

Mrs. Vamberry Takes a Trip

by Mike Resnick

Holmes, all bone and angles, sprawled comfortably upon the couch, sipping his champagne.

"You know, Watson," he said, holding his glass up, "this is really quite excellent stuff. I do wish I knew which of our many admirers was so thoughtful as to send us a case."

"Why not use your powers of deduction?" suggested his companion, looking up from his own drink.

Holmes studied the glass, and finally nodded his head, as if he had confirmed some inner suspicion.

"Well?" asked Watson anxiously. "What have you concluded?"

"It's definitely champagne," Holmes announced. "Probably made from grapes, unless I miss my guess." Suddenly he sat up. "But enough of this. I suspect we are about to receive a visitor."

"Why should you think so?"

"It's eight o'clock," replied Holmes. "And when Mrs. Vamberry called earlier today, she said she would arrive at eight on the dot."

"Actually," said Watson, looking at his watch, "it's seventeen minutes to ten."

"Well," said Holmes, adjusting his watch as someone knocked on the door, "it had to be one or the other. Come in!" he added, raising his voice.

The door opened, and a small but exceptionally well put together young lady entered. She had bright red hair, deep blue blue eyes, and skin the texture of the most expensive satin. She was wearing a tan raincoat, which she declined to remove. She immediately walked over and came to a stop just inches away from Holmes.

"Mr. Holmes," she said, "I am Mrs. Comfort Vamberry. I most desperately need your help."

"And I shall be happy to give it to you," replied Holmes. "Suppose you tell me what brought you here?"

"A horse and carriage," answered Mrs. Vamberry. "Though I can't imagine why you should care."

"I don't, actually."

"Then why did you ask?"

"I meant what problem brought you here."

"The carriage was no problem at all. Especially when compared to your stairs."

"You came here to complain about my stairs?" asked Holmes.

"Certainly not. My specialty is wine."

"You prefer 'whine' to 'complain', do you?" asked Holmes.

"Absolutely."

"Well, my initial observation is that you can whine with the best of them."

"I consider that a high compliment," replied Mrs. Vamberry.

"You do?" said Holmes, surprised. "I would have considered it the worst kind of insult."

"Really?" said Mrs. Vamberry. "What would be the best kind of insult?"

Holmes frowned. "I hate it when people ask questions like that."

"Where are our manners?" interjected Watson. "May we offer you some champagne?"

"I should be most grateful," said Mrs. Vamberry.

That good gentleman opened yet another bottle and poured her a tall glass.

"It's excellent," she said after taking a sip. "Where did you get it?"

"It came in the post," said Watson.

She finished the glass. "I'll have another, if you don't mind?"

"My pleasure," said Watson, refilling her glass.

"What about your pleasure?" she asked sharply.

"I give up," said Watson, confused. "What about it?"

"Gentlemen don't discuss their pleasure in front of ladies," said Mrs. Vamberry.

"Well, that's not entirely so," interjected Holmes. "Some gentleman do just that."

"Then they are hardly gentlemen," replied Mrs. Vamberry.

"But I wasn't discussing my pleasure," protested Watson. "I was expressing it."

"It sounds messy, like expressing a wound or something," she said.

"I beg your pardon."

"Keep your pleasure to yourself and you won't have to beg my pardon," said Mrs. Vamberry.

"If I may interrupt," said Holmes, "I assume you did have some purpose for arranging this meeting?"

"Yes, Mr. Holmes," she said. "As I told you, my specialty is wine."

Holmes juxtaposed his fingers and nodded his head. "As I surmised."

"My husband, Reginald, is abroad gathering samples." She paused. "I miss him desperately."

"Please go on."

"Well, two weeks ago he sent me his Grand Siecle."

"He did what?" demanded the detective.

"Sent me his Grand Siecle."

"My God! Wasn't it painful?"

"No," she replied. "I have always taken enormous pleasure in his Grand Siecle."

"I'm sure you have," said Holmes. "But hasn't your husband always been at the other end of it, so to speak?"

"Well, I certainly enjoy it more when he's with me."

"I would have sworn you couldn't enjoy it at all when he's not there."

"Oh, you're quite mistaken. I have enjoyed Reginald's Grand Siecle while in the company of any number of friends while he has been out of the country."

"Zounds!" muttered Watson. "I must wire Vienna immediately!"

"Another refill, please?" she asked, holding out her glass, and Watson immediately obliged.

"If his grand siecle can function when he's no longer in possession of it," said Holmes, still frowning, "then I fail to see what your problem might be."

"He tells me he sent his Grand Siecle again two weeks ago," she said. "But it never arrived. I suspect foul play."

