

The Death Of Sherlock Holmes

By Patrick Campbell

The detective knocked at the door.

“Hello, I’d like to examine the body,” he announced with a sunny and chipper disposition, as if he were commenting on the color of his shoes.

One of the younger constables had answered, to find a dark haired gentleman, with a broad and lean forehead, dressed in a fine suit, and carrying a long wooden cane. His beard and moustache were finely kept, though the hair sweeping down the back of his neck betrayed a certain wildness.

The young constable frowned. “Now see here,” he told him stiffly, “We’ve had enough of your sort around here. The inspector has clearly stated that he doesn’t want nobody-”

“Ah, but I’m sure he’ll want me, my good fellow,” the detective chimed, swiftly stepping around the constable. “I’ll just head inside shall I? No, no, don’t trouble yourself.”

The dark haired detective sauntered upstairs. The young constable was frozen only a moment, before he hurried after him. Next to the front door, the address numbers were printed on the house - two hundred and twenty one.

On the second floor, the detective left his wooden cane by the entrance, and strolled in to find policemen scattered about like an infestation of rodents. He wrinkled his nose at it, disliking when the authorities had the gall to contaminate his crime scenes before he’d had a crack at them.

There were charring and scorch marks on the floor and walls of the study, which suggested a fire. But finding no excessive amounts of ash upon closer inspection, the detective decided an explosion was far more likely. He paused at the fireplace, bending down to rub his fingers against the scorch marks, before sniffing them carefully.

Turning around, the detective took in the dead body lying on the floor. It was on its stomach, with a white tarp set respectfully over the back of its head. Scattered around were chunks of wood, what the detective observed were the remains of an armchair, much like the body, now somewhat in pieces. Only inches from the eviscerated remains of the hand, was what appeared to be the charred remnants of an old book.

The detective lifted the tarp, examining what remained of the head. "Oh Holmes," he muttered to himself. "Such a pity."

"Ere, you!" the detective's attention was grabbed, quickly rising to his feet, as a tall gentleman in an overcoat stampeded toward him. This, the detective surmised, must be the infamous Inspector Lestrade.

"I'm sorry sir," the young constable apologized. "He barrelled right past me - there was nothing I could do!" he lied terribly, before slinking off into the kitchen.

"Now you see here!" the Inspector barked at him. "We've had amateur detectives looking to make a name for themselves traipsing through here for days. Just this morning, we had the Belgian sniffing up and down these halls. But a great man - a personal friend of mine - has just died here, and I'll be damned if I'm going to just sit back and-"

"Amateur indeed," the detective cut him off smoothly, seeming not in the least bit rattled. "You pass me off as some common sleuth, or glory seeker hounding for fame. But there is a likeness between us, dear inspector - for like you, I was a personal confidant of the dearly departed Mister Holmes."

Lestrade's brashness seemed to falter. "You um... You knew him then?"

The detective nodded. "Sherlock and I knew each other as boys - our families close friends for most of our childhood. I hope I don't oversell myself to say I am much the reason he became a detective." The mysterious dark haired man rubbed his vest, modestly. "We lost touch over the years - largely my fault, I'm afraid. Sherlock adored his beloved London, while I on the other hand was seduced by Madame Paris - but maintained in contact through letter correspondence." Without missing a beat, he turned to the body splayed across the floor. "I was greatly saddened to hear of his demise, and thought it only natural I should pay my respects."

"Aye well," Lestrade removed his hat. His fury seemed to have cooled then, either finding a common ground with the stranger, or won over by the eloquence of his speech. "My apologizes then. And my condolences for your loss. He was truly a great man - the sharpest mind of his generation."

"Indeed," the dark haired detective echoed. "I hope you'll not think me overstepping the boundaries of my admittedly humble station, if I inquire as to the circumstance of his passing?"

"Well, it's the darndest thing," Lestrade scratched his head in bafflement. "The doors were locked, the window was bolted shut. It's as if the murderer simply walked through the walls when he left."

“You suspect foul play?” he asked, feigning scepticism as if the very thing had not already occurred to him.

Lestrade gestured to the charred remains of the body. “He was blown to bits! I’d hardly call that a natural death, would you?”

The detective nodded, seemingly joyed in making sport of the inspector. “No, I suppose not. May I ask who discovered the body?”

“The landlady, Miss Stella Maris,” Lestrade explained to him, wondering faintly why he was giving important details of the investigation to this man. Perhaps it was the frustration that he was getting nowhere in the investigation, or simply the charm of the man himself. “She’s overseen the residence ever since Missus Hudson passed, some years ago, as well as caring for Holmes in his old age. Miss Maris had the only spare key to the room, and discovered him last Monday.”

“Her alibi?” the detective asked.

Lestrade seemed faintly offended. “She’s a little old lady.”

“Her alibi?” he asked again.

Lestrade gave in. “She was spending the weekend Nottingham, with some friends. We’ve several eyewitnesses that can vouch for her.”

“I see. Which leaves Holmes alone at Baker Street, from Friday morning to Monday morning,” the detective concluded logically. “Now indulge me Inspector... Do you still have it here? Or has it been transported to some safe and secure location?”

“Have what sir?”

“The Western Star, of course.”

Lestrade was taken aback, nearly losing his balance. “But how on earth do you know about that?!”

“Oh come, come, Inspector,” he grinned like a cheshire cat toying with a mouse. “Do give me some credit. I’d only received word this morning that the American police were shutting down their investigation. And any logical thinking man could conclude, the only suitable reason to stop searching for a priceless missing diamond, is if said diamond is either no longer priceless, or - far more likely - no longer missing.”

Lestrade seemed stunned, either by surprise or some other force of nature. The strange dark haired man fixed him with eyes which could pierce through his

every facade or fiction, as if he could read his very mind. For some indiscernible reason, Lestrade felt the whole thing very familiar.

The detective eyed him expectantly, until Lestrade breathed in surrender, and produced a glittering white diamond from his pocket. It sparkled brilliantly even in the faint light from the windows. The detective's eyes gleamed over, with a hint of lust.

"Exquisite," the detective remarked. "May I?" Lestrade pulled back as the detective reached his hand out, his reservations clinging to him. The detective laughed. "Oh, be reasonable my good fellow. Even if I wanted to steal it, I wouldn't get very far with your fine men waiting downstairs, now could I?"

With that fine bit of flattery, Lestrade's reservations were cut down. The detective held the Western Star up to the light, soaking in every minute detail.

"Truly exquisite," he repeated himself.

"We found it on Sherlock's body, right in the pocket of his coat," Lestrade explained. "I can't believe that Sherlock would have stolen it. Not that he couldn't have if he wanted to - it just wasn't what he was about."

"I couldn't agree more, my good man," the detective told him, still observing the diamond covetously. "So the answer to one mystery - where is the Western Star - only leads to yet another mystery, with even more questions."

"Indeed," Inspector Lestrade tried out the word for size, finding it did not have the same effect for him. "What was Sherlock doing with the Western Star in his pocket? You don't suppose somebody killed him for it?"

"And perhaps more curiously," the detective continued, "If they did kill him for it, then why was the diamond still in his coat when the body was discovered?"

Circling the crime scene, the strange dark haired man stopped to crouch over the dead body of Sherlock Holmes, with Lestrade and the rest of the constables watching his every move. The detective looked up.

"Knowing the dearly departed Mister Holmes as I do, I believe it would have been his great pleasure that his final act in this world be a great mystery to solve," he announced confidently. Then bowing his head humbly to Lestrade, "Good Inspector, with your leave, I should like to inspect the scene of the crime."

Against his better judgement, Lestrade indulged him, and the detective went to work without delay. Lestrade offered to provide the strange man with the necessary tools, but soon discovered that everything the strange man needed was already right there in Sherlock's apartment.

To their surprise, the detective spent little time on the body. Using swabs and brushes, he collected samples of ashen residue from the scorch marks, placing them in a promptly sealed test tube. Then having finished that, he went to work on the badly burned book, lying out of reach from the corpse's grasp.

Under a magnifying glass, the detective spent meticulous attention pouring over every singed inch of the paper, brushing away at it until the smoky finish clear away. Lestrade found he couldn't help peaking over the dark haired man's shoulder.

In little over an hour, the front page was clear and legible once again. It read "*Crossroads & Crossguards, by Folton Finch.*"

Like a gunshot the detective sprang to his feet, and turned to Lestrade. "My good Inspector, I have indeed uncovered a clue in this most heinous of murders. A clue so glaringly obvious that I am frankly disappointed that you and your constables have not yet discerned it."

"Oh really?" Lestrade remarked bitterly, feeling the charm of this peculiar fellow starting to wane on him. "Found another missing diamond then, have you?"

He raised a finger high and proudly. "It is not what I found, but rather what I did not find which is so remarkably interesting!"

"Which is?"

"His pipe!" the detective exclaimed in excitement. "Sherlock's pipe. In all of his bachelor years, I never saw the fellow without the damned thing."

"But we didn't find a pipe," Lestrade explained, now kicking himself for not having noticed it sooner. Now that it had been pointed out to him, it was so glaringly obvious.

