

Sherlock Holmes

and the Amateur Mendicant Society

by John Gregory Betancourt

As I have written previously, my first years sharing lodgings with Mr. Sherlock Holmes were among the most interesting of my life. Of all his cases -- both public and private -- which took place during this period, there remains one in particular of which I have hesitated to write until this time. Despite an ingenious resolution -- and to my mind a wholeheartedly satisfactory one -- contrived by my friend, the bizarre nature of this affair has made me reluctant to place it before a general readership. However, I feel the time has come to lay forth the facts concerning Mr. Oliver Pendleton-Smythe and the most unusual organisation to which he belonged.

My notebook places our first meeting with Mr. Pendleton-Smythe, if meeting it can be called, at Tuesday the 24th of April, 1881. We had just concluded a rather sensitive investigation (of which I am still not at liberty to write), and Holmes's great mind had begun to turn inexorably inward. I feared he might once more take up experimentation with opiates to satiate his need for constant mental stimulation.

So it was that I felt great relief when Mrs. Hudson announced that a man -- a very insistent man who refused to give his name -- was at the door to see Mr. Holmes.

"Dark overcoat, hat pulled low across his forehead, and carrying a black walking stick?" Holmes asked without looking up from his chair.

"Why, yes!" exclaimed Mrs. Watson. "How ever did you know?"

Holmes made a deprecating gesture. "He has been standing across the street staring up at our windows for more than an hour. Of course I noticed when I went to light my pipe, and I marked him again when I stood to get a book just a moment ago."

"What else do you know about him?" I asked, lowering my copy of the *Morning Post*.

"Merely that he is an army colonel recently retired from service in Africa. He is a man of no small means, although without formal title or estates."

"His stance," I mused, "would surely tell you that he a military man, and the wood of his walking stick might well indicate that he has seen service in Africa, as well might his clothes. But how could you deduce his rank when he's not in uniform?"

"The same way I know his name is Colonel Oliver Pendleton-Smythe," Holmes said.

I threw down the *Morning Post* with a snort of disgust. "Dash it all, you know the fellow!"

"Not true." Holmes nodded toward the newspaper. "You should pay more attention to the matters before you."

I glanced down at the *Morning Post*, which had fallen open to reveal a line drawing of a man in uniform. MISSING: COLONEL OLIVER PENDLETON-SMYTHE, said the headline. I stared at the picture, then up at Holmes's face.

"Will you see him, sir?" asked Mrs. Hudson.

"Not tonight," said Holmes. "Tell Colonel Pendleton-Smythe -- and do use his full name, although he will doubtlessly bluster and deny it -- that I will see him at nine o'clock sharp tomorrow morning. Not one second sooner and not one second later. If he asks, tell him I am concluding up another important case and cannot be disturbed." He returned his gaze to his book.

"Very good, sir," she said, and shaking her head she closed the door.

The second the latch clicked, Holmes leaped to his feet. Gathering up his coat and hat, he motioned for me to do likewise. "Make haste, Watson," he said. "We must follow the colonel back to his den!"

"Den?" I demanded. I threw on my own coat and accompanied him down the back stairs at breakneck pace. "What do you mean by 'den'? Is he another Moriarty?"

"Please!" Holmes put up one hand for silence and eased open the door. Pendleton-Smythe was striding briskly up Baker Street, swinging his walking stick angrily, as though it were a machete. We both slipped out and Holmes closed the door behind us. Then together we crossed the street and proceeded surreptitiously after the colonel. He seemed to be heading toward the river.

"What is this affair about?" I asked as I hurried after Holmes.

"Mr. Pendleton-Smythe, had you bothered to read that article in the *Morning Post*, disappeared two days ago. Foul play was suspected. In the fireplace of his London home police inspectors found several scraps of paper, but little could be made out except one phrase: 'Amateur Mendicant Society.' What do you make of it?"

"A mendicant is a beggar, I believe -- "

"True!"

"But a whole society of amateur beggars? And for a retired army colonel to be involved in them! It boggles the mind."

