

From
In League with Sherlock Holmes:
Stories Inspired by the Sherlock Holmes Canon
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The Twenty-Five-Year Engagement

by James W. Ziskin

(From the reminiscences of John H. Watson, M.D.)

During the time of my early acquaintance with Mr. Sherlock Holmes, I confess that, now and again, his vanity inspired in me flashes of pique that tested my equanimity. It is understandable, of course, that two intimate friends lodging together in close quarters might suffer bouts of discord in counterbalance to the good cheer they normally enjoy. And while on occasion I found myself prey to such ill humors—tame though they were—Holmes remained immune to similar agitation in his attitude with me. The inevitable outcome of these episodes was, of course, a return to harmony and respect for my companion. Reflecting on our long collaboration, through all the adventures and investigations I've chronicled over these many years, I can recall no incident that so well exemplified this subtle peculiarity of our friendship than the Case of the Twenty-Five-Year Engagement.

A late-November gale was raging outside our shared rooms in Baker Street, cooling any eagerness we might have felt for venturing into the night in search of a meal. The rain thrashed against the windows in waves, as fierce squalls rose and fell, whistling down the chimney and through the rafters, causing the gaslight to dance on the walls. In such inclement conditions, we decided to ring the landlady, Mrs. Hudson, who delivered to us the remains of a toothsome steak-and-kidney pie from her larder. We made short work of the dish, rinsing it down with a serviceable claret I'd procured from the wine merchant. Alas, without advance instruction, Mrs. Hudson had prepared no pudding. Our appetites nevertheless tolerably sated, we repaired to the sitting room where I intended to dive into a yellow-back book of sea stories. I drew up the basket chair and settled before the hearth, a dash of brandy and soda within easy reach. My companion placed his post-prandial pipe on the mantelpiece and took up his violin at the music stand. After a moment's attention to the rosinning of his bow and the tuning of his instrument, he began to play.

He was soon lost in a rapture of transcendent euphony, an aspect—I noted—not dissimilar to the vacant look of satisfaction he displayed when under the spell of one of his cocaine solutions. Yet at no point on that cold-and-rainy November evening had he injected himself with a stupefacient or consumed a medicinal concoction of any kind. The source of his delight was, I

knew well, vainglorious not chemical. It was, in fact, pride at his own musical talents that inspired his contented mood. Truly, so enchanting was the melody he summoned from the violin that, despite the bother I felt at his satisfaction with himself, I closed my book, folded it in my lap, and chased all thoughts from my mind, save for the enjoyment of the recital. The music coursed along merrily for a few minutes more until, in the midst of a particularly energetic burst of *spiccato*, Holmes fell victim to what I can only surmise was an overmuch of zeal. Basing my conclusions on the visual and aural evidence available, I arrived at the most logical interpretation, namely that the extreme friction produced by his bowing had caused the A-string of his violin to snap. A man possessed of lesser sang-froid would surely have abandoned his performance forthwith and restrung the instrument. But not Sherlock Holmes. He carried on—I presumed—out of native contumacy and the desire to demonstrate the full measure of his considerable skill. Without hesitation, he contrived a mysterious solution that veiled from the listener the loss of the A-string altogether. Once he'd brought the piece safely into port with a stirring tremolo at the finale, I forgot the annoyance that had beset me earlier and I begged him to enlighten me as to what clever artifice he'd employed to accomplish the feat with only three strings.

“Simplicity itself, Watson,” he said, lighting his pipe. “As the D-string lies adjacent to the A, I needed only elevate the pitch of the former by a factor of one fifth to produce the notes usually dispatched by the latter. An unorthodox but effective fingering method, I’ll allow, though one that should be within the abilities of even the most prosaic fiddler.”

“Well done!” I ejaculated. “Had I not witnessed it with my own eyes, I would never have believed it.”

“Thank you, Watson. And now I would ask your indulgence as I intend to recount a singularly fascinating case that was presented to me recently. As you will have no doubt observed, for some time I have been wanting of a challenging investigation to stimulate my interest. And, so, it was with great relief that Thursday last I received in these rooms an attractive visitor of middle age.