"Precisely," he declared, eagerly strolling out to the stairway. "Which means we now have a world famous detective, in a locked room, in an empty house," he listed off the evidence, "A sudden and deadly explosion, a no-longer-missing diamond, and a now-painfully-missing pipe!"

Following the dark haired man to the top of the stairs, Lestrade again felt a pang of familiarity, as the detective basked in his macabre enthusiasm, his relish in the thrill of the hunt. The detective turned to Lestrade, bouncing on his feet like a boxer preparing to enter the ring.

"I wonder Inspector, if you know where I might find a John Watson?"

"Doctor Watson is upstairs," Lestrade informed him. "He's been inconsolable for days. Miss Maris is tending to him."

The detective nodded. "Then I should like to speak with him, once he is more consolable. The housekeeper as well." Snatching up his wooden cane, he darted down the stairs. "In the meantime, I've a yearning for some quality literature."

Not even pausing to bid farewell, the dark haired man dashed his way down the stairs. He put one in mind of a hunting dog, about to be set on the loose.

"I beg your pardon," Lestrade halted him, calling from the top of the stairs. "What did you say your name was, detective?"

Turning his gaze upwards, he met Lestrade's eyes unflinchingly. "Dupin," he announced proudly. "C. Auguste Dupin. And I am no detective," he corrected him graciously, "I am a *Chevalier*." And with that, he was gone.

Though it was true that Auguste Dupin had never held the rank a *professional* detective, it would do him ill credit to say any less than he paved the way and set the mark for all those who came after him. The man had been solving mysteries since before there was a name for it. As far as himself, Dupin had never held much by way of rank. His role as Chevalier, a knight in the Légion d'honneur, was all the honorifics he required. And beyond that, first and foremost, Dupin always considered himself a gentleman.

It was with this same charm and grace, that he was able to locate the foremost London bookstores, which would suit his needs. He visited six of them, coming up empty handed, until Dupin finally arrived at a small antique bookshop on the south end. The bell on the door announced his arrival, as he confidently approached the book clerk at the front desk.

"I'm interested in procuring a copy of *Crossroads & Crossguards by Folton Finch*," he cut straight to the point.

The clerk nodded, "Ah yes, one of our best sellers. Sad to say, it sold out in a matter of weeks." He shrugged. "There might be a copy left somewhere in the stacks. It'll be in the historical fiction section."

Dupin carefully hunted through the stacks, gently caressing the spine of each volume as he searched. In Dupin's mind, a true gentleman must be well read and versed in literature, with an unyielding respect for the written world. Indeed many crucial clues came to Dupin by way of newspapers and magazines, as had the news of Sherlock's death.

If Dupin had been pressed, he would have had to admit that he painted a far warmer picture of his friendship with Sherlock Holmes, than Holmes himself did. In

fact, the Chevalier had always felt that his childhood friend carried himself with a sense of superiority whenever standing next to him.

It had reached Dupin's ears that Doctor Watson had once compared the two men as intellectual thinkers. Apparently Holmes had described his old friend as *showy and superficial*, alluding to Dupin's unique talent of inferring the inner thoughts of his companion by deduction alone, despite Dupin's knowledge that Holmes had used the very same "trick" on several occasions.

Really it was that very same sense of competition which had kept the two men in correspondence after Dupin had gone to Paris, and if Dupin had been honest, that competition which had kept them as friends. They both relished in the challenge of it, and despite themselves, had built on it a sense of comradeship.

Dupin had never considered himself a detective. But he would see himself dragged in chains to the Tower of London, before he admitted that Sherlock Holmes was a better one.

Searching through the stacks, the Chevalier's eyes lit up. A first edition copy of *Crossroads & Crossguards* sitting on the shelf, mere inches from his nose. Eagerly Dupin reached his hand for it, before realizing that another hand reached for the same rare and very remarkable volume.

Auguste Dupin saw a man standing next to him in the stacks. He stood hardly more than five feet, but carried himself with great dignity. The curl of his upward turned moustache framed his face, from which his pink tipped nose stood out.

What struck Dupin more than anything was the neatness of his attire. His whole suit was scrupulously maintained, not a wrinkle nor crease stood out that could be held against him. Like Dupin, he carried a cane, but this man leaned on it, betraying a bad limp from some kind of injury. A military man, Dupin decided.

"Excuse me," the man asked, in a thick foreign accent which Dupin failed to place, much to his frustration. He sounded vaguely French, but Dupin couldn't place the exact region. "Were you looking for this book?" he asked stiffly, pointing to Finch's volume on the shelf.

"I'm afraid so," Dupin admitted.

"Ah, I too am in the market for the works of Folton Finch," the foreign man explained to him. He spoke in a very precise way, as if each of his words had been inspected by hand. "And the matter on which I pursue them, is of dire importance. Perhaps we can come to a suitable arrangement?"

Dupin thought he detected an offer of bribery. For a moment, he was sorely tempted to see how high this fellow was willing to go, then remembered his purpose.

Dupin shook his head. "I don't think that seems likely."

"I am afraid I must insist," the foreign man informed him in his slow, deliberate way of speaking. "There are forces in play here which you do not understand."

Now Dupin was sure he picked up on a threat, which chafed at his sensibilities. Tension crackled between them, as Dupin observed the foreign man's limp, working out in his head how fast the fellow could run. And then, like a serpent coiled to strike, cast his eyes on the shelf.

Snatching the book, Dupin kicked the cane out from under the foreign man. Grabbing the shelf to support himself, the foreign man faltered as Dupin dashed around him and barreled towards the door.

"Hey!" the book clerk yelled at him angrily, as he breezed right past him.

Falling out onto the busy London street, Dupin was already on the move, hoping to get some cover in the thick of the crowds. He was halfway when down the street, when he glanced over his shoulder, spotting the foreign man as he emerged from the book shop, eyes darting like a wily fox.

Almost instantly, Dupin felt his eyes land on him, and the chase was on. The Chevalier sprinted down the road, heart pounding, as he ducked and weaved around pedestrians, trying to shake the old fox off his tail.

Yet despite his limp, Dupin always seemed to find the old fellow just behind him, pursuing with a steady doggedness which seemed as rare and foreign to Dupin as the man himself. Worse still, as he looked up at his surroundings, he was greeted with only unfamiliar buildings and landmarks, and realized how long it was since he'd been in London.

Then spotting the River Thames, an idea flickered into existence. Dupin dashed for the bridge, feeling the foreign man pursuing hotly on his heels.

Arriving there, Dupin was greeted by the sight of the midday traffic, crowding the bridge, just as he'd hoped. Checking over his shoulder for his dogged pursuer, Dupin ran for the other end, working up a sweat. Once there, he stopped a local pedestrian, offering three shillings to exchange his hat and jacket with him.

The man quickly obliged him and went on his way. Dressed in new seemings, Dupin slowly turned on his heels, and went back across the bridge the other way. Keeping his hat down, he peeked out from under the brim, keeping an eye out for the

foreign man. Dupin kept walking until he was halfway across the bridge, and checking his surroundings, he let out a sigh of relief.

Without warning, Dupin was knocked off balance, as the foreign man grabbed him from behind, reaching for the book in his left hand. Dupin tried to shake him, but short in stature as the fellow was, he was stout and strong, his grip like iron manacles.

The two men fought against each other, as citizens passed them by. And as they struggled, Dupin felt his grip fail on the book. Both men rushed to the edge of the bridge, as the book tumbled down into the Thames.

“You foolish man!” Dupin’s attacker raged. “Now look what you have done!”

“What / have done?!” the Chevalier exclaimed insulted. “Good sir, you have accosted me in the middle of a bookstore, chased me up and down London, and now you have cost me my only clue! Who the blazes do you think you are?!”

“Poirot,” he bellowed at him sternly. “Monsieur Hercule Poirot.”

Glaring at him, a hint of a grin slipped into Dupin’s hostile disposition, as he failed to resist. “Is that a French accent I detect?”

“Belgium,” he corrected him promptly.

It all clicked together and Dupin cursed himself for a fool. Of course! Lestrade had mentioned before that a Belgian had come sniffing around Baker Street earlier that very morning.

Relaxing his shoulders, Dupin took on a more amicable disposition, almost as a reflex. “You’re investigating the death of Sherlock Holmes.”

Hercule Poirot sniffed, rubbing his pink tipped nose. “And I can only surmise from my senses, that you sir are one of those amateur detectives that have been badgering the good Inspector Lestrade about the investigation.”

“Then your senses deceive you, good sir,” Dupin rebuffed him with a charming grin, which seeming to utterly fail at charming the Belgian. “For I am neither a detective, nor certainly an amateur.”

“Amateur enough to lead me on that merry chase,” Poirot pointed out, gesturing to the street across the bridge. “Such flamboyancy. I must say, that all seemed rather *showy and superficial*.”

A sharp retort rose on the edge of his mind, and it was all Dupin could do to bite his tongue. “My dear Monsieur Poirot,” he started, in his most calming of voices, “I do believe this has all been a rather untimely misunderstanding. Please allow me

the honor of introducing myself. C. Auguste Dupin,” he extended his hand formally, “An old associate of the dearly departed Mister Holmes. And I do believe,” he added with a glint in his eye, “That we are going to be the most cordial of acquaintances.”