"I suspect," said Holmes, "that modern views of beggary have colored your thoughts on this matter. Mendicants have been, at various times and in various cultures, both revered and despised. I suspect this is another name for the Secret Mendicant Society, a network of spies which is -- or was, at any rate -- quite real and much older than you realize. Its roots stretched back to the Roman Empire and as far abroad as Russia, India, and Egypt."

"You think it still exists, then?" I asked.

"I thought it had died out a generation ago in Europe, but it seems to have surfaced once more. I have heard hints in the last few years, Watson, that lead me to suspect it has become an instrument of evil."

"And Pendleton-Smythe -- "

"Another Professor Moriarty, pulling the strings of this society for his own personal gain? Fortunately, no. He is, I believe, a pawn in a much larger game, although only a few squares on the board are yet visible to me. More than that I cannot say until I have questioned Pendleton-Smythe."

"What do these 'amateur mendicants' do? Are they beggars or not?"

"Quickly!" Holmes said, pulling me behind a stopped Hansom cab. "He's turning!"

Pendleton-Smythe had stopped before a small rooming house. As we peered out at him, he paused on

the steps to look left then right, but did not see us. He entered the building and shut the door behind himself.

"Interesting," Holmes said. "But it confirms my theory."

"That he's a beggar?" I asked, feeling a little annoyed for all the rushing about. "If so, he is surely a well-lodged one."

"Pendleton-Smythe has gone into hiding out of fear for his life. Why else would a man who owns a house choose to rent a room in such shabby surroundings as these?"

"Are we to question him here, then?" I asked.

He paused, lips pursed, deep in thought. After a minute I cleared my throat.

"No, Watson," he said, turning back toward Baker Street. "I think that can wait until tomorrow. I have much to do first."

The next morning Holmes knocked loudly on my door until, bleary eyed, I called, "What is it, Holmes?"

"It's half past six," he said. "Mrs. Hudson has the kettle on and breakfast will be ready at seven sharp."

"For heaven's sake," I said, sitting up. "Tell me, why have you awakened me so early?"

"We have an appointment!"

"Appointment?" I asked, still cloudy. I rose and opened the door. "Ah. Pendleton-Smythe and his amateur beggars, I assume. But that's not until nine o'clock sharp -- you said so yourself!"

"Exactly!" He had a fevered look to his eye and I knew he'd been up most of the night working on the mysterious colonel's case -- although what the actual nature of the case was, I still hadn't a clue. Yet Holmes seemed to place singular importance on it.

When I had shaved and dressed, I emerged to find an excellent repast set out for us by Mrs. Hudson. Holmes had barely touched his plate. He was rummaging through stacks of old newspapers strewn across the floor and every flat surface of the room.

"Here it is!" he cried.

"What?" I asked, helping myself to tea, toast, and orange marmalade.

"A pattern is emerging," he said softly. "I believe I have all the pieces now. But how do they fit?"

"Explain it to me," I said.

He held up one hand. "Precisely what I intend to do, Watson. Your clarity of thought may be what I need right now." He cleared his throat. "In 1852, Oliver Pendleton-Smythe and six of his schoolmates were expelled from Eton. They were involved in some scandal, the nature of which I have yet to ascertain -- official reports tend to be vague on that sort of matter."

"Rightfully so," I murmured.

"Young Pendleton-Smythe found himself shipped off to South Africa after six months of knocking about

London, and there his career proved unexceptional. When at last he retired and returned to London, taking charge of his family's house, things seemed to go well for him. He announced his betrothal to Dame Edith Stuart, which you may also remember from the society pages."

"A step up for an army colonel," I commented.

"I suspect she may have been involved in the Eton scandal, but that is mere conjecture at this point," Holmes said. "Yes, to all appearances it is a step up for him. However, two weeks later he broke off the engagement, and the next day -- three days ago, in fact -- he disappeared."

"Until he showed up on our doorstep."

"Just so."

"Where does this Amateur Beggar Society fit in?" I asked.

