

The Case of the Colour-Blind Captain

Sherlock Holmes looked up from the letter he had been perusing.

‘So, Watson,’ he said. ‘The game’s afoot!’

I nodded wisely. ‘A foot, eh?’ I said. ‘Twelve-inch Scrabble, perhaps?’

I’ll say this for Holmes, he always knows when to ignore a fellow. ‘This letter,’ he went on, ‘is from a Captain Grey, who has just been imprisoned in Liverpool. His steamer, the *Matilda Briggs*, left Sumatra three weeks ago with a crew of twenty-one, but has arrived home with only himself aboard. The crew have, he says, simply disappeared. Naturally, the local police have taken a dim view of his protestations, and have duly incarcerated him.’

‘Good Lord! How barbaric!’

Holmes raised an eyebrow. ‘It means they’ve locked him up, Watson.’

‘Oh. Ah.’

‘The captain claims he is innocent, and has asked me to help.’

‘Yet it seems an open and shut case. For reasons unknown, he must have decided to do away with all his crew. He is probably a lunatic.’

‘Perhaps,’ said Holmes. ‘Yet his letter is full of good sense. “Mr Holmes”, he says, “you are known to be the *foremost detective in the world...*” Hardly the words of a madman.’

‘Oh,’ I said again, ‘ah.’

‘Watson, just make a long arm for that Bradshaw, would you,’ said Holmes, ‘and look up the trains to Liverpool?’

We caught the eleven-thirty from Euston and Holmes settled himself in a corner of the carriage with a pile of newspapers. ‘Ah, the English Press, Watson,’ he said. ‘A fine institution, and one that can provide snippets of useful information, if one searches amongst the advertisements.’

‘Uh-hmm?’ I said, alert and as attentive as always. ‘And what have you found?’

‘I have to spend thriftily this week, but I may meet a dark stranger,’ said Holmes. ‘I’m Sagittarius, you see.’

‘Anything about the case, though?’

‘I fear not. Still, I have been looking over the Captain’s letter again. Here – what can you make of it?’

Holmes tossed me the letter, and I shuddered. It was written in bright red ink on

thick green paper. ‘Holmes, the man has no taste! The colours clash horribly.’

‘Possibly prison materials, Watson. Designed to unsettle criminals. In such institutions one often finds the cell walls have been painted orange and blue.’

‘Devilish cunning,’ I murmured, as I read the rest of the letter.

At Nuneaton we collected some cups of scalding-hot brown fluid, sold under the name of “tea” at the exorbitant price of a penny a cup, and resumed our journey.

‘Well, Watson,’ said Holmes, nursing his tongue, ‘what do you make of it? Tell me the facts, as you have gleaned them.’

I sipped and winced. ‘It seems the voyage was a routine one, Holmes, but the cargo was strange...’

‘Yes, the Giant Rat of Sumatra.’

‘About six feet long in the body, says Grey, and twice as long in the tail. Powerful teeth, and a hostile disposition. The thing has been kept in a cage in the hold, and fed from a supply of dried Sumatran hamster flesh.’

‘And the disappearing crew, Watson?’

‘The captain is very precise. Man overboard Tuesday 13th, off the Andaman Islands. Another on Thursday 15th, off Trincomalee. Then Saturday 17th. I say, Holmes – there’s a pattern!’

‘Every second day, Watson. Every second day...’ Holmes fell quiet for a moment, as those masterful eyes strained to pierce the darkness before him. Why he didn’t just let the blind up, I don’t know.

‘Have you ever seen a giant rat, Watson?’ said Holmes.

I thought for a moment. ‘Had to eat quite a few rats in Afghanistan,’ I said, licking my lips at the thought. ‘Some were rather big – perhaps twelve inches in the body.’

‘Aha,’ said Holmes. ‘The rat’s afoot!’

I dare say I was too surprised to reply, because he went on: ‘The giant rat of Sumatra, Watson, is one of the largest carnivores on the island, but one of the rarest. Naturalists agree that its camouflage is poor, compared to, for example, the Sumatran tiger. Despite this handicap, it has to consume vast quantities of food in order to sustain its formidable bulk. But, Watson – its reputation is fearsome. No fewer than five armed expeditions have vanished without trace, and local superstition says that to look upon the tail of a giant rat is to die. Do you have your revolver?’

In reply, I patted my pocket. I’m not entirely sure why, for my pistol was in my suitcase.

We disembarked at Lime Street and took a cab to the police station. There we found none other than that dogged epitome of the regular force, Lestrade. He shook Holmes' hand warmly.

'Strange case, this, Mister Holmes,' he said, with a wink. 'This here Captain Grey – he swears blind he had nothing to do with the crew's disappearance. Claims he's innocent. But there's no escaping facts. Not another man returned to port.'

'Has the Captain a police record?'

