

The Singular Habits of Wasps

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Dr Landis' first story, "Elemental", was written while he was a graduate student in physics at Brown University, and earned him a Hugo Award nomination in 1985. Since then his stories have appeared regularly in all the science fiction magazines, and have been translated into twelve languages.

His story "A Walk in the Sun" won the Hugo Award in 1992, and "Ripples in the Dirac Sea" won the Nebula Award in 1989. A short story collection, *Myths, Legends and True History*, appeared as part of Pulphouse Publishing's *Author's Choice Monthly* series.

About "The Singular Habits of Wasps" (which was nominated for both the Nebula and Hugo Awards), he says: "I recall reading 'The Adventure of the Speckled Band' as a child, and it made quite an impression on me; in particular the image of an unknown but terrifyingly deadly menace, slithering in the dark down a bell-rope into the bedchamber of our adventurers. I can assure you that, at least for children of some ages, many of the adventures of Sherlock Holmes are not so much mysteries as horror. This story skirts that ill-defined territory which lies at the boundary between mystery, science fiction, horror and historical. A territory, of course, which was not unfamiliar to Sir Arthur himself."

"In researching the story, I came across several interesting facts, including the fact that in the summer of 1888, the stage adaptation of Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was the hit of London's Lyceum

Theatre, and that in the only one of the Jack the Ripper killings in which the presumed murderer was seen with the victim, the suspect was described as a tall man wearing a deerstalker hat..."

OF THE MANY ADVENTURES in which I have participated with my friend Mr Sherlock Holmes, none has been more singularly horrifying than the case of the Whitechapel killings, nor ever had I previously had cause to doubt the sanity of my friend. I need but close my eyes to see again the horror of that night; the awful sight of my friend, his arms red to the elbow, his knife still dripping gore, and to recall in every detail the gruesome horrors that followed.

The tale of this adventure is far too awful to allow any hint of the true course of the affair to be known. Although I dare never let this account be read by others, I have often noticed, in chronicling the adventures of my friend, that in the process of putting pen to paper a great relief occurs. A catharsis, as we call it in the medical profession. And so I hope that by putting upon paper the events of those weeks, I may ease my soul from its dread fascination with the horrid events of that night. I will write this and then secret the account away with orders that it be burned upon my death.

Genius is, as I have often remarked, closely kin to madness, so closely that at times it is hard to distinguish the one from the other, and the greatest geniuses are also often quite insane. I had for a long time known that my friend was subject to sporadic fits of blackest depression, from which he could become aroused in an instant into bursts of manic energy, in a manner not unlike the cyclic mood-swings of a madman. But the limits to his sanity I never probed.

The case began in the late springtime of 1888. All who were in London at that time will recall the perplexing afternoon of the double cannonade. Holmes and I were enjoying a cigar after lunch in our sitting room at 221B Baker Street when the hollow report of a double firing of cannon rang out from the cloudless sky, rattling the windows and causing Mrs Hudson's china to dance upon its shelves. I rushed to the window. Holmes was in the midst of one of those profound fits of melancholia to which he is so prone, and did not rise from his chair, but did bestir himself so much as to ask what I saw. Aside from other, equally perplexed folk opening their windows to look in all directions up and down the street, I saw nothing out of the ordinary, and such I reported to him.

"Most unusual," Holmes remarked. He was still slumped almost bonelessly in his chair, but I believed I detected a bit of interest in his eye. "We shall hear more about this, I would venture to guess."

And indeed, all of London seemed to have heard the strange reports, without any source to be found, and the subject could not be avoided all that day or the next. Each newspaper ventured an opinion, and even strangers on the street talked of little else. As to conclusion, there was none, nor was the strange sound repeated. In another day the usual gossip, scandals and crimes of the city had crowded the marvel out of the papers, and the case was forgotten.

But it had, at least, the effect of breaking my friend out of his melancholia, even so far as to cause him to pay a rare visit to his brother at the Diogenes Club. Mycroft was high in the Queen's service, and there were few secrets of the Empire to which Mycroft was not privy. Holmes did not confide in me as to what result came of his inquiries of Mycroft, but he spent the remainder of the evening pacing and smoking, contemplating some mystery.

In the morning we had callers, and the mystery of the cannonade was temporarily set aside. They were two men in simple but neat clothes, both very diffident and hesitant of speech.

"I see that you have come from the south of Surrey," Holmes said calmly. "A farm near Godalming, perhaps?"

"Indeed we have, sir, from Covingham, which is a bit south of Godalming," said the elder of the visitors, "though how you could know, I'll never guess in all my born days, seeing as how I've never had the pleasure of meeting you before in my life, nor Baxter here neither."

I knew that Holmes, with his encyclopaedic knowledge, would have placed them precisely from their accents and clothing, although this elementary feat of deduction seemed to quite astound our visitors.

"And this is the first visit to London for either of you," said Holmes. "Why have you come this distance from your farm to see me?"

The two men looked at each other in astonishment. "Why, right you are again, sir! Never been to London town, nor Baxter."

"Come, come; to the point. You have traveled this distance to see me upon some matter of urgency."

"Yes, sir. It's the matter of young Gregory. A farm hand he was, sir, a strapping lad, over six feet and still lacking 'is full height. A-haying he was. A tragic accident t'was, sir, tragic."

Holmes of course noticed the use of the past tense, and his eyes brightened. "An accident, you say? Not murder?"

"Yes."

Holmes was puzzled. "Then, pray, why have you come to me?"

"'Is body, sir. We've come about 'is body."

"What about it?"

"Why, it's gone, sir. Right vanished away."

"Ah." Holmes leaned forward in his chair, his eyes gleaming with sudden interest. "Pray, tell me all about it, and spare none of the details."

