

Sherlock Holmes Arrives Too Late

[...]

“Time to go!” he said to himself, “There’s nothing more for me to do here. And if Sherlock Holmes arrives before I’m ready for him, it might go badly for me.”

The park was deserted, but some gendarmes were posted at the small pavilion that served as guard-house near the entrance. Lupin hid among the bushes, leaped over the wall and took a footpath across the fields towards the railway station. Ten minutes later, he had reached a spot where the country lane cut through a small mound and ran narrowly between two steep shoulder-high walls of compressed dirt. In this cleft, he suddenly found himself face-to-face with another man who was coming from the opposite direction. It was a man of not quite 50, tall, smooth-shaven and wearing clothes with a distinctive foreign cut. He carried a heavy cane, and a small satchel was strapped across his shoulder.

When they crossed paths, the stranger spoke with a nearly indiscernible hint of an English accent:

“Excuse me, Monsieur. Is this the way to the Castle?”

“Yes, Monsieur,” replied Lupin. “Straight ahead. Turn left when you come to the wall. I believe they’re expecting you.”

“I see.”

“Yes, my good friend Monsieur Devanne told us last night that you were coming.”

“I wish Monsieur Devanne had not been so free with information.”

“For my part, I’m happy that he was, for I’m delighted to be the first to welcome you. Sherlock Holmes has no more ardent admirer than I.”

Lupin had put an almost imperceptible note of irony in his voice, and he regretted it as soon as he had uttered the words, for the Great Detective then scrutinized him from head to foot with such a keen, penetrating eye that the Gentleman Burglar experienced the strange sensation of being captured, imprisoned and registered by those eyes more thoroughly and precisely than he had ever been by a camera.

“It’s as if he’d taken a photograph of my true self,” he thought. “None of my disguises will ever fool that man. He would see through them in an instant. But, I wonder, does he know who I am?”

They saluted each other. But, at that moment, they heard the sound of beating hooves and the clanging of metal. It was two gendarmes riding on horseback. The two travelers were obliged to step out of the way and press their backs against the embankment in order to avoid the horses. The gendarmes rode slowly, one behind the other, so it took them several minutes to pass by. During that time, Lupin was thinking:

“It all depends on whether he knows who I am or not... If he does, he may seek to take advantage of the occasion and turn me in. And there’s little I can do but wait... It’s a vexing situation...”

When the last gendarme had passed, Holmes stepped forth and brushed the dust from his clothes. The strap of his satchel was tangled on a thorny branch, which Lupin pulled out. Then, for a moment, the Englishman and the Frenchman gazed at each other. If anyone could have seen them at that very moment, they would have likely recorded it as one of the most interesting and memorable sights of their entire lives. The first encounter between these two remarkable men, so powerfully equipped, both gifted with superior talents, and fated because of their unique abilities to clash with each other like two irresistible, yet equal, forces of nature.

Then the Detective said: “Thank you, Monsieur.”

“The pleasure was all mine,” replied the Burglar.

They parted. Arsène Lupin went toward the railway station, and Sherlock Holmes continued on his way to the Castle.

The local police had given up the investigation after several hours of fruitless efforts. The Castle guests were awaiting the arrival of the Great English Detective with a vivacious curiosity, justified by his reputation. At first, they were a little disappointed because of what they thought was his rather commonplace appearance, which did not conform to the pictures they had formed of him in their own minds. He did not resemble the romantic hero, the mysterious, devilish, almost supernatural character that

the name of Sherlock Holmes evoked in their imaginations. However disappointed he might have been, Devanne nevertheless welcomed the Englishman with his usual gusto:

"Monsieur Holmes! At last you're here! It is such an honor, and a pleasure... I almost have no regrets about what happened to me, since it was instrumental in bringing you here. But how did you come?"

"By train."

"But I'd sent my automobile to meet you at the station."

"I prefer to travel without fanfare, Monsieur Devanne. I'm sorry if that disappoints you, but that's the way I choose to conduct my business," replied Holmes, who had somehow divined the feelings of his host.

This speech disconcerted Devanne, who said with a forced smile:

"Fortunately, your business here has been greatly simplified since I wrote to you."

