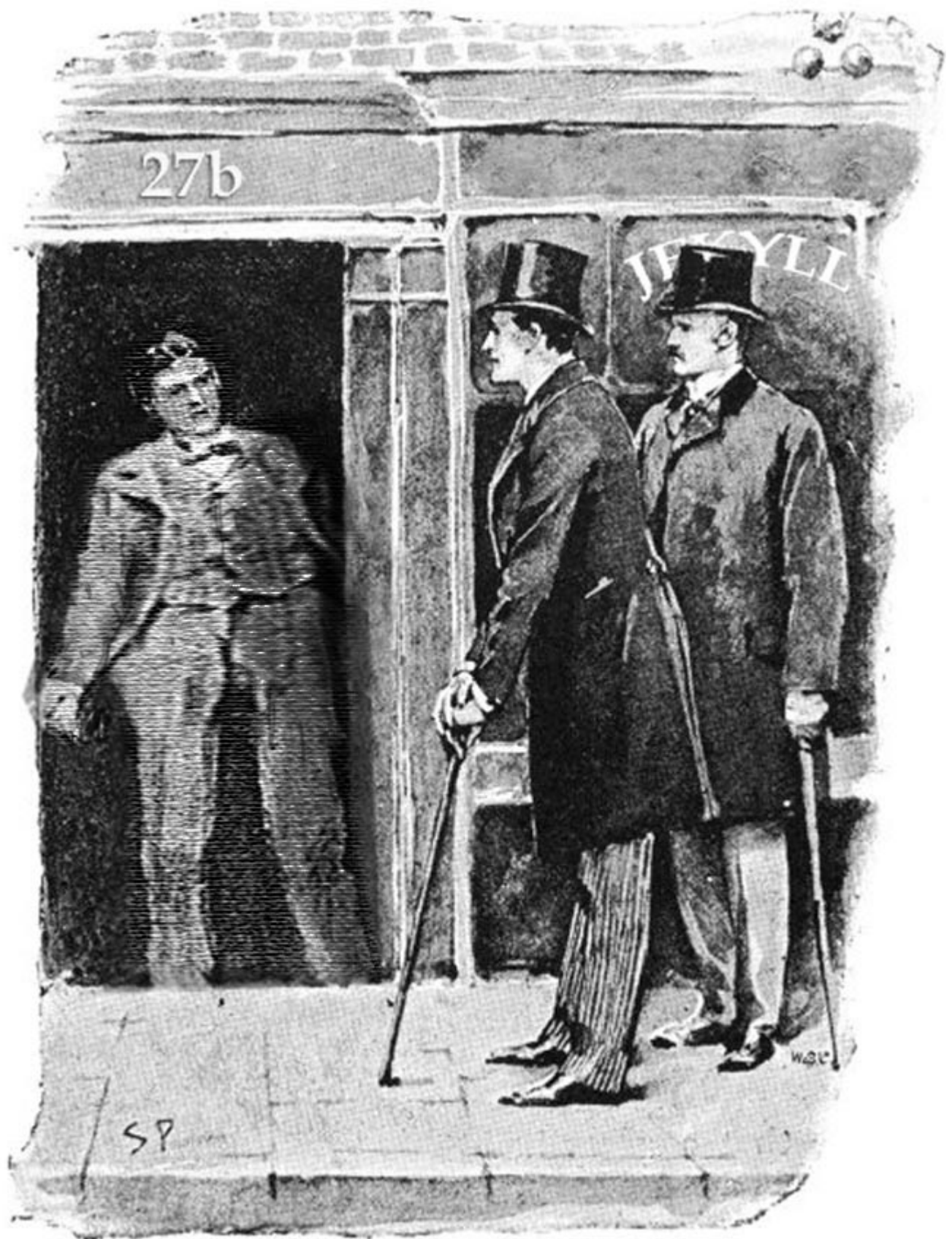


Sherlock Holmes and the Red-Headed League Redux



A portly young man opened the door and bade us enter.