“Taking her coat, a seal plush jacket bearing hints of wear at the elbow, I invited her to sit before the hearth, in the very spot you occupy now. The snugness of her Kersey vest, worn over a pearl-shaded blouse topped by a frilled *haut col*, made it abundantly clear that she was belted into a tight-fitting bodice underneath. Such a sartorial choice, when considered along with her ample bustle and the peculiar passementerie brocade adorning her skirt, convinced me that her wardrobe was perhaps four or five seasons out of fashion. That conclusion served to substantiate my initial approximation of her age, which I had placed between forty-eight and fifty. Still a handsome woman by any popular standard, she was making every effort, I inferred, to reclaim by means of the restrictive garment the trim silhouette she’d sported in years gone by. Vanity exacts its price at the expense of comfort. The fabrics and workmanship were of a fine quality, indicating that she circulated among the more privileged classes of our city, even if newer costumes appeared to be beyond the limits of her purse.

“She introduced herself as Mrs. Lavinia Biddlecombe, and while her surname suggested Somerset to me, her speech indicated otherwise. To wit, East Anglia or the Fens. She confirmed

my suspicions and informed me that she had been born in Lincolnshire. Biddlecombe was her husband's good name. The scion of a wealthy family of Taunton, Charles Henry Biddlecombe was deceased, she explained, having died in a shooting accident twenty-six years before in his native Somerset.

"She told me it was a wet November, much like this one. Her husband tripped in the mud and fell on his gun while hunting otter. The weapon discharged and he was killed instantly.

"I offered condolences, calculating silently that she'd been widowed at the age of twenty-three or -four. As she was still using her late husband's name, I deduced she had not remarried in the intervening years.

"The lady cast her eyes downward and thanked me for my kind words. Then, as if to sweep away the memory of her husband's premature demise, she asked me how I had managed to ascertain her origins, given that she had resided in London these past thirty years, all the while endeavoring to adapt her diction to her surroundings."

"Excuse me, Holmes," I interrupted, "but has her provenance anything to do with the case? Or is this simply more of your usual brag and bounce?"

"My dear Watson, I am attempting to paint a picture for you," he said, having taken no offense at my gibe. In fact, he seemed eager for some friendly sport. "Clearly my spellbinding powers of narration have intrigued you so that I have strained your patience to hear the conclusion."

I chuckled despite myself, even as I bristled at his capacity for self-congratulation. Holmes, smiling, dug into the Persian slipper where he stored his tobacco, and, having filled his pipe again, he lit it and puffed blithely before continuing his tale.

"I asked my guest the motive of her visit, and she, reaching into her purse, produced a letter, which—she informed me—had arrived in the morning post a fortnight earlier. Examining the envelope, I observed that the Penny Lilac had been affixed artlessly, askew, with no thought to symmetry or parallel lineation. And the handwriting was coarse, almost infantile. Now, Watson, you will surely recall that, inspired by one of Rosa Baughan's clever tomes, I once made a deep study of graphology and the character traits observable in handwriting. Armed with that science, I concluded that the letter in question had been written by a left-handed man of the laboring classes—approximately sixty years of age—of below average intelligence."

"All that from his handwriting? Really? Nothing more?"

"Only that the author suffered from advanced arthritis of the gonorrhoeal variety."

"But surely that's impossible," I cried. "Never mind that you are not a pathologist or, for that matter, a physician of any sort. How can you possibly know that this man was afflicted with gonorrhoeal arthritis?"

"Simple graphology, my dear Watson. The swelling of the distal joints of his left fingers trailing the pen was discernible in the ink smudges on the page, indicating a severe arthritic condition."

"Yes, but gonorrhoea? Can you be sure it was not rheumatoid?"

“Tumescence of the distal joints is rarely symptomatic of rheumatism, as you must be aware. I once wrote a monograph on the subject of arthritis and the venereal diseases among the criminal classes. You would no doubt find it instructive. For now, however, I shall describe the contents of the letter in question, and my reasoning viz. a diagnosis of gonorrheal arthritis, I trust, will become plain to you at the conclusion of my report.

“A Mr. Feargus Cheswick, late of the 64th Regiment of Foot, was the author of the letter, in which he described his experience in India shortly after the Great Mutiny had begun. The year, of course, was fifty-seven. The regiment had recently shipped back from Persia to Bombay, whence it was immediately sent marching to relieve the siege at Cawnpore. I need not tell you, dear Watson, that the 64th failed to arrive in time to save those poor British souls—men, women, and children—from their fate at the hands of the mutineers. It was during this campaign that Cheswick befriended a comrade in arms by the name of Edward ‘Ned’ Plunkett.