"In what way?"

"The robbery took place last night."

"If you hadn't announced my visit, it probably would not have been committed last night."

"When, then?"

"Tomorrow. Some other day perhaps."

"And in that case?"

"Lupin would have been arrested," said the Detective.

"And my furniture?"

"Would not have been carried away."

"Ah! But my belongings have been returned."

"Here?"

"Yes. They were brought back at three o'clock."

"By Lupin?"

"By two army vans."

Sherlock Holmes put on his cap and adjusted his satchel.

"Monsieur Holmes! What are you doing?" Devanne exclaimed, anxiously.

"I'm going home."

"Why?"

"Your belongings have been returned. Arsène Lupin is gone—there is nothing for me to do here."

"Yes, there is. I desperately need your help. What happened yesterday, may happen again tomorrow, as we don't know how he entered, or escaped, the Castle. Or even why, a few hours later, he returned what he stole."

"Ah! You don't know..."

The idea of a problem to be solved quickened Holmes's interest.

"Very well. I shall investigate. At once—and alone, if possible."

Devanne understood, and led the Englishman into the Guards' Hall, after having asked the police to leave. In a dry, clipped voice, in sentences that seemed to have been rehearsed, Holmes asked a number of questions about the events of the preceding evening. He also inquired about the guests and members of the household. Then, he looked through the two volumes of the *Chronicles of Thibermesnil*, comparing the maps of the secret passage. Finally, he asked the banker to repeat word for word the two quotes unearthed by Father Gelis.

"Was yesterday the first time you mentioned those two quotes to anyone?" he finally inquired.

"Yes."

"You had never mentioned them to Monsieur Velmont before?"

"Never."

"Well then, order your automobile. I shall leave in an hour."

"In an hour?"

"It didn't take Lupin any more time to solve the problem that you gave him."

"That I gave him?"

"Of course! Arsène Lupin and Horace Velmont are one and the same."

"Ah! The scoundrel! I had my suspicions but I never..."

"Last night, at ten o'clock, you unwittingly gave Lupin the last clues that he required, and which he had been seeking for weeks. During the night, he had time to solve the problem, gather his men and loot your Castle. I should be as expeditious."

Holmes walked from one end of the room to the other, seemingly in deep thought, then sat down, crossed his long legs and closed his eyes.

Devanne waited, not quite knowing what to do. “Is he sleeping?” he thought. “Or is he only thinking?”

Eventually, he left the room to give some orders. When he returned, he found the Great Detective on his knees, scrutinizing the carpet at the foot of the stairs in the gallery.

“What did you find?” the banker inquired.

“Look! There... Candle wax...”

“You are right. Quite fresh too.”

“You will also find them at the top of the stairs, and around the case that Lupin broke into, and from which he took the ornaments that he afterward placed in this armchair.”

“What do you conclude from that?”

“Nothing yet, my dear Monsieur. These facts may explain the reason for the restitution of the stolen properties, but that is a separate issue that I do not have time to investigate. The main question is the secret passage...”

“You have found...?”

“Yes, I have. But first, tell me: is there a chapel some 200 or 300 yards from the Castle?”

“Yes, a ruined chapel, containing the tomb of Duke Rollo.”

“Instruct your driver to wait for us near that chapel.”

“My driver hasn’t returned yet. If he had, they would have told me. Do you think the secret passage leads to the chapel? But why?”

“Please, Monsieur,” interrupted the Detective. “All in good time. I need a ladder and a lantern.”

“You require a ladder and a lantern?” repeated Devanne, nonplussed.

“Certainly, or I shouldn’t have asked for them.”

The confused banker rang the bell. Minutes later, a servant brought the two articles.

Holmes then issued orders with the sternness and precision of military commands.

“Place the ladder against the bookcase, to the left of the word *Thibermesnil*.”

Devanne placed the ladder as directed.

“More to the left...” the Englishman continued. “To the right... There! Now, climb up... All the letters are in relief, aren’t they?”

“Yes.”

“First, turn the letter *H* one way or the other.”