The story they told was long and involved many diversions into details of life as a hired hand at Sherringford Farm, the narration so roundabout that even Holmes's patience was tried, but the essence of the story was simple. Baxter and young Gregory had been working in the fields when Gregory had been impaled by the blade of the mechanical haying engine. "And cursed be the day that the master ever decided to buy such an infernal device," added the older man, who was the uncle and only relation of the poor Gregory. Disentangled from the machine, the young farmhand had been still alive, but very clearly dying. His abdomen had been ripped open and his viscera exposed. Baxter had laid the dying man in the shade of a hayrick, and gone to fetch help. Help had taken two hours to arrive, and when they had come, they had found the puddle of congealing blood, but no sign of Gregory. They had searched all about, the corpse was nowhere to be found, nor was there any sign of how he had been carried away. There was no chance, Baxter insisted, that Gregory could have walked even a small distance on his own. "Not unless he dragged 'is guts after him. I've seen dying men, guv, and men what 'ave been mere wounded, and young Gregory was for it."

"This case may have some elements of interest in it," said Holmes. "Pray, leave me to cogitate upon the matter tonight. Watson, hand me the train schedule, would you? Thank you. Ah, it is as I thought. There is a 9 AM train from Waterloo." He turned to the two men. "If you would be so good as to meet me on the morrow at the platform?"

"Aye, sir, that we could."

"Then it is settled. Watson, I do believe you have a prior engagement?"

That I did, as I was making plans for my upcoming marriage, and had already made firm commitment in the morning to inspect a practice in the Paddington district with a view toward purchasing it. Much as I have enjoyed accompanying my friend upon his adventures, this was one which I should have to forego.

Holmes returned late from Surrey, and I did not see him until breakfast the next morning. As often he was when on a case, he was rather uncommunicative, and my attempts to probe the matter were met with monosyllables, except at the very last. "Most unusual," he said, as if to himself. "Most singular indeed."

"What?" I asked, eager to listen now that it appeared that Holmes was ready to break his silence.

"The tracks, Watson," he said. "The tracks. Not man, nor beast, but definitely tracks." He looked at his pocket-watch. "Well, I must be off. Time enough for cogitation when I have more facts."

"But where are you going?"

Holmes laughed. "My dear Watson, I have in my time amassed a bit of knowledge of various matters which would be considered most *recherché* to laymen. But I fear that, upon occasion, even I must consult with an expert."

"Then whom?"

"Why, I go to see Professor Huxley," he answered, and was out the door before I could ask what query he might have for the eminent biologist.

He was absent from Baker Street all afternoon. When he returned after

supper time I was anxious to ask how his interview with the esteemed professor had gone.

"Ah, Watson, even I make my occasional mistake. I should have telegraphed first. As it was, Professor Huxley had just left London, and is not to return for a week." He took out his pipe, inspected it for a moment, then set it aside and rang for Mrs Hudson to bring in some supper. "But in this case, my journey was not in vain. I had a most delightful discussion with the professor's protegee, a Mr Wells by name. A Cockney lad, son of a shopkeeper and no more than twenty-two, unless I miss my guess, but a most remarkable man nonetheless. Interested in a wide variety of fields, and I venture to say that in whatever field he chooses, he will outshine even his esteemed teacher. Quite an interesting conversation we had, and a most useful one."

"But what was it that you discussed?" I asked.

Holmes set aside the cold beef that Mrs Hudson had brought, leaned back in his chair, and shut his eyes. For a while I thought that he had gone to sleep without hearing my question. At last he spoke. "Why, we discussed the planet Mars," he said, without opening his eyes. "And the singular habits of wasps."

It seemed that his researches, whatever they were, led to no distinct conclusion, for when I asked him about the case the next day, he gave no response. That day he stayed in his chambers, and through the closed door I heard only the intermittent voice of his violin speaking in its melancholy, unfathomable tongue.

I have perhaps mentioned before that my friend would habitually have more than one case on which he worked at any one time. It appeared that over the next few evenings he was about on another one, for I found him dressing to go out at a late hour.

"Another case, Holmes?" I asked.

"As you can see, Watson," he replied. He indicated his less-than-respectable outfit and the threadbare workman's jacket he was pulling on over it. "Duty calls at all hours. I shan't be more than a few hours, I expect."

"I am ready to assist."

"Not in this one, my dear friend. You may stay home tonight."

"Is there danger?"

"Danger?" He seemed surprised, as if the thought hadn't occurred to him. "Danger? Oh, perhaps a slight bit."

"You know that I would not hesitate..."

"My dear doctor," he said, and smiled. "Let me assure you that I am not worried on that score. No, it is that I go to the East End..."

The East End of London was no place for gentlemen, with slaughterhouses and tenements of the lowest order; a place for drunkards, sailors, Chinese and Indian laborers, and ruffians of all sorts. Nevertheless I was quite willing to brave much worse, if necessary, for the sake of Holmes. "Is that all?" I said. "Holmes, I do believe you underestimate me!"

"Ah, Watson..." He seemed to reflect for a moment. "No, it would not do. You are soon to be married, and have your wife-to-be to think of." He raised a hand to forestall my imminent objection. "No, not the danger, my friend. Don't worry for me on that score. I have my resources. It is... how to put it delicately? I expect that I shall meet people in places where a gentleman soon to be married would best not be seen."

"Holmes!"

"Business, my dear Watson. Business." And with that, he left.

His business there did not seem to be concluded that evening or the next. By the end of August he was visiting the East End once or twice a week. I had already become used to his odd hours and strange habits, and soon thought nothing of it. But he was so habitual about it, and so secretive, that it soon caused me to wonder whether perhaps he might be calling upon a woman. I could think of nothing that seemed less like Holmes, for in all my time with him he had never expressed a trace of romantic interest in the fairer sex. And yet, from my own medical experience, I knew that even the most steadfast of men must experience

those urges common to our gender, however much he might profess to disdain romance.