“Now, addressing once more your objections to my diagnosis, I remind you that the Great Mutiny preceded by several years the Cantonment Act of 1864, which, as everyone knows, imposed strict prophylactic controls on the dens of iniquity in that far corner of the Empire. Before the enactment of such regulations, British soldiers frequenting such establishments on the subcontinent routinely fell victim to all manner of venereal contagions. Gonorrhea is the most likely culprit in cases of arthritis of the hand.”

“Still, Holmes,” I said, raising one last protest, “you’ll understand my irritation. What evidence have you that this Cheswick fellow visited brothels in India?”

“It is but an inference, my dear Watson, but perhaps we shall find confirmation of my theory before the night is through. Now, to continue my tale, Messers Cheswick and Plunkett became thick, as they say, after the latter saved the former’s life at Ahwera. Young Plunkett bayoneted to death a charging sepoy who, musket lowered, was poised to blow Cheswick’s brains out. Cheswick, in turn, pledged devotion to his savior from that day forward, and stuck to him like a burr. The two men shared rations, water, wages, and even the details of their sentimental histories, a point upon which Cheswick insisted in his letter.

“After two months on the march, the relief force finally stood ready to enter Cawnpore and free the British hostages held there. We both know that chapter of history turned out otherwise. And so it did for Ned Plunkett as well. He was cut down by a mutineer’s bullet in the chest just outside the city. Cheswick cradled his wounded friend in his arms, comforting him in his last moments. Before going to meet his Maker, however, Plunkett asked Cheswick for one last kindness: a promise to deliver a token to the woman back in London whom he loved and had intended to marry upon his return. And so, with Cheswick’s solemn oath to fulfill the commission, Plunkett placed a small leather pouch in his friend’s hand. ‘This is a ring I found in Bombay,’ said he. ‘It was to be Lavinia’s wedding ring, and I wish for her to have it.’ Plunkett died an instant later.”

“And now Cheswick is here to honor his promise? Twenty-five years later?”

“That appears to be his intention, though Mrs. Biddlecombe is not persuaded of the fact. Citing woman’s instinct, she fears a nefarious motive on his part.”

“What is it she suspects?”

“She declined to say, explaining instead that she only wanted me to attempt to recover the ring, if the ring exists at all. I could not fault her for her caution. A strange man emerges from the mists of the past, claiming to have in his possession a token from her long-deceased betrothed? It is suspicious. She is a woman of some means, after all, even if she is not wealthy. Naturally she fears this Cheswick may be after some other quarry.”

“Blackmail?”

“A possibility. And if so, I can only surmise that it involves the bygone romance Ned Plunkett described to him. Mrs. Biddlecombe was, I noted, keen that I not think her the wrong kind of woman. She explained that she was already widowed when she agreed to Plunkett’s proposal, which had come in a letter he’d posted from India upon learning of Charles Biddlecombe’s death.”

“But why such worry?” I asked. “Surely no harm can touch her reputation now.”

“It would seem not. Although the swift proposal might well have prompted vicious gossip at the time. I advised her to meet with this man to gauge his intentions.”

“A logical course of action.”

“But Mrs. Biddlecombe objected. She neither wanted to confront the man at his Shoreditch lodgings, as he’d suggested, nor would she entertain the idea of his visiting her in her home. As my interest was stirred, I proposed a rendezvous here. If she was averse to meeting Cheswick face to face, she could wait in the next room while I recovered the ring from him. And, provided the heavy weather has not dissuaded them from the appointment, the meeting will happen this very night at nine.”

I consulted my watch and remarked that it was nearly nine already.

“Indeed,” said Holmes. “And despite the gale outside, I perceived just now the distinct clapping of a single horse’s hooves in the street below. A hansom cab, no doubt. I expect the bell to ring at any time.”

And, in fact, it did. Moments later Sherlock Holmes ushered into the sitting room an attractive lady of about fifty years of age. He introduced her to me as Mrs. Lavinia Biddlecombe, and assured her that any confidence she shared with him was secure with me.