Devanne took hold of the *H*, and exclaimed: “Ah! Yes, it turns toward the right! About a quarter of a turn. How did you guess?”

Sherlock Holmes did not reply, but instead continued to issue directions.

“From where you stand, can you reach the letter *R*? Yes... Take it and move it back and forth, as you would a bolt.”

Devanne did so and, to his great surprise, it produced a clicking sound.

“Perfect,” said Holmes. “Now, you need to go to the other end of the word *Thibermesnil*... Slide your ladder along... Very good... Now try the letter *L*... If I’m right, and things are as they should be, it should open like a trapdoor.”

With a certain sense of momentousness, Devanne seized the letter *L*. It opened, as the English Detective had predicted, but the banker fell from the ladder, for the entire section of the bookcase lying between the first and last letters of *Thibermesnil*, had turned on its hidden axis and disclosed the secret passage.

“You are not hurt?” Sherlock Holmes said, unruffled.

“No, no,” said Devanne, as he rose to his feet. “I’m not hurt, only bewildered. I don’t understand... Those letters that move... The secret passage...”

“Well, doesn’t that correspond exactly to the quote from Sully’s *Memoirs*? ‘*La hache tournoie dans l’air qui frémit, mais l’aile s’ouvre...*’ ‘*The axe swings in the trembling air, but the ell opens...*’ *La hache*—the axe—corresponds to the French letter *H* and it did swing; *l’air* stands for the letter *R*, which “trembled” when you shook it; *l’aile* is the letter *L*, which opened, and completed the release of the secret mechanism. That is how your Mademoiselle de Tancarville was able to visit King Henry IV in the middle of the night.”

“What about Louis XVI?” asked Devanne.

“He was a clever locksmith. I have read his *Traité des Serrures de Combinaison*, his Treatise on Combination Locks. The Duke of Thibermesnil undoubtedly wished to impress his King by showing His Majesty a clever bit of locksmithing. As an aid to his memory, the King wrote: 2-6-12, that is to say, *H-R-L*, the second, sixth and twelfth letters of the word *Thibermesnil*.”

“Now I understand! That explains how Lupin got out of the room. However, it does not explain how he came in. Because he came from the outside...”

Sherlock Holmes lit the lantern and stepped into the secret passage.

“Look! All the mechanism is exposed here, like the works of a clock, and the reverse side of the letters can be reached. Lupin worked the combination from this side—Elementary!”

“How did you know?” asked Devanne.

“Look at that puddle of oil on the ground. Lupin had even foreseen that the mechanism would need oiling.”

“So he knew the secret of the other entrance?”

“As I do. Follow me.”

“Into that dark passage?”

“Are you afraid?”

“No, but are you sure you can find the way out?”

“With my eyes closed,” said Holmes.

They descended 12 steps, then 12 more, and another two flights also of 12 steps each. They then walked through a long, underground corridor. Its brick walls showed the marks of successive restorations, and, in spots, dripped water. The ground, too, was damp.

“We must be beneath the moat,” said Devanne nervously.

At last, they came to a stairway of 12 steps, followed by three other flights of 12 steps each, which they climbed with difficulty. They then found themselves in a small chamber cut into the rock. They could go no further.

“By Jove!” exclaimed Holmes. “Nothing but bare walls. This is a challenge.”

“Let us go back,” said Devanne. “I think I’ve seen enough...”

But the Englishman raised his eyes and uttered a sigh of relief. There, above their heads, carved in the rock, was the word *Thibermesnil* and the same mechanism as before. He merely had to work the three letters. After doing so, a block of granite swung out. Stepping through the other side, they found that it was the tombstone of Duke Rollo, and the word *Thibermesnil* was engraved on it in relief. Now, they stood inside the little ruined chapel.

“...*Et l'on va jusqu'à Dieu!*’ ‘...and one journeys towards God!’ ” said the Detective.

“Marvelous!” exclaimed Devanne, amazed at the clairvoyance of the Englishman and the speed at which he had solved a mystery that had defied learned men for centuries. “Can it be that those few words were enough for you to ferret out the truth?”