I was reclining in a slightly feverish state, head leaning back against the antimacassar, when Holmes entered, pacing

animatedly. He picked up the latest addition to his smoking assemblage, a finely carved briar, and carelessly tossed his deerstalker onto the mahogany sideboard.

“Well Watson, the Red Headed League are at it again.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, Holmes. I thought Conan Doyle had managed to arrange it so that we had outsmarted them.”

“Not so, Watson, not so. These things come back to peck us.” Holmes made his customary search around the room for his tobacco pouch.

“It’s in your pocket, Holmes.”

“Yes, yes, I know that.” He said impatiently. “But where’s my pipe? Eh?”

“It’s in your mouth, Holmes.”

“Ah yes. Perceptive today, Watson. Now, as I was saying ... ”

“Holmes, before you start on another fictional adventure, please keep me out of it. This time, anyway. I have a touch of the Omega Plus strain of Wuflu. I can tell you, they didn’t have that in Afghanistan. D–pity and all that, but I really need some time to rest *in situ*. The Omega Plus vaccine has not yet been invented. You go on, you go on.”

“Red headed, red headed,” repeated Holmes distractedly to himself, pacing back and forth feverishly.

“Holmes, really!” I interjected. “Your creator, Doyle, did not bestow on you any lively interest in the fairer sex. That is totally out of character.”

“Ah, yes. That’s correct, Watson, but I was ruminating not *only* about how the league of red-headed gentlemen arranged a tunneling under the Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank, but about how some avian species are also red headed,

and indeed the dangers such interlopers might pose.”

Just then, Mrs. Hudson the landlady, knocked and entered.

“A Dr. Jekyll to see you, sir.”

“Ah, show him in, show him in.”

A gentleman entered somewhat diffidently and glanced around, seemingly unsettled. He handed Holmes a business card.

“I assume I have the pleasure of meeting the renowned detective?”

“You have indeed. Please sit down,” said Holmes, indicating an armchair near the blazing fire.

“For what unexplained circumstance you have sought me out,” my friend enquired.

Dr. Jekyll was a handsome, smooth-faced man of fifty, not yet balding, wearing a well-tailored herringbone suit from Poole’s of Saville Row. But to a man of my discernment, I thought his demeanor unmanly. My doctor’s eye suggested that he had partaken of opiates rather too indulgently.

He came straight to the point. “I do hope you can solve a small—uhm—problem that has developed at my laboratory at Frith Street. You see, well, I seem to be seeing strange things.”

“Strange things?” exclaimed my good friend. “That is indeed a mystery.”

I myself could not help interjecting a reminiscence of my own about my time in Afghanistan. A time and place in which I had seen strange things indeed. “It was outside Kandahar, and Ayub Khan and all his fuzzy wu ... ”

“My dear Watson, not now.” interrupted Holmes. “Now, please continue, sir.”

“Well, my research has most recently been into creating hybrids of the *Phalaenopsis* orchid, which as you may know is a variety originating in Asia.”

“Yes, yes. Go on, sir.”

Just a month ago I succeeded in creating a new plant food which I administered daily to my subject. But imagine my astonishment, Mr. Holmes, when the orchid took on the features of a cockerel. This tiny bird even spoke to me out of the petals in some tongue with which I am not myself familiar.”

“This is indeed a marvel,” I remarked. “What do you imagine it means?”

But Holmes had already assumed his usual thoughtful posture, his rathboned chin resting on his long bony, entwined fingers. He repeated the words ‘red-headed’ several more times, peering down at the fringe of the Kashkai rug as though searching for grains of wheat in a chicken coop—a habit he’d picked up in Bohemia.

I kept silent. Jekyll looked on somewhat apprehensively, fidgeting meanwhile with his pocket watch.

All at once, Holmes jumped up and strode over to the bookshelf from which he extracted a well-thumbed copy of Nostradamus’s [Les Prophéties](#). This was the one containing 942 quatrains in the original linguistic medley including Greek, Latin and Provençal. He sat down again and bypassing the sections containing these latter idioms went immediately to scrutinizing the pages containing the most abstruse hieroglyphs.