“Mr. Cheswick will arrive before long,” he said. “When he does, you will conceal yourself in the next room. There is an armchair for your comfort.” He fished in his pocket for a small enameled etui. “Keep these pastilles at the ready in case you feel the urge to cough.”

“I was told I could count on you, Mr. Holmes,” she said. “Thank you for indulging the whims of a foolish, frightened widow. I’m sure my suspicions will prove to be groundless.”

Holmes smiled and assured her he would get to the bottom of the matter.

In due course of time—barely ten minutes later, in fact—the bell sounded again. Lavinia Biddlecombe slipped into the next room. Presently, my friend and I nestled into our chairs in the company of a ragged man of an indeterminate age.

“Am I correct to presume that I have the pleasure of addressing Mr. Feargus Cheswick?” asked Holmes.

“You are,” he said in a gravelly voice. “Mind, I wouldn’t rightly call it a pleasure, leastways not for a gentleman such as yourself.” Then he glanced in my direction with an air of uneasiness.

“You may put your worries to rest,” said Holmes. “This is my colleague, Dr. Watson. He enjoys my full confidence and, provided you do not seek some undeserved or illegal gain from my client in this matter, you may speak freely in our presence without fear of consequences.”

Holmes considered our guest down his long nose. Cheswick, for his part, fidgeted under the scrutiny. His black overcoat, soaked through by the rain, threw off an odor typical of the larger breeds of hunting dog. The bloodhound, came to mind, and one that had just tramped through a bog at that. I repeat this last detail with some vexation, given Holmes’s extensive knowledge of the properties of soil and mud around London and, indeed, across the British Isles. His habit of advertising his mastery on all matters involving clay, loam, peat, and the like annoyed me. I confess that the subject of mud—along with that of the distinguishing qualities of various types of cigar ashes—figured among the least enjoyable in my many colloquies with Sherlock Holmes.

But I have strayed from the subject at hand, which was the outward aspect and manner of the man seated before us. So wasted and bent was he that I found myself unable to estimate his age. He may have been an infirm pensioner of sixty years, or a relatively hale-and-heartily grandfather of five-and-eighty. A grizzled beard, matted and tangled upon itself, obscured much of his face, though not enough to disguise the ravages of a hard and diseased life. Holmes endeavored to put him at his ease, offering him some tea. But Cheswick, having spied the decanter on the sideboard, affected a shiver and remarked he wouldn’t object to a peg of brandy instead.

“It’s a raw night out, indeed,” said he, licking his lips and showing a toothless grin. “I shouldn’t wonder if I catch my death.”

Holmes obliged and served up a generous portion of the spirit. I studied Cheswick’s hands, which shook from avidity as he took the glass. He drained half the liquid in one gulp, before swallowing the residue with similar dispatch mere seconds later. Observing him closely, I had to admit that his swollen fingers and puckered, bilious eyes, which squinted at the low light as if distressed by it, provided little evidence to contradict my companion’s earlier diagnosis.

“Now, Mr. Cheswick,” said Holmes once he’d refilled the man’s glass, “I have read the letter you sent to Mrs. Biddlecombe and, before any other discussion, I have an urgent question to put to you.”

“You want to know why I waited so long to keep my promise to deliver the ring,” he answered. “You won’t be surprised to learn, Mr. Holmes, that I have led a life of cold coffee and gruel. My earliest recollections are of my dad floggin’ me for the sin of bein’ handy when he was worse for the drink. ’Course he up and died one fine day when I was not yet twelve. I come home from the factory and my mum tells me it’s broxy and ale for dinner ’cause we’re celebratin’. ‘Father’s went to his eternal reward,’ says she, ‘and begone and good riddance.’ Sure but she never pined after the blinkers and bruises he give her, and she shed no tears at his demise neither.

“You see, Mr. Holmes,” he continued, “my earliest miseries led me to a life of disgrace and hardship. A thief from a young age, then a factory boy for slave wages and a bent spine. And, when I was a mere lad of thirteen, my mum was knocked down by a speeding Brougham in the

street, leaving me an orphan. For a few years, I moiled and toiled, stealin' and runnin' for the swell-mobsmen, buttoners, and gang-leaders around the docks and the Rookery. That's when I acquired a taste for the pleasures to be found in the company of the fair sex. And I've paid dear for those enjoyments, with more doses of shameful maladies than a decent man ought to admit."