After his ill timed encounter with the flamboyant Chevalier, Hercule Poirot returned immediately (after making a few inquiries) to the lodgings he’d procured in the city. Settling down for a good night’s rest, Poirot awoke the next morning to find Dupin outside, already waiting for him. Somehow, Hercule was not at all surprised to find him there.

“Let us share a cab,” Dupin declared instantly.

“Let us not,” Poirot refused stubbornly.

“Nonsense,” he retorted, climbing in without invitation as a hansom cab was already pulling over for them. “A pair of gentlemen sharing a cab is twice the conversation, for only half the price. Most especially,” Dupin added in his sly fashion, “Since I suspect you are headed to the same destination as I am.”

And so it was that the two discerning gentlemen found themselves seated next to each other, in the back of their horse drawn accommodations. The early morning sun was still steadily rising in the east, casting its glorious rays across the city as they rode through the street. Dupin gazed out the window, drinking in the local scenery.

“I must confess, mon cher Poirot,” Auguste Dupin began conversationally, eyes still surveying London outside his window, “I do not feel as though my presence here is entirely welcome.”

“It is not,” Hercule Poirot told him simply.

Dupin turned his head curiously. “Surely you must concede that the two of us working in tandem, will solve this mystery far quicker than any one of us could do individually?”

“A radical hypothesis you have yet to prove,” Poirot pointed out to him briskly chafing at his new companions sense of unearned familiarity. “My skills of deduction are to myself without question, while yours monsieur, remain presently, and most assuredly, in doubt. As are your motives.”

“You question my honor, sir?”

Turning to face him, Poirot asked him bluntly. “Why do you want to solve the murder of Sherlock Holmes?”

“Why do you, sir?” Dupin reflected back at him.

“Sherlock Holmes was a great man - an inspiration to many in my profession. And he was murdered,” he stated simply, as if he had just added two and two, and come up with four. “His killer must be captured, and face justice accordingly.”

Nodding his head, Dupin considered this carefully. “Yes... Yes, you have a very strong sense of justice, don't you? Right and wrong? Though I suppose I shouldn't expect anything less from a man of the law. I imagine it's something you picked up during your service in Brussels.” Dupin paused, waiting for the reaction he usually got from the common rabble. The best he was able to elicit from Poirot was a raised eyebrow. “Oh yes, I've had time to learn all about you, *mon cher Poirot*. I do feel a fool that I was not able to place your accent yesterday. Looking at you now, it seems obvious you were a police officer back in Brussels. I say were, because it is plain as the nose on your face, that you are currently retired, and now working as a private detective.”

“Not so plain so you might think,” the Belgian intercepted him stoically, now picking up on the conversation like a duelist sharpening his sabres. “For if you, *mon cher Chevalier*,” he interjected playfully, perrying back at Dupin, “Are to supply me with so much candor, then I will be forced to admit that I have had time to make my own inquiries about you.”

“Do tell,” he spurred him on, relishing in the game.

Poirot continued promptly, his observing eyes flashing like blades. “You were once from a wealthy family, but by a variety of untoward events, you have been reduced to more humble circumstances. You were granted the honorary title of Chevalier, though that is the only title you have ever been received. You've certainly solved enough mysteries in your time to be a detective, but you refuse the title whenever proffered.” With one hand, the Belgian twisted his already twisted moustache, observing and considering. “You are a man who is fond of enigmas, conundrums, and hieroglyphics.”

“In fairness to myself, who doesn't enjoy a good mystery?” he reasoned to Poirot, both of them determined to remain unimpressed. “The art of deduction. For example, I can deduce that you've only been in London for about two days now. And that you arrived by train, only this Wednesday.” A warm smile. “I do hope you had a relaxing journey.”

“I did not,” Poirot told him simply, remembering the last time he tried to relax on a train, and ruined the whole experience for himself forever.

“All the same, I can imagine you hurried over to London the very instant you learned of the death of Sherlock Holmes. Drawn to the intrigue, the inescapable

seduction of the unknown.” Dupin raised his hand, as if he had reached the end of a very thorough equation. “You see? Who doesn’t enjoy a good mystery?”

Both men girded themselves, as the hansom cab ran over a bump in the road. “You are something of a mystery yourself, mon cher Chevalier,” Poirot declared wryly, using the nickname more frequently because he sensed it irritated his companion, wielding it as a hidden dagger in their duel of deduction.

“Indeed?” Dupin raised his eyebrow, looking thoroughly amused.

Poirot adjusted himself in his seat, as if he could no longer bear to be anywhere unless he were absolutely comfortable. “I took the liberty of reviewing the murder of Madame L’Espanaye, and her daughter at the Rue Morgue.” For a split second, Dupin’s amused look seemed to falter. “According to local rumor, you undertook solving the murder, seemingly for your own personal amusement. You even went as far as to refuse a financial reward, despite your humble circumstance”

“There was also an innocent man, accused of a crime he did not commit,” Dupin reminded him, though whether he was defensive of his own dignity, or possessed by some other passion, none could say. Dupin’s face drifted back towards the window, as if to hide his expression.

“Ah yes, Adolphe Le Bon,” the Belgian nodded thoughtfully, searching his memory. “Is it true that he was framed by an orangutan?”

Dupin shrugged. “Framed may be awarding too much credit.”

“Yes, well. In any case,” he continued, “It reveals a contradiction in your character. For, I went on to discover that when you were conscripted to retrieve a stolen letter, for the Queen of France, you were known to have made a particular occasion on the issue of payment.” Poirot paused, tilting his egg shaped head back, ever so slightly. “If I recall correctly, you insisted they write you a check immediately, just after doubling your reward.”

He nodded, still gazing out the window as his mind thought back to those early misadventures. “May I ask to your meaning, sir?” Dupin inquired.

Poirot fixed Dupin with a firm, steely gaze. “Profit or pleasure, mon cher Chevalier. Which is your motive in pursuing your cases, and which is your motive in pursuing the death of Sherlock Holmes?” he demanded bluntly, officiously. “Do you pursue truth? Some higher virtue? Or are you simply a hired hand, out for his own gain? If we are indeed to work in tandem, this much I must know of your character.”

The Belgian waited patiently, watching his new companion like a kettle on the stove, waiting to whistle. But he was only welcomed by silence.

“Well?” Poirot prompted him.

Dupin turned back to him, sporting that same sly grin, showing off his teeth and looking thoroughly amused. “It’s as I said, my good man - who doesn’t love a good mystery?”

Arriving at their destination, the cab pulled over to the side of the road, and let them out. Recalling his companions earlier promise of splitting the fare, Poirot felt all the more stiff as Dupin made no objections as he paid the driver by himself. All the same, Poirot said nothing of it.

“I might inquire as to our plan of action,” Dupin remarked, as the carriage rolled down the street away from them. “After all, that book was the only clue I had, and I went to six different book shops before I found a copy.”

Hercule Poirot chuckled, a jollier sound that Dupin might have guessed from his idea of the man. “Such a lack of imagination, Chevalier. If we cannot locate a book, than the answer is simple.” Dupin followed the Belgian’s eyes, as they turned to gaze up at the building towering behind them. “We go to the author.”

C. Auguste Dupin and Hercule Poirot met with Folton Finch in his office, up on the fifth floor. Finch sat across from them on the other side of his imposing, polished mahogany desk, next to which there was a cage containing a black bird. A raven, if Poirot had to hazard a guess. And for reasons Poirot could not fully understand, but was never the less delighted by, his companion Dupin seemed inherently unnerved by the bird’s presence, which meant he rarely talked during the meeting.

Poirot was loathe to confess it, but it brought him no small amount of satisfaction to see Dupin’s usually brash and self satisfied veneer cracked, even if only for a short while.

The author Folton Finch was for his part, not a wholly imposing fellow. Poirot himself could hardly be described as a giant, but Finch appeared as though a slight breeze might startle him, if not subdue him over entirely. Poirot knew however not to be deceived by appearances - all ten of Finch’s published books over the past twenty years had been bestsellers, and he himself was worth a fortune most men can only dream of.

Finch sat there patiently, sipping his tea as they asked him questions. “Yes, I read all about his passing in the newspaper. Such a pity,” he remarked, shaking his head sadly. “Poor, poor Sherlock.”

“You knew him then?” Poirot asked.

“Oh yes, I knew him. Mostly through business, but also - I would’ve liked to think - as a friend.”

Poirot paused momentarily, glancing at Dupin, who was still nervously watching the raven like a hawk. “Mister Finch, when Mister Holmes was found dead last Monday, a copy of your book, *Crossroads & Crossguards*, was found with him. It seems as though it was the last thing he was reading before he died. Can you think of any reason why that might be?”

“I can’t imagine so, no,” Finch answered, dropping another sugar cube into his tea. “*Crossroads & Crossguards* was a historical fiction I wrote, sadly enough, mostly to pay the bills. Not nearly as good as some of my other works.”

