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THE SUCCESSFUL EDITOR! (BILLY BUNTER, Editor of our grand supplement, look forward to the time when he will be treated like this!)

THE MYSTERY OF THE VACANT HOUSE!

A Splendid Complete Story, featuring Herlock Sholmes, the Amazing Detective.

By Dr. JOTSON.

With the approach of the holiday season I noticed alarming symptoms in my amazing friend, Mr. Herlock Sholmes. At frequent intervals his eyes would turn inwards and concentrate on the end of his aquiline nose. Then he would make a vicious sweep with his hand as though to remove an imaginary fly from the tip of his highly-developed process. He would awake at night yelling that spotted starfish were jumping at him. These symptoms led me to the reluctant conclusion that Sholmes was suffering from a condition known to the medical profession as *temporarius non compos mentis*, or, in other words, a temporary attack of bats in the belly.

For a few days a natural delicacy forbade me to broach the subject that was worrying me even more than the demise of a brace of my wealthiest patients. But as Herlock Sholmes became more restless and absent-minded I determined to exert the prerogative of an old friend and colleague. For my task I selected breakfast-time one morning.

"My dear fellow," I said, as Sholmes absent-mindedly helped himself to my kipper, after devouring his own, "it is imperative that you should take a holiday. You have been working far too hard. Now, I know a little country place called Wigglesmire, in Wapshire, nine miles from the railway, where I propose you shall accompany me for a complete rest and change."

"An excellent suggestion, my dear Jotson!" exclaimed Sholmes. "But where do you propose to obtain the wherewithal with which to pay for our fares and lodgings?"

I smiled serenely.

"I have quite sufficient for the purpose," I replied. "A fortnight ago I helped an old gentleman—one of my patients—to make his will. A week later he submitted to an operation at my hands. Needless to say, the operation was a complete success. Fortunately—er—I mean, unfortunately—the patient kicked the bucket before he had time to reap the full benefit of my skill."

"Quite so," said Sholmes. "And you have now received the legacy? Good! I will pack my dressing-gown, my violin, and the cocaine cask immediately after breakfast, and accompany you to Wigglesmire this very day."

Needless to say, I was delighted in having so easily persuaded Sholmes to take a well-deserved holiday. That afternoon we set off on our journey. We travelled all night on the Mudbury, Metropole, and Mausoleum Railway to Mudbury Junction. Thence we proceeded on foot towards the rustic village of Wigglesmire. Daft Jimmie, a well-known local character, preceded us with our luggage.

Midway between Mudbury and Wigglesmire, three miles from anywhere, Daft Jimmie suddenly stopped short. A crash of broken glass sounded as he dropped our luggage on the road. Then he stared ahead, his mouth wide open, heedless of the flies which took refuge therein.

"Well, Oi be fair blessed!" he ejaculated. "Old Jerry Jobbs' house! Look at it!"

Sholmes and I gazed in the direction indicated by the yokel's grubby forefinger. All we could see was a scattered pile of bricks, plaster, tiles, broken glass, and splintered wood.

"A house!" I exclaimed. "That heap of rubbish!"

"It were a house when Oi come by here first thing this mornin'," mumbled Jimmie. "That be a fair knock-down, that be! Oi be blessed if 'tain't!"

Sholmes hooked his stick affectionately round my neck!

"Come, let us proceed on our way, my dear Jotson," he said.

Together we walked down the lane, leaving Daft Jimmie to pick up the luggage. As we approached the wreckage we discerned a stout figure, wearing side-whiskers, sitting huddled in despondent attitude on the main heap of rubbish.

"That be poor ole Jerry Jobbs, the

builder," said the voice of Daft Jimmie from behind us.

We halted by the side of the lane, and the dejected figure raised his head. His eyes lighted upon the lank form of my companion. Then, with a cry of joy, Jerry Jobbs leaped from the debris.

"Mr. Sholmes!" he exclaimed. "I recognised you at once from your portraits in the 'Popular'! 'Tis a wonderful coincidence! You have stumbled across a great mystery." I groaned aloud.

"My dear sir," I protested, "my colleague, Mr. Herlock Sholmes, has come to the country for complete repose. As his friend and medical adviser, I could not dream of letting him exercise his already overtaxed brain on any intricate problem."

"Bow-wow, Jotty!" ejaculated Sholmes, removing an imaginary fly from his nose. "There is no mystery here. The solution of Mr. Jobbs' trouble is as clear as the nose on your face on bath night."

Like the builder, I gazed at my amazing friend in utter astonishment.

