

The Secret Files of the King of Detectives: JACK THE RIPPER (1908)

I. The Detectives' Bet

"It's an affair that seizes me by the throat, Mr. Holmes—and I've come to you as a last resource. I don't see any other way to solve a mystery which is becoming more frightful every day."

It was with these words that Mr. Warren, Chief of the London Police, received the famous detective who had just entered his office.

"I'm back from Italy," said Sherlock Holmes, "where I was lucky enough to succeed in a very delicate matter. I found your letter, sir. I saw you had an urgent communication to make to me, and here I am."

The two men shook hands. They then sat down comfortably in two leather armchair near a small table.

"Was your stay in Italy long?" asked the Chief of Police.

"About three months."

"Despite that, you must have heard of the scourge which has fallen on London? The newspapers must have informed you that the Police are on burning coals."

"Ah, you are speaking of Jack the Ripper?"

"Naturally, and all of London, Europe, the world even, will speak to you of him, just as I do. For centuries, I can testify, there hasn't been a comparable mystery to that which this mysterious individual poses to us. I assure you, Mr. Holmes, that there are moments when I think of rendering my resignation into the hands of Her Gracious Majesty, who will no doubt entrust my job to someone younger and more capable than myself, just to no longer have this vision from beyond the grave always present before my eyes."

"From beyond the grave?" smiled the detective. "I think on the contrary that we are dealing with a man of flesh and blood, and I don't see why it should be difficult to end the exploits of this person."

"What a consolation to hear such words in a mouth like yours, Mr. Holmes" said Mr. Warren, slowly regaining his confidence. "Have a cigar—and light it up, will you? Our conversation is going to last for a while, and I've given orders that we are not to be disturbed under any pretext."

And the Chief of Police presented the Detective with a small ivory box filled with excellent, imported cigars. Holmes took one, cut it and lit it. The Police Officer followed his example.

An odorous blue smoke invaded the office where these two men, true luminaries in the field of criminal investigation, were going to decide in some way the future fate of London.

"You've learned from the newspapers all that concerns Jack the Ripper. For that reason, I'm going to get to the point quickly, and limit myself to the bare bones of the problem.

"Three months ago, at the main police station, we came across a case that initially didn't disturb us too much. A murder had been committed in Whitechapel, in Gloucester Street, one of the most ill famed in that neighborhood, under a carriage entrance. A young woman—a prostitute as it was discovered later—was found with her belly slit open, atrociously mutilated.

"Mr. Hunter, the Superintendent in charge of Whitechapel, was called. He concluded that it was a crime of passion. As you know, there are criminals who feel compelled to kill the woman they've just taken. It's a sick passion, the work of a lunatic, something that is more the concern of Bedlam Asylum than that of the Scotland Yard..."

"Bravo! I share your just and humanitarian opinion, Mr. Warren," replied Sherlock Holmes.

"The murder of Gloucester Street nevertheless remained obscure," continued the Chief of Police. "Our inquiries eventually concluded that a suspect had indeed been spotted in the street, but no one was able to provide us with a good description. According to some, he wore a yellow overcoat; but for others, he had no overcoat. A sailor swore great oaths that the suspect wore a beard. To the contrary, the proprietor of a neighboring bar maintained that he was beardless.

“The girl was buried. The case was closed. Three days later, another murder happened, on Greenwich Road. This time, it was the wife of a sailor. Her husband was still in India. A young and pretty girl, my word! She was walking home late from a friend’s house and was killed in the same manner.”

“It’s the verification of the theory of the repetition of facts,” said Holmes, smiling. “You know that we criminalists believe, as do doctors, that any remarkable case will reoccur, the same day or shortly thereafter, under identical conditions.”

“Well, in this case, the theory has been abundantly verified,” continued Warren. “One crime followed another. In one week, eight young women were the victim of the same, mysterious killer. Always the same kind of death. The victims were attacked and murdered in the street, dragged under a carriage entrance, to a stable or a courtyard, in short, a place where the murderer was certain not to be interrupted for the few moments necessary to complete his grisly task.

“Then with a well-sharpened knife, the killed slit their womb open in a manner that I could only characterize as skilled—and death soon followed.”

“None of these unfortunate victims was able to make a declaration before dying?”

“None. In every case, death had occurred before the arrival of the police or the public. Soon, it became evident that the murderer was not content with just the wretched prostitutes and women of loose morals whom he met in Whitechapel and neighboring areas usually frequented by prostitutes. Several women and young girls of excellent families have also become his prey. However, I must share with you a conclusion that we reached after the most thorough inquiry by our best detectives: all these women led a secret, double life. Remember that, Mr. Holmes, it must be important.”

“Actually, I share your opinion,” replied the Detective. “And how many murders have there been in total?”

“Up to now, in three months’ time, thirty-seven women have been murdered in this manner. A panic has spread throughout the entire city. No woman, no young girl, dares to go out at night anymore, even accompanied.

“Popular voice has given a name to the murderer; they call him Jack the Ripper. As far as we’re concerned, we haven’t been spared reproaches. The newspapers rant daily against us, and challenge us to put an end to these crimes. My masters have formally instructed me to capture Jack the Ripper at all costs, but I just don’t see how!