The Belgian nodded, scribbling in his notepad. “Now, you said you knew Holmes mainly from business. Exactly what kind of business were the two of you involved with?”

At this line of questioning, Finch started to look uncomfortable. “I really don’t know if I should say. Client confidentiality and everything.”

“I can assure you Mister Finch, that everything you tell me and my associate will be kept in the closest confidence.” Studying the small man closely, Poirot could tell by the anxious tapping of his finger on the table, that Finch had something he wanted to confess. “And I hope I needn’t remind you, any information you can provide may prove crucial in bringing Holmes’ killer to justice.”

At the end of a long silence, Finch finally gave in. “Holmes approached me shortly after the death of his older brother, Mycroft. He wanted to hire me as his biographer, and write his life story, from beginning to end,” he told them, setting down his cup of tea. Finch gauged their reactions, and tried to explain. “He was getting on in years, and it’s not exactly uncommon for a man to think of such things in his twilight years.”

“I simply would’ve imagined he’d want Doctor Watson, for such an undertaking” Dupin commented, still keeping an eye on the raven, like it might explode at any moment. “After all, he chronicled all their adventures together, back when Holmes was still in his prime.”

Finch shrugged. “He said he wanted a professional touch. Not to mention Doctor Watson is quite busy nowadays - being a family man and all. I’m sure Holmes just didn’t want to take up any of his time.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” Dupin said, though Poirot was quite well aware that neither of them was even remotely convinced.

Sighing warily to himself, Finch leaned forward on his desk, clenching his hands together anxiously. "There's more. About six months after Holmes had been coming to visit me, to write his biography, I confessed to him that I believed I was being followed. I only caught glimpses of him here and there - about five and a half feet, in a dark coat and a flat cap." In Finch's voice, the men could hear how frightened he was. "At first I thought I might just be paranoid. Then one night, somebody broke into my home. I called the police and locked myself in my study with a revolver. Whoever it was, was gone by the time they arrived." Finch tried to take a sip of tea to soothe himself, but his hands wouldn't stop shaking as he lifted the cup and saucer, clinking the delicate china together. "I asked Holmes if he would look into it for me, as a personal favor."

"Did he find anything?" Poirot asked.

"I don't know," Finch admitted timidly, seeming as though he might shrink into the floor itself. "The next time I saw him, he just assured me everything was fine, saying he'd taken care of it. He-" the man paused suddenly, thoughtfully, before continuing. "He also apologized to me, saying it was all his fault. I assumed he was just being dramatic - you know how he could get - but now I wonder if maybe he didn't mean something else entirely."

Poirot raised an eyebrow, inquisitively. "You suspect it may have had something to do with your work? With Holmes' biography?"

His face was slowly turning pale, looking as though he was suffering from indigestion. "Oh, I don't know what to think anymore," Finch moaned pitifully, leaning further and further forward. "I should've known better. I should've known better than to get involved with the Holmes boys."

The Belgian assessed the little author with a firm, focused face, before rising from his chair. "Thank you very much, Mister Finch. I think we have all that we need for now." Dupin rose from his own chair, to join Poirot as he departed. The raven let out a shrill caw, rattling its cage, and causing the Chevalier to jump.

Monsieur Poirot read from a book on the cab ride back. Before leaving his office, Folton Finch had gifted them both with a copy of *Crossroads & Crossguards*. An avid reader, Poirot flicked through pages every thirty seconds, while smirking in amusement at Dupin out of the corner of his eye.

"I didn't think to imagine the proud Chevalier would be so easily unsettled by a tiny little black bird," he chided him with great pleasure.

Dupin curled his upper lip ruefully. "All right thinking people are unsettled by black birds," he bit back.

Poirot shrugged. "Well perhaps you will change that opinion in the future."

"Nevermore," he muttered under his breath.

They felt another bump in the road, as they crossed back into the residential district, headed back towards Baker Street and Doctor John Watson, the next stop on their list. Dupin recalled what Lestrade had said, that the good doctor had been inconsolable since hearing about Holmes, and pondered the kind of friendship the two men must have shared, for his passing to affect him so.

Much of it eluded Dupin's grasp, but then, the Chevalier would have had to confess that he had a very unique definition of friendship. For instance, the fact that the Belgian had proved utterly prolific in annoying Dupin, was much the same reason he was rather growing fond of the man.

Peering out of the corner of his eye, Dupin spied Poirot reading Finch's book. "What do you make of it so far?" he asked.

"So far?" Poirot echoed. He gave one last glance at the page he was on, before abruptly snapping the book shut. "Nothing much, other than it is rubbish. If the man is a murderer, it would certainly explain how his book managed to become a bestseller."

Some of the self assured smirk flickered back to life, on Dupin's face. "Sometimes you have to read between the lines, Monsieur Poirot," he informed him smugly. "Especially when it's a mystery."

Straightening his posture, Poirot observed him sceptically. "Is there something that you wish to tell me?"

"There is something I wish to *show* you," Dupin said, reaching into his jacket. He produced a small glass vial, stopped with a cork, and holding black ashy residue within. "Have a look at this, and tell me what you make of it."

Carefully Dupin handed the vial to Poirot, who took it and studied the contents vigilantly. Holding it up to the light, he slowly removed the stopper, lifted the lid of the vial up to his nose, and took a sniff. At once, Poirot's eyes nearly popped out of his head, overcome with surprise.

"It can't be... Is that...?" he stared in awe. "Metravine powder?"

"Ah, you know it then?"

Quickly stopping the vial back up, Poirot held it back to the light, as if to double check his findings. "I encountered it only once, during a brief stay in Bangkok. One of the most rare and versatile explosives on the black market. Even a small pinch can create a massive explosion."

"And more importantly, it's practically untraceable," Dupin continued his train of thought, taking back the vial, which he thought Poirot was just a bit too eager to hand back to him. "Metravine burns itself up, leaving almost nothing behind. And it's so uncommon, no average lawman would know how to check for it."

"In other words, the perfect murder weapon," he proclaimed in a hushed tone. Poirot proclaimed it with certainty, making it clear he was not asking for confirmation, or a second opinion. He simply leaned back in the hansom cab, relishing the knowledge that they were one step closer.

By the time they arrived at Baker Street, Lestrade and his lot had finally taken the body and cleared out, having believed the apartment to have been stripped of all useful evidence. Holmes' study had been somewhat restored, following the damage of the explosion, though you could still make out the faint scorch marks on the framing of the room.

Poirot sat with his notepad, in a chair they'd brought in from the kitchen, while Dupin was standing, always pacing about the study, always on the move. Doctor Watson was sitting on the sofa, wedged between two women - one was his wife, Mary, while the other was Miss Maris, the housekeeper. She was thin and frail, with green eyes and silver hair.

The good doctor's eyes were rimmed with red veins - proof he had indeed been sobbing for several days. His face was weathered and worn out, as his wife held his hand vigilantly. Watson and Poirot both kept their canes close by, betraying their respective limps.

"I still can't believe he's really gone," Watson murmured, his voice drenched in despair. "After all these years, after so many adventures. Like the time we hunted the hounds of the Baskerville. Or Sherlock's first battle with Moriarty, at the Reichenbach Falls," he listed off proudly, eyes glistening with the memories of years gone by. Dupin and Poirot looked at each other nervously. "Or there was this one time, when Holmes was dressed as a vicar, and he-"

"Yes, yes," Poirot cut him off anxiously fearing that he would go on for hours. "We all feel your loss, Doctor Watson. You have our deepest condolences." Flipping through his notepad, he found a blank page, and kept his sharp pencil at the ready.

“Now I’m sorry to have to ask this doctor, but can you account for your whereabouts during the time that Sherlock Holmes was murdered?”

It seemed as though Watson was still lost in the memories of his time with Holmes. His wife answered for him. “We were at home all weekend. We moved out to the country, to get away from city life.”

“So you, Missus Watson, are the good doctor’s only alibi?” Poirot asked her pointedly, making the implication clear.

“Our neighbors,” Mary said quickly, realizing her mistake. “We invited the couple down the road to ours, for Sunday dinner. And they would’ve seen us coming in and out of the house.”

“Just so,” Dupin chimed happily. Circling about the sofa, his scrutinous gaze fell on Miss Maris. “Now I have been told that you took over as the caretaker for this estate, shortly after the late Missus Hudson left us.”

“Yes, that was about eleven years ago,” she confirmed graciously.

“And you were the only one who had a spare key, to the room where he was murdered?” Dupin questioned cuttingly.

“Now hold on, just a moment-” Watson started, ready to rush to her defense.

Miss Maris stopped him, gently placing her hand on his shoulder. “It’s alright, Johnny. We can trust these men. They’re here to help,” she assured him. Miss Maris looked at Poirot, and the Belgian noticed a strange look come into her eyes, saying the old lady was not nearly as faded as she appeared. “Yes, I had the only key. I took it with my on Friday, when I left for Nottingham.”

“What about Doctor Watson?” Dupin inquired, now standing by the light of the open window. “He used to live at Baker Street with Holmes, didn’t he? Surely he would have a spare key.”