"The Secret Mendicant Society, as it is more properly called, was part of a network of spies set up by the Emperor Constantine. The Roman Empire had more than its share of beggars, and Constantine realized they heard and saw more than anyone gave them credit for. Originally, noble-born members of the Society would dress as beggars and go forth to collect news and information, which then made its way back through the network to Constantine himself.

"The next few emperors made little use of Constantine's beggars, but oddly enough the Society seems to have established itself more strongly than ever rather than collapsing, as one might have expected. It developed its own set of rites and rituals. One faction in India splintered off and became affiliated with the Thuggee, of whom you may be familiar."

"Indeed," I said, "I have heard of those devils."

Holmes nodded. "Sometime in the Middle Ages they seemed to disappear. However, in 1821 a condemned man mentioned them in his last statement. Since then I've found two other mentions of the Secret Mendicant Society, the first being a satirical cartoon from *Punch* dated 1832, which refers to them as a rival to the Free Masons as if everyone had heard of them, and the second being the scrap of paper found in Colonel Pendleton-Smythe's house."

"So where does the colonel fit in?"

"I was just getting to that," Holmes said. "Of the six chums expelled from Eton, I have been able to trace the movements of three. All three died in recent weeks under mysterious circumstances. What does this tell you?"

"That the colonel is next on the list to be killed?"

"Precisely, Watson. Or so it would seem."

"You have reason to believe otherwise?"

"Ha! You see right through me, Watson. It seems distinctly odd to me that this rash of murders should coincide with Pendleton-Smythe's return from Africa."

"Indeed, it does seem odd," I agreed. "But perhaps there are other circumstances at work here. You won't know that until you speak with the colonel himself." I looked at my watch. "It's only half an hour until our appointment."

"Time," said Holmes, "for us to be on our way."

I stared at him in bewildered consternation. "You'll have Pendleton-Smythe convinced you don't want to see him if you keep to this course!"

"Rather," he said, "I am endeavoring to make sure the meeting does take place. Your coat, Watson! We'll either meet him on the street on his way here -- or if, as I suspect, he intends to skip our meeting since he was recognized yesterday, we will meet him at his rooming house!"

I grabbed my coat and hat and followed him once more out to the street.

We did not, of course, meet Pendleton-Smythe in the street; Holmes always did have a knack for second-guessing other people's actions. When we arrived at the rooming house, we found a stout gray-haired woman who I took to be the landlady sweeping the steps.

"Excuse me," Holmes said briskly, "I wish to ask after one of your tenants -- a military man with a slight limp, dark coat, dark hat. I have a letter he dropped last night and I wish to return it to him."

"You'd mean Mr. Smith," she said. "Give it here, I'll hand it to him when he's up." She held out her hand.

"Is he in, then?" Holmes asked.

"Here now, who are you?" she said, regarding us both suspiciously and hefting her broom to bar our way.

I hastened to add, "This is Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and we must speak to your Mr. Smith. It's very urgent."

"Mr. Holmes? Why didn't you say so, gents? 'Course I've heard of you, Mr. Holmes. Who hasn't, round these parts? Come in, come in, I'm forgetting my manners." She lowered the broom and moved toward the front door. "I'm Mrs. Nellie Coram, sir, and I own this establishment. Mr. Smith's room is on the second floor. I'll just pop up and see if he'll come down."

"If you don't mind," Holmes said, "I think we'd better come upstairs with you."

"Oh, is he a slippery one, then?" she said. "I thought he might be, but he paid me a fortnight's rent in advance, and I can't afford to be too nosy, business being what it is these days."

"He is not a criminal," Holmes said. "He is a client. But it is urgent that I speak with him immediately."

She laid a finger alongside her nose and gave him a broad wink, but said no more. She led us in at once, up a broad flight of steps to a well-scrubbed second floor hallway. She turned right, went down a narrow passage to a closed door, and there she knocked twice. A gruff whisper came in answer almost immediately: "Who is it?"

"Nellie Coram," the landlady said. "I have two visitors for you, Mr. Smith."

The door opened a crack, and I saw a single piercing blue eye regard Holmes and me for a second. "Come in," said the voice, stronger now, and its owner moved back and opened the door for us.