My friend glanced at me and raised his eyebrows, a subtle signal to indicate that Mr. Cheswick had all but confirmed the diagnosis of gonorrheal arthritis. I had to concur, of course, though not without a sting to my pride.

"Pray, go on," said Holmes to our guest.

"After several quarrels with the law, I decided I was ill-suited to the life of a thief. I'd heard tell that there was fortunes to be made abroad, so I joined the army and spent the next seventeen years with a musket on my shoulder, trampin' about the world for queen and country. From the Cape of Good Hope to China and Burma and Afghanistan, I seen a healthy portion of the Empire, I did. But I never made my fortune. I limped from one payday to the next, fritterin' away my wages on women and drink, never layin' by a farthing for a rainy day. The only luck I ever had was to steer clear of the worst horrors of war. Until the Mutiny, that is."

"And that's where you met Mr. Plunkett, isn't it?" asked Holmes.

"It was on that hot march from Bombay to Cawnpore we became fast friends, Ned and me. Not for long, true enough, but never have I known a finer mate. Saved my life, he did. So watchin' him die in my arms near broke my heart. The hardest thing I ever saw was that handsome lad gaspin' for life, and me with nothin' I could do to help him. The hardest thing ever, I tell you. Until the next day, that is. What was waitin' for us inside the Bibighar drove many a hard man to tears. And then to rage. I ain't proud of the justice we give 'em as repayment for the butcherin' of those women and children, but if you'd seen what we had, well, I'd wager you'd have ne'er a word to say against us. We took eyes for eyes and teeth for teeth, and then some more for good measure."

Outside the wind continued to keen, dashing more rain against the windows, intensifying our sense of dismay at the memory of that distant tragedy and its murderous aftermath. Holmes puffed silently on his pipe. Cheswick sipped his brandy and wiped away a tear with his rough, knobby hand. At length, my companion suggested a return to the subject of Plunkett and the ring.

"He was fadin' fast," said Cheswick. "I could hear the blood gurglin' in his chest as the life drained out of him. But he had enough strength left to reach into his pocket for a small pouch. There was a ring inside. Sterling silver, he said."

"May I see it?" asked Holmes. Cheswick produced the pouch and held it out to my friend. "A peacock," observed Holmes, turning the ring over in his hand. "Fine workmanship. And a great, red eye. A garnet."

"So Ned told me. Said it cost him every penny he could steal or borrow. Bought it in Bombay for Lavinia. Made sure I committed her name to memory so as to deliver it on my return to England."

"I see," said Holmes, giving the ring and pouch back to his guest. "What else did he tell you about his beloved?"

“That she was a widow,” said Cheswick. “He told me she’d married a cold-hearted man who ill-treated her. But fate smiled on her and the husband died young. A hunting accident, he said.”

“And when was that?”

“November of fifty-six. Mere days after Ned shipped out for Bombay, as it turned out.”

Holmes put down his pipe. Gazing at the ceiling, fingertips pressed together, he seemed to be putting some data in order. At length he spoke.

“Tell me why it took you so long to deliver this ring to Mrs. Biddlecombe.”

“I was keen as mustard to honor my promise. It was never my intention to delay. But I served five more years after Cawnpore. Then I was drummed out of the corps and locked up in a Singapore jail for a misunderstanding involving a gent and his purse. Took me this long to do my time and raise the sum for my passage home.”

“Very well, then,” said Holmes. “I now have all the information I require, good sir. You may go.”

Cheswick was caught off his guard by the dismissal. He managed, nevertheless, to recover his wits and pour the last of the brandy down his throat. Then he stood—crooked—and bowed to his host and to me.

“What about the ring?” he asked from the landing.

“Keep it,” said Holmes, causing me great surprise. “I shall contact you in the days to come if Mrs. Biddlecombe wishes to have it. Good night, Mr. Cheswick.”

Once the door was closed and we’d heard the man’s footfalls melt into the night, Holmes called to Mrs. Biddlecombe to come out from her place of hiding.

“Your interview took longer than I would have imagined,” she said. “Did he have the ring?”

Holmes lit a fresh pipe. “Yes, he did. And I left it in his charge. He has kept it safe for twenty-five years. Surely a few days more will do no harm.”

