

THE PURLOINED LABRADOODLE

by BARRY B. LONGYEAR

* * * *

Wherein Jaggars and Shad give new meaning to the phrase
“impersonating an ... officer?”

I had originally intended these narratives to address the more significant inquiries Guy Shad and I worked in our time together in the Exeter office of Artificial Beings Crimes. An incautious comment I made in my chronicle of Shad’s death in “The Hangingstone Rat,” however, touched upon my suspicion Shad might have his rescued engrams imprinted temporarily on a celebrity look-alike bio of British actor Nigel Bruce while his mallard duck replacement meat suit matured. Nigel Bruce, of course, was known primarily for his role as the bumbling Dr. Watson in the grayscale Sherlock Holmes vids of the mid twentieth century. I deduced this attire would amuse Shad to no end due to my police replacement bio strongly resembling Basil Rathbone, the actor who played Sherlock Holmes in the same series.

Since Shad regarded me as something of a foil for his humor, due to his former career as the American comic advert insurance duck on the telly, he could not possibly resist the opportunities for silly situations with us thus configured. This aside in one of my accounts, however, produced a rash of queries about the cases we worked thus resembling Holmes and Watson, *néé* Rathbone and Bruce. Not just the facts, mind you. These inquiring minds wanted to know down-to-the-last-flipping-detail, please and thank you very much.

Shortly after he moved into his new feathers, I discussed it with Shad. As always he had little interest in anything not involving movies, acting, his feline friend Nadine, or solving the current case. When I pointed out to him that the original Sherlock Holmes stories by Sir Aurhur Conan Doyle were narrated by Dr. Watson, hence rightfully Shad should author our adventures so made up, he looked up from his case file and said, “You know, Jaggs, despite my many quills, I’ve never been much of one for writing.”

We were on three matters together with Shad in his Watson meat suit. The first of these inquiries I have titled “The Purloined Labradoodle.” This inquiry initially had nothing to do with Watson or a Labradoodle. It initiated actually in relation to improperly imprinted puppies, an imprisoned parakeet, and a parrot profoundly perturbed.

“Limp stone,” muttered the parrot darkly.

I finished stocking the shelves in back of the small shop counter with boxes of birdseed, tins of dog food, and little packets of catnip. The counter and display case were festooned with colorful leashes of assorted sizes; plastic bones; rubber mice; squeaky toys; scratching posts; king-, queen-, and knave-sized pet beds and such. The walls were hung with posters concerning the various hideous diseases cats and dogs could contract, complete with expensive preventative treatments that could be purchased right here, should the shipments ever arrive. Shad and I, you see, were undercover operating a pet shop in The Strand, Village of Lympstone, east bank of the River Exe south of Exeter, Devon. I was the pet shop owner and DS Shad had traded his cherished Nigel Bruce meat suit in on what budget-strapped ABCD had left over in the way of undercover pet bios: a rather timeworn parrot.

We were, as it happened, an insignificant part of a rather large task force attempting to crack down on a UK ring of swindlers who were representing real household pets as android bios capable of taking full human imprints with rather appalling consequences for bargain seekers who would lose a good bit of their savings, all of their natural bodies, and most of their minds in the process. The main thrusts of the task force effort were in London, Manchester, and Bristol. Shad was being cranky on two accounts: first, because he felt we had been left out of the big show; and second, because he wasn’t getting to do his Dr. Watson, which he really wanted to do.

Nevertheless, the pets used by the perpetrators came from somewhere and covering pet stores was a logical investigative consequence. From what we could observe from our post in Lympstone, though, it didn’t appear to be a well coordinated operation—something Shad was beginning to refer to as a “clusterbugger.” In any event, we were on our third day of operations and our shipments of kittens, puppies, and much of our equipment and supplies had yet to arrive. No bait, no customers, no suspects. I looked from the window at the quaint village street, and it was raining. There went our chance for someone blind drunk mistaking us for a tube station and wandering in.

* * * *

“Limp stone,” Shad muttered again from his perch at the end of the counter. He was getting quite tiresome. I turned from the window.

“Actually, Shad, the *m* is silent and the *stone* is pronounced *stin*.

Lipstin.”

“Brits pronounce a whole lot better than they spell.”

“I don’t recall that American insurance company you did the telly adverts for being such great spellers. Why wasn’t your duck quacking ‘Aflass, Aflass?’”

“You mean besides how close it sounds to ‘half-assed’? Jaggs, you really think ‘The Petting Place’ is a good name for a pet store?”

“Superintendent Matheson chose the name, not I, as you well know.”

“It sounds like a bordello or lap-dancing salon. Why don’t we just call it ‘The Cat House’ and be done with it?” The parrot held out his wings, began bumping and grinding his hips as he danced on the perch, and sang out in something of a Jamaican accent, ‘Hey dere, sailor boy, you come to Mama Bimbo’s Cat House for all you pettin’ needs, mon.” The dance stopped. “Jaggs, if you were a self-respecting crook would you go into a pet store called The Petting Place?” He sidestepped grumpily from one end of his perch to the other. “Can’t believe the names around this neck of the woods: Ex mouth. Nut well. Glebe lands. Cock wood. Under Wear—”

“That’s *Lower* Wear and—”

“Key off, Jaggs,” cautioned Shad, nodding toward the window. “Live one approaching. This may be the kitten pickin’ kingpin herself.”

The bell rang as the door opened revealing a short, stocky woman in a green anorak and yellow plastic rain scarf, her feet in a pair of bright yellow wellies. In her right hand she had by the handle a small gray metal case. She walked up to the counter.

“Good morning, love,” I said. “How may I be of assistance?”

“I want me parakeet fixed,” she stated.

“Indeed. I regret to say we don’t neuter birds at Petting Place.” I glanced at Shad and he was returning my look down his beak, as it were. I looked back at the woman. “You’ll have to take your bird to a veterinary surgeon.”

“I means *repair*. This one’s a robbie,” she said. “All ‘is nuts’s got bolts in ‘em, if you gets me drift.”

"I see." I smiled brightly. "If I might take a look at your bird?"

"Nothin' much works on it." She lifted the case and dropped it rather heavily on the counter. "Salt in the air, I expect. Too close to the bleedin' ocean."

I opened the case on the counter next to Shad's perch. Inside the case was a musty-smelling robotic parakeet. There was something white and crusty dried between its toes. Shad moved on his perch until he could look down into the case.

"Ain't that cute, your parrot there looking at me bird. He's in love!"

Midway through her rising belly laugh, Shad said to her, "Sod off, you old cow."

"Here, now!" she responded, her color rising.

"I apologize for the parrot, love," I said. "I'm afraid we rescued the poor thing from a rather tragic situation."

"Aw," she responded empathetically, reaching out a hand to pet Shad's head. "Chick abuse, was it?"

With a loud squawk and a belated flap of his unfamiliar wings, Shad fell off his perch backward onto the floor.

"I didn't hit the poor thing," said the woman holding a hand up to her maker. "I swear it."

"Please don't distress yourself unduly, madam. The bird also suffers from an inner ear problem. It affects his balance." Excusing myself, I went around the end of the counter and bent over my partner. He was rolling on the floor flapping his multicolored plumage, beak open, and laughing. "Steady," I said to him over our wireless net, a deserved degree of menace in my transmission.

After a few gasps, Shad eventually said to me, "*Sorry, Jaggs. Ah-hah! Sorry, but check out the eyes on her bird. That's no simple robot.*" He stood, doubled over, shook again, and transmitted, "*Should I share with her how I was never coddled as a young egg but spent my deviled youth getting fried and have since become hard-boiled?*"

"Not unless you also wish to become scrambled and beaten," I buzzed back.

He flapped his wings and resumed his place on the perch, occasional unconquerable snicker spasms shaking his feathers.

I turned toward the woman and smiled brightly yet again. "Now, shall I take a look at your bird?"

Shad was correct. The creature's eyes were animated, its gaze darting about and eventually coming to rest upon me. If it was a simple rundown robot and not a mech, its eyes should not have been moving. As they were moving, however, indicating the possibility of a rather serious crime, I asked as delicately as I could, "How long have you had this mech, love?"

She laughed and waved a hand at my apparent silliness. "Oh, that's no mech, dearie. That one's just a clockwork toy. Me aunt were well off, but Auntie wouldn't pay for no mech when she could get the feathers, flap, and song by only payin' for a robbie."

"Really."

"Course. Think she wanted to get tied up with all that red tape, wages, taxes, forms, and bother? Not me Aunt Annabelle." She frowned. "Besides, if this here bird was self-aware, it'd take better care of itself, wouldn't it?" Before I could answer, she added, "More to point, that's what the parakeet told me aunt."

"This parakeet told your aunt it didn't come under the Artificial Intelligence Regulations?"

"That's what me aunt told me years before she passed on. The parakeet told her, oh—" She frowned and looked up at the beamed ceiling. "—got to be four years ago." She lowered her watery gray gaze down until she was looking me in the face. "See, Annabelle Wallingford passed last year. Quite well off she was, as I said. Her place was in Wotton Lane by Watton Brook."

"In Wotton by Watton?" asked Shad.

She frowned at the parrot. "Cheeky bastard."

"To be sure. About the parakeet?" I prompted.

"Well, as part of Auntie's estate, she left me Ringo. That's what we called this here bird before it seized up. Shame. Only had the bloomin' thing a few days when it broke."

"I see. And you're bringing it in now because...?"

"Just getting around to going through me aunt's things and cleanin' up. Found Ringo tucked away in me auntie's attic. Maddie girl, I says to meself, it'd be right homey havin' a singin' bird in the lounge next to the settee. Ringo sings real sweet's, I remember."

"I see."

"With a robbie there's no papers to clean up. No offense," she said to Shad.

He looked away, talon to brow, feigning acute personal devastation.

She poked the parakeet several times in the tummy. "I can do the feathers up some with needles and me hot glue gun, but I'm no good with chips, springs, electronics, and such. If it can't be fixed I'll just toss it in the dustbin. Maybe a jumble sale. Some little tyke might have a laugh takin' it apart. Might be worth a bob or two."

I lifted a wing and released it. It dropped to the counter with a thud. "Let me take it in back and have a look."

"Is this old parrot here for sale?" she asked, poking Shad in the belly.

"Easy, lady," he said with the voice of Huntz Hall, "you'll bruise the fabric."

"You'll have to ask the bird, love," I answered. "He's a bio."

"Oh, I wouldn't want no bio."

"That's not the issue, Chuckles," Shad said to her. "The issue is, does the bio want you."