Romance? Though I myself never frequented such places, as an Army man I knew quite as well as Holmes what sort of women dwelt in Whitechapel, and what profession they practised. Indeed, he had admitted as much when he had warned me away "because I was to be married." But then, a woman of such type could well appeal to Holmes. There would be nothing of romance involved. It would be merely a business proposition for her, and a release of pressure for him. A dozen times I resolved to warn him of the dangers - the danger of disease, if nothing else - in patronizing women of that sort, and so many times my nerve failed and I said nothing.

And, if it were not what I feared, what case could it be that would take him into Whitechapel with such frequency?

One evening, shortly after Holmes had left, a message boy delivered a small package addressed to him. The address proclaimed it to be from a John B. Coores and Sons, but gave no clue to its contents. This name seemed to me familiar, but, struggle as I might, I could not recall where I might have seen it before. I left it in the sitting room for Holmes, and the next morning saw that he had taken it. He made no mention of the package or of what it contained, however, and my curiosity over it remained unslaked.

But another event soon removed that curiosity from my mind. The newspaper that morning carried a report of a brutal murder on Buck's Row in Whitechapel. The body of an unidentified woman had been found on the street, and, what was even more grotesque, after her death her body had been brutally sliced open. I read the paper to Holmes as he sat drinking coffee in the morning. As far as I could tell, he had not slept the previous night, although he seemed little the worse for it. He made no comment on the article. It occurred to me that for all its gruesome features, this was the sort of commonplace murder he would have no interest in, since it seemed quite lacking in the singular points that so interested him. I made a comment to him to that effect.

"Not so, Watson," he said, without looking up. "I am quite interested to hear what the press has to say about the Nichols tragedy."

This comment startled me considerably, since the paper had given no name to the victim. I suddenly remembered that East London was exactly where Holmes was going for all these evenings, perhaps to the very place the murder had occurred.

"My God, Holmes! Did you know her?"

At this he looked up, and gave me a long, piercing stare. After a long while he looked away and gave a short laugh. "I do have my secrets, Watson. Pray, inquire no further." But to me his laughter sounded forced.

It was a week before I saw Holmes prepare for another of his nocturnal sojourns. After napping all afternoon, Holmes was again dressing in faded and tattered clothing. This time I did not ask, but silently dressed to follow.

When he put on his ear-flapped travelling-cap, I was ready as well. I quietly walked to his side, clutching my old service revolver in the pocket of my coat. He looked at me with an expression of utmost horror and put up a hand. "My God, Watson! If you value your life and your honour, don't follow me!"

"Just tell me this, then," I said. "Are you doing something... dishonourable?"

"I am doing what I must." And he was out the door and gone in the time it took me to realize that he had in no way answered my question.

As I prepared for bed that night, wondering where Holmes had gone and what he was doing there, it suddenly occurred to me where I had seen the name John B. Coores and Sons before. I crossed the room, thrust open the cabinet where I kept medical supplies, and drew out a small wooden box. There it was. I had looked at the name a thousand times without really seeing it, neatly lettered on the side of the box: John B. Coores and Sons, Fine Surgical Instruments. But what could Holmes want with surgical tools?

And in the next evening's paper, I saw with horror that there had been

another murder. The Whitechapel killer had struck again, and once more he had not contented himself with merely killing the woman. Using a surgical knife and a knowledge of anatomy, he had dissected the body and removed several organs.

That Sunday I took my beloved Mary to the theatre. My thoughts were dark, but I endeavoured to allow none of my turmoil to be communicated to her, hoping instead that her sweet presence might distract me from my dire speculations. Events plotted against me, however, for playing at the Lyceum was a most disturbing play, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. I watched the play with my mind awl, scarcely noticing the presence of my beloved at my side.

After the play I pleaded sudden ill health and fled home. Seeing my ashen face, Mary heartily agreed that I should go home to rest, and it was all I could do to dissuade her from accompanying me back to serve as nurse.

The play had been presented as fiction, but it had hit a note of purest truth. That a single man could have two personalities! Stevenson had been circumspect about naming the drug that would so polarize a man's psyche as to split his being into two parts, but with my medical knowledge I could easily fill in the name, and it was *a*. drug I had intimate knowledge of. Yes. A man could suppress his animal instincts, could make himself into a pure reasoning machine, but the low urges would not wither away, oh no. They would still be there, lurking inside, waiting a chance to break loose.

I had thought that either Holmes was stalking the Whitechapel killer, or else that Holmes was the killer. Now I suddenly realized that there was yet another alternative: Holmes the detective could be stalking the Whitechapel killer, completely unaware that he himself was the very criminal he sought.

It was a week before he went out again. The following day I scanned the newspapers in an agony of suspense, but there was no murder reported. Perhaps I was overwrought and imagining things? But Holmes seemed haunted by something, or perhaps hunted. There was something on his mind. When I invited him to confide in me, he looked at me for a long time and then slowly shook his head. "I dare not, Watson." He was silent for a while, and then said, "Watson, if I should suddenly die — "

At this I could take no more. "My God, Holmes, what is it? Surely you can tell me something!"

"This is important, Watson. If I should die... burn my corpse. Promise me that."

"Holmes!"

He gripped my shoulder and looked intently into my eye. "Promise me, on your honour."

"I promise."

"On your honour, Watson!"

"On my honour, I promise."

He suddenly relaxed, almost collapsing into his chair. "Thank you."

That night again he went out, and again the next. His face was drawn, as if he were desperately seeking something he had been unable to find on the previous night. Both evenings he seemed upon the brink of saying something to me, only to think better of it at the last moment, and vanish without a word into the London night.

The next evening's papers told of not one, but two murders in the East end. The Whitechapel killer - now dubbed "Jack the Ripper" by all the papers - had worked double duty. And this time a witness had given a description of the suspected killer: a tall man in a dark cutaway overcoat, wearing a felt deerstalker hat.