'Nothing to speak of. He's been pulled over a few times for going through a red light, that's all. Otherwise, he's been a law-abiding chap – when on shore, that is.'

'Er, Holmes,' I said *sotto voce*, tugging at his sleeve. 'He can't talk about traffic lights. They won't be invented until 1912.'

Holmes consulted his pocket-watch. 'Well, Watson, we can't wait until this evening. We must see Captain Grey now.'

I scratched my head.

We found the Captain sitting at a small table in his cell. He was a tall man with iron-grey whiskers and eyebrows that kept the rain out.

'Pleased to meet you, Mr Holmes,' he said. 'I do hope you can sort out this puzzle for me. As you see, I am becoming somewhat bored.' He indicated a copy of *A Beginner's Guide to Ships' Signals*, its jacket covered in illustrations of colourful flags. 'Can't make any of them out, I'm afraid.'

'It's *A Beginner's Guide to Noose Knots* you'll be needing before long, my lad,' put in Lestrade.

'Have you any clues, Holmes?' I asked. 'Do you think you can solve the mystery?'

'I see no difficulties, Watson,' said Holmes. 'The rat itself, Captain – where is it now?'

Grey smacked his forehead.

'Ow!' said Holmes. 'What did you do that for?'

'The poor creature!' cried Grey, unabashed. 'I have forgotten all about the rat! It is still on the ship!'

We took a police cab to the Albert Dock, and there boarded the *Matilda Briggs*.

'I pray you both,' said Holmes, 'take care. Where lurks the Giant Rat of Sumatra, there is peril. Your pistol, Watson?'

‘Here.’

‘Now,’ said Holmes, producing three pairs of coloured glasses from his pocket. ‘Put these on.’

We complied, but at once Lestrade ripped his off. ‘You’re having me on, Mr Holmes. These are nothing but children’s toys, like something you get at the cinema!’

‘Sh!’ I hissed.

‘Sorry. Cinemas not invented yet, eh?’ said Lestrade, trotting down the iron staircase into the hold. ‘Anyhow, I’m not wearing those things. I want to see where I’m going. You charlies can fall over if you like.’

‘Inspector,’ said Holmes, ‘you must listen – ’

‘And this rat’s all caged up, ain’t he? Great Scott, what’s that?’

He had flung back a door, sending diffuse grey daylight into the lower hold. Through our coloured glasses Holmes and I could see a vague shadow, crouching in the corner of the steel room. Its very outline suggested vast muscle and powerful jaws, and its growling was awful to hear; yet Lestrade’s reaction was shocking. He gave a shrill scream, and started scrabbling for the gangway.

‘Save me!’ he cried, clawing at the air. ‘No – not that – they clash so – get it away from me!’

The rat bounded after him, and the stench of its body as it passed was overpowering. Its great long tail, decorated with swirls and curving shapes which all seemed grey to me, whipped past us as it scampered after the detective. We could hear his piteous cries from above.

‘Your pistol, Watson!’ cried Holmes. We galloped up the stairs two at a time, and arrived on deck to see Lestrade, still wailing, leap over the side of the ship.

‘Heavens, Holmes!’ I cried. ‘He’s gone!’

‘Look out, Watson,’ said Holmes. ‘It’s coming – ’

The rat, big as a small bear, came galloping towards us, teeth gnashing. Taking aim, I gave it one blast through the head. With a great screech, it skidded through the railings behind us and landed with a splash in the water.

‘It is all quite elementary,’ explained Holmes, as I helped a distressed Lestrade soothe the bruises he’d got from landing on a dockside bollard.

‘As soon as I met Grey, I knew the case must be connected with his colour-blindness. Not only is he unable to tell the difference between red and green lights – he cannot make out naval signals. Why had Grey survived meeting the rat, whilst his crew

had not? The answer must concern colour. And remember the native superstition that says that it is death to look upon the rat's tail.'

'So,' I said, 'you knew that the rat's tail was colourful. But why should that matter?'

'I can tell you that,' said Lestrade, shivering. 'Pink and yellow.'

'Pink and yellow?' I said, aghast. 'Its tail is *pink and yellow*?'

'*And* green – lime green! And orange...'

Nauseated, I clapped a hand to my mouth. 'Of course!' I said. 'Every second day, the rat had to be fed. Any man of taste would lose his wits when confronted with such an orgy of clashing colours. No wonder the crewmen all jumped overboard, as Lestrade did. Except for the colour-blind captain...'

'I can't hear what you're saying, Watson,' said Holmes. 'Take your hand away from your mouth.'

'Another of your triumphs, Holmes,' I said. 'I shall write an account of it straight away.'

Holmes held up a hand. 'I think not, Watson. You may wish to describe the *body* of the rat – but say nothing more. I fear the world is not yet ready for the tail.'

It will go ill with the nation when Sherlock Holmes turns to comedy.