Watson shook his head sadly. “I returned my key to Holmes when I moved out. Sherlock Holmes was more than a friend to me,” he assured the two gentlemen, his voice quivering, “He was my partner, and a lifelong companion. But the truth is, after I married Mary and settled down, we simply started seeing less and less of each other.”

“Is that so?” Poirot asked. And then he raised his eyebrow in that very slow, deliberate way that he did, which Dupin was becoming convinced was engineered solely to irritate him.

“I had my own affairs taking up my time, and Holmes was still preoccupied with his mysteries - you know the way things are.” Sniffing loudly, Watson’s wife

offered him a handkerchief to blow his nose. "There was a long period where indeed, we did not see nor hear from each other at all. But to my great joy, we reconnected over the last few years. I suspect," Watson suggested with a dire certainty, "That he needed a shoulder to lean on, while he was still dealing with his brother."

"Mycroft?" Dupin squeaked in surprise. His head flooded with memories from his childhood, of a tall boy who used to look down his nose at Dupin, while their families were visiting each other. "What happened to Mycroft?"

"Near the end of his life, Mycroft Holmes had started to succumb to a terrible case of dementia. My dear Holmes tried his best for him," Watson told them the story, with the same urbane wit and tact which had chronicled so many of his adventures with the great detective. "It still astounds me even to say it out loud. Back in his prime, Mycroft was a force of nature - he operated the entire British government, practically by sheer force of will. But in those last few days..." the good doctor paused, feeling chills crawl up his spine. "Truly dreadful business. No idea where he was, what was happening. He couldn't even use the restroom without someone helping him. I defy you sirs, to devise a more dreadful scene, than a man sitting across from his own brother, and having him fail to recognize him."

With his vivid imagination, Dupin was quite sure he could envision several scenarios far more dreadful, but he held his tongue all the same. Studying his companion, Poirot for his part, did not seem altogether without sympathy.

Blowing his nose, Watson folded up the handkerchief, and put it away. "Sad as it is to confess, I think Holmes was more relieved than anything when his older brother finally passed on."

"Surely you can't mean that," Poirot reasoned with him.

Doctor Watson shrugged, seeming as though someone had pricked him with a needle, and he had slowly deflated. "After a time, loss and grief becomes comfortable, like a pair of old leather shoes. I suppose Sherlock got used to saying goodbye. Nowadays all of his friends - all of *our* friends - have all gone to meet their maker. Dear Mycroft perishing without dignity in the hospital, poor Missus Hudson falling down the stairs... several years ago, we even received word that Irene Adler, his great love, was drowned in the Czech Republic." Beside himself, Watson's lower lip started to quiver most terribly, before he found himself bawling in tears again. "Now I'm the only one left," he sobbed.

His wife Mary held him in her arms. "Oh, there there dear," she consoled him. "It'll be alright. Everything's going to be alright."

“It should’ve been me,” Watson kept sobbing to himself. “God help me, it should’ve been me!”

More than a little discomforted at this outcry of emotion, and more than a little aware that they had overstayed their welcome, the two men thanked them for their cooperation, and Miss Maris showed them the way out.

Leaving Baker Street for the second time that week, Dupin and Poirot walked along the open London street, upon Poirot’s insistence that they travel by foot rather than take a cab. As they walked, they discussed and debated their respective investigative methods.

“As far as I can surmise,” Poirot started them off, “We both agree it is a simple means of logic. Order and method. Using our *little grey cells*, to follow the clues to a natural and obvious conclusion.”

Dupin jumped in almost immediately, never passing up a chance to make use of his rather extensive vocabulary. “You are broadly speaking accurate, though that is somewhat of an oversimplification. The police - and I say this not to offend, as I know you have an endearing predisposition to law enforcement - waste too much time focusing on physical evidence, and supposed clues.” The Chevalier paused to adjust his collar, betraying his own vanity. “I on the other hand, identify with the criminal suspect. I inhabit their minds, and thus, know everything they know, and can therefore solve any crime. Ratiocination,” Dupin presented the word to him grandly, as if he had just presented the Western Star, “The process of exact thinking. The combination of scientific logic, with artistic imagination.”

“Again we find ourselves, most astoundingly in agreement, mon cher Chevalier,” Poirot conceded, both men finding it akin to some strange foreign land, or a far off alien world, to be on the same page. “I must concede that I too find the nature of the victim, or the psychology of the murderer, far more useful than the so called conventional clues, read about in detective fiction. The slope of a footprint? The ashes of a cigar?” The Belgian scoffed. “It is an essential and fundamental truth that crimes are committed by the criminal, and a window into that criminal motive is the height of utility.”

Dupin tilted his head, a devious gleam in his eyes, like he had won some sort of game. “Do I detect us at some sort of understanding, my fine fellow?”

Hearing this, the Belgian scoffed again - not entertained, but feigning entertainment. “I understand that you a snob, Monsieur Dupin. Your only interest is in pure logic, and you believe that your aptitude for reasoning puts you above the common man. Methinks your family’s fall from grace may yet have left a chip on your

shoulder.” Stopping at the corner, Poirot smoothed out the front of his suit, unable to abide a single imperfection. “Myself, I prefer to be underestimated.”

“Ah, is that why you have a tendency to feign broken English, even though it is quite clear you are capable of fluency?” the Chevalier’s eyes sparkled, as he thrust his symbolic saber at his worthy foe. “Or perhaps you were referring to how you feign your limp, to make it appear worse than it actually is? You call me an enigma, but quite honestly my good man, I would be surprised if anything about your character was more than fiction.”

“If we’re going to play this game again... You will need a better hand,” Poirot countered his thrust playfully, cupping his hands cordially behind his back. “Especially since you have yet to observe what is right in front of you.” A moment passed. “Or behind you,” he added.

Dupin stared at his companion momentarily, not yet grasping his meaning, when suddenly his eyes lit up. Acting with all reasonable subtlety, Dupin glanced over his shoulder, spotting a suspicious looking man, about five feet in height, dressed in a heavy dark coat with a flat hat, walking several feet behind them. Dupin waited for thirty seconds, and then checked again to make certain.

“We’re being followed,” Dupin observed.

“Indeed. Since before we arrived at Baker Street, to question the Watsons,” he elaborated. Dupin suddenly noticed the self satisfied smirk Poirot had stolen from him, and was now wearing on his own face. “I observed him passing over a number of perfectly good cabs, only getting into one once we did.”

“You knew?!” Dupin blustered. “And you didn’t think to tell me?!”

“I had faith you would get there eventually,” his companion mocked him, taking the wind out of him. “Besides, I would’ve hated to spoil the ending for you.”

Rather than stop right there and give Poirot a piece of his mind, Dupin settled for storing away all his biting remarks for later, and focusing on their current dilemma. Walking at an even pace, they turned around the next corner, as their shadow kept chase with them, trying not to get too close, nor stray too far to lose them. It was only when the two well dressed gentlemen darting across the street without warning, and into an alley, that a flash of worry crossed his face.

Picking up the pace, the man in the trench coat hurried after them. He paused at the entrance to the alleyway, refusing to give the game away so quickly. Slowly he peered out from the corner, and was shocked to find the alley completely empty. Dashing inside, he swiveled his head around searching for his quarry, before turning

his head up to see the two gentlemen scrambling their way up the fire escape towards the roof.

“Bloody hell!” the man in the trenchcoat exclaimed in fury.

Like a hound on a racetrack he was after them, unsheathing a large dagger from inside his jacket. With their feet clanking against the rusted metal of the fire escape, they climbed with great haste, Poirot leading the front, and Dupin following him up the rear.

They reached the top of the roof at breakneck speed, and quickly inspected the fifteen foot distance between the next building, and the thirty foot plummet that awaited them down below. With a running start, and the sound of their pursuer still climbing after them, Poirot took the honor of jumping first. He landed on the other side of the chasm with a thud, just nearly falling short of the mark.

Fire blazing in his eyes, Dupin followed suite, running for the ledge just as the cutthroat took a swipe at him with his dagger. Gliding through the air, Dupin undershot the ledge and felt himself tumbling downwards, before Poirot grabbed his wrist, and pulled him back up.

“Thank you,” Dupin gasped for breath.

Grinding his teeth together, the cutthroat girded himself and took a running leap after them, off the edge of the building, making the very simple mistake of not inspecting it first. The cutthroat’s heart nearly leapt out of his chest, when hovering in midair he saw the cavernous drop down beneath him. Letting out a shrill shriek of terror, he glided towards the other building, falling just below the edge.

A moment passed, as the two men glanced at each other. Then tentatively, they sauntered over and peered over the edge, to find their bloodthirsty cutthroat clinging for dear life to the side of the building.

“Oh god’s love and mercy, ‘elp me!” he pleaded in a thick cockney accent, as his dagger plummeted down below to the ground.

“My, oh my, the poor chap does seem to be in a fix,” Dupin remarked conversationally, positively relishing the literal high ground he’d seized.

“Please! It weren’t my fault!” he begged them shamelessly. “Not ol’ Pearly! Ol’ Pearly’d never do nothin’ to nobody!” His eyes went wide, as a thought popped into his head. “It was ‘im! E’ did it! E’ put me up to it alright!”