"Are you quite sure?" asked Holmes. "I mean, it hardly seems the kind of thing one would be inclined to steal, at least on the face of it."

"You have no idea of its value, Mr. Holmes," said Mrs. Vamberry, downing the rest of her champagne. "I've a young lady who lives down the street who will pay top price for it."

"And you sell it to her?" demanded Holmes.

"I'd like to keep it all to myself, but we're in business."

"I wonder if Scotland Yard knows about this business?"

"Certainly they do," she said. "We are duly licensed."

"What is the world coming to?" mused Holmes.

"Could you open a window, please?" asked Mrs. Vamberry. "I've suddenly become quite warm."

Watson walked to a window and opened it, then came back and stopped in front of Mrs. Vamberry.

"I say, Holmes," said that worthy, "we seem to have a problem here."

"We certainly do," said Holmes, lost in thought. "She wants to hire me to help her salvage this seamy if intriguing business that she and her remarkable husband have entered into. It poses a fascinating ethical conflict."

"We have a more immediate problem," continued Watson. "The lady seems to have passed out. Doubtless it stems from having so much champagne so rapidly."

Holmes walked over to Mrs. Vamberry. He snapped his fingers in front of her, slapped her face, and gently tickled her armpits.

"No reaction at all," he said.

"I suppose we could let her sleep in my room," said Watson.

Holmes shook his head. "If she sleeps in anyone's room, it will be in mine. But the thought of sharing those happy moments with her husband's grand siecle simply boggles the mind. I think I shall refuse the case and take the lady home."

"I'm afraid I can't help you," said Watson. "I have to finish writing your latest adventure tonight, if it is to make the latest edition of The Strand."

"Your absence should pose no problem," replied Holmes. "I am, after all, a world-class athlete. Just help me set her on her feet, and I'll take her from there."

The two gentlemen lifted Mrs. Vamberry to upright position. As they did so, her raincoat fell open, revealing that the young lady was quite naked beneath it.

"She gives every indication of having dressed in rather a hurry," remarked Watson admiringly. "Perhaps I will help you after all."

"Not necessary," said Holmes, half-carrying and half-dragging her to the doorway. "I shall return within the hour."

* * * *

It took Holmes less than two minutes to realize that his current mode of transporting Mrs. Vamberry was next to impossible, so he hailed a double-decker bus. He was aware of the curious stares from the other passengers as he carried her up the stairs and over to a seat, but he did his best to ignore them.

"She sure is a looker, Mister," said one gentleman who was dressed in a wrinkled tweed suit.

"Thank you," said Holmes, placing Mrs. Vamberry next to the window and taking a seat himself.

"Had a little too much to drink, eh?"

"Not really," said Holmes. "I feel quite well."

"I meant the girl."

"Ah. Well, yes, the truth of the matter is that she has had a little more than she could handle."

"Does the poor dear need any help?" offered a middle-aged woman, putting aside her knitting to gaze at Mrs. Vamberry's ashen face. "A mixture of lemon and prune juice does it every time."

"Does what every time?" asked Holmes, curious.

"Flushes out the system. Clears the head, too," replied the woman knowingly. "Mainly," she said, "it flushes out the system."

"Perhaps I shall consider it in the future."

"Of course," continued the woman, "I don't know what you can do about those eyes."

Holmes turned to Mrs. Vamberry. The bouncing of the bus had caused her eyes to open, and they were now staring, dull and bloodshot, at the assembled well-wishers.

Holmes hastily pressed the lids down, restoring her serene if somewhat inebriated expression, and began

wondering just how he had gotten himself into this position. He scratched his head, trying to conjure up some plan of action.

"My God, mister!" said the man in the tweed suit. "What a thing to do in public!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Holmes.

"Your hand."

"What about my hand?"

"That's a terrible thing to do with it!"

"Nonsense," replied Holmes, scratching his head even more vigorously. "It helps me think."

"It'd help me think too," agreed the man. "But I still wouldn't do it in public."

"You men only think of one thing anyway," said a little old lady in a blue print dress.

"Rubbish," said Holmes. "I think of lots of things!"

"What mental control!" said the man in the tweed suit admiringly. "If I had my hand in a place like that, I could only think of one thing. I freely admit it."

"What on earth is so unusual about a man scratching his head in public?" demanded Holmes.

"I was talking about your other hand," said the man, staring unblinking at the hand in question.

Holmes looked down at his other hand. Somehow it had wandered inside Mrs. Vamberry's coat of its own free will, and it still resided there.

"Oh," said Holmes, flustered. "I must have misunderstood you."

"Well, your girlfriend could hardly have misunderstood you," said the little old lady disapprovingly.