Holmes and I went in. I looked around and saw a small but tidy room: bed, wash stand, armoire, and a single straight-backed chair by the window. A copy of the *Times* lay open on the bed.

Pendleton-Smythe closed the door before Mrs. Coram could join us, and I heard a muffled "Humph" from the other side of the door and the sound of her footsteps as she returned to her tasks downstairs. The colonel himself was a man of medium height and strong build, with iron gray hair, blue eyes, and a small moustache. He wore dark blue pants, a white pinstripe shirt, and a blue vest. But it was the service revolver in his hand that most drew my attention. Pendleton-Smythe held it pointed straight at Holmes and me.

"What do you want?" he barked. "Who are you?"

Holmes, who had already taken in the room with a single glance, crossed to the window and parted the drapes. "Rather," he said, "I should ask what *you* want, Colonel. I am here to keep our appointment. I am Sherlock Holmes, and this is my colleague, Dr. John Watson."

Holmes turned and stared at Pendleton-Smythe, and after a second the colonel lowered his revolver. His hands were shaking, I saw, and I steadied his arm for a second.

"I am glad to have you here, Mr. Holmes," he said. Nervously he crossed to the bed and sat down, tossing the revolver beside him. He cradled his head in his hands, ran his fingers through his hair, and took a deep breath. "Truly, I am at wit's end. I don't know if you can help me, but if any man in England can, it's you. Your presence here is proof enough of your remarkable abilities."

Holmes sat in the straight chair, steepled his fingers, crossed his legs, and said, "Begin at Eton, with your involvement in the Amateur Mendicant Society."

He started violently. "You know about that, too? How is it possible?"

"Then he's right," I said, "and the Amateur Mendicant Society *is* involved?"

"Yes -- yes, damn them!"

"My methods are my own," Holmes said. "Please start at the beginning. Leave out no detail, no matter how small. I can assure you of our utmost discretion in this and all matters."

I sat on the bed beside the colonel. Suddenly he looked like a very tired, very old man. "You'll feel better," I told him. "They say confession is good for the soul."

He took a deep breath, then began.

Everything started with one of my professors, Dr. Jason Attenborough. He taught second year Latin as well as classical history, and one day after class six of us stayed late to ask about the Secret Mendicant Society, which he had mentioned in passing in that afternoon's lecture. It was thrilling in its own way, the idea of spies among the ancient Romans, but we found it hard to believe any noble-born person could possibly pass as a beggar. Dr. Attenborough said it was not only possible, it had happened for several centuries.

Later, at a pub, almost as a dare, the six of us agreed to try it ourselves. It seemed like a rum lot of fun, and after a few rounds at the Slaughtered Lamb, we set out to give it a go.

We went first to a rag merchant -- he was closed, but we pounded on his door until he opened for us -- and from him we purchased suitable disreputable clothing. Dressing ourselves as we imagined beggars might, we smeared soot on our faces and set out to see what news and pennies we could gather. It was a foolish sort of game, rather stupid really, and the prime foolishness came when we decided to visit Picadilly Circus to see what sort of reception we got. We were pretty well potted by this time, you see, so anything sounded like fun.

Suffice it to say, we terrorized several old women into giving us pennies and were promptly arrested for our trouble. The next day, after being ransomed home by disbelieving parents, we were summonsed to the Dean's office and informed that our activities had disgraced the school. In short, our presence was no longer desired. The news was devastating to us and our families.

That's where things should have ended. We should have quietly bought our way into other schools, or vanished into military life, or simply retired to family businesses -- there were many choices available. However, that night, as we gathered one last time in the Slaughtered Lamb, Dr. Attenborough joined us. He was not consoling or apologetic. Rather, he was ebullient.

He asked what we had learned as beggars -- and we hadn't learned a thing, really -- but as he led us through the lesson (for that's what it was to him), we could see that we had gone to the wrong section of the city, spoken to the wrong people, done all the wrong things. Beggars have their place in our society, as you know, and we had stepped outside their domain. That's where we had gone wrong.