As I picked up the parakeet and carried it around the counter, Shad began singing a rather raunchy sea shanty centered on a seductive female giraffe and her erstwhile suitor, a love struck field mouse who, for reasons

unnecessary to elucidate here, ran himself to death. I took the mechanical bird into the room where we had our surveillance equipment set up. I cracked the parakeet's back and Shad was right. Although the bird was robotic, there was one slight illegal modification. Tucked among its gears, bellows, batteries, and computer was an AI chip—an illegal AI chip at that. I'm no expert in such things, but it looked as though the AI chip had worked its way loose from its improvised mountings, which had caused a microcard to partially dislodge from its tiny motherboard effectively paralyzing all motor functions save the eyes.

With a pair of tweezers I disconnected the AI chip, took it over to the workroom's computer, and inserted it into the appropriate port. All of the identification data on the chip was code scrambled. I keyed for voice recognition and said, "Hello. Hello, hello, whoever you are."

No response.

"Detective Inspector Harrington Jagers, Devon ABCD here. I know you've just gone through a rough patch, old chicken, but it's about to get a good deal bumpier. Either you talk to me or I put this chip right back in the squab the same way I found it. Then one of two things happen: either Maddie girl will toss you in the dustbin, or perhaps she'll put you in a jumble sale and someone six years old with sticky fingers will take you all apart before he loses interest and goes on to something else. Or perhaps they'll make a Christmas tree decoration out of you. Pretty little bird. The way I read your battery consumption rate, you have another two—two and a half years you can click around those eyeballs up on some shelf until things go dark for good. But who can say? Sitting on the tree next to the candy cane once a year, looking through the plastic icicles, listening to tattooed and perforated children playing their new thunder rumbles. It might be fun listening to Dad and Uncle Mike wagging on endlessly about test matches, especially after they've gotten good and bladdered, before you go back in the box—"

"Very well," interrupted the computer's speakers in a female voice. "You got me."

"Indeed." I thought I'd give my American partner a little Don Ameche wireless moment. "*Mr. Watson, come here, I want you,*" I transmitted to Shad.

The parrot flew through the door and landed atop the computer monitor. "*The Story of Alexander Graham Bell*, Nineteen thirty-nine, and that wasn't the Watson I was hoping for."

“That’s all right, Shad. Right now you don’t look much like Henry Fonda, anyway.” I pointed at the screen and Shad looked down between his feet. A female human CGI was on the screen.

“That’s not Loretta Young.”

I looked at the lovely creature. “I do believe that’s Rita Hayworth.” The computer generated image, indeed, looked like 1940s and ‘50s actress Rita Hayworth in her role as the sultry nightclub singer in *Affair in Trinidad*, with Glenn Ford. I frowned at Shad.

“Nineteen fifty-two,” he said without looking up.

Insufferable bird. I looked back at the screen. Pirate AI chip manufacturers paid no royalties for images, but steered clear of using images of still living celebrities who could afford to hire the forces of darkness necessary to hunt down and prosecute trademark poachers and encroachers. Rita, as always, was looking radiant. “Your name?” I asked her.

“Lolita Doll.” Rita smiled demurely. “Honest, guv. That’s the name I was born with, spelling and all. I’m from Plymouth by way of Land’s End. Thanks for busting me out of that parakeet.”

“You’re not out of the feathers yet, love,” I said evenly. “I’m kind of curious how you wound up in that chip, how that chip wound up inside that bird, and especially how that bird wound up inside a wealthy woman’s estate.”

The image was silent. From his perch atop the screen, Shad said, “Is it just me or is Rita looking just a bit furtive?”

“What’s that parrot saying?” Rita—Lolita—asked me.

“Detective Sergeant Shad opined that you appeared just a tad sneaky, Lolita. I agree you seem less than forthcoming.”

Shad hopped down to the keyboard, did a little dance on the keys, and called up Lolita’s previous in a new frame. “Whoa!” he exclaimed in mock shock. “Lolita,” said Shad, “I’d download your complete criminal record, but this sorry shadow of a computer only has fifteen hundred megagigs of memory.”

I glanced at the list. Sealed juvenile previous weighing a third the megabyte weight of her adult convictions. She was a jewel thief primarily, some confidence work, not terribly competent at either. She couldn't have done much worse if she'd spent her mornings booking cells for her evenings through the Convict Accommodation Association. Did her first stint in H.M Prison and Remand Centre Exeter at the age of nineteen. Back in at twenty-two. Back again at twenty-five. According to the record I was reading she was nearing sixty and more than half of that time had been spent as a guest of His Majesty's government. According to her library record in the nick, she'd read every piece of children's fiction in the place. Psych evaluation: Terrific liar; couldn't change a battery; at risk for becoming institutionalized, which meant she's been inside so long she'd do almost anything to stay behind walls.

"So you modified a robotic parakeet with a pirated mech AI chip capable of taking a human imprint to sneak past the security systems into some wealthy person's home," I said.

"Yes."

"You do the work yourself, Lolita?"

"Sure."

Shad whistled a bar from the Woody Woodpecker song. True. If she had been Pinocchio instead of Rita Hayworth she would have had a California redwood hanging from between her eyes by now.

"How could you be sure that parakeet would be chosen by your mark?" asked Shad.

"The robbie was already sold to Annabelle Wallingford," answered Lolita. "I did work release at Songbirds in Queen Street, Exeter. It's a tech shop sells robbie birds and accessories. You know, it's just up from Boston Tea Party, in next to the News?"

"Yes," I said. "I know it. It's owned by Frankie Statten, isn't it?"

"Mr. Statten's the proprietor."

Shad glanced at me and I shrugged. "You were on work release?" I continued.

"So?"

“Doesn’t say a whole lot for the rehab program up there,” observed Shad. “The parakeet robbie gimmick, Lolita: What made you think of it?” he asked her.

No answer for a while, then Rita said, “I suppose it seemed like a good idea at the time.”

The parrot looked up at me. “Well, Sherlock, I guess she’s got nothin’ to hide.”

I sat down on a stool and looked again at Lolita’s file. The picture of Lolita Doll—taken when her nat was about thirty—although of typical constabulary quality, was not unpleasant. Her photo gave the impression of a lonely, frightened girl trying to look tough and into her third decade of refusing to stand up straight. Her most recent photo showed her sadder, grayer, and a bit more stooped. “Swap your body for the AI chip and imprinting, did you?” I asked, not much interested in the answer, knowing it was going to be a lie.

Rita Hayworth glanced at the window, then looked away. She nodded. “Just another meat suit, wasn’t it. Didn’t like the way I looked anyway. With what I would’ve made off the Wallingford job—I could’ve become ... I could’ve become ... why, just anybody, couldn’t I.” Rita shrugged and looked down.

“Who would you have liked to become, Lolita?” I asked her.

“What’re you, copper? Bleedin’ Mother Mary?” The sneer Rita had on her face was not attractive at all and was quite contradicted by the tears welling in her CGI’s eyes.

“Listen up, you sorry scrap of plastic and magnetic impulses,” snarled Shad into the workstation’s camera pickup, “You are talking to Detective Inspector Harrington Jagers of Interpol’s Artificial Beings Crimes Division’s Devon Office, late of the London Metropolitan Police, the cop who’s put away enough blood-and-guts stone killers to fill the recruiting needs of every tattooed and drugged up prison gang in the United Kingdom, Wales, and the Maldives until the next millennium! So unless you want your highly illegal AI chip to accidentally find itself flushed down the Petting Place’s toilet, me girl, you’d best straighten up and answer up, ‘less you want to find yourself up that bleedin’ pile of sand and rock, haulin’ a rucksack full of ruddy flippin’ shot puts!”

He had begun as Jack Webb in *The D.I.*, but at the end had slipped rather badly into Harry Andrews in *The Hill*.

“Steady there, Shad,” I transmitted.

“Sorry,” he sent back.

Rita was looking rather wide-eyed at the parrot. After a moment her gaze shifted to me. “Sorry, Inspector. Didn’t mean anything.”

I cleared my throat. “Who would you have liked to become?” I asked her again.

Rita was trying, struggling for words, her eyes welling with electronic tears. “I don’t know. I want to be...” She looked directly at me. “I want to be safe.” She nodded to herself. “I’ll tell you, inspector. Safe. Taken care of.” She glanced away for a moment, as though embarrassed. “Had that inside, kind of. You know?” She looked back at me. “Wasn’t happy, though. I do so want to be happy.”

“What about love, Lolita?”

“You having a laugh, guv?”

“No.”

“Don’t mix me up with the picture on the screen, Inspector. I’m near sixty. Love’s something you read about in the romance graphs. Money, now.” She smiled wickedly. “They tells me money can’t buy me love, but it do make the search a heap more comfortable.”

“Spare us the brass, sister. What happened this time?” asked Shad.

She glanced at the parrot and shrugged. “Me own fault. Flying around the place, scoping out the security systems, I ran flat into something. Never saw it. Jammed me up. Froze me solid. Everything but me eyes and ears. Butler found me next morning, put me on a shelf. Auntie shakes her head. Auntie’s brother, Barney Bananas, takes me up to his room and sticks me on top a nine year old slice o’ wedding cake he was saving for his future missus, which give me sticky feet and a good look at his telly. ‘Course he only played this one vid he liked, over and over and over, day in and bleedin’ night out for a year three months a week and four days until Barney Wallingford died right in the middle of Lawrence Harvey gettin’ kissed by

his mum for the last time as it turned out. Then they packed up Barmey Barney's belongings, including me, and stuck us all in the attic for another three years. The last I saw the light 'til Maddie checked me out to bring me here."

"Is she lying?" I transmitted to Shad.

"What was the name—" he began out loud.

"The Manchurian Candidate," she answered, "Frank Sinatra, Lawrence Harvey, Janet Leigh, Angela Lansbury—"

"The dir—"

"John Frankenheimer."

"Pro—"

"George Axelrod and John Frankenheimer, Executive Producer Howard W. Koch."

"She may have seen it," Shad reported back.

"Don't you want to know who did Janet Leigh's hair styles?" Rita Hayworth asked the parrot. She pulled back the left corner of her mouth into a knowing smile. "Or do you already know?"

The parrot looked up at me. "Only a fool bandies wits with an electron," I offered.

Shad looked back at the screen. "Who?" he asked.

"I rest my case."

"Gene Shacove," she answered.

While Shad went on the net to check out her answer, he asked Lolita, "Why didn't your partner come and get you out?"

Rita arched her lovely brows. "Partners look out for each other. If I had a partner you think I would've gotten into such a fix?" She looked down. "Four years," she said. "Four years."

"What did you do all that time to keep from going crazy?" asked

Shad.

Rita stared wide eyed at Shad. "Why, birdie, I passed the time by playing a little solitaire."

We both fell silent as Shad and I reflected upon the famous trigger-the-killer line from the original *The Manchurian Candidate*. He pointed his wing at the frame next to Rita. Janet Leigh's hairstyles by Gene Shacove.