I confronted Holmes with the papers and my suspicions. I had hoped, more than I hope for paradise, that he would dismiss my deductions with his soft, mocking laugh, and show me some utterly commonplace alternative explanation of the facts. My hopes were in vain. He listened to my words with his eyes nearly shut, his briar pipe clenched unlit between his teeth. Finally my words ground to a stop against his stony silence. "My God, Holmes, tell me I'm wrong! Tell me that you had nothing to do with those murders, I beg, of you."

"I can say nothing, my friend."

"Then give me some reason, some shred of sanity."

He was silent. Finally he said, "Do you intend to go to the police with your suspicions?"

"Do you want me to?" I asked him.

"No." His eyes closed for a moment, and then he continued, "but it doesn't matter. They would not believe you in any case." His voice was weary, but calm. His manner did not seem that of a madman, but I know that madmen can be fiendishly clever in concealing their madness from those about them. "Are you aware of how many letters and telegrams have flooded Scotland Yard in these last few weeks? The Yard is a madhouse, Watson. Landladies and madmen, people claiming to have seen the Ripper, to know the Ripper, to *be* the Ripper. They receive a thousand letters a week, Watson. Your voice would be lost in the madness." He shook his head. "They have no idea, Watson. They cannot begin to comprehend. The Whitechapel horror, they call it. If the true horror of it were known, they would flee the city; they would scream and run in terror."

Despite everything, I should have gone to the police, or at least have confided my suspicions to someone else and asked for counsel. But I knew of no one in whom to confide such an awful suspicion, least of all my Mary, who trusted Holmes nearly as a god and would hear no ill of him. And, despite all, in my heart of hearts I still believed that I must have read the evidence awry, that Holmes could not truly be a culprit of such infamy.

The next day, Holmes made no reference to our conversation. It seemed so strange that I thought to wonder if it had actually occurred, or if I had dreamed the entire thing. I determined that, without giving any outward sign of it to Holmes, I should keep my eyes sharp on him like a hawk. The next time that I saw him making preparations to leave on a nocturnal sojourn, I would follow him, whether he wanted it or no.

Holmes made several trips to Whitechapel during the daytime, and gave no objection when I asked to accompany him. It was no place for decent humans to live. The streets were littered with the filth of horses, pigs, chickens and humans, and the air clamorous with the clatter of delivery wagons and trains, the carousal of children and drunkards, and

the cackling of chickens and bawling of pigs which lived side-by-side with people in the basements and doss-houses. Above us, hanging from every window, ragged wash turned dingy grey as it dried in pestilence-ridden air.

During these trips he did little other than inspect the streets and look over the blank, white-washed brick walls of warehouses and blind alleys. On occasion he would stop for a brief chat over inconsequential matters with a charwoman or a policeman he might meet walking the narrow alleyways. Contrary to his nature, he made no attempt to visit the scenes of the crimes. To me this last fact was the most damning to my suspicions. Unless he were involved in some way, surely there would have been no possibility that anything could have kept him away.

But it was all of October and a week into November before he again left upon one of his evening peregrinations. But for an accident of chance, I would have missed it entirely. I had laid out several traps for him, so as to awaken me if he tried to leave in the night, and sat wakeful in the evenings until long after I had heard him retire. One night in early November, after retiring without incident, I was unexpectedly awakened in the middle of the night by some noise. The night was foggy, and through my window I could hear only the most muffled sounds of the street, as if from a tremendous distance, the clopping of a lone set of hooves and the call of a man hailing a hansom. For some reason I was unable to get back to sleep, and so I put on my dressing-gown and descended to the sitting room to take a finger of whisky.

Holmes was gone. His door was ajar, but the bed was empty.

I was determined to know the truth, whatever it might be, and thus in one way or another to bring this adventure to an end. I dressed hurriedly, thrust my service revolver into a pocket of my overcoat, and ran out into the night. At that hour, well after midnight, I had only the most remote hope of finding a cab anywhere near our Baker Street diggings. Sometime during the day Holmes must have surreptitiously arranged for the cab to meet him that night. As I had made no such arrangements, he had quite the head start on me. It was the better part of an hour before I made my way past Aldgate pump and entered the East End slums.

I had suspected that in the wake of the killings the streets of Whitechapel would be deserted, the public houses closed and the citizens suspicious of any strangers. But even at this late hour the streets were far

from deserted. It was a busy, populous area. Wandering aimlessly on the streets, I found many open pubs, most all crowded with unemployed workmen and idle women of dubious repute. Everywhere I walked I found that I was not more than a hundred yards from a citizen's patrol or a watchful, armed constable - several of whom watched me with an intent, suspicious gaze. Even the women on the streetcorners, wearing shawls and bonnets to ward against the wet November night, stood in groups of two and three.

Holmes I could find nowhere, and it occurred to me belatedly that if he were in one of his disguises, he could be any of the people about me - one of the unemployed mechanics gambling in the front room of the Boar and Bristle, the aged clergyman hustling down Commercial Street toward some unknown destination, the sailor chatting up the serving girls at the King's Arms. Any of these could be Holmes.

Any of these could be the Ripper.

All around me there were women, in the pubs, in the doorways, walking the streets; pathetic women dressed in cheap finery, with tired smiles and the flash of a stockinged ankle for any passers-by wearing trousers - "You lonely, love?" - or with saucy greetings and friendly abuse for the other women.

I realized that the size of Whitechapel that showed on the map was deceptive. In the fog and the darkness the streets were far more narrow, the shops smaller, and the whole larger and more cluttered than I recalled from the daytime. Even if there were a hundred constables patrolling the streets it would not be enough. The blind alleys, the sparse gas lights, and the drifting banks of fog made the streets a maze in which the Ripper might kill with impunity within a few yards of a hundred or more people.

Twice I thought I caught a glimpse of Holmes, but, when I ran after him, found that I had been deceived. Every drunkard sleeping in a doorway seemed to be a fresh corpse, every anonymous stain on the cobblestones looked like blood, every wandering alley-cat seemed the shadow of a lurking killer. Several times I contemplated giving up my hopeless errand and going home, managing to keep on only by promising myself that I would stay on for just one hour more.