"Drunk or not, she ought to be lady enough to tell you to stop it."

"To stop what?"

"To stop what you're doing."

"How do you know what I'm doing?" asked Holmes.

"I know what I'd be doing!" said the tweedy man enthusiastically. "You need a little help, friend?"

"He needs a lot of help," said the middle-aged lady, "but of a more professional nature."

"Are you implying that the lady in question is an amateur?" asked the tweedy man. "Seems to me that any woman who lets a man do that to her in the middle of a bus isn't an amateur at all."

"But he's not doing it to her in the middle of the bus," said a nattily-attired elderly gentleman. "He's doing it in a corner of the bus."

"I'm not doing it at all!" Holmes exploded.

"Not doing what?" asked the little old lady, who evidently had fallen asleep for a moment.

"I'm not doing anything," said Holmes lamely.

"Yes you are," said the elderly gentleman. "You're shouting."

"I apologize," said Holmes, fighting to control his temper. "And now that we have all discussed the problem in full, would you mind leaving me and my companion alone?"

"Yes," said the little old lady. "Let's leave them to their own devices."

"What kind of devices?" asked the tweedy man with keen interest.

"Whatever kind of devices that gentlemen who do obscene things on busses are inclined to use," said the little old lady.

Holmes could stand it no longer. His mind made up, he arose, lifted Mrs. Vamberry in his arms, and walked to the door of the bus.

"Let me off here," he told the driver.

"I know a good hotel about two miles further up the road," said the bus driver helpfully. "And they only charge by the hour if you say that Bertie sent you."

"I don't want a good hotel!" shouted Holmes.

"I also know of an exceptionally bad hotel, if that's more to your liking," said the driver.

"I don't want any kind of hotel!" yelled Holmes.

"All right," said the driver, still agreeable. "But I'd be careful about which bus you choose at this time of night. The other drivers aren't all as liberal as I am."

"I'll keep that in mind," said Holmes, getting off with Mrs. Vamberry.

It was only after the bus pulled away that he realized he had come out without his wallet, and had just used up the last of his spare change. And he knew, with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, that he wasn't going to be able to avoid still more scenes if he had to drag and carry Mrs. Vamberry the rest of the way.

"Hey, Mister," said a voice from out of the night shadows. "That's quite a woman you've got there. Is she for rent?"

"Of course she's not for rent!" snapped Holmes, turning to confront a small, snappily-dressed young man. "Whatever gave you the idea that she was?"

"I'm not saying that she's for rent," answered the man defensively. "I'm just asking if she is, because it seems to me that she's displaying all the parts that would be for rent if she was."

"But I've already told you she isn't."

"Then you're better button her coat, Mister. It must be ten degrees Celsius out. Nobody walks around like that because they feel too warm on a night like this."

Holmes hastily rearranged Mrs. Vamberry's coat to cover up the points in question. Then an idea came to him. "Do you really have the money to rent her?" he asked.

"Yes," said the man, interested again.

"Good," said Holmes. "Then you can pay for a taxi while I take her home, and afterwards I'll reimburse you."

"Why should I loan you money?"

"Because I am London's greatest consulting detective, and she is my client."

"Well, I'm the Sultan on Zanzibar," said the man sarcastically. "I just wear these clothes to stop women from throwing themselves at me."

"Dash it all, I am a detective!"

"Assuming that's true, what kind of case is she involved in?"

"This is Mrs. Comfort Vamberry, and it has something to do with her husband's grand siecle."

"It does?" said the man, surprised. "Hell, I've had her husband's Grand Siecle!"

"You have?" exclaimed Holmes, flabbergasted.

"Enjoyed the hell out of it."

"You enjoyed it?"

"Yes. Okay, I'll pay for the cab. Who knows? I may get lucky and have the lady share Mr. Vamberry's Grand Siecle with me."

"What is the world coming to?" muttered Holmes under his breath.

"By the way," said the man, "my name's Eddie."

"Eddie what?" asked Holmes.

"Huh?"

"I said, Eddie what?"

"I wasn't going to say anything," answered Eddie.

"I know."

"Then why did you say, 'Eddie, what'?"

"I was simply asking your last name."

"Oh. It's Wutt."

"Eddie Wutt?" repeated Holmes.

"I just told you," said Eddie, beginning to lose his patience.

"I know you did," replied Holmes. "That's what I said."

"You said what?"

"Precisely," said Holmes.

"Are you sure you're feeling all right, Mister?" asked Eddie.

"What?" asked Holmes, his mind having strayed for a moment.

"Mr. What," corrected Eddie.

"What in blue blazes are you talking about?" asked Holmes irritably.