Shad looked at Rita. "Ever see the remake to *The Manchurian Candidate*?"

Rita nodded, smiling wickedly.

"What'd you think?"

"I'd rather go back and watch the original another fifty-five hundred times." Her CGI looked at me. "What are you going to do with me, Inspector?"

"To be perfectly honest, Lolita, I don't know. Hence, I'm going to pass the buck. I have a friend in London and this parrot, Dr. Watson here, is going to send your engrams and particulars to my friend for a second opinion." Shad looked at me all wide eyed and quizzical. "Dr. Bing Ehrenberg. You'll find his address in my personal folder. Attach a copy of Lolita's previous along with a brief description of the current situation, what she's been through, and our assessment of her account, and send the lot to Dr. Ehrenberg. Include her complete prison record, as well." I looked one last time at Rita. "While he's doing that, I'll see if I can repair old Ringo and get the bird singing again. Once I hear from the doctor, I'll make my decision." I put her on pause.

Later, as Lolita's engrams and history were bouncing off a satellite, I told Shad to destroy the AI chip once Ehrenberg confirmed receipt and installation. Then I turned my attention to Ringo. I brushed off the crumbly old icing from its toes, reattached the parakeet's robotic computer, anchored the minicards, reattached the remainder of the connections, buttoned it up, and listened as the bird began singing the sweetest bird songs. I held out a finger and with a flap of its wings it jumped up and perched there, shook the dust from its back and wings, the remaining bits of wedding cake from its toes, its happy song filling the air. Picking up the carrying case by the handle, I brought the patient back to our client. Maddie girl's face blossomed into smiles. "Bloody Nora, Ringo's as right as rain. I

comes in here and says to meself this here Sherlock Holmes and his bleedin' parrot're a couple of barmpots, but who's arse-up now? Eh? Ringo's right as rain."

"Like sands through the hour glass," began Shad, "so are the days of our lives—"

"Shad," I interrupted with a mix of menace and smile.

Since our credit numbers and equipment were out there somewhere awaiting delivery along with our puppies and kittens, we took Madeleine Wallingford's address ostensibly for billing purposes and agreed to put an advert in the window for an outing to the medieval underground tunnels of Exeter being organized by the Lymptone Society and another for Maddie's own group, the Order of St. Trinians, ta ta, Abyssinia, and all that twaddle. The door closed.

Quoth the parrot, "Nevermore."

"Sorry?"

"Jaggs, I think I see the purpose of this catch-and-release policy of yours. We're trying to build up the criminal stock out there in the mainstream so that there will be criminals enough for all law enforcement officers everywhere to make a living. It's part of the Blue Peace Environmental Movement, right?"

"Although I truly admire the depth of your cynicism, Shad, certainly someone of your sensitivity and high intellect can appreciate that Lolita Doll has learned everything confinement at government expense can teach her."

"I heartily agree with your modest assessment of my mental prowess, Jaggs, but you must really be sticking something tender beneath a pinch bar if you have to resort to such blatant flattery. Who is this Dr. Ehrenberg, anyway?"

"Chap in London. Therapist. Back when I was killed in Metro, he went a long way toward piecing me back together and into my first bio. If Bing says tossing what's left of Lolita Doll before a magistrate is what's best for her, then off she goes. If he says we do something else, then we'll see. Meanwhile, give Superintendent Matheson a ring and see if anything is brewing."

He did and something was. While Shad and I had been in Lymptone

disposing of Lolita and the kaput parakeet matter, ABCD units in Manchester and London, in conjunction with local police authorities, had successfully detained all the improper puppy imprinting principals as well as their primary patrons. The bogus bio barons had been bagged. While muttering, Shad flew to the shop's garage and copied back into his Nigel Bruce, I bent to the task of repacking all those bloomin' boxes of bird seed, tins of dog food, and little packets of catnip. Mama Bimbo's Cat House was going out of business, mon.

* * * *

As Shad drove us back to Exeter he said in his Watson voice, "Of course, Holmes, Frankie Statten was her partner."

"Of course."

"Why didn't the fellow rescue her?"

"Never let it be said that Frank Statten unnecessarily placed himself at risk for anything or anybody."

"Honor among thieves. Humph! Stranding her like that," said Watson in disgust. "What do you suppose it was like, Holmes, after watching that vid a few thousand times with Barmy Barney then shut up in a little box in the dark for another three years? Nothing to move but your eyeballs? Nothing to think about but *The Manchurian Candidate*." He shuddered convincingly. "Had to make two weeks of solitary confinement seem a mere stroll in the park."

"It must have been strikingly like an experience I had years ago in London shortly after I died, Watson." I wondered slightly at my use of the "Watson" name. Came devilishly easy to the tongue for someone who swore the name would never pass his lips.

"In a cast were you, Holmes?" asked Watson. "Held in stasis a long time, old trout? Medically induced coma?"

"Not at all, old fellow. Valerie took me to see a showing of the Bette Davis-Lillian Gish classic, *The Whales of August*." For once Shad didn't immediately come back with the release date. He simply shuddered.

"Dear me," he said. "You gave me quite a start, Holmes. Had a shockingly similar experience with Nadine not long ago," he said.

“Really.”

“I should say so. They had the bloody thing at the Exeter Picture House. Special treat. I’d never seen it before. *The Whales of August*. Ought to require theaters to post well-being warnings before showing the blithering health hazard.”

“Were you convinced you were running a risk, doctor?”

“Holmes, it was like watching quartz crystals grow in real time.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t find the action quite that compelling.”

Nigel chuckled a Watson chuckle. “You know, Nadine quite likes that movie, Holmes. What do you make of that?”

“Nadine’s a cat. *The Whales of August* does bear a striking similarity to watching a mouse hole for three hours. Val is rather fond of *The Whales of August*, too, you know.”

“Really. Well, perhaps it is a feline thing.”

I thought for a moment. “Not exactly. You see, Val wasn’t a cat when we saw it.”

“But she became a cat, Holmes. Everything was there but the fur and whiskers, you see?”

“Perhaps. Yes, I’ll grant you that, Watson. Well done.” I glanced over at Shad and he was doing a very good self-satisfied Watson chuckle having gotten-one-up on Sherlock Holmes. Detective Superintendent Matheson’s face came into my thoughts for some reason. “Two things before we get back to division, old fellow.”

“What’s that, Holmes?”

“One, when we get in the building, you must stop calling me Holmes. Two, I see that deerstalker cap you have in your pocket.”

“Oh?”

“I don’t want to see it on my hat rack.”

“What? Wha—What makes you think I wasn’t going to wear it myself, Ho—Jaggs?” he asked, feigning injured innocence.

There was only one phrase that seemed to fit. “Elementary, my dear Shad. Elementary.”

* * * *

Time passed as it has a wont to do, and Bing Ehrenberg eventually rang me to say that he believed the best thing for Lolita Doll was to get her out of a computer and into a human bio, into some therapy, and into some vocational rehabilitation. I discussed the matter for all of eleven seconds with a county crown prosecutor’s assistant who had less than no interest in the case, and the fellow proceeded to discharge it, including the eleven months she had remaining on her previous sentence. Lolita had done four years in solitary for attempted burglary and was now free. I suppose Justice does have to lift that hanky once in awhile and have herself a peek.

Shad and I, on the other hand, went out on a deranged squirrel call in front of Debenhams and there witnessed a three vehicle pile-up as two ground electrics slammed into a lorry, whose driver stopped in the middle of his lane of traffic because he was stunned at seeing the real Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Chief Constable Raymond Crowe, who had yet to be found out for crimes of his own, buzzed D. Supt. Matheson about getting Shad back into his feathers. At the very least, Matheson was to keep us off the streets. The squirrel withdrew the complaint against Debenhams, but insisted upon autographs from Shad and myself. He returned our early efforts pointedly remarking that no one had ever heard of Harrington Jaggers and Guy Shad. After we sent the furry fellow off with the Holmes and Watson inscriptions upon which he insisted, Watson looked at me and said, “Why are you looking so glum? So it wasn’t for your own name. Cheer up. It was your first autograph request.”

“That is true.”

“Consider my plight, Holmes. As the Aflak duck I was asked for countless autographs but couldn’t sign them. Now I can sign them but they don’t want my name.”

“Well, cheer up, Watson,” I said. “At least the squirrel didn’t demand you quack out ‘aflak’ and fall off a cliff. Every cloud has a silver lining.”

“You ever try flying *through* a cloud that had a silver lining?”

* * * *

Early one sunny afternoon, a call came into ABCD from Powderham Castle, the home of the Earl of Devon. The castle was located almost directly across the River Exe from Lypstone, between the Village of Powderham and the larger village of Kenton. The call had been placed by the head of security at the castle, a former assistant chief constable of the West Midlands Constabulary named Ian Collier whom I had known many years ago from a case I had worked when I had been with Metro. A quite capable fellow, Collier. I had lost touch with him by the unfortunate expedient of getting killed. I fully expected him to be chief constable by now. Silly me. Instead he was Mr. Collier and running a private security force at a castle that doubled as a mini theme park and convention center with all kinds of events from nature walks and children's theater to weddings and rock concerts. Collier had called me directly.

Earlier in the day a large wedding had been held at Powderham in the castle's ornate music room. The reception luncheon, curiously enough, was held in the selfsame music room, while the music, with its concomitant dancing was taking place in the castle's huge dining room. Conversing, apologizing, promising, drinking, changing, pilfering jewelry, and recovering from various excesses were spread among the other rooms that had been made available to the wedding party.

The father of the groom, a Mr. Edsel Meyer, first reported one of the guests missing her jewelry, a rather expensive triple strand of matched natural pearls. Later, other guests reported missing jewelry until even the bride, the former June Grimpion and grandniece of Lord Devon, reported missing an emerald-cut diamond bracelet. The total promised to be a respectable haul. Ian Collier stated quite bluntly that he wanted that which could be done in an unofficial capacity to be carried out in exactly that manner.

When I reported to the superintendent, Matheson, who was a John Dillinger look-alike bio, wondered why Collier had called Artificial Beings Crimes.

"Possibly he suspected AB involvement," I offered as a plausible but completely untrue explanation.

"Perhaps you should knock this over to the constabulary, Jagers," Matheson said as he contemplated his graphic of the Biograph Theater in Chicago, on the liquid crystal wall opposite his desk. He shifted his gaze toward me. "At least until we know for certain an artificial being is involved.

Things are so touchy with Middlemoor lately I'm afraid the chief constable only needs one more little excuse to go off on the lot of us. Met Parker in the lobby downstairs yesterday and I swore the chief was going to rip a patch out of Parker the size of a throw rug. This office can't afford to put that gorilla back into therapy."

I glanced at Dr. Watson as he stood there fumbling with his deerstalker, and said, "Actually, sir, we were specifically requested by Powderham Castle. Hence, I'm certain there must be an AB involvement."

