

# 4. The Case of the Mental Detective

William Harston

*The human brain is a device to keep the ears from grating on one another.*

Peter de Vries

‘Ah, Watson! Good of you to come.’ Sherlock Holmes opened the great oak door of his Baker Street chambers to admit his old friend. ‘I’ve just received an invitation to present the prizes at the Slough Grandmaster Tournament. Knowing of your interest in chess I naturally decided to take the opportunity to invite you to accompany me and meet some of the players.’

‘Jolly thoughtful of you, Holmes,’ said Dr Watson eagerly. ‘I’m not at all busy at the moment and would be delighted at the possibility to renew my acquaintance with the old game and its protagonists. When do we leave?’

‘Straight away,’ said Holmes decisively. ‘Anticipating your enthusiasm, I took the liberty of booking seats on the 18.48 from Paddington. I can inform you of the tournament results on the journey and perhaps we might look over some of the better games from the bulletins.’

In the course of the short train ride, Watson learned more details behind Holmes’s unusual alacrity in acquiescing to officiate at the prize-giving. The tournament had ended with a most remarkable result: in the first place was the American grandmaster Pescatory, who had won all eleven games to finish with a 100 per cent score. The other eleven grandmasters had all finished level on five points to share the remainder of the prize fund. Even for the great Pescatory this was an outstanding performance. Already, results such as these, combined

with Pescatory's extravert, highly confident nature, had made him one of the most universally despised figures in the chess world. Holmes had, however, always maintained excellent relations with the great American and was delighted with the opportunity to present him with the large cheque and the famed 'Golden Rook of Slough' trophy.

During the journey Holmes had demonstrated to Watson the eleven crushing victories which had earned Pescatory his first place. Watson was not especially enamoured of the winner's own contemptuously dismissive notes to his opponents' moves. 'Refreshingly objective observations' was how Holmes had described them. Watson's opinion was that the man was a despicably arrogant example of a trans-atlantic culture, but this he left unspoken.

On arrival at Slough, the pair took a cab to their hotel, where the games of the tournament had also taken place and the players were still accommodated. As soon as they had reached their room. Holmes administered himself a quick shot of cocaine, then took out his violin and started playing some wild Hungarian music. Watson picked up the telephone, demanded room service and ordered some Italian food. Within minutes, the waiter had arrived bearing an almost unidentifiable pasta dish.

'Is that meant to be Spaghetti Bolognese?' queried Watson with a hint of incredulity.

'Brute Philistine,' replied Holmes, by now flying high as a kite. 'I thought that even you should be able to recognize the sound of a Szigeti Polonaise.' But before Watson could work his way back into the conversation, the telephone rang.

'Sherlock Holmes's suite,' announced Watson into the mouthpiece. A choked voice issued from the phone. 'For God's sake, come quick. I need help.'

'I think it's for you,' said Watson, handing the receiver to Holmes. The great detective carefully put down his violin and spoke loudly into the telephone.

'Sherlock Holmes, the great detective, at your service'.

'Thank God you're there. You're my only hope,' continued the voice. 'Come at once or it could be too . . . ' The voice stopped abruptly and the line went dead.

'That was Pescatory,' said Holmes. 'I believe that he may be in some danger. We must hurry.' He swept out of the room with Watson managing to keep but a short distance behind. The waiter stood bemused in the doorway, still holding the spaghetti. After a brief pause he shrugged his shoulders and settled down to eat it.

The door to Pescatory's room was ajar when Holmes and Watson reached it. They rushed in, not pausing to knock, but were already too late. The body of the American grandmaster lay face down in the middle of the floor. From his back emerged the handles of eleven knives, each of distinct pattern from the rest, and all embedded to their hilts in the corpse of the unfortunate grandmaster.

'A dastardly crime,' said Holmes gravely, 'but we must not let our emotions interfere with our capacities for making logical deduction. Our task must now be to find the killer and bring him or her to justice.'

'Or them,' interpolated Watson.

'Don't be pedantic,' admonished Holmes.

'Well anyway,' continued Watson, 'this one doesn't look too difficult. Even I can make a pretty fair guess what happened here.' Even as he spoke the sound came drifting faintly from farther down the corridor of an eleven-voice male choir singing 'Ee-I-Addio, we won the cup'. Holmes, immersed deeply in his own thoughts, did not notice the noise.

'We are not in the business of making guesses, Watson,' he said critically. 'Criminal detection is a precise science. First we must find the murder weapon.' Watson blinked in disbelief at the body lying porcupine-like on the carpet.

'Those knives . . .'

'You don't eat spaghetti with a knife, Watson. If you must still think about food, may I recommend a visit to the kitchens for the purpose of acquiring a fork and spoon. As I was saying, there are no spent cartridge cases on the floor. I noticed that as soon as I entered the room. So he was not shot. No; by the angle at which the body lies we may safely deduce that he was bludgeoned to death by a blow or blows to the head with a blunt object.' His trained eyes scanned the room in a search for

the likely weapon. Watson, whose legs were beginning to feel weak, sat on the edge of the bed dumbstruck, still staring at the pin-cushion of a body.

'I have it!' exclaimed Holmes suddenly. 'The typewriter. He was battered to death with the typewriter. Nothing else is possible. Find the owner of that typewriter and we have our murderer, Watson.'