"I've already forgotten," said Eddie.

"Probably all for the best," said Holmes. "If you're quite through trying to drive me to distraction, let us proceed."

"I'm not trying to drive you anywhere, Mr. What," said Eddie. "I thought we were getting a cab to drive us."

Holmes, preferring not to get drawn into another debate, contented himself by turning his back on Eddie and flagging down a taxi. As it pulled to the curb, he turned to Eddie.

"Take her feet," he directed. "I'll grab her arms."

"Hey, I don't want no monkey business in my cab," warned the burly cab driver.

"We shall be the soul of discretion," answered Holmes as he slid Mrs. Vamberry onto the seat.

"Hah!" said the cabbie.

"What do you mean?" asked Holmes.

"Tell one-third of your soul to cross her legs or button her coat or something. I don't know about any other cabs you guys have been in, but this one isn't a cathouse on wheels."

"Who said anything about cats?"

"Just watch your step -- and get your hand out of there right now! Imagine, taking advantage of a lady like that!"

"Just drive straight ahead for another mile," said Holmes. "I'll tell you when to stop. And you, get your hand off her!"

"What?" said the cabbie, who had both hands on the wheel.

"Are you talking to me?" asked Eddie, quickly withdrawing his hand.

"Yes," said Holmes sternly. "Leave her alone."

"What's going on?" asked the cabbie.

"Wrong," said Holmes. "Wutt's stopping."

"Damn it, you never let a guy have any fun," complained Eddie. "I want Comfort."

"I'll give you Comfort later," replied Holmes.

"You're not giving him any comfort in _my_ cab!" said the cabbie. "The young lady may be of dubious moral character, but the two of you are out-and-out degenerates."

"Stop!" shouted Holmes suddenly.

"What's he doing to you now?" asked the cabbie.

"Nothing. I was speaking to you."

"_I'm_ not doing anything to you!"

"I meant for you to stop the cab."

The cab screeched to a halt, and Holmes and Eddie carried Mrs. Vamberry out.

"How much do I owe you?" asked Eddie.

"More than you could possibly pay," said the cabbie, peeling off into the night.

"So where the hell are we?" asked Eddie, looking around.

"At the far end of Baker Street," replied Holmes. "I took the opportunity to look in Mrs. Vamberry's purse for some identification, and found that she lived at 2218. Help me get her up to her flat."

The two men carried the still-unconscious woman up two flights of stairs. Then Holmes rummaged through her purse again and found the key to her front door. He unlocked it, and then they deposited her on an easy chair, dusting her off here and there as gentlemen are wont to do in such cases.

"Shall we make some tea while we're here?" suggested Holmes, walking toward the kitchen.

"None for me, thanks," said Eddie.

"How very un-British."

"I can't help it," said Eddie. He lowered his voice. "I've been constipated for the past two days."

"How very fortuitous," said Holmes.

"What are you talking about?"

"I can always use another Baker Street Irregular."

* * * *

"I see you're home already," remarked Watson, looking up from the champagne bottle he had emptied during the detective's absence. "Did Mrs. Vamberry ever regain consciousness?"

"She was still sound asleep when I departed," said Holmes. "I left a note explaining that we had no interest in taking the case."

"Still, one can't help but wonder what happened to her husband's grand siecle," said Watson.

"The mere thought of it being rented out to neighbor ladies is enough to give me nightmares," replied Holmes. "No, Watson, that is one case I shall never solve." He paused long enough to pour himself a glass of champagne. "A more interesting puzzle relates to the unknown admirer who sent us this wonderful champagne."

"Why not look at the case it came in?" suggested Watson.

"I did," admitted Holmes. "But it was of almost no use whatsoever."

"Even to a man with your remarkable powers of deduction?"

"The science of deduction can go only so far, my old friend," replied Holmes. "And literate help is so hard to find these days that the B in 221B Baker Street looks exactly like an 8."

"What a shame," said Watson. "So there were no clues at all?"

"Well, just one," said Holmes. "The man who sent this is obviously a passionate follower of the Sport of Kings."

"How could you tell?"

"As you know, Grand Circle is the favorite for the upcoming Epsom Derby, and our mysterious philanthropist was trying to tell me to place a wager on him by writing his name in bold letters all over the case. Misspelled hideously, of course."

"I wonder if I should make any notes at all about the events of this evening," said Watson.

"I wouldn't bother," replied Holmes wearily. "I refused one case, and hadn't enough clues to solve the other. I suppose there will be days like this."

"Well, if every day brings us another dozen bottles of fine French champagne, they won't be so hard to take," said Watson, filling their glasses once again.

"I'll drink to that," replied Holmes.