Poirot twirled his moustache, as he did when he was calculating. “Who put you up to it?”

“Who’d ya think?!” Pearly screamed at them. “*Moriarty!* E’ just tol’ me to follow the clever talkin’ detective. Never said there’d be two of ya,” he remarked crossly, glancing between the two of them. “You was supposed ta’ be carryin’ around a diamond in yer pocket! I were supposed to jumps ya, and steals it!” He clenched his eyes shut, struggling to keep his grip. “Please, it weren’t ma fault! Not ol’ Pearly!”

Poirot and Dupin shared a curious look with each other, drawing it out just long enough for Pearly to confess his sins, and make peace with his living god. And then, almost reluctantly, Dupin strolled over to the edge and grabbed hold of Pearly, the very instant that the cutthroat’s grip had failed him.

The Chevalier dragged Pearly up onto the roof, and then, using what he’d learned in his younger days fighting ruffians in the street, Dupin leashed Pearly with his belt. Cutting off his air, every time he started to rant on, the two of them dragged Pearly down to the street, and then to the nearest police station. There Dupin released his windpipe, and throw the cutthroat in a dirty cell.

“You got ta believe me,” Pearly whined from behind bars, like a donkey beaten with a stick. “It weren’t ma fault! It were Moriarty you see! E’s behind all of this, I tell you! I’m just a-”

“Would you keep him quiet?” Poirot demanded in frustration. Happy to oblige, Dupin thwacked the bars on Pearly’s cage, scaring him away like a rat, while the Belgian continued dialing on the phone.

“Who might you be calling?” he inquired.

Poirot looked up, cupping the phone to his ear. “My hotel,” his eyes lit up, as his call was answered. “Ah! Hello? Yes, I was wondering if you might have a parlour room I could use?”

The very next day at the stroke of noon, Poirot and Dupin were in the parlour room, kept in the lodgings Poirot had chosen to stay. Dupin was waiting by the wall with his arms folded, while Poirot was puttering about the room, straightening out pillows, and smoothing out the curtains. Much like his appearance, everything in the parlour room had to be set exact, and precise, for it to be perfect.

The guests had been sent for, were on their way, and would be arriving shortly. Inspector Lestrade was down the hall in the lobby, still trying to guess who the murderer was, before the big reveal.

“Is all this really necessary?” Dupin asked, surveying the elaborate decor of the room.

Poirot turned to a mirror, giving a last minute adjustment to his appearance. "It is entirely necessary, mon cher Chevalier. This is the moment when I gather the suspects, and reveal who murdered Sherlock Holmes, as well as how they did it, why they did it, and most importantly, how I deduced the truth."

"Yes..." Dupin rolled his syllables, in an accusatory fashion. "That is, *if* you know who did it."

Frowning, Poirot turned on his companion, lines creasing on his face. "Of course I know who did it. Don't be absurd." Though to his shame, the unshakable confidence of his companion was starting to plant a seed of doubt in Poirot's mind.

The truth was, every single time Poirot had assembled his suspects in a parlour, he always had the facts laid out in front of him beforehand, and he was always completely certain of the truth. And in this case as well, he was completely certain who the killer was. The trouble as it lay, was that for this case, Poirot was only completely and absolutely certain that one suspect was the culprit, for about ten minutes at a time - and then something would occur to him, and he would become completely and absolutely certain that another suspect was the culprit.

Dupin shrugged carelessly. "Very well. Just as long as you don't feel too *showy and superficial*," he remarked with a smirk, only causing Poirot's frown lines to deepen.

The doors opened, and they entered the room, every one of them, one by one. Doctor Watson and his wife Mary were sitting together on a couch, while Miss Maris, the housekeeper, stood by the window cradling a glass of champagne. Folton Finch rested in an armchair with a lamp illuminating his thin, pale face.

Lestrade's men were already stationed around the room, as the Inspector himself entered. Behind him, he dragged the young cutthroat Pearly, wrists and ankles shackled in handcuffs.

"Ah, Inspector," Poirot greeted him, assessing Pearly with his eyes shining like a cat's. "It seems you've brought our final guest." He leaned closer to the Inspector, making certain the other guests were out of earshot. "And the diamond?" Lestrade nodded, producing the Western Star for Poirot to inspect. "And the second set of handcuffs?"

Lestrade nodded again. "Everything you asked for sir. So," he started eagerly, his mind racing with conspiracy, "Was it the cab driver? No, no, no! Wait - they trained a raven to fly through the window, and- No, wait. Then how would it lock the window when it leaves?" The Inspector fired off his theories quicker than Poirot could answer. "Alright then! Maybe an orangutan-"

“I think,” Poirot cut him off quickly, but gently, “Perhaps you’d better just sit back and listen.”

Lestrade conceded reluctantly, and took his place vigilantly by the door. All the guests surveyed the room anxiously, electricity whizzing through the air. Poirot found Dupin sitting in a comfortable chair, by the back of the room, holding something small and shiny in his hand. Poirot inspected closer - it was a bag of peanuts.

“Oh mon dieu,” he muttered to himself. It seemed the Chevalier’s snobbery knew no bounds.

Taking a deep breath, Poirot poised himself and turned to the room, with all the grace and fluidity of a trained actor, who’d spent a lifetime rehearsing his lines. “Sherlock Holmes, was a great man,” he started strongly, “The sharpest mind of his generation. An extraordinary detective, and an inspiration to us all. This week, he was found dead in a locked room, missing his trademark pipe, and carrying a long lost diamond in his pocket.” Poirot scanned their faces, as he moved about the room, taking in their unsettled reactions. “The clues to solving this mystery are all right here, inside this very room.”

The Belgian paused, turning to the back of the room. Dupin popped a peanut into his mouth, the faint ghost of mockery lingering on his expression. For some indiscernible reason, his companion’s calm demeanour put Poirot on edge, as if Dupin still knew something he did not.

“Don’t see what I’m doing ‘ere,” at once Poirot’s train of thought was interrupted by Pearly’s ear splitting tones. “I already tol’ them everythin’. It was Moriarty what put me up to it,” he explained to them vehemently, rattling his chains in outrage. “E’ tol’ me, follow the smart talkin’ detective, and steal the diamond what he’s got in his pocket. E’s the one what should be ere!”

“Moriarty!” Lestrade exclaimed in excitement. “Well then we should bring him in! He was Holmes’ arch nemesis, he’s the obvious suspect!”

“Obvious, but wrong,” Dupin called smugly from the back of the parlour room. “It’s not him.”

“And how would you know, smart arse?” Pearly demanded.

Poirot stepped in. “Because Professor James Moriarty has been dead for over three years.” His answer was met by a room full of stunned looks. “He and his criminal associates were transporting an illegal shipment of metravine powder - a rare and dangerous explosive - and somehow it was set off. His body was blown to pieces, with several eye witness accounts.”

“Good lord,” Watson muttered in hushed awe.

“How could you possibly know this?” Miss Maris asked them sceptically.

Poirot shrugged modestly. “Well naturally when we heard that Sherlock Holmes had been murdered, our first instinct was to suspect the arch nemesis who’d been trying to kill him for most of his life. Both Mister Dupin and myself had the foresight to make inquiries, which soon unveiled the truth about Moriarty.”

“Lies!” howled Pearly in desperation. “I only spoke ta’ the professor just last week. E’s the one what put me up ta this!”

“Just so, Pearly?” Poirot questioned him firmly. “Or were you merely in talks with a man who *claimed* to be Professor Moriarty? Pray, can you describe what your absent principal looked like?”

“E’... e’...” Pearly stammered helplessly. “E was, you know... Hunched over. Bit of a broken voice. Twitch in his eye, and e’ talked with a lisp.” Poirot and Dupin both looked at each other, at the exact same moment.

“A disguise?” Poirot asked him.

“Quite possibly,” Dupin nodded.

Turning on his heels, Poirot paraded in front of the sofa. “In any case, it proves as a dead man, Moriarty could not possibly have been the culprit.”

“Ah, so he did it!” Lestrade exclaimed, pointing a gloved finger at Pearly.

“No! No! Never! Never!” Pearly defended himself. “I wasn’t even nowhere near Baker Street when e’ snuffed it! I was down at the pub! You can ask the lads, they’ll vouch for me!”

Approaching Lestrade and Pearly, Poirot gently lowered Lestrade’s finger from the cutthroat’s face. “This much I’m afraid is true. We’ve followed up on his alibi.” Poirot turned his back on a disappointed Lestrade, facing the room again. “Neither is our dear cutthroat Pearly, the culprit.” With polished leather shoes, Poirot stalked his way throughout the parlour, like a panther preparing to pounce. “Which leads me to question you... Mister Finch.”

Folton Finch, who had been taking a sip of water, nearly choked on it. “Me? Er... what about me?” he squeaked like a mouse.

“Begging your pardon good sir, but when my companion and I questioned you at your office, you rather gave yourself away,” Poirot reminded him, a twinkle of mischief in his eye. “When you said that you should never have gotten in business with the *Holmes boys*. Boys, plural. Not just Sherlock himself.”