"Lord Devon specifically asked for us?" I could see the stars glittering in the superintendent's eyes.

"I took the call myself," which was not a lie. "In addition, sir, it would be an opportunity to get Dr. Watson and myself away from the tower for the afternoon, what with the inspection of the Exeter Station by the chief constable rumored to be occurring at almost any moment—"

"Omigod!" He placed both hands flat on his desktop. "Ah, I see. I see. Godspeed, Inspector Jaggers, and convey my respects to his lordship."

"I will, sir. Come Watson."

"What? Oh? Game's afoot, eh?"

"Don't you two play at that Holmes and Watson nonsense out at Powderham, Jaggers? Shad? You hear me? Shad? *Shad?*" Matheson cautioned as his door closed behind us.

As the doors to the elevator hardened and the car ascended, Watson said, "What was that fellow blathering on about, Holmes—all that playing at Powderham rubbish?"

"I haven't the slightest, Watson."

* * * *

Up on the roof, we settled into the cruiser. As Watson drew us out of our slot and headed the vehicle toward the target, I rang up Collier and let him know we were on our way. *"The security is excellent at Powderham, Jaggs, but not oppressive,"* he said. *"Permanent security staff is long term, all retired police officers. We mostly stay outside the castle on the*

grounds. No guards inside. For big weddings like this one we make up extra security staff with local off-duty police, all good cops. Couldn't fault one of them."

"Cameras?" I asked.

"A few remote recording cameras on the grounds—nothing manned. Again, nothing inside the castle. Lord and Lady Devon let parts of the estate for weddings, corporate functions, and other events—in that respect Powderham is very much a business. However, the castle is also their home. The more valuable artworks and sculptures have motion detectors, sensitivity sensors, alarms and such. Anything that isn't bolted down has ID nanodots concealed on or in it—no way to get them out of the castle."

"What about nanodot codes on the guests' jewelry?"

"About three quarters of the missing pieces have them. Nothing's come up at the gates, and no one's left by air. No guests have left yet and no castle staff."

"Who has left?"

"The first shifts of caterers, florists, technical and lighting crew, photographers, a quick raid by a discreet liveried dustbin brigade, and the Lord Bishop of Exeter. We checked in, beneath, above, through, and around everything that could block a signal."

"Years ago, Collier, I had a case in which a well-endowed woman concealed a nanodot encoded diamond ring between her breasts and got it through the screens. There was a sufficient enclosure of flesh to absorb the dot's signal."

"There is sufficient jewelry already reported missing to pack an overnight bag, Jagers. In my entire life I've never seen anyone that well endowed outside a perv graphic."

"Ah, sweet bird of youth."

"Indeed. I am aware other cavities have been used in which to conceal valuables, but have you ever seen the points and edges on emerald cut diamonds?"

“Yes I have. I agree: It would take quite a fellow to stick a bracelet full of them up his bum and still play bass guitar for two hours.”

“Jaggers, unless the thief burrowed out underground, the stuff’s still on the grounds.”

“I take it you’ve checked possible underground routes and locations?”

“What do you think? I should make clear, Jaggers, that the castle is not liable for any stolen property. That’s not his lordship’s concern. It’s just that his lordship is related to the bride’s family and is a guest at both wedding and reception, as well.”

“Hence he would prefer not having the screws slamming his fellow guests up against his ornate walls, spreading them out, and patting them down.”

“You are so sensitive, my friend. I knew calling you was the right thing to do.”

“See you in a few, Collier.”

Watson pulled the cruiser up from Heavitree Tower as Collier sent me lists of wedding guests, wedding service and catering staffs, as well as castle staff including full-time and part-time security personnel, along with images.

As we took the Exminster-Dawlish Warren Air Corridor down the west bank of the Exe, Dr. Watson *néé* Shad turned on the autopilot, leaned back from the controls, and glanced at me. “Powderham. This is the place with the old tortoise who entertains children, Holmes. Timothy something?”

“You are correct, Watson. The first Timmy Tortoise dates back to 1854 and died in the early twenty-first century. The current one is an amdroid bio taken from the original Timmy’s DNA imprinted by—her name escapes me—an actress.”

“Went down there with Nadine, Holmes, and caught the woman’s act just before we were blown up that time out at Hangingstone. Quite depressing.”

“Getting blown up, or the tortoise?”

"Tortoise—What? Oh." He chuckled. "You will have your joke. Her *act* was depressing, Holmes, her act. Rather get blown up again than have to sit through her routine again. Dreadful. Hundred-and-fifty-year gig and all the flies she can eat."

"I suspect the actor imprinted onto the Timmy bio restricts her tortoise fare to lettuce, Watson. Perhaps the odd tomato slice. I hear she does impressions. Is that true?"

"Dear God, Holmes: Turtle standup comedy impressions for seven year olds. No one should miss it. 'Hey, man, I heard these two bugs talking the other day, y' know? One says to the other, "Katydid." Now, get this. The other says, "Katydid." Stop me if you've heard this one before. So the other says, "Katydid." Now, the second bug comes back real quick with "Katydid, ha, ha, haaa..." Shad looked through his side of the window and back at me. "Dreadful. Well, it's work I suppose. Clarice Penne's her name." He glanced back at me. "Ever see her picture?"

"I can't say I have, Watson."

"Hideous looking woman. If she'd let herself go a little she'd be a dead ringer for Alistair Sim. There'll be a part for her if they ever decide to tell the story of Jack the Ripper's waning years in a nursing home."

"Alistair Sim of the Ebenezer Scrooge Sims?"

"The very same. Not a whole lot of really creepy maiden aunt parts available these days. I suppose she figures the shell game is at least show business. Reminds me of that old joke about the fellow in the circus scrubbing the elephant's bum." He coughed a Watson cough. "Sorry, Holmes. This wretched acting business: Millions grasping hungrily for a scant dozen brass rings. Had one of those rings once myself." Silence as he thought for a moment on his famous past, then he shook his head and waved a hand as if dismissing it from his attention. "Sorry. Sorry, Holmes. Can't imagine what came over me. Got a head full of fuzz lately. Apologies."

"Think nothing of it, old fellow." I frowned at him. How much was fuzz and how much was Shad doing his Nigel Bruce's Watson?

He sat in silence for a long time apparently thinking heavily upon something of great importance to him. At last he asked, "Why else does this Powderham Castle sound familiar to me, Holmes? It's stuck in my head

like Tom Mix and Hannibal Lecter, but I can't seem to place it."

"Why, I'm astounded, old fellow. Did your Nigel Bruce Watson get up come with a bumbled brain program?"

"Bumble—No need to be offensive, Holmes. I asked but a simple question."

"Now, no need for hurt feelings. Late in the twentieth century what famous motion picture was partly filmed at Powderham? Remember?"

"A vid?"

"Think, now." I raised an eyebrow in his direction. "Come, come Watson. Anthony Hopkins..."

"Motion picture? Hopkins? Wait, wait..."

"Ed—"

"No! Edward Fox! Hop—*Remains of the Day*. Of course. Emma Thompson, Christopher Reeve, Hugh Grant—Powderham is Darlington?" He looked at me, bushy gray eyebrows arched. "Dear god, I am bumbled! What year?"

"Nineteen ninety-three," I added with a touch of smugness as I looked over the lists and images supplied by Ian Collier, which also included images of the pets brought by a few of the guests. In a flash I knew who stole the jewelry as well as how it was done. What to do about it, however, was going to take a bit of detail sorting.

"Having trouble finding the culprit, Holmes?"

I nodded toward his screen. "Have a go at it, Watson. While you're busy at that, I need to check some details."

On my screen I checked my details. My suspicion turned out to be correct. Assistant Chief Constable Ian Collier had been allowed to take immediate retirement from the force sixteen months ago for unspecified reasons. Using some computer tricks Shad taught me early in our relationship, I managed to find out those unspecified reasons involved specific unauthorized use of police equipment. It was all in the notes. I triggered the special links, entered a private code or two, and found the answers I needed. How mundane the scandalous tale once unfolded.

When the Collier family dog, a golden retriever named Laddie, was dying, ACC Collier had had a patrol cruiser with him at his home. In the grip of despair, he and his two young sons put Laddie into the cruiser to rush him to the vet. Laddie, however, died along the way. Ian probably hadn't even thought about it. The equipment was there, so were his sons, and so was the need. He harvested Laddie's engrams onto a chip—police cruiser, police reader, police chip. What to do with the harvested engrams after that got lost in the dust when the cruiser's automatic after-action report was picked up by a hostile media. It was then reviewed by a cautious deputy chief constable, judged by a frightened board, defended by an indifferent Association of Chief Police Officers, and resulted in forced retirement. Birmingham and West Midlands found itself with one less good cop. Then it was job-hunting time, new digs, new schools, new church, new friends, same family minus a dog, a home, and maybe part of a dad.

For every detail sorted, a new one needing a sort popped up. I rang a number. Bing Ehrenberg was in and available. I sent him what I had along with my best guesses regarding who and what to do. He agreed with me, which settled a couple of details. He asked a few questions. I answered them. Bing was happy to hear I was enjoying my work again. I told him I had been blown up and was working for John Dillinger. He asked about Val. I told him she was now a cat. Asked about my job. Told him I was now Sherlock Holmes. Asked about my new partner. I told Bing my partner used to be a duck and would be again. He wanted to know how I felt about that and I told him we got along rather well—even better after he was killed and came back as Dr. Watson. Asked me if I thought Norfolk would take the MCCA Knockout Trophy and I told him that would happen when Inland Revenue ran out of taxpayers. He told me I seemed to be doing much better. Patience of a saint, Dr. Ehrenberg.

Watson sat back, looked at me, and said, "The butler did it."

I glanced at him. "Astonishing. What ever led you to that conclusion?"

"Great heavens, man! It's right there under your nose. Look! The bounder's name is Moriarty! James Moriarty!"

I looked back at the list on my screen. "So it is." I frowned as I considered a detail that was becoming increasingly troublesome to put aside: The Moriarty business was only the latest symptom. It was just the sort of joke Shad might have made had Shad been in his feathers and in Watson's place at that point in time. It was also what the current Watson might have said had he been smoking proscribed substances or

experimenting with having his brain perforated and filled with kitty litter. It wasn't just concern for my friend's sanity. Was it really safe letting him drive? I was wondering a bit about my own mental state, as well. I was rather getting into the Basil Rathbone Sherlock Holmes character. It seemed to me I was enjoying it a good bit more than Watson—Shad, that is.