In the dark hour before sunrise I found him.

I had come into a pub to warm myself for a while. The barman was surly and uncommunicative, evincing a clear suspicion of my motives that, while perhaps well enough justified by recent events, nevertheless made the atmosphere inside scarcely less chill than that of the night outside. The beer was cheap and thoroughly watered. At first a few of the women had come by to pass time with me, but I found them pathetic rather than alluring, and after a bit they left me in solitude.

After an hour or so of this, I went out into the night air to clear my head of the smoke and stink. A light rain had cleared most of the fog away. I walked at random down the streets and up alleyways, paying no attention to where I headed.

After walking for some time, I was disoriented, and stopped to get my bearings. I had no idea where I was. I turned a corner and looked down into an unmarked court, hoping to descry a street sign, but had no luck. In the darkness I saw something ahead of me; a pair of legs protruding from the arch of an entranceway. I walked forward, my blood chill. It was the body of a woman laid on the cobblestones, skirts awry, half concealed in a doorway. I had seen a dozen such in the last few hours, drunkards too poor to afford a bed, but in the instant of vision a dread presentiment came to me that this one was not merely drunk and asleep. The darkness beneath her body looked darker and more liquid than any mere shadow. I knelt down, and touched her wrist to take a pulse.

Her eyes flew open. It took a moment for her to focus on me. Suddenly she shrieked and stumbled to her feet. "Lord have mercy! The Ripper!" she said in a hoarse whisper. She tripped over her petticoats in a clumsy effort to stand and run at the same time, and fell to her knees.

"My pardons, Miss," I said. "Are you all right?" Without thinking, I reached down a hand to help her up.

"Murder!" she shrieked, scrambling away on all fours like an animal. "Oh! Murder!"

"Madam, please!" I backed away into the alley behind me. It was evident that nothing I could do would calm her. She continued to yell as she clattered away, darting frightened glances back at me over her shoulder. The courtyard I was in was dark and silent, but I was afraid that her cries would wake others. I stepped backwards into a doorway, and suddenly found the door behind me yield to the pressure. It had not been

latched. Off balance, I half-fell backwards into the room.

The room was thick with the cloying, coppery odor of blood. The hand I had put down to steady myself came up slick with it. By the wan light of the fire in the grate across the room I could see the bed, and the dark, twisted shape on it, and I had no need to look more closely to know what it was.

The body of the woman on the bed had been so badly mutilated that it was hardly recognizable as human. Blood was everywhere. In a daze I reached out a hand to feel for a pulse.

Her hand was already cool.

Her skirt had been removed, her petticoats cut away, and her body neatly opened from pubes to sternum by some expert dissector.

I was too late. I gave a low moan. Somewhere before me I heard a low, steady dripping. I looked up, and stared into the pale face of Sherlock Holmes.

His eyes were weary, but empty of any trace of the horror that I felt. He was standing in the room behind the body, and as my eyes adjusted to the shadow I saw that he held a dissecting knife. His arms were red to the elbows, and gore dripped in a monotonous rhythm from the knife onto the stone floor. At his feet was a worn leather shopkeeper's satchel, half open.

"There is nothing you can do for her, Doctor," said Holmes, and the calm, even voice in which he said this pierced me with chill. It was not the Holmes I knew. I was not sure if he even recognized me. He bent down to snap the satchel shut before I had more than a brief glimpse of the bloody meat within it, then wiped the scalpel on the canvas apron he wore, put it carefully back into the small wooden case, and dropped it into an outside pocket of the bag.

He tugged at his left elbow, and only then did I realize that he wore full-length gloves. He was well prepared for this venture, I thought, my mind in a state of shock. He removed the gloves, tossed them into the fire grate, and pushed at them with a poker. They smoldered for a moment and then caught fire, with the heavy charnel stink of burning blood. Beneath his apron he wore work clothes such as any tradesman might wear.

"My God, Holmes!" I stuttered. "Did you kill her?"

He sighed deeply. "I don't know. Time is short. Please follow me, Watson."

At least he recognized me. That was a good sign. I followed him out of long habit, too numb to do anything else. He closed and locked the door behind him and put the key into his pocket. He led me through a small gate, down a cluttered alley, then quickly through two narrow passageways and into a courtyard behind the slaughterhouses. The key and the apron he discarded there. I saw he had a cab waiting, the horse tethered to an unlit lamppost. There was no cabman in sight. "Take me home, Watson," he said. "You should not have come. But, since you are nevertheless here, I confess myself glad of the chance to unburden myself of the awful things that I have seen and done. Take me home, and I shall conceal nothing from you."

I drove and Holmes sat in the back, meditating or sleeping, I could not tell which. We passed three constables, but I did not stop. He bade me halt at a certain mews not far from Baker Street. "The cabman will be here in half an hour," he said, as he tended expertly to the horse. "He has been paid in advance, and we need not wait."

"I believe you must think me most utterly mad, Watson," said Holmes, after he had exchanged his rough clothes for a dressing-gown, meticulously cleansed himself of dirt and spattered blood, fetched the Persian slipper in which he kept his tobacco, and settled back in his chair. "You have not loosened your grip on that service revolver of yours for the last hour. Your fingers must be cramped by now, you have been clutching it so strongly - Ah," he said, as I opened my mouth to deny this, "no use in your protesting your innocence. Your hand has not strayed from the pocket of your robe for an instant, and the distinctive weight of your pistol is quite clearly evident in it. I may be mad, my dear Watson," he said with a smile, "but I am not blind."

This was the Holmes I knew, and I relaxed. I knew I had nothing to fear from him.

His hand hesitated over his rack of pipes, selected his clay-stemmed pipe, and filled it with shag. "Indeed, Watson, at times during these last

months I would not have disputed it with you myself. It would have been a relief to know myself mad, and that all I have seen and conjectured to be merely the delusions of a maniac."