“I don’t know what to say, Mr. Holmes. I feel let down by you.”

Just as the lady uttered those words, the bell rang once more.

“Who can that be at this hour on such a night?” I asked.

“That will surely be Inspector Lestrade,” said Holmes. “Earlier today I invited him to come once Mr. Cheswick had departed. Mrs. Biddlecombe, Inspector Lestrade is the finest detective—so called—that Scotland Yard has to offer. I am certain he will be useful in the resolution of this case.”

Looking quite waterlogged and in foul temper, the inspector soon joined us in the sitting room. Holmes attempted to placate him with some brandy and a seat near the fire. Still, Lestrade wanted to know what the mystery was all about. My companion began sketching out the details of the letter, the ring, and the interview with Mr. Cheswick. Before he could finish, however, Mrs. Biddlecombe interrupted to make clear a point.

“I agreed to marry Ned Plunkett, but before you judge me wrongly, I must insist that we became engaged only after my husband had passed away. And, of course, we were determined to

observe all proper conventions of mourning and wait at least three years before pursuing any plans of marriage.”

“Then your husband was indeed dead, as Mr. Cheswick described, when you accepted Plunkett’s proposal?” asked Holmes.

Mrs. Biddlecombe blushed scarlet. “Of course he was. I would never have given my heart to him if not free to do so.”

“Still, you will allow that the courtship was a brief one.”

“Ned and I were acquainted from a young age in Lincolnshire,” she said with a huff. “There was a sympathy of spirit between us, but nothing base or tawdry. After Charles died, Ned declared his long unrequited love for me in a letter and asked for my hand. I agreed to his proposal, but insisted that we must keep it secret as long as I was in mourning.”

“Quite right. And when did you learn of Mr. Plunkett’s demise?”

“In September of the following year, fifty-seven. I remember because word of Ned’s death reached me on my birthday. A tragic coincidence.”

“You are quite sure of that date?”

“One does not easily forget such a horror on one’s birthday.”

“I would imagine not,” said Holmes. Then, addressing Lestrade, he continued. “Edward Plunkett died, shot through the chest by a mutineer’s ball, at Cawnpore on the sixteenth of July of fifty-seven, just as our brave boys in arms were retaking that forsaken outpost. His dying wish was that Cheswick deliver a silver peacock ring to his betrothed, this very same Lavinia Biddlecombe.”

“A touching story,” grumbled Lestrade. “But hardly worthy of dragging me out on a night such as this. You must have something more up your sleeve.”

“Indeed, I have. I summoned you here this night to arrest Mrs. Lavinia Biddlecombe for the murder of her husband, Charles, twenty-five years ago.”

“That is a lie!” she exclaimed. “I did not murder my husband. The verdict of accidental death was confirmed by the coroner’s inquest.”

“I am sure it was,” said Holmes. “And I would wager there were no witnesses to his death besides yourself.”

Reluctantly, the lady admitted there was none.

“At our first meeting, you told me your husband died while hunting otter in November of fifty-six. And yet, Mrs. Biddlecombe, your husband could not possibly have died shooting otter at that time of year. As any hunter knows, otter is only in season from April to mid-September.”

“Clearly, I misremembered the game,” she said with a stammer. “Perhaps he was stalking hind instead.”

“The species of the game is unimportant. What matters is that my suspicions were aroused by the mere mention of otter-shooting in November. It caused me to question your entire story, so I decided to start at the beginning. With your husband’s hunting accident.

“I made my way to the General Register Office in the Strand where I consulted the death indices for the year 1856. But it was the oddest thing. I could locate no record of a Charles Henry Biddlecombe among the deaths in the fourth quarter—or any other quarter—of that year.

Perplexed, I searched the indices for 1855 and 1857, even though I thought it unlikely that you would have forgotten the year of your husband's death."

"I was in shock, Mr. Holmes. You can hardly hold me at fault for this discrepancy if some doctor or clergyman neglected to register the death."

"Ah, but there was an inquest. Which means your husband's death would have surely been registered properly at the conclusion of the proceedings."

"Then how do you explain the absence of his name in the index?" she asked.