"Why, my dear Sholmes," I exclaimed,



With a cry of joy, Jerry Jobbs leaped from the debris.

"Mr. Jobbs has not even told us his trouble yet, so how the dickens—"

"Simplicity itself, my dear Jotson," said Sholmes. "This pile of debris is obviously the remains of a new vacant house built by Mr. Jerry Jobbs. The wallpaper was quite thick enough to keep the walls up. Yet the place collapsed. The house did not just fall down, as the manner in which the doors are splintered amply testifies."

"Wonderful!" ejaculated the wide-eyed Mr. Jobbs. "My men finished erecting the house yesterday. This morning I walked out to look at it. It was a total wreck. I was so surprised you could have knocked me down with a brick!"

"Maybe you have an enemy, Mr. Jobbs?" I suggested.

"Ah, I fear you are right, sir," said the builder sadly. "Several people have bought similar four-roomed dwellings from me, though why they should have their knives in me I can't make out. I only charged them two thousand pounds apiece."

Feeling I had unearthed an important clue, I looked towards Herlock Sholmes for approval. My famous friend merely smiled.

"A good attempt, my dear Jotson," he said; "but you are quite off the track. Cast your eyes about you."

I looked at the wreckage carefully.

"H'm!" I remarked. "It seems rather as though an anarchist has set off a bomb here."

Sholmes regarded me with his peculiar smile.

"Have you ever heard of a four-legged anarchist, my dear Jotson?" he asked quietly.

I shook my head sadly. In that moment I feared that my famous friend's overworked brain had given way completely. Just then an angry shout came to our ears from across some meadows. We swung round. Then, with a dramatic gesture, Sholmes pointed towards a small wood.

"There is your anarchist unless I am greatly mistaken, Jotson!" he said.

Mr. Jerry Jobbs and I gazed in amazement. From the wood trotted an old dilapidated grey mule, followed by a perspiring rustic.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" gasped the builder. "Old Podger's Army mule!"

"I think you will be able to claim substantial damages against friend Podgers, Mr. Jobbs," said Sholmes. "But leave the matter to me for the present. Let us accost the fellow."

Leaving Daft Jimmie to sleep by our luggage, we set off across the meadows.

By this time the mule was about played out. So was Podgers, but he managed to clutch the halter that was fastened round the animal's neck. The mule halted, and started cropping grass. Sholmes strode up to the man, with Jerry Jobbs and me close at his heels.

"Good-morning, Mr. Podgers!" said Sholmes amiably. "A nice mess your mule has made of my friend's house."

Mr. Podgers' jaw dropped with a resounding click.

"Herlock Sholmes!" he breathed hoarsely. "You—you've found out? I felt in my bones when I bought this Army mule that one day I should land into trouble through the beast!"

"You should not have allowed the fierce animal to break loose, Mr. Podgers," said the great detective severely.

"Allowed him!" snorted Mr. Podgers indignantly. "I was just hitching him into my baker's cart this mornin' when he took a bit out o' my left leg with his teeth. Then he made off like a streak. I chased him three miles down the road, I did. Then I caught him by Mr. Jobbs' new house. The beast backed, and lashed out with his heels. Good-bye, house! I followed him over ten fields, across six streams, and through three woods; but I got him at last. Kim up, you brute!"

"Stop!" cried Jerry Jobbs. "This morning's work will cost you a pretty penny. I'll—I'll sue you, and—"

"Send my commission to the Cow and Cartwheel Inn," said Herlock Sholmes. "Good-morning, Mr. Jobbs! We'll leave you to it."

And, with the toe of his boot, Sholmes helped me back to where we had left Daft Jimmie.

As we resumed our walk to Wigglesmire my admiration for my amazing friend found expression in words.

"You are superb, Sholmes!" I said. "How you knew that a four-legged creature had been responsible for the damage before ever Podgers' mule came into sight beats me hollow! Did you note some specific clue that escaped our eyes?"

"No," replied Sholmes. "I deduced the fact by a process of elimination. Directly I saw the wreck of Jerry Jobbs' newly-erected house, I knew that such damage could only have been done by a South Sea hurricane, a Zeppelin bomb, or a British Army mule. We have no South Sea hurricanes in this country, thank goodness, and the war is over. Therefore, it was obvious to even an average intelligence that an Army mule must have been responsible for the complete annihilation of the building. By searching for clues, I easily could have tracked the animal to its lair, as you well know, my dear Jotson. However, I was saved that trouble, thanks to the timely appearance of the brute. I trust Jobbs' remittance to us will be a substantial one."

THE END.