

# The Case of the Detective's Smile

By [Mark Bourne](#). Short story originally published in *Sherlock Holmes in Orbit*, edited by Mike Resnick and Martin H. Greenberg; DAW Books, 1995. All rights to this story have reverted back to the author. Distribution in any form without written permission from the author is strictly forbidden.

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"The mundane bores me, Watson."

These were the first words Sherlock Holmes had spoken all morning — a gray, frigid January morning of 1898. His statement so startled me that my coffee was jostled from its cup, speckling the morning *Times* spread out before me.

He lounged listlessly in his armchair before the fire, a hodge-podge of books and monographs littering the floor about his feet. My friend languidly waved his pipe before his face, watching the fragrant smoke rise in ever-changing patterns that veiled his features.

"And good morning to you, Holmes," I retorted, dabbing up the coffee spill. I offered him a scone from Mrs. Hudson's breakfast tray, but he refused with a directed wave of his hand. Smoke swirled in graceful curls about his solemn face. By this stage in our long association, I had learned his moods well, and I had seen this one before.

"Surely, Holmes," I began, "You cannot have already forgotten that frightful episode of the princess and the bloody marionettes."

Holmes shrugged. "Trifles, Watson, trifles."

"Or the case of the spotted diplomat?"

"Hardly worthy of my unique talents, you must agree."

I was undaunted. "Well, then, that Cornish horror of the Devil's Foot."

"Watson, Watson, Watson." Holmes turned his great hawk-like face toward me. "My blood cries out for challenge, for the unexpected, for anything beyond the realm of the everyday world." He indicated the view beyond the sitting room windows. "Which does bore me so. But I thank you for trying to relieve my black mood."

In earlier days, before the so-called Return of Sherlock Holmes, I would have worried that my friend would soon pull a tiny key from his pocket, open a certain drawer in his work desk, and withdraw a polished morocco case. A case in which he kept a hypodermic syringe with its long hollow needle. For

it was while in such dark ruminations that he had sought solace in the black embrace of a seven percent solution of cocaine.

But the Sherlock Holmes who had returned from his mysterious three-year journey abroad was a changed man. Of course, he was still the friend I had publicly declared the best and wisest man whom I have ever known. Nonetheless, the foreign lands he encountered in his travels, during which all the world, including myself, thought Sherlock Holmes dead, had altered him in subtle ways that only I could have noticed. Chief among these was the absolute absence of the cocaine case. He had not touched it since his resurrection. What I had tried in vain to do for many years, his secret and solitary adventures had done for me.

When pressed about the details of his journeying, he would merely tell me to re-read the "colorful romance" in which I recorded the events surrounding his Return. Over the years, however, troubling discrepancies had come to my attention. His account of travels in Tibet and Khartoum was rife with fallacies, anachronisms, and paradoxes. I was forced to the conclusion that Holmes' statements regarding his Great Hiatus were the purest invention on his part.

Often I wondered: what adventures could be of such profound secrecy and mystery that he would not share them with another living soul, including — especially — his most trusted friend?

I returned to my breakfast and newspaper, concerned but resigned. Holmes was starved for stimulation of his renowned powers, and nothing less than a case of great import could blow the dark cloud of ennui from his brain.

It was with providential fortune that a knock rapped our door.

"Mr. Holmes? Doctor?" called Mrs. Hudson.

Holmes seemed to not hear her. He remained still, eyes fixed on the smoke twisting in the air before him. With a grunt of dismay I opened the door.

"A woman is at the door, sir," said our landlady. "She insists on seeing Mr. Holmes."

"Did she offer her name?"

"No sir. But she told me to say that she and Mr. Holmes share mutual acquaintances, and to give him this." She handed me a playing card, of the kind used in a gaming deck. I examined it for anything peculiar, such as a message written along its white border. But it was merely an unremarkable Queen of Hearts.

This portended something extraordinary. Anonymous strangers on our doorstep had become routine over the years, but they usually saved their cryptic messages until after they had entered our rooms. I turned toward Holmes. By all appearances, he was completely unaware of our presence in this hemisphere.

Mrs. Hudson peered over my shoulder at Holmes. A frown of concern tugged at her elderly features. She stood on her toes and leaned close to my ear.

"Oh dear," she whispered so softly I could barely hear her words. "Mr. Holmes *is* a gray cloud today, isn't he?"

I whispered in reply. "You may have just provided a ray of sun, Mrs. Hudson. Please show the lady up."

She looked gravely at my companion, then exited, silently closing the door behind her.

"Mrs. Hudson has taken to predicting the weather, I see," Holmes remarked from his chair. I felt my face flush with embarrassment, and he smiled wanly. "But within every gray cloud lurks the makings of a thunderstorm. Pray, Watson, let me see our visitor's calling card."

I handed it to him. He leaned forward and studied it intently. He flexed it gently between his hands and rubbed its surface with his long fingers. At last he brought it to his nose and sniffed, as if inhaling the vapors of a fine wine.