As he had done in his lecture hall, he inspired us that night with his speech. He persuaded us that we should go out again -- and this time he went with us.

Dressed once more as beggars, we ventured into the sordid, dark places near the docks, where such as we had never dared go at night. Using the Roman system as a model, he showed us what we had done wrong -- and how we could do it right.

We listened at the right windows. We lurked outside sailors' taverns and heard their coarse, drunken gossip. And suddenly we began to understand how the Secret Mendicant Society had worked so admirably well. Wine loosens men's tongues, and much could be gleaned from attentive listening. For who pays attention to beggars, even among the dregs of our society?

There were a dozen ship's captains who we could have turned in for smuggling, a handful of murders we could have solved, stolen cargos that could have been recovered with just a word in the right ear at Scotland Yard.

We did none of that. It was petty. But we were young and foolish, and Dr. Attenborough did nothing but encourage us in our foolishness. Oh, he was a masterful speaker. He could convince you night was day and white was black, if he wanted to. And suddenly he wanted very much to have us working for him. We would be a new Secret Mendicant Society -- or, as we chaps liked to call it, an Amateur Mendicant Society. Dabbling, yes, that was a gentleman's way. It was a game to us. As long as we pretended it was a schoolyard lark, it wasn't really a dirty deal.

I regret to say I took full part in the Amateur Mendicant Society's spying over the following six months. I learned the truth from dishonest men, turned the information over to Dr. Attenborough, and he pursued matters from there. What, exactly, he did with the information I can only guess -- extortion, blackmail, possibly even worse. However, I do know that suddenly he had a lot of money, and he paid us handsomely for our work. He bought an abandoned warehouse and had a posh gentleman's club outfitted in the basement -- though, of course, there were no servants, nobody who could break our secret circle. Later he leased the warehouse out for furniture storage.

I was not the first to break the circle. Dickie Clarke was. He told me one evening that he had enlisted in the army. His father had used his influence to get him a commission, and he was off to India. "I'm through with soiling my hands with this nonsense," he told me. "I've had enough. Come with me, Oliver. It's not too late." I was shocked, and I refused -- to my lasting shame.

When Attenborough found out, he had an absolute fit -- he threw things, screamed obscenities, smashed a whole set of dishes against the wall. Then and there I realized I had made a mistake. I had made a pact

with a madman. I had to escape.

The next day I too enlisted. I've been away for nineteen years -- I never came back, not even on leave, for fear of what Dr. Attenborough might do if he found out. He was that violent.

I had stayed in touch with Dickie Clarke all through his campaigns and my own, and when he wrote from London to tell me Attenborough was dead, I thought it would be safe to return home. I planned to write my memoirs, you see.

Only two weeks ago Dickie died. Murdered -- I'm sure of it! And then I noticed people, strangers dressed as beggars, loitering near my house, watching me, noting my movements as I had once noted the movements of others. To escape, I simply walked out of my home one day, took a series of cabs until I was certain I hadn't been followed, and haven't been back since.

Sherlock Holmes nodded slowly when Pendleton-Smythe finished. "A most interesting story," he said. "But why would the Amateur Mendicant Society want you dead? Are you certain there isn't something more?"

He raised his head, back stiff. "Sir, I assure you, I have told you everything. As for why -- isn't that obvious? Because I know too much. They killed old Dickie, and now they're going to kill me!"

"What of the four others from Eton? What happened to them?"

"The others?" He blinked. "I -- I really don't know. I haven't heard from or spoken to any of them in years. I hope they had the good sense to get out and not come back. Heavens above, I certainly wish I hadn't!"

"Quite so," said Holmes. He rose. "Stay here, Colonel. I think you will be safe in Mrs. Coram's care for the time being. I must look into a few matters, and then we will talk again."

"So you will take my case?" he asked eagerly.

"Most decidedly." Holmes inclined his head. "I'm certain I'll be able to help. One last thing. What was the address of the warehouse Attenborough owned?"

"42 Kerin Street," he said.