* * * *

The air corridor followed the Exeter Canal as it hugged the west bank of the Exe as far south as Turf where the canal ended. The river made a gentle bend to the east, and the corridor continued south over the farmland canals and greenery near the hamlet of Exwell Barton. Directly before us, rising from the greensward like some sort of medieval stone rocket gantry at the top of a gentle hill was Powderham Castle estate's triple-towered stone Belvedere. Vacationers waved from the crenellated battlements and Watson waved back. Beyond and below the towers, set among the trees in a deer park by a small lake, was the castle. Looking beyond the castle site was the wide avenue of the river, then Exmouth just below the curve of the ocean's blue horizon. White sprinkles of gulls flitted among the blues, greens, reds, and yellows of the sails and pennants flying on the sailboats filling the Exe. Watson pointed toward the boats. "Looks more fun than selling kitty litter, eh Holmes?"

"It appears so, Watson. Do you sail?"

"Sail? Heavens, no. Do you?"

"I'm ashamed to say I've never set foot on a sailboat. I suppose some day off we could take a lesson. Want to give it a try?"

Watson settled deeply into his couch and concentrated on the Sky Rover's instruments. "River looks very deep there, Holmes. Probably quite cold, too."

"Nonsense, old fellow. You'd take to it like a duck to water."

"Very amusing. Those things don't look safe."

"Sailing is like working around bombs, Watson: It pays to know what you are doing."

"I suppose we know where you and I come down on working around bombs, Holmes: A bit here, a bit there—"

“—A bit there, a bit here—”

“—A teeny bit way over there—”

“—And a great big gob or two down right here!”

We finally allowed ourselves to have a thorough laugh over that dark episode at Hangingstone Hill that was, after all, over—at least until the next echo.

* * * *

Powderham Castle stood atop a slight rise in the well-tended and tastefully wooded deer park. We went once around it before touching down. The lake mentioned before stretched gracefully east and west just south of the castle giving that side of the building views of deer drinking from the reflections of ancient trees. The castle itself, although replete with crenelated walls, gates, and towers, looked to be more manor home than fortress. Still, it had seen its battles during the Civil War, fighting on the Royalist side. Norman towers, a mix of brickwork, cut gray stone, sandstone, carved beerstone casements, oak, and ivy made of it an architectural map of the centuries it had withstood since it came into the Courtenay family in the thirteen hundreds.

The Courtenays were not only respected in the west country but well liked. I doubt if there had been anyone living within a hundred kilometers of Powderham who hadn't, at least once in their lifetimes, visited the castle. Val and I had been there several times on tours and at events: once on a tour of the castle, once on a tour of the gardens, once on a nature walk, once as guests at a wedding, twice we went to catch the fireworks on Guy Fawkes Day. Even Shad and Nadine had been there, as Watson had narrated. A big jewelry heist among the guests at a Powderham paid occasion wouldn't ruin the Courtenays and probably wouldn't break any of the guests so robbed. It was not, however, the sort of thing needed right then by Ian Collier and his family. In any event, it was very rude.

Watson put us down in the skydock off Powderham Castle's North Drive. "Notice something about that castle as we came in, Holmes?"

"Many things, old fellow. Which did you have in mind?"

"Doesn't look a thing like Darlington in *Remains of the Day*."

"Then perhaps we won't have Hannibal Lecter with which to contend. In any event, here comes the welcoming committee."

Since we arrived in an ABCD Sky Rover, one of Collier's off-duty constables advanced upon us from my side. He was a chunky fellow sporting a handsome gray handlebar mustache, a reflective silver and yellow traffic bib over his uniform. Since Shad had on his nineteenth-century Watson getup, complete with genuine houndstooth Sherlock Holmes deerstalker (a size too small) atop his head, a wedding party parking attendant advanced upon his side of the vehicle. This lad was also chunky, apparently from bench-pressing railroad rolling stock. He was wearing a midnight blue tuxedo with a candy-striped tie. Shad opened the windows, I showed my ID to the constable, but before I could ask for Collier's office, Watson asked of the attendant, "Grimpion-Meyer wedding party, please?"

The guide pointed to a slot, I bit my tongue, put my ID away, and Shad moved the cruiser toward the slot. We both held it in as long as we could, but mere flesh can bear only so much. Just as we locked into the slot we collapsed into each other's arms choking off cries of, "Grimpion-Meyer!" as best we could. As we exited the cruiser, the parking attendant and the constable seemed to be arguing. Actually, the attendant was upset, and the constable was attempting to calm him.

"What seems to be the problem, Constable?" I asked.

"Nothing, Detective Inspector. The lad's mistaken about something, that's all. Heard you and your partner havin' a laugh and he thought it might be at his expense."

"Not at all, my boy," I said to the fellow in the candy-striped tie. "The name of the wedding party, Grimpion-Meyer, struck us funny because of our resemblance to some fictional detectives in some very old vids: Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson." I took the deerstalker cap from Shad's head and placed it upon my own.

"What's funny about that?" demanded the lad.

"One of their cases, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Have you heard of it?"

"Of course. I attend Cambridge, don't I?"

"Cambridge College of Dry Cleaning," muttered Watson.

"What was that?" the lad demanded.

"*The Hound of the Baskervilles*," said Watson loudly, "took place near the Great Grimpen Mire."

The lad stared at us for a moment, then smiled on one side of his mouth, then the other, then he said, "Grimption-Meyer," he laughed, and unpleasantness was averted. "One thing, though," the lad said to me as Shad turned and began walking toward the castle's north gate entrance.

"What is that?" I answered.

"I understand that Sherlock Holmes—not the one in the movies, the one in the stories?"

"Yes?"

"I understand he never wore a deerstalker cap. That was just something they done up in the flicks."

"Ah," I said placing an arm across his substantial shoulders. Solid fellow. "A popular myth that I am pleased to have an opportunity to dispel, lad. I believe you will find in Dr. Watson's account entitled 'Silver Blaze' the good doctor depicts Holmes's attire on their rail trip to Exeter. Watson describes his friend's face 'framed in his ear-flapped traveling-cap.' Now, among the available ear-flap caps in those times and later were any of the knitted, fur, and cloth winter affairs—Andes, Eskimo, aviator, Elmer Fudd, Omar Bradley, and so on. I'm certain you'll agree Sherlock Holmes would rather let Professor Moriarty make off with the crown jewels than appear in public in any one of them. Do you agree?"

"I'm not sure."

"Can you see Sherlock Holmes with a shotgun sneaking through the woods saying, 'Shhhh. I'm hunting a wabbit.'"

"I cannot."

"Good lad." I patted his back. "Sir, the rakish deerstalker is the only possible ear-flapped traveling cap sufficiently fashionable for Sherlock Holmes. Good day to you."

The constable nodded me toward the north entrance. By the time I had made my way through it into the courtyard, Watson was nowhere to be

seen. I stood across from the castle's famous red door which, recalling the wedding Val and I had attended, was the main entrance for wedding participants and guests. I had a spine chilling moment thinking of Shad befuddled up as Dr. John Watson stumbling among the guests doing his best to solve the crime. Just before my blood turned to blueberry yogurt, I caught a movement out of the corner of my eye. It was a small door closing in a wall behind and to the right of the main tower. By the time I reached that door, it had closed altogether.

"Shad," I said in something between a shout and a whisper, "That's the wrong bloody door." He was gone. I opened the door to a dark sort of vestibule and entered, the aromas of prepared foods blending agreeably with the scents of old wood and new wax. I crossed hallways, rushed down passageways, and generally worked myself into a panic. I peered into rooms gingerbreaded with Italian molding, hung with portraits of ancestors, and festooned with Chinese glazed pots large enough to make a rather comfortable maisonette with the proper plumbing. I peered down hallways polished until everything seemed dipped in honey, more portraits of ancestors, polished brass candlesticks, and hoary crude tables that wore their polished scars with beribboned honor as though inflicted by shielding the body of the Conqueror himself. Thinking of Shad running loose in this movie set re-chilled my blood to hypothermic levels.

* * * *

By the time I managed to catch up with him, Shad was standing at the foot of a dark staircase covered with a blue runner, blue carpeting on the immediate landing, and more blue runner as the stairs continued up and to the right. On the back of the landing into the blue plaster of the wall was a hidden door to a set of servant's stairs. It strained memory but it appeared to be where the butler's father in *Remains of the Day* first showed that his squirrels were getting the better of him, as a duck I had once known might have put it.

Nigel Bruce, thoughtfully cocking his head to one side and tugging at his bit of a mustache, could have been right out of any of the Rathbone-Bruce series of vids. He glanced at me. "Oh," he said bluntly. "There you are, Holmes. Been looking all over for you. Where the deuce've you been?" He looked back at the stairs. "Look at this staircase. Not much of *Remains* was filmed here, you know. Never cared much for the character of Lord Darlington. Not a great role for Edward Fox, an actor I much admire, as you know."

"Yes."

“Much underrated in his time, Edward Fox. What a Nelson he would’ve made. Eh, Holmes?”

“A role for which any self-respecting British actor would gladly give his right arm, Watson.”

He looked at me for a stunned five seconds before he continued. “Holmes, remember Fox’s remarkable performance in *Day of the Jackal*?”

“Yes. Very exciting production.”

“Was there anyone who saw that performance, Holmes, who at the conclusion wasn’t rooting for the Jackal to shoot Charles de Gaulle?”

“Very true, Watson, but that may have been for other reasons besides Fox’s performance.”

“How do you mean?”

“As you may recall, *Day of the Jackal* was inspired by an actual plot to assassinate de Gaulle. It was said most Western leaders had his face on their dart boards.”

“I see. Well then, how about Edward Fox’s role as Lieutenant Francis Farewell, the adventurer who came to South Africa to hoodwink a savage ruler and stayed to fall beneath the spell of the great Shaka, king of the Zulus?”

I could almost hear the mourning and the dramatically mysterious musical score as Dr. Watson lowered himself to one knee before the staircase. He still had his multitrack sound system programs and databanks intact, if not his judgment. “As mournful chanting lows in the royal kraal, the reflections of the hearth flames flicker against the walls of Shaka’s great house. Farewell kneels and listens as the great Zulu king bitterly throws the Englishman’s deceptions back in Farewell’s face. The lieutenant tells Shaka that hating the English is not the solution, that they must search for the solution together. Shaka scorns the Englishman’s words. He says that Farewell is a man with no nation, a shadow. The king tells him to go, that Shaka no longer has any need for him. Farewell answers:

“Go?” Watson cried loudly, doing a remarkably good Edward Fox. “Go?” he inquired again of the Zulu king as I heard a squeak come from the stairs above. “Where?” he demanded loudly and angrily as I spied with my

little eye a sharply dressed fellow wearing a black tux with silver tie descending the stairs. Between a loosely blown array of silver-gray hair and the tie was the smoothly shaved, only slightly jowly face of Charles Hugh Pepys Courtenay, Earl of Devon. He was heading straight down the stairs for Shad's performance of Nigel Bruce's performance of Dr. Watson's performance of Edward Fox's performance of Francis Farewell's farewell performance before Shaka, as Shad's and my pensions joined *Pliopithecus* and the Dodo in existence's dustbin.