“But that was just... I mean, what I meant was...” Finch tried, searching for shovel to dig himself out, before he sighed in surrender.

“You knew Mycroft Holmes,” Dupin stated, rather than asked.

Finch nodded. “Yes, I knew him. Even before I met Sherlock,” the author explained, looking utterly defeated. “Mycroft approached me many years ago, when I was just starting as a writer, and offered to enter into an arrangement.”

Poirot raised his eyebrow. “And what was the nature of your arrangement?”

“I’m a lousy author,” Finch confessed, with as much weight as if he were confessing to the murder. “But Mycroft had a use for me. Being in the government, often times Mycroft would have agents placed in the field, who he couldn’t contact by direct means. So,” he breathed heavily, “Mycroft promised to use his connections to make sure my books were globally successful, and universally adored - just so long as I allowed him to plant messages inside them, using secret codes. That way his agents could receive their instructions, without arousing suspicion.”

Munching on another peanut, Dupin rolled his eyes. It seemed as though Poirot had been right on the money about the quality of Finch’s literature.

“Ah ha!” Lestrade exclaimed again. “So *he* killed him! To uh, uh... No! Because he...” the Inspector calmed down, as he saw Poirot shaking his head. “No? Ah, alright then.” And then he stopped talking.

Poirot turned back to Finch. “Did you bring what I requested?” Finch nodded, and retrieved a manuscript from his bag, handing it to the Belgian without argument. With his usual speed reading, Poirot flipped through the biography, with something nearly stopping him, and provoking some confusion. Poirot felt that seed of doubt inside him start to blossom.

Shaking it off, Poirot continued. “No indeed, though a fraud Folton Finch may be, a murderer most certainly not. Certainly he does not seem the type for things like murder, blood, war...” he paused dramatically, circling around to tower before the sofa. “Not like you... Doctor Watson.” The good doctor blinked in astoundment, as his wife clung on to him. “Tell me good doctor, how long had you and Holmes known each other, before he passed?”

“Almost forty years,” Watson reported obediently.

Poirot considered. “Mmm hmm... And how long had you been lovers?”

“I-” Watson looked like he was about to argue ferociously, but something about the look on Poirot’s face halted him. And then he just slouched on the couch,

appearing tired more than anything. "Ever since the Reichenbach Falls. Our very first case together."

"My word man!" Lestrade bellowed in shock. "Say it can't be true!"

Watson flipped on him in rage, almost like a switch had been pulled in him. "You don't understand! You will never understand what it was like!" his lower lip was quivering, on the verge of tears even as he yelled. "He wasn't just a man! He was Sherlock Holmes! He was my partner, my everything, he-" the good doctor paused, as he saw his wife, looking overcome with guilt. "Mary, I-"

"I knew," she told him. There was no rage, nor grief, nor resentment of any nature in her. Simply flat resignation, which cut deeper than any knife. "I think deep down, I always knew."

John and Mary held hands, as Poirot picked up again. "I shall tell you a story of two men - running off on grand adventures, risking life and limb to uncover the great mysteries of the world. Passions ran high, and a secret was born between them. A secret the world could never know." Unable to speak himself, Watson seemed both relieved and outraged that the Belgian was telling this story. "To maintain appearances, the good doctor married and settled down. He and his great love, the great detective, lost touch until a few years ago, when they rekindled their old flame."

Doctor Watson sniffed. "It was just like old times again. Only him and me, against the rest of the world."

"Disgusting," Lestrade muttered to himself, at a volume he thought only he himself could hear.

"Not as perfect as you thought though," Poirot countered raising a finger. "After the death of his brother, Holmes started seeing you less and less. You became suspicious, started following him, and discovered his secret meetings with Folton Finch," he gestured to the tiny author. "You thought that Holmes was seeing another man."

Finch pleaded, "I was only writing his autobiography. His life story."

"In a way, that would have been just as awful," Watson confessed shamefully. "That he would trust such a sacred task to anybody but me. It wounds me like a dagger in my heart."

"Oh, oh!" Lestrade was jumping excitedly. "So he killed him! He murdered Sherlock Holmes in a fit of jealousy!"

Watson nearly leapt from his chair. "Never!"

“Calm yourself, good doctor,” Poirot advised him sternly. “You are not yet accused of murder. Though,” he added slyly, “You are the one who broke into Finch’s home, are you not?”

“I was angry.” Doctor Watson hung his head in shame. “And I was drunk. I don’t believe that I wanted to hurt him, though my memory of that night is hazy.”

“That was you?!” Finch nearly fell out of his chair.

“Are you sure it wasn’t him?” Lestrade asked again, unconvinced.

“Indeed not,” Poirot assured him. “The good doctor’s alibi still clears him of the deed, as it does his wife. And their involvement would still not account for the priceless diamond found in Holmes’ jacket pocket.” Beckoning to Lestrade, he rushed over and handed the Western Star to the Belgian, who held it up to sparkle in the light. “The Western Star. A diamond of such rare beauty and allure. A diamond which had been placed under thorough security and supervision. A diamond which could only have been stolen by you... Miss Maris.”

A collective gasp from the room, as the delicate looking housekeeper turned from the window. She smiled at Poirot warmly, almost indulgently.

“Why I never!” said Mary Watson.

Lestrade shook his head. “Surely you can’t be serious, Poirot. She’s a little old lady - she couldn’t harm anybody.”

“A little old lady she might be,” Poirot admitted, “But the Western Star would surely have been easy pickings for a thief of your reputable skills. Wouldn’t it Miss Maris. Or may I call you, Miss Adler?”

“Call me Irene,” she implored him smoothly, offering her hand. “Please.”

Watson’s eyes were as wide as dinner plates. “How extraordinary! She looks completely different!”

Miss Stella Maris, now Irene Adler, set down her champagne glass. “A simple rubbing of exotic snake oil to change my hair color, coconut milk for the skin tone, raise my voice an octave or two, and voila,” she presented herself with a flourish. Then she sighed, almost mournfully. “Back in the day, my dear Sherlock would have seen through such a pitiful disguise in moments.”

“He didn’t though, did he?” Dupin queried. He’d been lounging so quietly in the back, busy enjoying the show, that everyone had almost forgotten he was there.

She shook her head. “No, it took him years to figure out who I really was. And then he only realized it, because he discovered the Western Star hidden in my

things.” The woman turned on her hips, pressing both hands over her chest. Her posture was altogether transformed. “Do you have any idea how it feels to have the world’s greatest detective standing right in front of you, and have him not even recognize you. It’s enough to make a girl weep. And after I put such an obvious clue right under his nose.”

“Clue?” Watson looked stupefied, as usual.

“Her name,” Poirot expostiated generously, twirling his moustache confidently. “Stella Maris. It’s an old medieval term, meaning the *star of the sea*. It is also another word for *Polaris*, the northern star - as opposed to the Western Star. A clue to our landlady’s true identity, and the identity of the jewel thief.” He held up the diamond for effect, before motioning to Lestrade. “My dear Inspector, I believe the time has now come for you to make use of those spare handcuffs.”

“With pleasure sir,” Inspector Lestrade obliged, shackling them over Irene Adler’s wrists, who didn’t put up any sort of fight. “So um... *she* killed him?” Lestrade asked uncertainly. “Definitely this time?”

Miss Adler rolled her eyes. “Oh, don’t be absurd. I’m a thief, not a murderer. I may have led Sherlock on a death defying chase, risking life and limb every now and again - but that was how we showed affection.” She swooned sweetly at the memory. “Besides which, my alibi is still air tight.”

“Just so, madame. And so we come to the endgame,” Poirot began, launching into his final tirade, even as something was nagging at him in the back of his head. Something that had caught his eye in the manuscript for Sherlock’s biography. “The truth behind the death of Sherlock Holmes. The evidence now laid down in front of us, we draw the inevitable conclusions. Who had means, motive, and opportunity?” The Belgian declared boldly, as the Chevalier watched on in great amusement, still munching on his peanuts.

“Was it the desperate young cutthroat,” Poirot glared at Pearly, still rattling his chains and shaking in his boots, “Guided by the hand of a ghostly villain, and the promise of stolen treasure?”

He circled around to Folton Finch, looking ever more queasy and uncomfortable. “Or perhaps it was the fraudulent author, drowning in a sea of secrets and lies, possibly concerned his own secret to fame might be sniffed out, by a discerning and well accomplished detective?”

“Could it maybe have been the best friend?” Doctor Watson sat stiffly on the couch, his wife clinging to him. “His ever faithful companion, scorched by the flames of lost love, after years of love and loyalty turned to bitter jealousy?”

Swiftly turning on his heels, Poirot pointed a finger to Irene, bound in handcuffs. "Or was it the cunning master thief with the key to his apartment, and the key to heart, finally tired of playing a dangerous game which had ceased to amuse her long ago?"

Hercule Poirot stood in the center of the room, planting his feet firm as he prepared for the coup de grace, even as he couldn't escape the feeling that he was missing something. It was as if the cogs in his brain were still turning, and he was powerless to stop them.