“Pah!” said Holmes. “They weren’t even necessary. In the map contained in the copy of the book taken from the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, the dotted line starts on the left at a circle, meant to symbolize the Tour Guillaume, and ends on the right with a cross, which undoubtedly was meant to refer to this chapel in which we now stand.”

Poor Devanne could not believe his ears. “It’s incredible, amazing, and yet so simple! How can it be that no one has ever solved the mystery?”

“Because, I think, no one had ever gathered all the clues, I mean, the two books and the two quotes, before Arsène Lupin and me.”

“But, Father Gelis and I knew all those things, and yet we...”

Holmes smiled.

“My dear Monsieur Devanne,” he said. “Not everyone is good at solving riddles.”

“I tried for ten years to do what took you less than ten minutes...”

“Pah! I’m used to it.”

They stepped out of the chapel, and found an automobile stationed there.

“This vehicle seems to be waiting for us.”

“It... It’s mine,” said Devanne, puzzled.

“Yours? But you said your driver hadn’t returned when we left.”

“He hadn’t... I don’t understand...”

They approached the car, and Devanne questioned the driver:

“Edouard, who told you to come here?”

“Why, it was Monsieur Velmont.”

“Velmont? Did you see him?”

“He was at the railway station. He told me to wait for you and the English Gentleman at the old chapel.”

“The old chapel! But why?”

“He didn’t explain, Monsieur. That’s just what he said.”

Devanne and Holmes exchanged looks.

“He knew the mystery would be a simple one for you,” the banker said. “It’s a subtle homage.”

A smile of satisfaction briefly lit up the Detective’s normally serious features. The compliment pleased him.

“A clever man!” he said, shaking his head. “I knew that when I saw him.”

“You saw him?” said Devanne, astounded.

“We crossed paths earlier—literally.”

“And you knew it was Horace Vermont, I mean, Arsène Lupin?”

“Not at first. But I soon guessed that’s who he was from his turn of speech, a certain irony in his tone.”

“And yet, you allowed him to escape?”

“Naturally... Even though I could have had him arrested... Two gendarmes rode by as we spoke...”

“*Sacrebleu!*” cried Devanne. “You should have taken advantage of that opportunity...”

“Precisely, Monsieur,” said the Englishman, haughtily. “When I encounter a foe like Arsène Lupin, I do not take advantage of chance opportunities, I create them.”

But time pressed, and since Lupin had been so kind as to send the automobile, they resolved to take it. They seated themselves in the comfortable limousine. Edouard started the engine, and they drove away. They looked at the sunny fields and the small groves of shade trees as they rushed by, the gentle hills of the *Pays de Caux* leveled by the power of the motorcar. Suddenly, Devanne’s eyes fell upon a small package in the glove box.

“What’s that? A package! Whose is it? Why, it’s for you, Monsieur Holmes!”

“For me?”

“Yes, it is addressed to Sherlock Holmes, with compliments from Arsène Lupin.”

The Detective took the package, opened it, and inside, found a watch carefully wrapped in paper.

“Ah!” he exclaimed, with an angry gesture.

“A watch...” said Devanne. “Could it be...?”

The Englishman did not reply.

“... It *is* your watch! Arsène Lupin is returning your watch! But, in order to return it, he must have taken it. He stole your watch! Dear God, that’s a good one! Sherlock Holmes’ watch stolen by Arsène Lupin! That’s too funny! You must excuse me... I can’t help it...”

After the banker had finished laughing, he said, in a tone of earnest conviction:

“A clever man, indeed!”

Sherlock Holmes remained like a stone. On the way to Dieppe, he never spoke a word. His gaze remained fixed on the fleeting horizon. His silence was dreadful, unfathomable, more violent than the wildest rage. At the harbor, he spoke calmly, but in a voice that contained all the will power and energy of the famous man.

“Yes, he is a clever man,” he said. “But one day, I shall still have the pleasure of placing on his shoulder the hand that I now offer to you, Monsieur Devanne. For I believe that Arsène Lupin and Sherlock Holmes shall meet again some day... Yes, the world is too small for us not to cross paths again... And on that day...”