"Where can I go?" Farewell begged more humbly, a shaking hand extended toward the imaginary Zulu king. It was Oscar-winning stuff.

"Where I have been," answered Lord Devon in a deep, rich voice, doing a quite credible Henry Cele as Shaka.

Shad looked up the stairs, his eyes bugged, his cheeks bulged, and he struggled to his feet, spluttering apologies. Lord Devon placed his well-manicured hands together and clapped genteelly. "Well done, sir. *Shaka Zulu*. Well done." He nodded his gray mane at me. "Indeed, I am horribly late for the reception and I see the chief constable has sent England's most dynamic duo to track me down, wot? Holmes and Watson, wot? Basil Rathbone and Nigel Bruce?"

Shad and I exchanged quick panic glances. "Chief constable?" Watson mouthed. Facing Lord Devon, Watson said, "Just a gentle reminder of the time, milord. Could you direct us to the castle's head of security so that we may report our mission accomplished?"

The master of the house laughed, crinkled his eyes, and pointed down an ancestor-imaged hallway generally toward the south. "All of the way down there, doctor, last door on the right. Oh."

We both paused, frozen in mid getaway, giving Lord Devon our full attention. It was that kind of 'oh.' "Yes, milord?" I said.

"Do you know if there has been any progress made concerning this dreadful jewelry matter?"

"Yes there has, milord," I said. "I am pleased to say it should all be cleared up before the conclusion of the reception."

"Not a theft, was it?" He pronounced "theft" as though its mere thought might endanger the very foundations of Powderham.

"A mere misunderstanding, milord. Nothing more. Please put your mind at ease."

His eyebrows ascended. "Excellent!" He nodded, his face wreathed in very happy smiles. "Jolly good." He looked at Watson, his face growing somewhat more serious. "Excellent actor, Edward Fox." He shook his head gravely. "*Remains of the Day*. Hated that movie as a boy. Don't mind me baring the old soul, do you old fellow, one actor to another?"

"Not at all, milord."

"Your excellent portrayal of Edward Fox reminded me of it. As a boy they told me a thousand times *Remains of the Day* was filmed here. Dreadful film. I even watched it once. Could hardly stay awake. I mean you practically stand up begging Emma Thompson to hop naked in Hopkins's tub, wot? Muss his hair a bit?"

"Quite," said Watson.

Lord Devon looked into a glass and darkly. "Away at school you tell all your chums the bloody thing was filmed at Powderham. They don't care the ruddy film's boring. It's Hollywood. Movies! With *Hannibal the cannibal*. You sit before the tellymax screen all puffed up, the ruddy thing begins. There it goes, sir, with that bloody ride up a hilly lane you never saw before and you pull up to a townhouse with a Georgian roofline decorated with bloody old urns. 'Where the hell is that?' shouts out Jimmy Brown. 'That's not Powderham,' says Cyril Danforth. 'Where's that, Charlie?' yells out Tommy Welles. "Where are the battlements?"

His lordship descended the remains of the stairs, clasped his hands behind his back, shook his head, and made his way toward the wedding party, still shaking his head. "Scarred me for life," he muttered as he turned a corner. "Bloody movies." Shad and I exited on tiptoe in the opposite direction.

"Now, was that a good save or what?" said my partner as we reached Ian Collier's door.

"Save? Save?"

He gave me his hurt Watson expression. "Of course, Holmes. Where's the head of security? Mission accomplished?"

"Shad, there *is* a built-in bumble factor in your Dr. Watson brain! It's the size of a casaba melon!"

"Really, Holmes!"

"You know what they call a firefighter who does a superb job of extinguishing fires he himself has ignited?"

"What?"

"An *arsonist*!" I knocked on the door and entered.

* * * *

The security officer on duty led us to an office, which led to an outer office and a secretary who led us to an inner office overlooking the deer park and lake. It was a well-lighted room, smallish, and tucked about with family photos, professional photos, and neat shelves of books. Ian Collier himself was older than I remembered, a testimony to the dozen years or more that had passed since I had last seen him. He was a pleasant-looking fellow of about Watson's height, brown hair thinning on top and graying on the sides. He rose slowly behind his desk as we entered. He had a narrow face I hadn't remembered as mournful but which certainly rated such a description a moment before he caught a glimpse of the professional help he was getting from Exeter. The expression then became something between flabbergasted and crestfallen.

"Blood and sand, Jaggs! What's become of you?"

"I haven't time to explain, dear boy," I said briskly. I nodded at Shad. "Former Assistant Chief Constable Ian Collier, this is my partner, Detective Sergeant Guy Shad. Watson, this is Mr. Ian Collier."

"Pleased to meet you, sir," said Watson, extending his hand. They shook. Collier appeared to be waiting for an explanation I really had neither the time nor the heart to provide. Hence, I said, "Shad and I are traveling incognito."

"I shouldn't wonder," he responded. He gestured at two red leather-covered captains chairs facing his desk. "Please. Be seated. Can I offer you some tea?"

"Thank you. That would be most welcome," I said, lowering myself into the chair to Shad's left. As we waited for Ian's secretary to bring tea

and biscuits, Powderham Castle's head of security briefed us on the missing jewelry. I noticed while he was talking, family photo images randomly appeared in a screen on the shelf behind Ian's head. Wife and two young sons perhaps ten and seven respectively. There was a single still of a golden retriever hanging on the wall opposite the desk. It looked as though it had been taken on a sunny day in a field of wildflowers. The tea was poured and I took my cup. Excellent blend, by the way.

"We need several things," I said to Ian. "First, as discreetly as possible, have several of your security personnel go to the reception, locate, and extricate Miss Betsy Blythe."

"The blind woman with the seeing-eye dog?"

I smiled. "She is not blind, and that dog is a Labradoodle bio with a human imprint. As soon as possible after grabbing them—"

"You said *extricate* them."

"With prejudice. Once you have them, separate them. Make certain you get both woman and dog and that they cannot communicate. I doubt that they'll be rigged with wireless, but be prepared for it just in case they are."

"Very well."

"Next, I need to interview Clarice Penne."

His eyebrows went up. "You mean Timmy the Tortoise?"

"Yes. I need to do so in private, with Betsy Blythe, and without the dog."

Collier was looking confused. So was Watson.

"Come now, gentlemen. Surely you can arrange a meeting. It must be near a place where we can have unobserved access to the ABCD cruiser."

Collier leaned back in his chair and crossed his legs. "There's a place just beyond the rose garden where you can have that meeting," he said. "At the east edge of the garden where it drops down to the dressage lawn there's a wall. It would conceal your cruiser."

"Excellent."

“Am I permitted to know what’s going on?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, old fellow. It’s like rescuing the troops from Dunkirk. If it had to be written up in triplicate and approved in advance, no one ever would have had the courage to take the responsibility.”

Collier looked at Watson, who chuckled. “Holmes really knows how to lead a charge, doesn’t he?” said my partner.

“Now that you mention it, the phrase ‘the brave Six Hundred’ does come to mind rather easily right now.” Ian Collier shifted his gaze back to me. “I’m not going to find out you two have escaped from some asylum am I?”

“No. I don’t believe you will ever find out.” I touched my fingertips together and looked over them, my eyebrows arched, my eyes widened, but not crossed.

He leaned back in his chair, raised a hand in dismissal, and dropped it to the arm of his chair. “I can arrange for you, your cruiser, Betsy Blythe, and Timmy the Tortoise to meet privately off the edge of the rose garden. Anything else?”

“When you took that imprint of your dog, Ian.”

The change of subject caught him off stride. Once his double take was done, he leaned back in his chair. “When I was forced to retire?” he asked, his face reddening.

“Yes. Do you still have that chip?”

He frowned. “Yes. It’s here in my office.”

“Excellent. We’ll need that.”

“Is that quite all?” he asked.

“No, not quite.” I rubbed my chin. “We’ll need a dungeon, a butcher’s apron, some tomato juice, a rusty knife, and two of your most thuggish-looking cops. They must be reliable chaps, not squeamish, men who can keep their mouths shut. If the chief constable, the earl, or Superintendent Matheson get wind of any of this, the lot of us will be balls-up and most likely never play the violin again.”

* * * *

As gentle breezes touched the treetops, the warm spring air was filled with the heady scent of roses. A marquee for children's entertainments had already been erected at the edge of the lawn below the rose garden. Inside the marquee were a few chairs, Betsy Blythe, Ian Collier, Clarice Penne as Timmy the Tortoise, Shad as Bruce as Watson, and myself somewhat in charge. The ABCD cruiser was parked out of sight of the castle next to the rose garden wall stairs. Collier and Watson stood guard by the stairs while I sat on the chair facing Betsy Blythe to my right and the tortoise to my left. Miss Penne, of course, as a thorn-thighed tortoise, had her head stuck out of a shell about the size of a smallish elongated dinner plate with warmer. Miss Blythe was somewhat more attractive being a shapely human female bio wearing a pale blue cocktail dress with white half-heels. She was in her mid twenties, brown hair with reddish highlights, a relaxed cupid's bow mouth, a bit of an upturned nose, and lovely hazel eyes once I removed her heavy sunglasses.

"A shame to hide those beautiful eyes, Miss Blythe."

"I'm sorry, sir. I don't know who you are. I'm blind, you see."

"Actually, I do see, Lolita, and so do you."

"My name's Betsy—"

"It's Lolita Doll, and you are no more sightless than am I. We are pressed for time, my dear. Therefore, may we dispense with the denials, explanations, excuses, and so on?"

"My dog—"

"We have Frank Statten in detention and caught red-handed—or red-pawed—with the goods. Because you tipped us off, we are inclined to be lenient."

She stood up and glared down at me. "Lolita Doll rats out *nobody*, copper!"

I held up a hand. "Please. Calm yourself. You all but sent engraved invitations. Now, take your seat."

She slowly sat down on her chair, still glaring at me, then looking

down ashamed. "You helped me a lot, Inspector Jagers. That's the truth. You and the parrot. Don't know what I would've done if I hadn't fallen into your hands. That Dr. Ehrenberg helped me, too. But how'd you know I had a partner in that Wallingford job? And how'd you know to come here to catch us?"

"Unintentionally, perhaps, but you told me both times, my dear. The parakeet was certainly too small either to hide or carry much in the way of swag. About all it could do was map out the security systems and get the codes when they were entered. You had to have a partner. Add to that you worked at Songbirds and we already knew Frankie Statten owned the shop, and there you were. Then when I heard a large jewel heist had gone down at Powderham and saw Betsy Blythe had brought a large dog, well, it was obvious that Lolita Doll and Frankie Statten were at it again."