"Through either a lie, or the truth, the culprit is bound to give themselves away!" Poirot declared with utter certainty. "And after using all the power of my mind, it is clear to me that this mystery is... That this mystery is..."

Suddenly Poirot felt his gaze drawn to the back of the room, where he saw Dupin still smirking. That knowing smirk, that irked him so. And suddenly, like the click of a revolver, everything fell into place. At once the Belgian realized what the Chevalier knew that he did not. He realized what he had seen in the autobiography that had been troubling him so. He instantly grasped what kind of a man could have committed such a murder. And he knew without a shadow of a doubt where Holmes' old pipe had gotten to.

Poirot understood everything. And he knew the identity of the devious culprit, as he slowly turned to Inspector Lestrade, trying to conceal his amazement as he gaped at him.

"This mystery..." Poirot repeated again, all eyes in the room on him, "Is unsolvable," he finished. The parlour room was met with silence. "My apologies Inspector. I was wrong. And I must retire for the evening."

With that, Monsieur Hercule Poirot abruptly exited from the parlour room, as all the guests watched him leave in confusion. The room was left in a still awkward silence, save for the sound of Auguste Dupin, still munching on his peanuts, ever the self satisfied man.

The very next day, C. Auguste Dupin returned to Poirot's hotel, and went upstairs to his room. The Chevalier was not surprised to find the door unlocked, and the man inside waiting for him patiently, if somewhat annoyed.

"You knew," he told Dupin accusingly.

He nodded with a veneer of smugness. "Indeed," Dupin confirmed with a grin, as if the word may as well have been a donkey's ass, peeking out of the front entrance to a convent.

"Is there any particular reason you didn't tell me?" Poirot demanded with his arms crossed gruffly.

Dupin shrugged. "I had faith you would get there eventually. Besides, I would have hated to spoil the ending for you."

The Belgian slapped his hand on his face, despising how his own words were being used against him. "Can you at least oblige me with when you when you uncovered the truth?"

"Well," Dupin started, taking off his coat and making himself comfortable in one of Poirot's armchairs, "To be honest, I wasn't entirely certain. But I had my suspicions from the very beginning, after I inspected Holmes' apartment." He shrugged, as Poirot joined him in the other armchair. There was a chess set laid out between them. "It seemed plainly obvious to me. But more than anything, it just seemed to fit. It's as I said my good man, I inhabit the mind of the criminal. And knowing everything I do about the man, it just seemed natural that the only murderer who could get the best of Sherlock Holmes..."

"Is Sherlock Holmes," Poirot finished for him. He took white on the chessboard, moving his knight-pawn forwards, as if they had been headed for this game since the moment they met in the bookstore.

"As I said, plainly obvious," Dupin admitted, taking up the black, which suited him like a velvet robe. He added with a sparkle between his teeth, "But that doesn't mean I didn't enjoy the ride."

They delved into the game, like the logical and intellectual thinkers they were. Before long, the evidence was spread out in front of them, like pieces on a chess board. "Sherlock Holmes, a great man," Dupin started from the beginning, like the narrator of a play, "The sharpest mind of his generation, starts to get on in years, and wakes up one day to find all his friends disappeared. His cherished landlady, the woman he loves, his elder brother, and even his diabolical arch nemesis have all passed on. And the man he loves, his most loyal companion, has gotten married and - for all intensive purposes - abandoned him." The Chevalier brings his knight charging forth from the end of the board.

"The death of his brother Mycroft, proved particularly unsettling," Poirot continued, striking down the knight with the righteous fury of his bishop. "Seeing his own flesh and blood succumb to dementia, and perish without dignity strikes him to

the core. He begins to fear in his old age, that he may yet be subject to the same fate - having his mind slowly slip away from him.”

Dupin’s own bishop fended off a pair of Poirot’s petulant pawns. “Thus Holmes immediately sets out to avoid this end, by engineering his own death. He seeks out Folton Finch, an author Mycroft had dealings with in the past, and experience in crafting secret messages into works of literature - not knowing of course, that his dear Watson would mistake Finch for a new lover to replace the old, and spiral into the thralls of jealousy. Holmes recruits Finch under the guise of writing his autobiography.”

“Finch did say that Holmes wanted to write down his life story, *from beginning to end*,” Poirot pointed out.

“And if I know anything about Holmes,” Dupin commented wryly, “He would have taken immense pleasure for his final act in this world being one giant mystery to solve.”

Poirot sent his shimmering white knight out into the field, to face Dupin’s duplicitous black knight. “It would have been simple enough for Holmes to guide Finch into unknowingly weaving a coded message into his autobiography. Not a message to some remote government agent, but to anyone who ever managed to solve the death of Sherlock Holmes.”

“He was setting everything into place, when unexpectedly, the final straw came.” Dupin’s knight cut down Poirot’s without mercy nor quarter. “He discovered the Western Star, the priceless jewel, and discovered that his new landlady and caretaker was in fact the woman he loved, not dead as believed. His failure to recognize the infamous Irene Adler right under his nose only reminds him of his brother’s final days, and terrifies him that he may be succumbing to the same ailment. His powers of observation deserting him at last.”

All of Poirot’s knights stood respectfully at attention, as his queen marched out to join them, in all her resplendent glory. “Sherlock had had enough. Keeping the diamond, he disguised himself as Professor Moriarty, and set up Pearly to pursue him and the diamond post mortem. A way to further the intrigue surrounding his death, by both drawing attention to the diamond, and casting aspersions on the demise of his most infamous nemesis.”

Dupin set up his bishop in the path of the white queen, like a trained archer preparing to take the shot. “Diamond in his pocket, manuscript at the ready, and cutthroat on the loose, all that was left was for Holmes to return home and lock himself in his study. And complete his murder mystery, with a controlled implosion, expertly detonated by a concentrated portion of metravine powder, ignited inside his very own pipe.” The Chevalier gave a cheshire cat’s grin as his bishop went in for the

kill. "We couldn't find the damned pipe, because it was reduced to ashes and cinders, at point blank range."

Rising from his chair, Poirot smoothed out the cuffs of his jacket. "It was no murder, but an elaborate suicide. All that remains now, is the autobiography."

Dupin rose as well, leaving the chess game unfinished. Perhaps both men understood, that neither one wished it to be finished just yet. "Have you deciphered it yet?" Dupin asked eagerly.

"Not yet," Poirot answered, tapping the side of his nose.

It took them all afternoon, pouring over the numerous pages of Folton Finch's manuscript, checking for recurring patterns or any clues they might find, written between the lines. But with the two brilliant minds working in tandem, they made short work of it, far swifter than possibly any other men could have. Once they had figured it out, the code seemed rather obvious in retrospect, and it was not long before they had Sherlock Holmes' final message written on a sheet of paper before them, resting on the polished wooden table.

"Well, that's that then," C. Auguste Dupin concluded. "Are you going to tell anyone?"

Monsieur Hercule Poirot shook his head. "I think not sir. You might have known him as a man, but I knew him as the mystery, the legend, the great hero detective. I respected him a great deal, and I would not deprive him of his final wish. Though if I were to have a final wish," he went on, refusing to let the matter drop, "I would know your character sir. Why did you investigate his murder? If not pleasure, if not profit, if not loyalty or virtue, then what?"

He only smiled knowingly. "Nevermore."

Poirot chuckled to himself. "Shall we meet again, monsieur?"

"I shouldn't be at all surprised."

The former policeman stood at attention, stiff and formal as he extended his hand. "Then until the next time, mon cher Chevalier."

Somehow, Dupin didn't seem at all annoyed by the nickname any longer. He shook the Belgian's hand gratefully, and then with a bow, the gentleman Chevalier from Paris, who had never been a detective, left the former policeman turned private detective. Hercule Poirot stayed in his temporary London lodgings for two more days, enjoying the sights of the city before he returned to his explorations of Europe. But that evening, he simply remained in his room, reading the words on a small piece of paper, over and over again.

Seekers of Truth,

My congratulations and condolences are in order to you. For if you are reading this, then I can only imagine you have uncovered the truth concerning my final days. Therefore you have earned my congratulations. And yet I must also offer my condolences, as you now have a very difficult choice to make.

You must now decide what the legacy of Sherlock Holmes will mean to the world. Shall my death be an old man's cowardly escape, from his own broken and fading mind? Or shall it be the epic conclusion in the adventures of a master detective? A pioneer in his profession, hunted by his enemies, his end the subject of debate and conspiracy, continued for years yet untold?

If I have learned anything - and I do hope I have learned, for once one has stopped learning, one may as well be dead from boredom - it is that people do not remember the man. Not truly. They remember the mystery. Indeed, the very thing that kept me coming back, and I do believe, kept people coming back to me, was the promise of a good mystery. The promise of surprise. The thrill of revelation, and the adrenaline of discovery. A new adventure to explore, just beyond the horizon.

As I say, the choice is yours. If nothing else, I take solace that my own story is now concluded, no matter the number of times you may tell it again, in a new light. My best of luck to you.

I remain ever your faithful servant,

The late Sherlock Holmes