"Our mysterious visitor is between forty and fifty years of age," Holmes said. "She hails from a family with close associations to University education. Specifically Oxford, where I suggest her father was at least a professor of mathematics. She has particularly fond memories of her childhood that she treasures dearly."

Even after so many years and hundreds of cases in my files, I was still capable of surprise.

"Holmes," I said. "If I believed in supernatural forces I would say you were of their realm. How, for heaven's sake, can smelling a playing card tell you so much about a woman you haven't even seen yet?"

"As always, Watson, you choose not to see that which is in plain sight. Notice the manufacturer's imprint." He indicated a singular symbol hidden amid the ornate decorative patterns on the back of the card. Tiny letters were printed beneath it.

"Highley and Wilkes, 1862," I read.

"Exactly. Makers of the finest playing cards ever to grace a gentleman's table. Their work was particularly popular among those in the cloisters of academia, who often commissioned limited-edition packs for themselves. The set to which this orphan belongs was such a commission, printed in 1862 for the Department of Mathematics, Christ Church, Oxford, which is represented here in the card's illustrative decor. The fact that our guest is in possession of this particular card indicates that she has a close male acquaintance associated with that department at that time. Most probably her father. This card, after more than three decades, is in remarkably fine condition. It is no forgery, for it carries the unique scent of the treating chemicals used in Highley and Wilkes paper. It has likely been kept pressed in a scrapbook, carefully isolated from both dirt and handling fingers. I infer that it was given to our visitor at a memorable time in her childhood during — or shortly after — 1862. It has remained a memento of her youthful days amongst the ivy of academe."

Before I could utter an exclamation of amazement, a woman's voice spoke up behind me.

"Impressive indeed, Mr. Holmes. Nine out of ten."

I turned toward the voice as Holmes rose to his feet. A handsome woman stood in the doorway. She was about Holmes' age, with streaks of gray adding mature dignity to hair that had once been deep brown. She was clad in mourning black and held what appeared to be a glass case the size of a jewelry box, tinted a smoky red.

She smiled disarmingly and looked squarely at Holmes. "What my acquaintances tell me about your gifts," she nodded toward me, "and what I read through the good doctor's reminiscences in the *Strand*, have apparently not been exaggerations. But in truth my father was a Dean. I had a beloved friend who was Mathematics Lecturer of Christ Church. He was the gentleman who gave me the card when I was ten years old, and yes, my memories of that time are very precious indeed."

With renewed vigor, Holmes stepped over the clutter and approached the woman. "Please forgive my error, Madam. Do come in."

He offered her a chair and she sat, resting the glass box carefully on her lap. Its exquisitely crafted facets reflected the light in complex patterns. On the lid was engraved a stylized heart, similar to those on the playing card.

Holmes took the chair opposite her. "You have me at a disadvantage, Madam. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"My name is not important just now. In fact, it would initiate a flurry of questions on your part, queries of a personal nature that would merely delay my mission here today. Let us say that your assistance in a significant case was valuable to some—" she paused, and her expression took on a pleased, far-seeing look, "—acquaintances of mine. Five years ago."

Holmes sat up with a start. I had never before seen such an expression of shock and bewilderment on his stoic face.

"You left them," she continued, "before they had a chance to thank you adequately. That is why I am here." She paused and gazed into the red crystalline patterns of the box. A tear drifted down her cheek. Holmes offered her a handkerchief, which she accepted with a small, embarrassed laugh.

"Most kind," she said, dabbing her eyes.

Holmes waited for the woman to collect herself. Then he leaned forward, steepling his fingers in his gesture of undivided attention. "Madam, I ask you to provide specifics. At the time you indicate, I was . . . traveling extensively, so this 'significant case' could have occurred in any one of a number of, let us say, exotic locales." He indicated her mourning clothes. "And if you please, Madam, may I ask who has passed on? Is it someone known to me, a client from the case you mentioned?"

She shook her head. "No. Not the client. But the departed was known to you. He once found you

to be a most promising student, though a tad too serious at times. He was aware of this particular mystery; however, he was not involved in its resolution, which you devised to the gratitude of all concerned."

Holmes frowned. "Madam, you speak in riddles, and I have met few individuals who do that in a manner I find engaging. Please come to your point so that I may be at your service."

The woman in black nodded. "Mr. Holmes, as Doctor Watson is your chronicler and Boswell, so too did I once have mine. He was a kind and gentle man, the only adult who found it not only easy but logical to believe the fanciful accounts told to him by a child friend. He wrote down all I told him about special places I had visited and the unusual persons I had met there."

She turned to me. "Like you, Doctor, he . . . added color to my reports and altered many of the unimportant details so that they could be presented to a reading public. He knew few would believe the accounts. He even published them under a nom de plume. But he felt, as I think you do, that even grown-ups want to believe in something beyond the world we walk through everyday. They want to be told that maybe their own lives could be touched by the magic that surrounds us, if only their eyes saw what was before them." This last was directed toward Holmes, who nodded behind peaked fingertips.