I knew when to hold my tongue. Dr. Jekyll sat nervously.

“By Jove, Watson!” Holmes sat up and gave out a low whistle. He looked over searchingly at our visitor.

“My dear fellow, please allow me to attend you at your

laboratory, number 27b Frith Street, tomorrow precisely at noon. That is all. Now if you would be so good as to give me leave to make preparations. I shall solve your quandary in the most elementary and sensible way. Good day to you.”

Dr. Jekyll blinked and was clearly on the point of remonstrating with Holmes’s abruptness of manner when my good friend interrupted him with “Not a word more, my good man. Not a word more.”

He rang the bell for Mrs. Hudson, who with practiced facility showed the gentleman out and into the bustling throngs of Baker Street.

“I’ve solved it, Watson. “He tapped [Les Prophéties](#) as one would a tow-headed street urchin.

“By Jove, Holmes! That was fast work indeed.”

“Did you not notice the stains on the fellow’s jacket? Their purplish color was no doubt formed from the use of solutions of the alchemical kind. As you may recall from our recent perambulation around the Herbarium at Kew, that particular shade of purple can only be obtained by combining various substances. One of them is only found in the Murasaki plant of the Kasuga Meadows near to the Great Shrine of Nara. From thence it is secreted out in illegitimate trade with the Turk. When this substance is combined with petals of *Galega officinalis*, known to the man on the Clapham Omnibus as ‘Goat’s Rue,’ the shade of purple intensifies and becomes a compound with unusual properties. Is he not trying to create sentient beings from living but insentient flora?”

“But, Holmes ... I blurted out.”

“Precisely, my good fellow. And did not the agitation with which the gentleman attended to his timepiece give you any inkling of his enfeebled nature? Such a nature allows all kinds of exotic and invasive ideas to gain admission. Such a

nature does not question their legitimacy. I do believe that some dastardly Oriental chicken-species is taking over Jekyll's research establishment, whether he be aware of it or not.

"But Holmes, that's not possible!

"Perhaps, Watson. But as Sir Arthur C. Doyle put it in one of his stories, 'when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.'"

"Well indeed. When I was at the frontier during the campaign of 18—, I noted many such imposs ... "

"Watson, prepare your service revolver. We may have need of it. And make sure you have been inoculated."

"My dear sir, I already have contracted the Omega Plus strain. I'm a doctor, and even *The Times* mentioned that a booster may not be necessary for those who have the antibodies."

"Quite so, my dear fellow, I mean inoculated against very dangerous and stupid ideas, and their metamorphic activation into real and invasive physical entities."

Soon after I retired to my chamber pondering the strange meaning of my friend's meaning.

The next morning whilst I breakfasted, Holmes once again perused his Nostradamus, silently pacing the breakfast room.

At mid-morning we exited our chambers and advanced along the busy streets, making diligent use of our eyes in every direction from which danger might be apprehended. We arrived at Frith Street a few minutes before the designated appointment time. A portly young man with startling greenish eyes and an obsequious disposition opened the street door and bade us enter.

He ushered up a narrow flight of stairs and into a chamber on

one side of which was a bench crowded with instruments of a scientific nature. Dr Jekyll came forward and bade us welcome.

“Welcome, gentlemen. Let me demonstrate the problem of which I have already informed you. Please, observe carefully. The orchid you see on the table will metamorphose before your very eyes. It turns into a tiny avian with a red comb and wattles. This it does several times a day. It then starts to harangue me in a language with which I cannot claim any familiarity.”

“My dear, sir.” said Holmes. “Indeed, this is strange. And what does this creature call itself?”

I thought my friend was making a jibe at the expense of our host. But Jekyll, replied most readily.

“He calls himself ‘Mo.’ At least that is what it sounds like, Mr. Holmes.”