He teased a coal out of the grate and lit his pipe with it. "To begin, then, with the missing corpse." He puffed the pipe until its glow matched that of the fire behind him. "Or, perhaps better," he said, "I should begin with the London cannonade." He raised a finger at my imminent objection. "I have promised to tell all, Watson, and I shall. Pray let me go about it in my own way."

"My brother Mycroft," he continued, "made a most interesting comment when I discussed the matter of the cannonade with him. He mentioned that when a highly-powered cannon is fired, an observer at the front lines ahead of the artillery and distant from the firing will hear a very distinct report at the instant the shell passes. This is the crack of displaced air. This report comes considerably in advance of the actual sound of the cannon firing. If our ears were but sensitive enough to hear it, he informed me, this report would be heard as two distinct waves, one of the air compressed by the shell, and another of the air rushing inward to fill the vacuum left behind it. An aership which traversed faster than the velocity of sound would produce a like crack, and, if it were large enough, the two waves would be heard as distinct reports."

"My brother discussed this only as an abstract but interesting fact, but I know him well enough to understand the meaning behind his words."

"Taking this as a provisional theory, then, and judging by the fact that observers noted the timing between the two reports was briefer in the north than in the south of London, we find that the hypothetical aership must have been slowing down as it traveled south."

"But Holmes," I said, my mind in total consternation, "an aership? And one which moves faster than an artillery shell? No nation on God's Earth could make such a thing, not to mention the impossibility of keeping it secret."

"Precisely," said Holmes. He took another puff from his pipe. "This brings us to the case of the missing corpse. I had been looking for a reason to investigate south of London, and the case presented by the two farm-hands was quite fortuitous in that respect."

"You know my method, Watson. It was unfortunate that the men in the original searching party had in many places quite trampled the tracks that I needed, but in the few places where they could be clearly distinguished, the tracks told a most puzzling story. Some animals had circled the hayrick, leaving tracks like nothing I had ever seen. I could make nothing of the footprints, save that one side was dragging slightly, as if one of the animals were limping. From the depth of the impressions they must have been the size of small dogs. What was most peculiar about the set of tracks was that the animals seemed to march in precision step. The strange thought occurred to me then, that the tracks of a single animal with eight or more legs might leave exactly such impressions. The steps led to the place where the dying man had lain, and circled about. Of outgoing tracks, there were only those of the men who had tended him and those of the searchers."

"I attempted to follow the tracks backward, but could follow back no more than a mile to where they emerged from a sheep meadow and were obliterated by the hoofprints of innumerable sheep. All that I could determine from this was that the animals had been severely panicked at some time in the last few days, running over and around each other and back and forth across the field."

"I turned my attention back to the impressions made by the dying man, and the tracks of the men away from the spot."

I inspected the tracks of the unusual animal further. They were extremely strange, and in some ways rather insectlike. The animal's tracks overlaid two of the other tracks, which I knew to be those of the men who had summoned me. Over these tracks, however, were those of a third man.

"I quickly determined these tracks to be those of the dying man himself. After the other two men had left, he had risen up and walked away, apparently carrying the strange animal with him."

"My God, Holmes," I interjected. The revolver lay forgotten in my pocket. "You can't be serious. Are you suggesting some sort of voodoo?"

Holmes smiled. "No, Watson, I am afraid that it was something far more serious than mere superstition."

"The man had crawled on all fours for a few feet, then stood up and walked in a staggering, unbalanced stride. After a few unsteady moments,

however, he found his feet and began to walk quickly and purposefully in a straight line. Soon he came to a hard-packed road, where his traces were obliterated by the traffic and I could track his movements no further. His aim, though, was quite clearly toward London, and this I took to be his goal."

Listening to his narrative I had completely forgotten the events of the previous night, the slain streetwalkers, and my suspicion of Holmes.

"At this point," Holmes continued, "I knew that I needed to consult an expert. Mr Wells, of whom I spoke earlier, was that expert, and I could not have asked for a better source. We discussed the possibility of life on other worlds. Mr Wells offered the opinion that, since there are millions upon millions of suns very much like our own Sun in the sky, that certainly there must be other intelligences, and other civilizations, some of which must be as far beyond ours as our English civilization is beyond that of the African savage."

"Then you take this strange aership to be a vehicle from another world?" I asked. While I had heard such ideas discussed in popular lectures on astronomy, I had, heretofore, always dismissed these as purest fancy.

"A provisional hypothesis, to be confirmed or forgotten as further data became available. I went on to ask Mr Wells whether such citizens of other worlds might be human in shape and thought. At this suggestion he was most frankly contemptuous. Such beings would have no more reason to be shaped in our form, he said, than we in that of an octopus or an ant. Likewise they might take no more notice of our civilization and our morality than we take of the endeavors and ethics of an ant hill."

"This I had already surmised. I turned the talk to biology, and without tipping my hand, managed to steer the conversation to the unusual life-cycles of other species. One in particular he mentioned struck my attention, the life-cycle of the ichneumon, or solitary wasp."

"Really, Holmes. Wasps? I do believe that you are toying with me."

"I wish that I were, my dear doctor. Pray listen; all of this is germane to the subject at hand. The ichneumon wasp has a rather gruesome life-cycle. When the female wasp is ready to lay eggs, it finds and stings a cicada, often one much larger than itself, and then deposits its egg inside the body

of the paralyzed but still living insect. This insect then serves as sustenance for the hatching larva, which forms its home within the living insect, having the instinct to avoid eating the essential organs until the very last, when it is ready to exit into the world to lay eggs of its own."

"This was enough for me to frame my provisional hypothesis. I believed that some strange being from the aership had not merely met the fatally injured man, but crawled inside his body and taken control of his gross physical function."

"I was struck by one fact. Of all the people that this... alien... might have met, it was a dying man who he — it — actually chose. Clearly, then, the... thing... believed itself unable to subdue an uninjured person."

