't be long. Betsy, do help the doctor and pay attention to all that he says."

With those words, Holmes departed.

For almost an hour, I worked with the little girl, preparing a tonic and instructing her sister in how to care for her.

With faithful nursing and better food, I had no doubt that Ellen

would survive, for the child showed fierce spirit, protesting loudly when we gave her a dose of medicine.

I was just packing up my bag when Holmes returned, bearing a large package, one that was brightly wrapped in Christmas paper.

"Sir, what is that?" Betsy demanded. Holmes only smiled.

"Something that you and your sister will enjoy. No, no—you must wait until Christmas morning to unwrap it," he warned, when her hands seemed eager to snatch away the paper and ribbons. "And, on Boxing Day, I want you to come to 221B Baker Street. There will be something else waiting for you with a kind lady named Mrs. Hudson."

The girl's eyes went wide. "You mean I'm not going to jail?"

"Not this time, my dear, for this is the season of forgiveness. But from now on, you must ask permission before you take something, even if it is only a doll."

She bobbed a curtsy.

We gathered up the Christ Child, which I noted with some humor was suffering from a withered leg, where the stuffing had poured from a tear in the cloth.

Holmes reclaimed the dog, ruffled the boy's hair, and soon we were restoring the baby Jesus to its place in the manger.

"How in the name of all that's wonderful! Oh, sir, you have saved my life!" the Reverend exclaimed. "But who was the villain who took it? Tell me, and I'll see that he's

prosecuted to the full extent of the law!"

"You will do no such thing," Holmes snapped. "You only hired me to retrieve the figure, not to find the thief. Now, there is the little matter of my fee."

The pastor went pale. "How much, sir?"

"Some human compassion for a family in want that lives at this address," Holmes replied, scribbling it out. "And I warn you, if you fail to assist them, your patron will know every detail of your irresponsibility."

Later that evening, Holmes fell into a black mood.

He stared out through the window, watching as carolers made their rounds and more than one intoxicated reveler staggered across the snow-covered pavement.

"What kind of a world do we live in, Watson?" he asked, "What manner of place would create gilded statues while ignoring starving orphans? Or place more value on the letter of the law than on the spirit of compassion?"

I tried to draw him out of the dark thoughts. "Holmes, what was in the box?"

"Oh come now, Watson. Surely you can deduce that."

I had been speculating on it for some time, but feared to voice my suspicions. "A doll?"

"Indeed. A very fine one, with a red dress and black hair and the greenest eyes ever created."

He removed his pipe, chuckling softly. "But it is no surprise that parents dread this season. Do you have any idea how much such a babble costs?"

I laughed fully, especially at the image of Holmes battling the crowd in a toy shop. "You are doing

yourself a disservice by remaining a bachelor," I opined. "You should marry and have children. Lots of children."

"Then heaven help London!" he retorted. "Can you imagine the Holmes' tribe running amok, trying to solve every riddle and unravel every problem among the juvenile set? Inquisitive little savages with lenses and cloth caps and pipes, even the girls? They'd make the

Baker Street Irregulars look like angels!"

I had risen during his speech, and poured out liberal holiday libations, passing one glass to my friend.

He smiled and it all seemed right again, another mystery solved and perhaps another soul saved.

"Happy Christmas, Holmes."