“Tell me, Mr. Holmes, you who are the best criminal investigator in the world, how could you stop a man who hides in the shadows like a ghost, who commits his crimes in minutes, and vanish afterwards without leaving a trace, a man who always operates in the same manner, but manifests himself ceaselessly throughout the city, and seems to be in league with the Devil himself? For no one ever got there in time to hear the victims’ cries of agony, nor to see the murderer get away...”

Sherlock Holmes rubbed his recently shaved chin with his hand.

“Would you allow me to ask you a few questions, Mr. Warren?”

“What do you think, Mr. Holmes? I beg you to! I will answer you to the best of my abilities.”

The Detective puffed a few smoke rings out from his cigar. He looked pensively at them and seemed to find some pleasure in that sight.

“You said just now,” he then remarked, “that the murderer always operates in the same manner. Have your doctors determined if he always uses the same instrument, the same knife?”

“I can reply unambiguously ‘yes.’ We have consulted the most illustrious doctors in London, and they have worked on the case with the greatest eagerness. Some of them claim that the murderer can only be a butcher or a butcher’s apprentice. Others actually say that he might be a surgeon. The victims’ wombs were opened as if he’d performed a laparectomy.”

“Did the bodies have any parts missing, or were they intact?”

“They were intact, but in many instances, the intestines had been pulled out.”

“Was there any theft accompanying the crime, in at least one case?”

“No, not one. In the last case, a murder committed in Montgomery Street, the victim was the wife of a rich merchant. She had a wallet containing 20,000 pounds on her. Not one note was missing. And all her jewels were there.”

“Naturally, you’ve positioned an army of detectives to try to catch Jack the Ripper *in flagrante delicto*?”

“Of course! You must realize, Mr. Holmes, that all my men are burning with desire to distinguish themselves in this affair. They’ve spent whole nights laying traps. Our entire force has been mobilized. We’ve organized signals. We’ve provided all the street walkers of London with a special whistle. If they’re attacked, they only have to use it...”

“And have they?”

“Never,” replied Mr. Warren. “And yet, some of the victims had the whistle in their pocket, or hanging around their necks. I’ve also promised a reward for the arrest of Jack the Ripper—a considerable sum, a thousand pounds. I hoped that we’d find a snitch, a man familiar with his crimes, who would want to earn his blood money by turning him in. But no one has yet presented himself with any reliable clue...”

At this moment, there was a rap on the door.

“Who’s that?” asked the Chief of Police, visibly vexed. “Didn’t I expressly leave orders that I was not to be disturbed as long as Mr. Holmes was here?”

A man entered and bowed respectfully.

“Ah, it’s you, Lestrade,” said Mr. Warren in a softened voice. “Doubtless, you’re bringing me some important news? To interrupt my conference with Mr. Holmes, it must be a question of great importance.”

“It is, sir. Very bad news—the thirty-eighth case has just landed on my desk.”

“What! The Ripper has struck again?”

“With one major difference, sir. This time, the victim is a celebrity. It will cause an enormous scandal. The singer Lillian Bell was murdered tonight.”

“Lillian Bell,” repeated the Chief of Police, “admired by all—who’s performed before the Queen herself... It’s not possible.”

“From what we were able to determine so far, sir,” continued the Inspector, “the singer had performed yesterday in Drury Lane with her customary success. Afterwards, she changed in her dressing room, and left the theatre with her dresser to take a carriage that was waiting to carry her to her lodgings in Oxford Street. The dresser usually accompanied her to the carriage. Yet, last night, Miss Bell left her at the stage door for some unknown reason and went to the carriage by herself. When the coach reached her residence, he was surprised to not see her come out of the cab. When he opened the door, he found Miss Bell lying on silk cushions savagely mutilated. The police was called and concluded it was yet another of Jack the Ripper’s murders.”

“This is truly awful,” said Warren, mopping his face with a kerchief. “We can expect a severe trouncing from the Press.”

“I’m convinced that, yet again, we’re going to be groping in the dark. This crime seems to be even more mysterious than the other thirty-seven,” said Lestrade.

“I agree with the Inspector,” said Holmes, “it’s very mysterious and complicated indeed. But I’m certain Mr. Lestrade will doubtless shed light on it. I wish you good luck.”

“Don’t joke, Mr. Holmes,” replied Lestrade, venomously. “Try to find Jack yourself amongst the city’s five million inhabitants. It’s like searching for a needle in a haystack!”

“But I will find him, my friend. In fact, may I suggest a little bet, that is, if you feel brave enough?”

“Brave? I’m brave enough to go to Hell itself and back if need be.”

“Very good!” said Holmes, offering his hand. “I know that you’ve often suggested in the past that I owed my successes to pure luck only.”

“That is so,” replied Lestrade.

“Then, let’s bet on who’s going to be the first to catch Jack the Ripper: you or I.”

“I’ll take that bet,” said Lestrade.

“A true detective’s bet,” said Mr. Warren, rubbing his hands in glee. “I’ll be your witness and set the bet at twenty-five bottles of French champagne that we will drink together the day Jack the Ripper has been arrested. Now, let the best man win!”

The two detectives shook hands.

“And now,” said Holmes, “I must leave you as I don’t have a moment to lose. As of now, I am officially in pursuit of Jack the Ripper.”