"I must confess, Holmes, if I were asked to prove your sanity, this story would hardly bolster your case."

"Ah, Watson, always the practical man. Permit me." He got out of the leather chair, crossed the room to where he had put down the leather satchel, and laid it on the table in front of me.

I sat paralyzed. "I dare not, Holmes."

"Your courage has never failed you before, my friend."

With a shudder I touched the satchel, and then, steeling myself, opened it. Inside was some object covered in streaks of gore. I didn't want to look, but knew that I must.

The two eggs inside were of a translucent purplish white, large as a moderate-sized mango, and slick with a film of blood. Within each one a monstrous coiled shape could be discerned. No Earthly animal ever laid such an egg, of this I was sure. More horrible than the eggs was the other thing. I shuddered and looked away. It was something like a giant prawn, and something like some jungle millipede, with dozens of long barbed feelers and multiply-jointed appendages bristling with hooks and spines. Its head, or what passed for a head, had been nearly severed with a knife, and the wound exuded a transparent fluid rather like whale-oil, with a sharp and unpleasant odor similar to kerosene. Instead of a mouth, it had a sucking orifice rimmed with myriad tiny hooked teeth.

"This is what I removed from her body," Holmes said.

I looked up at him. "My God," I whispered. "And she was not dead?"

"You asked that question before. It is a question of definitions, Watson. All that was left alive in her body was the thing that you see. By removing it, did I kill her?"

I shuddered again, and slammed the satchel shut with my eyes averted. "No." I stood for a moment, trying to regain my composure. "But why Whitechapel?"

"What you saw was a juvenile," said Holmes. "The adult would be much larger. I would not know if it is intelligent, or what we call intelligent, but it is at least very clever. Why Whitechapel? Think, Watson. It had eggs and juveniles it must deposit into a living body. But how is it to approach a complete stranger, embrace him - or her - closely enough to do it? Ah, you see the picture. It was the perfect place for the thing, Watson; the only place where it could do what it needed."

"I studied the East End in minute detail, tracing the path of the mysterious stranger. Again and again I was too late, sometimes only by minutes. I removed the juveniles from the corpses out of necessity. I say corpses, Watson, for although they still walked upright they were already dead. Had I not killed them, they would have gone to cover until they were mature. I could find the one, I knew, only by concentrating on the one trail. Even then it would be a near thing. Two of them, and I were lost."

"Why didn't you go to the police?"

"And tell them what? To start a man-hunt for a thing they can only find by ripping open bodies?"

"But the letters? The ones from 'Jack the Ripper' - did you write these?"

Holmes laughed. "Why should I need to?" he said. "Fakes, forgeries, and cranks, every one. Even I am continuously amazed at how many odd people there are in London. I daresay they came from newspapers hungry to manufacture news, or from pranksters eager at a chance to make fools of Scotland Yard."

"But, what do we do?"

"We, Watson?" Holmes raised an eyebrow.

"Surely you wouldn't think that, now that I know the danger, I would let you continue alone."

"Ah, my good Watson, I would be lost without you. Well, I am hot on its trail. It cannot elude me much longer. We must find it and kill it, Watson. Before it kills again."

By the next morning the whole episode seemed a nightmare, too fantastical to credit. I wondered how I could have believed it. And yet, I had seen it - or had I? Could I have deluded myself into seeing what Holmes had wanted me to see?

No. It was real. I could not afford to doubt my own sanity, and hence I must believe in Holmes!

In the next few days Holmes went back to his daytime reconnaissance of the East End, mapping the way buildings abutted and how doorways aligned with alleys, like a general planning his campaign, stopping for conversation with workmen and constables alike.

On the third day, my business in town kept me late into the evening. At the end of it, it was almost certain that I had purchased a practice, and at a price which I could afford, but the sealing of the deal required an obligatory toast, and then there were more papers to be inspected and signed, so that all in all, it was well past ten in the evening when I returned to Baker Street.

Of Holmes there was only a note: "I have gone to see the matter to its conclusion. It is better that you are out of it, and I shall think no less of you if you stay. But if you must follow, then look for me near the blind court at Thrawl Street." I read it and swore. He seemed determined to leave me out of this adventure, no matter how dangerous it was for him alone. I snatched my greatcoat and hat from the hall stand, fetched my revolver out from the drawer where it resided, and went out into the night.

It was the night of the great carboniferous fog. The gas-lights were pale yellow glimmers that barely pierced the roiling brown stink. The cab I hailed almost ran me down before seeing me in the street in front of him.

The fog in Whitechapel was even thicker and yellower than that of

Baker Street. The cab left me off in front of the Queen's Head pub, the cabbie warning me of the danger of the neighborhood. The blind court was one which was being resurfaced by the MacAdam method, in which the street was covered with liquid tar, and a layer of gravel rolled into the tar surface. The process results in a surface which is even and far easier to repair than cobblestone. I can see the day when all of London will have such smooth quiet streets.

Earlier Holmes had talked with some of the workmen as they rolled the gravel. Now they were long gone. The half-full cauldron of tar was still at the corner of the alley. Although the oil-pot which heated it to boiling had been removed, the cooling drum of tar still gave out quite a bit of heat.

Three unfortunate women had lit a small fire out of wood-scrap and huddled between the warm cauldron and their fire, with their hands toward the tiny fire and their backs against the cauldron for warmth. The glow of the fire gave a luminous orange cast to the surrounding fog. A tiny pile of additional wood scraps stood waiting to keep the fire going for the rest of the night.

Holmes was nowhere in sight.

The women spotted me looking at them, and whispered amongst themselves. One came up to me and attempted a smile. "Care to spend some money and buy a poor unfortunate a drink, dearie?" She tossed her head toward the end of the street where the pub was invisible in the fog, and at the same time flicked her skirt in such a way as to allow me a clear view of her bare ankle.

I averted my eyes. "I'm looking for a friend."