"Sorry?" She was frowning at me.

"Betsy Blythe," I repeated. "Blythe from the Blythe doll created in 1972 by the American Kenner toy company and Betsy from the Betsy Wetsy created in 1934 by Ideal." I held out my hands. "It's me, Doll.' Perfectly obvious."

"Remarkable," she said.

"At times I astound even myself. What were you trying to do, Lolita?"

She looked up at me, her eyes filled with tears. "See, all the ladies had these little changing cubicles set up in the room off the First Library where they could change before the reception and dance. Can't thunder rock wearin' all that ice. Mr. Collier there had folks they could leave valuables with, but most guests didn't bother. Frank was right about that. But a signal's supposed to go off when we returns to the shop. That's when we was all supposed to get nicked. I suppose this is all right for what it is, but it's only going to be attempted, isn't it? I wanted the whole book."

"I thought you wanted some place safe, Lolita, to be taken care of, to be happy and loved. You're not going to get that locked up in the nick."

"Half a loaf," she offered lamely.

"Is half a loaf short," I completed.

"It'd be almost worth it to think on Frank being miserable for a tenner."

"Listen, Lolita. I believe I have the answer to all your problems and mine." I held out a hand toward the tortoise. "Do you know Clarice Penne?"

She looked at the tortoise and back at me. "Oh, sure. I mean I seen her here in the garden maybe a hundred times tellin' stories to the children, the tykes pettin' her shell and all. Every chance I get I come down here. I told Dr. Ehrenberg about it. So beautiful here."

"How would you like to tell stories to children, Lolita? You're good with lies and know the very best stories. How would you like Clarice's job?"

"Now you hold on just a minute there, Sherlock," said the tortoise. "This is *my* gig and for as long as I want it. I got a contract."

I reached over, picked up the tortoise, and whispered at Clarice as I faced her about. "If you pee on me, love, I will put you on your back for the remainder of the meeting and leave you that way." I aimed her snapping end at Lolita. "Clarice, look at Lolita, hush for a moment and consider: How would you like to have that face, that voice, that age, those legs, and that body as you reinvent yourself and relaunch your theatrical career? You'd still have all your current financial assets, belongings, degrees, whatever."

The tortoise was dead silent, but I could almost see the smoke coming off the top of its wrinkled head. Finally the tortoise glanced back at me. "Who the hell are you, mate?"

"Forgive me, Miss Penne. I am D.I. Harrington Jaggars, Devon ABCD."

The tortoise moved its head until it was once again looking at Lolita. Clarice said, "Would you consider it, girl, even for a serious second?"

"Oh yes! In a heartbeat!" she answered. "You have the most wonderful job in the world! Please!"

"Girl, you don't even know what my body in stasis looks like."

"I don't care," said Lolita. "I don't want that body. I want the one you're in now."

"I have your natural all taken care of," I said to Clarice. "Are we agreed, then? Lolita?"

"Safe, taken care of, happy, and loved. You remembered everything,

Inspector. Is there nothing you can't do?"

"We'll see. Clarice?"

"I'd sure like to know how you read me so well, Sherlock."

"Elementary, Miss Penne. You are the only thorn-thighed tortoise in the United Kingdom on antidepressants." I held a hand out toward the cruiser. "Shall we? There is only a miniscule window of opportunity." Ian and Watson both hunched their shoulders, turned their backs, and faced the stairs.

I took Clarice and Lolita over to the cruiser, ran up the mechs, moved a few things out of the way, moved in one woman bio and one tortoise bio, swapped their imprints, and moved out one woman bio and one tortoise bio. Once that was accomplished the two of them went to a far corner below the rose garden wall to talk over some tortoise-girl, girl-tortoise stuff. As they were thus engaged, I sent the cruiser to the next location, the outside entrance to our improvised dungeon, and said to my faithful medical companion, "Come, Watson, come! The game is afoot!"

* * * *

It was not a bad dungeon for our purposes. The space was below ground level, sufficiently dank, the walls of ancient dressed stone, the atmosphere musty. The room's past as a storage place for meats was evidenced by the number of rusty meat hooks protruding from two of the four walls. There were no grinning skeletons hanging from irons, but the castle's spider population had done a grand job of decorating the craggy beams above with filthy old webs. The lights were electric instead of smoky old torches, but the lights were grimy and adequately dim.

In the center of the room was a large wooden butcher's block table. Its dark uneven surface had seen much use over the centuries. The dips and stains testified to millions of cuts and oceans of blood. I stood at one corner of the table, Ian stood across from me. At the other two corners were two of Ian's men, Peter Blake and Henry Tompkins. They were both retired constables who did professional wrestling on the local circuit. With the proper makeup they had also appeared in several locally produced horror vids. They were wearing the proper makeup.

In the center of the table sat about the sweetest, most good-natured, lovable dog I had ever seen. He was about seven stone, his fur light brown, curly, and uncut, giving him both a ragged and fluffy appearance. Delightful

face, with a few of those curls hanging before his eyes. The dog's name, according to his license tag, was "Doodles." His brace, peculiar to seeing-eye dogs, had been removed and was on the floor in the corner behind Ian. To all appearances he was a real dog, which meant his bio receiver was being shielded by a Bio Shack special. Doodles, poor fellow, appeared just a bit nervous.

"Gentlemen," I began, "While we're waiting for Dr. Watson to finish cleaning up from working on the two cats, please be so kind as to note the breed of this animal. This is a cross between a Labrador retriever and a poodle known to dog fanciers as a Labradoodle." I reached out and petted its head. "Good boy. Labradoodles are generally good natured, take complicated training extremely well, and are very remarkable in that they do not shed."

"Not at all, Mr. Holmes?" growled Peter Blake.

"Your allergic sensitivities are safe with this pooch, Mr. Blake. Now, as I remarked, they are easily trained and well behaved, which is why this animal's behavior quite puzzles me. There is only one reason I can think of why such a valuable animal should eat all that jewelry that was left in the changing room."

"How can you be certain he done it?" asked Henry Tompkins.

"Elementary, Mr. Tompkins. Staff security have searched everywhere else, have they not?"

"Aye, we have." The big man nodded his massive black-hooded head.

"And Dr. Watson has examined all of the other pets as possible hiding places, hasn't he?"

Ian, Blake, and Tompkins hung their heads. "Aye," said Tompkins. "He did that." I rather hoped they weren't overdoing it. I glanced down at the butcher block and there was just the right amount of tomato juice smeared about. The Labradoodle was looking down at the butcher block, as well. His tongue was out and he was panting.

"There you are, Mr. Tompkins," I said. "When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." I looked into the dog's wide-eyed gaze and said, "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle." A rattle followed by a low muttered curse came from the shadows beyond

the arched doorway. From beyond it Watson emerged wearing the butchers apron stained from the waist down with tomato juice. He wasn't wearing his tweed jacket and the sleeves of his white shirt were rolled above his elbows. His hands were stained slightly with red, but the butcher knife in his right hand was coated with the stuff.

"Told you the jewels wouldn't be in those cats, Holmes," he muttered through hurt feelings.

"We had to look, old fellow."

"Neither of them pulled through, you know. Wouldn't've hurt anything to let me hop into the village and pick up some anesthetic from the chemist's."

"We were pressed for time, old fellow. Sorry to put you through that."

He looked over the tops of his glasses at the assembly. "The owners of those cats are going to be quite distressed and it's no fault of mine. I objected to all those procedures from the start. I want that on the record." He snorted contemptuously at the butcher knife in his hand, which he began waving about. "Not even a proper scalpel. This thing's dull as an old rake. Do a better job with a chain saw."

"Couldn't be helped, old fellow." I reached out a hand and scratched the dog's head. "Here's the last one."

The Labradoodle's panting resembled a steam locomotive attempting to climb the South Face of Everest.

Watson's eyebrows went up. "At least this one is big enough to hold the jewelry, Holmes." He passed his thumb slowly over the knife's edge. "Strange looking beast, there. What kind of breed is that?"

I held out a hand to Peter Blake. "You may have the honor, Mr. Blake."

"Yes sir." He looked at Watson. "This here, doctor, is a Labradoodle."

"Labradoodle, you say? Well, there, stretch him out on the block boys and let's see if we can't separate his Labra from his doodles."

"All right! All right! Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" yelled the dog. "All bloody *right!*"

We watched as the dog sat back on its hind legs, pulled its forelegs to its sides, and a line appeared in the dog's fine belly hair. The line parted starting at the top, and essentially unsealed spilling all of the missing jewelry into Peter Blake's quick hands. Watson moved to my side.

"Congratulations, Holmes. You nailed Frank Statten."

"Ah me," I said as I shrugged. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to disappoint you once again, old friend."

He frowned, then one eyebrow slowly elevated. "I don't believe it, Holmes. Not another catch and release."

"With a condition." I looked and saw I had everyone's attention, including the Labradoodle's. "Jewelry heist at Powderham Castle, right in the middle of a reception, famous guests, among them Lord and Lady Devon and the chief constable of the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary. The scandal would never do." I looked at the dog. "Would it?"

He looked around, shifty-eyed. "No. No, the media would have a feast."

"So it seems to me the best thing is to return the jewelry to its rightful owners, no theft, no scandal, no harm done."

"That sounds cool." The dog held up its right paw, extended a toe and wagged it back and forth. "But, call me Mr. Suspicious, I see a big fat fishhook with my name on it."

"Whatever do you mean, sir?"

"In return for this generous offer, Mr. Holmes is it?"

"Yes."

"In return, what's Frankie Statten's bill?"

"Why, I'm so glad you asked that question, Mr. Statten. We keep the jewelry, return it to its owners, and return you to your natural body in Exeter no harm done—"

"—And?"

"And that's it. We keep your equipment, of course."

“Equipment?”

“The bios.”

“All ... Lolita. She ratted me out.”

“It’s only because of her you’re getting this deal, Frank,” I said. “We’ve detained her and she will be spending the rest of her life behind walls.” I pointed at the velvet-lined interior of his belly cavity. “We knew it was you all along because your gut was the last place there was to look. What about the deal?”

“You just let me go?”

“Once we get you back to Queen Street and Songbirds. Is that where you keep your natural?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you need to be counseled on how much time you could draw doing things your way?”

“There has to be a catch.” The dog looked down and shook his head.

“Must be disappointing for you, too, Holmes,” said Watson to me, as Statten pondered the deal.

“Why do you say that, Watson? I would call this a most satisfactory conclusion to this matter.”

“Here you have a dog and you never got to say anything about the curious incident of the dog in the nighttime.”

“Nighttime? There was no nighttime.”

“Wasn’t that what was curious?”