“I see, I see. But are you yourself entirely innocent of these exceedingly unexpected outcomes? Did you not mention that you feed a serum to this orchid plant? And was not the serum produced from a concoction whose secret ingredients were known only to the alchemical experimenters of Trabzon in the era of Sulieman the Magnificent?”

Jekyll stared at Holmes, dumbfounded. “Well, yes, that is true. My quest was to find an elixir to prolong life. My research into Oriental discoveries proved that the most suitable subject for such experimentation was a robust species of *Phalaenopsis* orchid.

“Yes, yes. Now, proceed, if you will, sir. Watson stand back and prepare yourself.”

I gripped my service revolver, concealed within the military-issue Inverness cape.

Dr. Jekyll took from the lab bench a test tube of sweet-smelling liquid and slowly and deliberately poured a few drops

onto the delicate petals of the exquisite flowering plant.

A few moments elapsed in which we stood waiting for some response. Then gradually, almost imperceptibly, a series of minute changes overtook the plant. I could not believe my eyes. The petals were being replaced with fleshy red wattles and comb. A true redhead indeed. Was I dreaming? I had not witnessed anything so extraordinary during my time in Jalalabad.

Then, suddenly, the creature became a palpable real-life cockerel. From its beak came forth the sounds of a voiced bilabial sonorant in the manner of a human infant calling for maternal attention; "m, m, m, mo, mo, mo."

The bird now stepped off the pot which held the fading orchid and inflated to an immense size. It strutted menacingly with its beak and claws seemingly ready to dismember us. I truly feared the thing. Holmes raised his brass tipped cane in an attitude of defense.

But Jekyll put out his hand and was about to interfere with our attempt to hinder the oncoming threat. "In the interests of science, gentlemen, I forbid you to harm this creature. The enrichment of the culture is paramount."

"Destroy it, Watson. Shoot. Shoot!" shouted Holmes.

I expertly leveled my weapon and emptied five rounds into the beastly thing. I swear that I heard it utter some horrible incantation as its head flew off and clattered across the bench of test tubes. Bloodied feathers scattered and floated down among us.

Jekyll wailed and made to attack Holmes.

"Cultural enrichment, Mr. Holmes. Cultural enrichment!"

Holmes rapped the demented scientist hard with the cane, and he collapsed like a sack of low-glycemic Basmati.

We soon made an end to the laboratory equipment, and exited the narrow stairs down to Frith Street. The portly young man looked on oleagiously as we exited.

“Good day to you Mr. Heep. Give our regards to your creator,” announced Holmes breezily. He added *soto voce*, “He certainly has put on weight since I last encountered him, Watson.”

We hailed a cab and returned to Baker Street forthwith.

“But Holmes, how did you know so much about this devilish scientist? After all, it was he who invited you to investigate the enigma,” I asked after regaining my breath.

“You mean, apart from having read Stevenson’s book? I was going to say ‘elementary,’ my dear friend, but have advised myself against the too frequent use of that word.”

“Exactly, Holmes.”

“Did you not notice that the herringbone was inverted on the left side pocket flap?”

I was incredulous, “Holmes, you don’t mean to say—

—Yes, Watson, but these were mere clues hinting at the greater nationwide debasement. I know, of course, from my study of Oriental dress traditions, especially those of the Dagestan region, that the wearing of apparel with inverted pocket flaps is indicative of membership of a deadly sect of Mohammedan agitators of the most devious kind.”

“That’s extraordinary! When I was passing through the Northwest Frontier I came across ...”

Holmes cut me off, with a gentle tap on the knee. “Yes, yes, that is enough for now. But I only want to add that this man Jekyll will, to the readers of posterity earn unwelcome fame, as will another of his creations, an ugly man with a heavy club and socialist tendencies.”

“You don’t mean to say that ...?”

“Quite so, Watson, quite so. But let me contribute my praises for your fine performance at Jekyll’s lab. Very well done, my dear fellow. Alas, though, we have only scotched the snake.” And he picked up his briar once again and reopened [Les Prophéties](#).

“You, Holmes, are truly a benefactor of the race,” said I, quoting myself, quoting my author.