"I could be a friend, if you wanted me to."

"No. I don't need... that sort of comfort."

"Oh, sure you do, dearie." She giggled. "All men do. 'Sides, I h'aint even got money for me doss. Surely a fine gent like yourself has a shilling to spend on a poor lady down on 'er luck, hasn't he? Sure 'e does."

I looked at her more closely, and she preened for my inspection.

She might have been a rather pretty woman, striking if not actually

beautiful, if she had been given the chance. Instead I saw the lines on her face, the threadbare bonnet she wore, and the unmistakable signs of the early stages of consumption. Such a woman should be resting in bed, not out standing in the chill of a night such as this. I was about to speak to her, to invite her into the public house for the drink she requested, for no other reason than to get her out of the chill and away, perhaps, from the monster that stalked the fog-shrouded night. I could wait for Holmes as well in the pub as in the street.

As I was about to speak, I heard a man approach from the blind end of the court, although I had seen no one there previously. I started to call out, thinking it must be Holmes, but then saw that, while the man was quite as tall as Holmes, he was much bulkier, with a considerable paunch and ill-fitting clothes. As he passed, another of the women smiled at him and called a greeting. He nodded at her. As she put out her arm for him to take, he dropped his hand to the buttons of his trousers. I looked away in disgust, and as I did so the woman who had spoken to me slipped her arm around mine.

I had lost track of the third woman, and was as surprised as the others when her voice rang out from behind. "Stop, fiend!"

The voice was calm and authoritative. I looked up. The woman was holding a revolver - Holmes' hair-trigger revolver - in an unwavering grip aimed at the man's head. I looked closely at her face and saw, beneath the makeup, the thin, hawklike nose and the unmistakable intense gaze of Sherlock Holmes.

The other man swiveled with surprising speed and sprang at Holmes. I pulled my hand loose from my lady companion and in an instant snatched my revolver free of my pocket and fired. Our two shots rang out at almost the same instant, and the man staggered and fell back. The two bullets had both hit above the left eye, and taken away the left half of the cranium.

The women screamed.

The man, with half his head missing, reached out a hand and pulled himself to his feet. He came at Holmes again.

I fired. This time my bullet removed what was left of his head. His jutting windpipe sucked at the air with a low sputtering hiss, and in the

gaping neck I thought I saw purplish-white tendrils feeling about. The shot slowed him down for no more than an instant.

Holmes' shot took him in the middle of the chest. I saw the crimson spot appear and saw him rock from the impact, but it seemed to have no other effect.

We both fired together, this time lower, aiming for the horror hidden somewhere within the body. The two shots spun the headless thing around. He careened against the cauldron of tar, slipped, and fell down, knocking the cauldron over.

In an instant Holmes was upon him.

"Holmes, no!"

For a moment Holmes had the advantage. He pushed the monster forward, into the spreading pool of tar, struggling for a hold. Then the monster rose, dripping tar, and threw Holmes off his back with no more concern than a horse tossing a wayward circus monkey. The monster turned for him.

Holmes reached behind him and grabbed a brand out of the fire. As the monster grabbed him he thrust it forward, into the thing's chest.

The tar ignited with an awful whoosh. The thing clawed at its chest with both hands. Holmes grabbed the cauldron, and with one mighty heave poured the remainder of the tar onto the gaping wound where its head had once been.

Holmes drew back as the flames licked skyward. The thing reeled and staggered in a horrible parody of drunkenness. As the clothes burned away, we could see that where a man's generative organs would have been was a pulsing, wickedly barbed ovipositor with a knife-sharp end writhing blindly in the flames. As we watched it bulged and contracted, and an egg, slick and purple, oozed forth.

The monster tottered, fell over on its back, and then, slowly, the abdomen split open.

"Quickly, Watson! Here!"

Holmes shoved one of the pieces of firewood into my hands, and took another himself. We stationed ourselves at either side of the body.

The horrors which emerged were somewhat like enormous lobsters, or some vermin even more loathsome and articulated. We bludgeoned them as they emerged from the burning body, trying as we could to avoid the oily slime of them from splattering onto our clothes, trying to avoid breathing the awful stench that arose from the smoking carcass. They were tenacious in the extreme, and I think that only the disorientation of the fire and the suddenness of our attack saved our lives. In the end six of the monstrosities crawled out of the body, and six of the monstrosities we killed.

There was nothing remotely human left in the empty shell that had once been a man. Holmes pulled away his skirts and petticoat to feed the fire. The greasy blood of the monstrosities burned with a clear, hot flame, until all that remained were smoldering rags with a few pieces of unidentifiable meat and charred scraps of bone.

It seemed impossible that our shots and the sounds of our struggle had not brought a hundred citizens with constables out to see what had happened, but the narrow streets so distorted the sounds that it was impossible to tell where they had originated, and the thick blanket of fog muffled everything as well as hiding us from curious eyes.

Holmes and I left the two daughters of joy with what money we had, save for the price of a ride back to Baker Street. This we did, not with an eye toward their silence, as we knew that they would never go to the police with their story, but in the hopes - perhaps foolish - that they might have a respite from their hard trade and a warm roof over their heads during the damp and chill months of winter.

It has been two months now, and the Whitechapel killings have not resumed. Holmes is, as always, calm and unflappable, but I find myself unable to look at a wasp now without having a feeling of horror steal across me.

There are as many questions unanswered as answered. Holmes has offered the opinion that the landing was unintentional, a result of some unimaginable accident in the depths of space, and not the vanguard of some impending colonization. He bases this conclusion on the fact of the ill-preparedness and hasty improvisation of the being, relying on luck and

circumstance rather than planning.

I think that the answers to most of our questions will never be known, but I believe that we have succeeded in stopping the horrors, this time. I can only hope that this was an isolated ship, blown off-course and stranded far from the expected shores in some unexpected tempest of infinite space. I look at the stars now, and shudder. What else might be out there, waiting for us?