As we headed back toward Baker Street, Holmes seemed in a particularly good mood, smiling and whistling bits of a violin concerto I'd heard him playing earlier that week.

"Well, what is it?" I finally demanded.

"Don't you see, Watson?" he said. "There can only be one answer. We have run into a classic case of two identical organizations colliding. It's nothing short of a trade war between rival groups of beggar-spies."

"You mean there's a real Secret Mendicant Society still at large?"

"The very thing!"

"How is it possible? How could they have survived all these years with nobody knowing about them?"

"Some people *can* keep secrets," he said.

"It's fantastic!"

"Grant me this conjecture. Imagine, if you will, that the real Secret Mendicant Society has just become aware of its rival, the Amateur Mendicant Society. They have thrived in the shadows for centuries. They have a network of informants in place. It's not hard to see how the two would come face to face eventually, as the Amateur Society expanded into the Secret Society's established territory. Of course, the Secret Mendicant Society could not possibly allow a rival to poach on their grounds. What could they possibly do but strike out in retaliation?"

"Attenborough and Clarke and the others -- "

"Exactly! They have systematically eliminated the amateurs. I would imagine they are now in occupation of the secret club under the old furniture warehouse, where Attenborough's records would have been stored. And those records would have led them, inexorably, to the two Amateurs who got away -- Dickie, who they killed at once, and our client, who they have not yet managed to assassinate."

"Ingenious," I said.

"But now Col. Pendleton-Smythe is in more danger than he believes. He is the last link to the old Amateur Mendicant Society, so it should be a simple matter to -- "

Holmes drew up short. Across the street from 221-B Baker Street, on the front steps of another house, a raggedly dressed old man with a three-day growth of beard sat as if resting from a long walk.

"He's one of them," I said softly.

Holmes regarded me as though shocked by my revelation. "Watson, must you be so suspicious? Surely that poor unfortunate is catching his second wind. His presence is merest coincidence." I caught the amused gleam in his eye, though.

"I thought you didn't believe in coincidences," I said.

"Ye-es." He drew out the word, then turned and continued on toward our front door at a more leisurely pace. "Let us assume," he said, "that you are right. What shall we do with the devil? Run him off? Have him locked up by Lestrade?"

"That would surely tip our hand," I said. "Rather, let us try to misdirect him."

"You're learning, Watson, you're learning." We reached our house; he opened the door. "I trust you have a plan?"

"I was rather hoping you did," I admitted.

"As a matter of fact, I do," he said. "But I'm going to need your help..."

Two hours later, I stood in the drawing room shaking my head. The man before me -- thick lips, stubbled chin, rat's nest of chestnut colored hair -- bore not the slightest resemblance to my friend. His flare for the dramatic as well as a masterly skill for disguises would have borne him well in the theatre, I thought. I

found the transformation remarkable.

"Are you sure this is wise?" I asked.

"Wise?" he said. "Decidedly not. But will it work? I profoundly hope so. Check the window, will you?"

I lifted the drape. "The beggar has gone."

"Oh, there are surely other watchers," he said. "They have turned to me as the logical one to whom Col. Pendleton-Smythe would go for help." He studied his new features in a looking glass, adjusted one bushy eyebrow, then looked up at me for approval.

"Your own brother wouldn't recognize you," I told him.

"Excellent." He folded up his makeup kit, then I followed him to the back door. He slipped out quietly while I began to count.

When I reached a hundred, I went out the front door, turned purposefully, and headed for the bank. I had no real business there; however, it was as good a destination as any for my purpose -- which was to serve as a decoy while Holmes observed those who observed me.

I saw no one as I went about my business, and in due course I returned to our lodgings in exactly the same professional manner. When Holmes did not at once show himself, I knew his plan had been successful; he was now trailing a member of the Secret Mendicant Society.

I had a leisurely tea, then set off to find Inspector Lestrade. He was, as usual, hard at work at his desk. I handed him a note from Sherlock Holmes, which said:

Lestrade --

Come at once to 42 Kerin Street with a dozen of your men. There is a murderer to be had as well as evidence of blackmail and other nefarious deeds.