'But my dear Holmes,' interpolated the doctor, unable any longer to hold his peace, 'that is Pescatory's own typewriter. He was, after all, a chess journalist as well as a player. And it's got his name on it in big capital letters on the top.' The great detective, however, was not listening. He was absorbed in a minute inspection of the supposed murder weapon.

'From the keys on this machine, I see under close inspection that some are worn considerably more than would be expected from the normal distribution of letter frequencies. We should normally expect the most used letter to be the lower-case letter e, which indeed it is also on this example, but here I fancy it is used still more than one would expect. And several other letters also admit to a similar description. Take down the following as I say them, Watson.'

Reluctantly the doctor extracted a pencil from his breast pocket and he wrote as the detective dictated: 'Capitals K, Q, R, N, and B and lower-case e, a, d, f, g, h, c and finally b.'

'Now consider,' went on Holmes with ever-increasing enthusiasm. 'What does that tell us of the owner of the typewriter and his occupation?'

'As I said,' replied Watson emphatically, 'he was a chess journalist.'

'A ludicrous guess, Watson, based upon not the slightest evidence. I am astonished that you can venture such an ill-thought opinion when it is perfectly obvious that the man we seek is a sailor!' Watson spluttered a few inconsequential monosyllables. 'Let me explain,' continued Holmes, 'though I should hardly have thought it necessary in view of the clarity of the evidence before us. Consider, good doctor, what are the letters used most frequently by the owner of a typewriter?'

‘Well, in this case,’ replied Watson, ‘I should have thought . . .’

‘You should indeed,’ confirmed his mentor. ‘The letters most frequently called into employment on any typewriter are those which are to be found in the very name of its owner. Those very letters which he utilizes perforce every time he fills in a form or writes a letter. In these capitals K, Q, R, N, B and lower-case e, a, d, f, g, h, c, b, we have, in enigmatic form admittedly, the very autograph of our killer.’

‘The well-known sailor,’ added Watson with a touch of cynicism.

‘At last you have seen it. I congratulate you,’ cheered Holmes grasping and shaking the hand of the bemused doctor. ‘As you must have by now spotted, the five capitals are too many to be merely initials. Two or more of them must be in some way an appurtenance to the name, a title, degree or somesuch. And the only possible such suffix from the available letters is RN. Our man is a member of the Royal Navy, a sailor, Watson.’

‘But that is not all the clues the typewriter can tell us’, continued Holmes, warming to the task. ‘Since there is no letter u, the Q must be a middle initial, and furthermore the proliferation of letters near the beginning of the alphabet, particularly f, g, h, e and a, tell us that he is an Irishman. Only a Gaelic name can have such a rare combination of letters. Possibly some such name as Keffeagh, which is, as you will know, my good doctor, an old Gaelic precursor of the present-day English names Keith and Kevin. Without doubt, he is an Irish sailor.’

Suddenly Holmes stopped and stared at the carpet where Watson’s foot had been idly and dispiritedly swinging to and fro, creating an ever-deepening furrow in the pile between the body and the bed. ‘How could I have missed that?’ asked the great detective, rhetorically.

‘Oh, sorry’, apologized Watson. ‘Didn’t realize I was spoiling the carpet.’

‘Only one instrument can be responsible for making such a single-track groove in Axminster pile,’ carried on Holmes,

oblivious to the doctor's interjection, 'Our man must have been riding a unicycle at the time of the crime! And to bring down a typewriter with sufficient force to kill Pescatory, while riding a unicycle, would demand that our killer be at least six feet eight inches tall.' Holmes paused, apparently unable for the moment to pursue his logic any further. 'What puzzles me,' Watson,' he continued slowly, 'are these remaining letters. We know his name is Keffeagh Q., something-beginning-with-B and the surname contains a further c, d and b, perhaps multiply, as well as possible further representatives from a, e, f, g, and h. Perhaps something like Keffeagh Q. Badbacache, but I would surely have remembered such a name were there one in the Royal Navy.'

Watson just stared at the eleven knives still embedded in the late grandmaster. He was wondering how to draw Holmes's attention to them before the great detective made a complete ass of himself. Any plans he may have had, however, were shattered by another sudden Holmesian outburst.

'I have it, Watson. How could I have been so blind. Keffeagh Q. Bacdabb!'

'Bacdabb?' echoed the doctor. 'What sort of a name is Bacdabb meant to be? Not another of your Gaelic specialities. Or do we have here a trace of Pictish with perhaps a Finno-Ugric maternal grandmother? You'll never convince me that Bacdabb . . .'

'No, Watson. Not Bacdabb. Macnabb! Our man is named Macnabb, but he has a cold, so it just sounds like Bacdabb.'

As the great detective uttered the final part of his explanation a great sneeze broke out from behind the curtain. The drapes spread apart, revealing a six foot nine inch man, dressed in full naval uniform, who pedalled slowly towards the detective on a unicycle.

'Keffeagh Q. Bacdabb ad your zervice, Bister Hobes. Gongradulations, me boyo, on a foin piece o' dedegdiv worg. I'll gome guiedly; id's a vair gob.'



I CONFESS.  
GOT ANYTHING  
FOR A COLD?