“Wasn’t what—I don’t quite see what you are driving at, Watson. I thought the curious incident was that the dog wasn’t barking.”

“Well, this dog wasn’t barking. Didn’t you find that curious?”

“Not in the least.”

He leaned back. "Not even a smidgen?"

"Dear fellow, this Labradoodle is an amdroid imprinted by a human impersonating a very well-trained, well-behaved seeing-eye dog. Why would he bark?"

"Well, I thought it curious."

"Really."

"Game's afoot and all that—"

"I agree to the deal," interrupted Frankie Statten. "Just so I don't have to listen to any more of this rubbish!"

"Thank you." I turned to Watson and smiled. "Well done, old fellow. Well done. So, while you clean up and Mr. Blake and Mr. Tompkins discreetly return the jewelry to their respective owners, Mr. Collier, Mr. Statten, and I shall repair to the cruiser and sort out a few final details." I held out my hand toward the stairs. "Gentlemen."

As I followed Collier and the dog up the dungeon stairs, I heard the Labradoodle ask him confidentially, "This Holmes and Watson thing those two got going. An act, right? An act?"

"I don't know," answered Mr. Collier. "I simply don't know."

* * * *

The cruiser rose from Powderham Castle in an arc that took us over the River Exe, giving us a good view of Lympstone's Bay Tower red in the afternoon sun. I could see Mama Bimbo's Cat House on The Strand being fitted out for some other kind of shop. A flight of gulls crossed below us and made wing for chips or fingerlings, whichever were more plentiful as the tide changed. Watson put us on autopilot and settled back in his couch.

"Holmes, what about Frank Statten and Songbirds?" He pointed toward the mech chip in the envelope on the dash clip. "Are you simply going to let him go without even a day in court?"

"I am going to take this chip to his stasis bed at Songbirds, update his natural, and leave, inquiry closed."

"Memories of every crime and crooked deal Statten ever pulled, everything he has in the works right now, is in his memory recall bank. I cannot believe you won't at least make a copy of that chip for the constabulary."

"I won't do it for two reasons, Watson. First, I gave him my word. Second, I don't think Statten will believe either that I won't copy his memory. Unless I'm terribly mistaken, every iron he has in the fire will be yanked out within hours of getting his engrams back into his nat. The deals he has going with any number of undesirable personages will be cancelled, and they will be after him to know why. Think he'll stick around to try and explain how he had to make a deal with Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson?"

Watson chuckled. "Not much to show on our records, though."

"Small price to pay for ending a one-man crime wave and doing a good cop a favor, don't you think? It should make absolute excrement of Frankie's criminal life and reputation, which will settle his account with Loretta nicely."

"I suppose." We rode along silently for a while, then Watson said, "Holmes, what is going to happen to Clarice Penne's body—the one in stasis? Sooner or later the owner of the stasis bed is going to have to put the body up for payments due, correct?"

"I'm surprised at you, Watson," I said. "Surely you recall our visit to that fair seaside cultural center you insisted on pronouncing Limp-stone."

"Yes." He nodded. "Of course I remember."

"Do you also remember the woman who constituted one hundred percent of the clientele of Mama Bimbo's Cat House?"

He chuckled at that. "Yes. Petting Place. Absurd name. Maddie girl, she was. Madeleine Wallingford. She brought in the hapless jewel thief now inhabiting Timmy the Tortoise over at Powderham Castle. Our first catch and release. What of her?"

"Remember the card Madeleine Wallingford had us place in the shop window? The one for the meeting of the Order of St. Trinians?"

"Vaguely. Theater group, wasn't it?"

"I'm shocked, Watson. Absolutely shaken to my very nucleus. An old

movie buff such as yourself? You yourself remarked how Clarice Penne's natural body resembled actor Alistair Sim, he who in his heyday played the headmistress of St. Trinians girls' school in *The Belles of St. Trinians* to such perfection—"

"The Order of St. Trinians," Shad interrupted. "That theater group does scripts based on the Ronald Searle cartoons!"

"Indeed, old fellow, indeed. Madeleine Wallingford is paying off the stasis estate agent and collecting the suit for Trinians new star performer as we speak. You know, possibly going without a proper hat has chilled your brain, depriving its cells of much needed oxygen, increasing your brain-bumble factor." I reached back and took a round box from the hands of the large walking mech. "In return for our services, I received this from my friend Ian Collier." I handed it to my partner.

"I didn't know we were allowed to accept gifts, Holmes."

"Nothing of value. This is just an old hand-me-down of Ian's grandfather's. It ought to keep your brain toasty."

He lifted the lid from the box, placed it aside, opened the tissue paper, and took the gray homburg from it. "Why ... why this is quite thoughtful, Holmes." He placed it on his head with both hands and faced me. "How do I look?"

"Very handsome, Watson. Distinguished. The very picture of Dr. John H. Watson."

"You shouldn't have."

"Why not?"

His face grew long and troubled. "Now, this makes me feel terrible."

"How so, Watson?"

"Well, I've noticed, Holmes, that you seem to be enjoying our Holmes and Watson thing quite a bit more than I have."

"I'd noticed it myself. Now that I reflect upon it, I haven't felt this perceptive in decades. I feel as though I could untie the Gordian Knot one-handed, blindfolded, and play multiple games of championship chess with my toes at the same time."

“Feeling rather sharp, eh, Holmes?”

“As a tack, dear fellow. Why?”

“I have a confession to make. You know how I dislike reading instructions of any kind.”

“Quite. As I recall DS Guy Shad’s famous dictum: ‘If the damned program or machine isn’t intuitive to operate, it’s crap.’”

Watson chuckled. “Yes. Very amusing.”

“Come, Watson. What about it?” I prompted.

“Brochure came with my Watson suit, you know, from Celebrity Look-alikes.” He reached into his side coat pocket with his left hand and pulled out a leaflet folded into thirds. “You were correct, Holmes, about what you called my bumble factor. There’s one built in. Slows things down and fuzzes up thoughts while mixing them in with the vocabulary, vocal mannerisms, and so on of the Nigel Bruce Watson.” He waved the leaflet idly in my direction. “Something else, too.”

“What’s that?”

“Bit of a cost-cutting measure, I fear. Makes sense if you look at it from their end. Celebrity Look-alikes, that is. You see?”

“I’m afraid I don’t see. What are you talking about, Watson? What cost-cutting measure?”

“Oh. Well, usually both suits are rented at the same time: Holmes and Watson. You see? Symbiotic relationship.”

“Ye-e-es,” I answered warily.

“They had to have the Nigel Bruce as Watson suits made, you see. For the Basil Rathbone as Holmes suits, though, they simply used the same model fallen officer replacement suit that you have yourself.”

“That makes perfectly good sense. Why reinvent the wheel?”

“Exactly, Holmes. So you understand.”

“Understand what?”

“When my Watson suit came in close enough proximity to your model suit, my Nigel Bruce-Dr. Watson bio program asked permission to insert a wireless patch through your bio receiver. You must have seen it. You agreed to the terms.”

“Ever since I went wireless I must get a half dozen of those things a day. I never read them—who has the time? What—well, what does it do?”

Watson yawned, tipped the homburg over his eyes, and slid down in his seat. “Only some mannerisms, vocabulary choices, thought pattern adjustments. According to the brochure it should sharpen up your thinking a bit. Seems to have done just that. Gordian Knot and all. We can uninstall it, I suppose.”

“Why would I want to?”

“Perhaps I should. Don’t quite seem to understand what’s going on.”

I picked up the brochure and gave it a quick scan. It had an address that would be useful in finding out if it would be possible to dial back Watson’s bumble factor. Something else, too, that might be a problem:

* * * *

The Holmes and Watson duo are only for entertainment, guys! Silly us! So if you run into real emergency situations while occupying these bios, programming automatically calls the chaps who are the real professionals. For anything less than emergencies, programming restricts your problem solving strategies to those not involving arrests or otherwise burdening the police. Have fun! And please solve crime responsibly.

* * * *

That opened all kinds of possibilities. A few dozen Holmes and Watson duos on the streets could put the constabulary out of business for good.

“Speaking of bumble,” said Watson, “I used to have a bumble dessert thing when I was with New England Wildlife. Quite tasty. Bumble brain pie.”

“Doesn’t sound very appetizing, old fellow.”

“What? Sorry.” He chuckled. “Misspoke there. Bumble brain pie. Silly of me. Actually it was called bum berry pie.”

“Bum berry pie? Are you certain?”

“Yes. Raspberries, blueberries, blackberries. Delicious. A Maine favorite. Woman in Farmington used to make it up special for the officers in my station.”

“Terribly sorry, Watson. Bum berry pie sounds even less appetizing than bumble brain pie.”

“Bumble berry pie, Holmes,” corrected Watson. “Whatever are you going on about? I said bumble berry pie. Keep going on about bum berry pie and you’ll make people wonder from where you got this great reputation.” He chuckled again and yawned. “Bum berry pie. You amaze me, Holmes. You absolutely amaze me. Oh, about the dog—”

“Frankie Statten was caught going equipped, hence the equipment is forfeit.”

“I see that. But since—how was that again?”

“Since we are all agreed that the jewelry was misplaced and not stolen, there was no crime. Hence, no need to produce anything back at the office.”

Watson grunted something.

As the late afternoon countryside sped beneath us, I looked back over my thoughts of the past few days, thrilling at always having an answer almost as soon as a question arose. Such as, if I am heading east toward Exeter late in the afternoon, why is the setting sun not at my back but is, instead, perpendicular to the vector of motion and warming my left cheek? I looked at the GPS.

“Watson, you have us heading north toward Exmoor. Watson?”

I caught the sound of the old fellow gently snoring, took over the cruiser’s controls, and entered the correct heading, wondering if the patch I had automatically accepted into my neural system included the ability to play the violin and an addiction to cocaine. Then I remembered my Holmes was a Basil Rathbone Hollywood Holmes whose strongest addiction was to

whatever tobacco was stuffed into that huge meerschaum pipe of his. I needn't worry about smoking. Neither my lungs, my wife, nor the clean air regulations at Heavitree Tower could tolerate any of that nonsense.

My partner was having a bit of bother about the Labradoodle. To wit: had we stolen it? I suppose a case could be made for it, and I would be happy to meet Frankie Statten in court any time he wished to settle the matter at law. Once I was on the proper heading for Exeter, I settled in and contemplated blowing bubbles from that meerschaum. It went very well with the image playing before my mind's eye of Ian Collier, his wife, and two boys at Powderham playing with their old golden retriever in his new Labradoodle suit.

Copyright (c) 2007 Barry B. Longyear

* * * *

(EDITOR'S NOTE: Earlier adventures of Jagers and Shad include "The Good Kill" [November 2006], "The Hangingstone Rat" [October 2007], and "Murder in Parliament Street" [November 2007].)