Sherlock Holmes

Lestrade's eyes widened as he read the note, and a second later he was on his way out the door shouting for assistance.

I accompanied him, and by the time we reached 42 Kerin Street -- a crumbling old brick warehouse -- he had fifteen men as an entourage. They would have kicked the door in, but a raggedly dressed man with bushy eyebrows reached out and opened it for them: it wasn't so much as latched. Without a glance at the disguised Sherlock Holmes, Lestrade and his men rushed in.

Holmes and I strolled at a more leisurely pace back toward a busier street where we might catch a cab home. He began removing his makeup and slowly the man I knew emerged.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"There were a few tense moments," he said, "but I handled things sufficiently well, I believe."

"Tell me everything," I said.

"For your journals, perhaps?"

"Exactly so."

"Very well. As you headed down the street looking quite purposeful, an elderly gentleman out for a mid-day stroll suddenly altered his course after you. He was well dressed, not a beggar by appearance or demeanor, so I took this to mean he was now watching us. I overtook him, grasped him firmly by the arm, and identified myself to him.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, sir," he said. "I believe we may have business to discuss."

"Exactly so," I told him. "Are you at liberty to speak for the whole Society, or must we report to your superiors?"

"Come with me," he said, and he led me to a quiet building on Harley Street. I had been there once before on business with the Foreign Office, but I showed no sign of surprise; indeed, this piece of the puzzle seemed to fit admirably well.

"He took me upstairs to see a rear admiral whose name I agreed not to divulge, and there the whole truth of the Secret Mendicant Society became apparent to me."

I said, "They no longer work for Rome. They work for us."

"Quite right, Watson," he said. "This rear admiral took me into their confidence, since they have a file on me and know I can be trusted. The organization of the Secret Mendicant Society was once quite remarkable, though it seems near its end. Their membership is small and, as far as I can tell, consists largely of septuagenarians or older. The times have changed so much that beggary is dying out; modern spies have much more efficient means of political espionage . . . for that is the current goal of the Secret Mendicant Society."

"But what about the murders!" I exclaimed. "Surely not even the Foreign Office would --"

"Not only would they, they did. Politics is becoming less and less and gentleman's game, my dear Watson. For the security of our great country, nothing is above the law for them -- laws that must govern the common man, such as you or I -- or even poor Pendleton-Smythe."

"So there is nothing you can do to help the colonel," I said bitterly.

"The admiral and I rapidly reached an arrangement," Holmes said, "when I explained what I had done with you and Lestrade. With Scotland Yard about to close in on the headquarters of the Amateur Mendicant Society, there was nothing he could do but agree with me that the Amateurs must be exposed. The publicity surrounding them will camouflage the activities of the real Secret Mendicant Society and allow Pendleton-Smythe the luxury of living out the rest of his days in peace. He, for one, never for an instant suspected the Secret Mendicant Society actually existed. That is his salvation."

"It would seem, then," I said, "that everything has sorted itself out remarkably well."

"I for one find it far from satisfactory."

"What will Lastrade find?"

"He will uncover the records of the Amateur Mendicant Society, which reveal their wrongdoings in

excruciating detail. Their specialty was blackmail and extortion, as we had surmised. Their records will be doctored to include, I dare say, the full catalog of murders by Dr. Attenborough, as he desperately tried to maintain control of a crumbling criminal empire. The newspapers will, I am certain, find much scandalous material in it -- and the colonel will have little choice but to deny his participation and suppress that part of his memoirs, should he still choose to write them. All the Foreign Service wants, at this point, is to maintain the Secret Mendicant Society's anonymity while contributing whatever small gains it can to the war effort."

"You're fortunate they didn't try to kill you," I commented.

"I believe the admiral considered it. However, I do make my own small contributions to the Foreign Office, as you well know. You might say we have friends in common."

"Your brother for one," I said.

"Just so," he said.

"Then we have reached a successful resolution to the case -- after a fashion."

"After a fashion," Holmes agreed with a half smile. "After a fashion."