"I understand," he said solemnly. Then a keen light of recognition shone in his eyes. He sat up straight and looked at the woman as if for the first time, as if he were seeing behind her eyes into a special realm that only they shared. Something intangible, like a wind or a whisper, passed between them. "Have you returned," he asked, "to that place again?"

She gave him a sad smile. "Several times. Each time, I was the only one who had changed. It was as if only a day had passed since my previous visit. Time, I think, moves differently there than in our world. Perhaps Mr. H.G. Wells knows."

"Perhaps," Holmes replied. "You have paid another visit most recently, am I correct? Your attire is connected with that journey?"

"Yes. I returned there last night. My husband believes I am visiting a sister. I spent a week there, maybe more, and still returned this morning. That's when I found out you had been there since my last visit. They speak most highly of you, you know. You solved a crisis of royal urgency, one that almost cost me my head. The only participant you upset was the local self-proclaimed consulting detective, who didn't take kindly to an outsider barging in on his jurisdiction."

"A successful consulting detective," said Holmes, "should never be late, particularly if he wears a watch in his waistcoat pocket."

The dark woman laughed, and years seemed to fall away from her. I could see the child she once was, still was, behind the thin veil of age. She delicately lifted the box and gave it to Holmes.

"This is for you," she said. "A small token of their gratitude, something you may use when you need it."

Holmes took the box, but his eyes never left the woman as she rose and strode gracefully toward the door. He followed her and opened the door for her.

"It has been an honour finally to meet you," she said as Holmes took her hand.

"I was going to say the same, Madam. I hope to have the pleasure again."

"Perhaps. If we're both in the same place at the same time." She looked at me. "Doctor. Thank you for your reminiscences." Holmes gently closed the door after her.

He brushed his fingers over the beautiful cut glass container, held it up to the light and studied the fine filigree in its wine-red surfaces. Woven into the reflective facets were the words OPEN ME.

A silence hung between us for a long moment. What had just transpired between Holmes and that woman? He was keeping something from me, and I was not going to stand by and let him carry it further.

"Blast it, Holmes! Who was she? What on earth are you waiting for? Open the box!"

He looked me in the eye with an intensity I had not seen since his Return. "First, my dear Watson, I must ask you to hand me the *Times*. I suspect it holds the one item our visitor did not reveal. Though sadly I believe I know what it will tell us."

I passed the newspaper to him. He put the box on the table and shuffled the pages with restrained urgency, letting them fall like leaves to the floor until, at last, he found what he was searching for. A

weight seemed to settle about his neck, and he sank into his chair.

"What is it, Holmes?" I asked.

He handed the page to me. Amidst reports concerning the Sudan campaign, Indian finance, and the situation in Cuba, the most prominent item was a narrow column that covered the right-hand side of the page. It read

OBITUARY.  
"Lewis Carroll"

We regret to announce the death of Rev. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, better known as "Lewis Carroll," the delightful author of "Alice in Wonderland," and other books of an exquisitely whimsical humour. He died yesterday at The Chestnuts, Guildford, the residence of his sisters, in his 64th year . . .

When I finished reading, I turned to find Holmes inserting a tiny glass key into the box's lock. With a delicate twist of his fingers, he unlocked the lid and gently raised it. Within was a sheet of stationary, which he withdrew and read in unmoving silence. The faintest whisper of amused recollection crossed Holmes' features. Then he opened his fingers and let the sheet flutter toward the floor. I snatched it out of the air:

*My dear Mr. Sherlock Holmes,*

*Our mutual acquaintances wish you to have this as a reflection of their appreciation re the Case of the Stolen Tarts. No one else, they say, could have come to the surprising truth of the mystery so thoroughly. Our friend the Caterpillar says it was certainly a three-pipe problem. The enclosed trifle is for you. You need not be concerned about the benefactor. He has plenty of them and never uses the same one more than once.*

*With fond admiration,  
Alice Pleasance Hargreaves, née Liddell*

Holmes reached into the box and pulled back a red velvet cloth. Underneath was the most astounding sight I have ever seen, and to this day I wonder if my eyes served me honestly. What I beheld was this: a floating crescent of cat-like teeth, drawn into a grin like a toothy quarter moon, perpetually amused.

Before I could look closer, Holmes replaced the cloth and closed the lid.

Holmes stood from his chair. He strode to his bookcase and sorted through myriad volumes, raising a cloud of ancient dust. At last, he pulled out a tattered edition that looked as though it had been well read long ago. He returned to his armchair and for the remainder of the day said not a word nor moved so much as a muscle save for the turning of the pages and the occasional chuckle or exclamation.

Since that day, whenever black clouds settle over him, Sherlock Holmes pulls a tiny key from his pocket, opens a certain drawer in his work desk, and withdraws a wonderfully crafted, wine-red glass case. I am always relieved when I hear the sound of the key turning in its lock