"It baffled me for some time. I confess that I smoked several pipes, brooding over the mystery, before a simple path to the solution finally occurred to me this very morning. As I breakfasted alone—my fellow lodger, Dr. Watson, was sleeping late as is his custom—I had a revelation. What if Biddlecombe actually had been hunting otter when he died, as you told me?"

"I pulled on my waterproof and hat, and dashed back to the Register Office. As I'd already consulted the years from fifty-five to fifty-seven with no result, I decided to expand my search to include the second and third quarters of 1858, when otter was in season. My persistence paid off in a trice. I discovered that Mr. Charles Henry Biddlecombe of Taunton, Somerset, died on May 13, 1858. The cause of death was recorded as an accidental gunshot wound to the chest. And, according to the index, the informant of the death was Mrs. Lavinia Biddlecombe, widow of the deceased."

"Can this be true?" asked Lestrade. "Are you certain there is no mistake in the registration date?"

"Perfectly certain," said Holmes. "Fearing such a question might arise, I dispatched a wire to St. James's Church in Taunton this morning as soon as I left the Register Office. St. James's is, of course, the oldest church in Taunton and, as such, I thought it most likely to have been Biddlecombe's parish. My instinct proved correct. The vicar's reply arrived at teatime this afternoon, confirming the date of May 13, 1858, graven into Charles Biddlecombe's headstone in the churchyard there."

Holmes let his words echo in the room for dramatic pause before continuing. "Now, Mrs. Biddlecombe, how was it possible that Ned Plunkett believed your husband dead in a hunting accident in November of 1856—and informed Feargus Cheswick of as much in the summer of 1857—when your husband did not, in fact, die until May of 1858? The explanation, of course, is that Ned Plunkett knew of your intentions to murder your husband. But something must have disrupted your plan. Illness, perhaps? An inconvenient witness? Lack of opportunity? Whatever the reasons for the delay, you were unable to communicate them to Plunkett, as he was aboard a ship bound for India in November of fifty-six. So, with no option, you left Ned to assume the murder had gone off according to its original timetable."

Lavinia Biddlcombe fixed her blazing eyes on her accuser, but uttered not a word.

"You must truly have despised your husband," said Holmes, "to have waited so patiently to shoot him dead long after Ned Plunkett was gone."

Lestrade cleared his throat to speak. “I would urge you to unburden your conscience,” he said, addressing the lady. “But I must also inform you that your words will be taken down and may be used against you.”

“My husband was an odious, miserly man,” she answered. “Even if I hang for it, I have no regrets. You may not believe that twenty-five years free from his cruelty is worth the price to be paid at the gallows, but I tell you—for me—it is a fair bargain.”

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“Your powers of deduction are without peer,” I said once the inspector had led the lady away in handcuffs.

Holmes threaded a new A-string onto his violin, and commenced to tuning the instrument—plucking and tightening—as he spoke. “I dare say, Watson, that, while fascinating, this was one of my simpler cases. It was the otters that first sparked my doubts about her. Cruel sport, that, shooting otters.” He paused to reflect. “Or, when you come to think of it, shooting men.”

A shiver ran down my spine as I considered Lavinia Biddlecombe’s singular determination. “It is a hard-hearted woman who will murder her husband and coolly bear false witness before the coroner’s inquest.”

“True enough. And yet, I detected in her bearing today emotional turmoil whenever Ned Plunkett’s name was mentioned. No more than a tinge of melancholy in her eyes, but it betrayed what I am certain was authentic sorrow and yearning for the lad she lost so long ago. Perhaps that is why she never remarried.”

“Who would have guessed that, of all the characters in this sordid tale of murder and otters, a man as outwardly vile as Cheswick would play the noblest part?”

“The poor man has led a life of misfortunes, some of his own doing and others resulting from the conditions of his low birth. Yet I have seldom witnessed such genuine devotion in one man for another. And now his health is failing. I doubt he is long for this world. My fervent hope is that he will pawn that accursed ring and use the money to find some little joy in the time he has remaining.”

“I fear he will only spend it on women and drink,” said I, all thoughts and recriminations for Holmes’s arrogance behind me, replaced by the usual warm affection and admiration I felt for him. “But let us think of pleasanter things.”

“Quite right, Watson,” said he, the A-string now in place and tuned to his satisfaction. “Shall I play something sweet, that we may forget—for a short while at least—faithful Cheswick and his troubles?”