

PART 1.

The fire crackled and the rain drummed against the windowpanes. Only a pale grey light seeped in from outside. Holmes was reclining in his easy-chair, but his eyes were sharp and bright with the glow from the fire which flickered and danced upon them like spectres of his imagination.

"We have seen cruelty before," I said, recalling his warning to steel myself for the unpleasant truth. "Dr. Grimesby Roylott springs to mind, and you yourself spoke of that man out at the Copper Beeches."

"You have provided two excellent examples alongside which the culprit in this case can readily be ranked. I do not, however, agree that they exhibited any particularly noteworthy form of cruelty."

"What term would you use to describe scheming to murder your own stepdaughters, then?"

"A calculated and unconscientious pursuit of self-interest. Cruelty, on the other hand, requires no motive."

"Very well. We have a culprit driven by motive, not conscience. Is the motive simply money?"

"On that point your opinion may differ from mine. But we have got ahead of ourselves. To uncover the motive, we must cast our minds back to the 14th of February, 1893, and the sinking of the *SS Calais Queen*."

"Ah, the ship Mr. Holgate surveyed—the one which caused him so much distress when it went under that he contemplated ending it all?"

"No, Watson. That is not the ship to which I refer. Had you bothered to examine the ship's manifest, you would have found Edward Holgate listed among the passengers."

"How can that be? Every male passenger perished, save for the very young."

"It is not a great conundrum, but it is a matter for some contemplation. In any case, with this simple knowledge you now hold the very key to the first riddle with which we were presented. The blackmailer's cipher."

"Really?"

"Indeed. Now, I should say that the cipher is simple—and long—enough to be broken by conventional methods. Each letter in the alphabet has been replaced by another, and thus the task before us is to simply undo the transposition—a process that becomes easier as the message grows longer. The experienced code-breaker has a variety of tools at his disposal. One invaluable method is the statistical analysis of the English language, which allows us to identify the most frequently occurring letter and replace it with 'e'. Another straightforward technique is to search for words consisting of the same three letters—a clear indication that the word in question may be 'the'."

"This process is how you solved it?"

"I had no need for common tools. I possessed a far superior instrument: knowledge."

"That Edward Holgate apparently died in a shipwreck? How could that be of any help?"

"Well, which shipwreck was it?"

"SS Calais Queen?"

"Good. Now keep that in mind as you work through the cipher text. Does the section reading 'DD OEFELD RSGGJ' spark any insight in your mind?"

"It does now, but I cannot imagine how I could have realized on my own that the name of some ship would fit into those specific letters amidst all the others."

"It's not 'some' ship, Watson. It's the name of the ship which carried Edward Holgate three quarters across the English Channel and sank with him aboard. What word would you have sprung for in place of 'DD'? Two-letter words made up of the same letter are not common. Would you have opted for 'HH' for 'Her Highness'? That is usually printed with periods between the initials, and would have been an unusual

reference in a letter of blackmail. 'Mm' for 'Madame,' perhaps? No, I believe 'SS' for 'Screw Steamer' fits most naturally,—and once that is settled, the puzzle is half-solved."

"I shall take your word for it."

Holmes rose from his chair and crossed to the table to fetch one of the notes he had made during the night, from which he read:

"'FOR SALE: A POEM.

"'ENTITLED GALES OF PRETENCE, THIS POEM IS SET ABOARD *SS CALAIS QUEEN*, ON WHICH A GENTLEMAN DISGUISES HIMSELF AS A LADY TO BE ALLOWED TO ENTER A LIFE BOAT. QUITE A SCANDAL! SCHEDULED FOR IMMINENT RELEASE WITHIN MY UPCOMING COLLECTION, UNLESS YOU SECURE THE PUBLISHING RIGHTS.'

"Now you know, Watson, how Edward Holgate survived the shipwreck, and why he did not want this embarrassing truth unearthed. We also learn something about the blackmailer. It is a reasonable supposition that she is a poet or writer, or someone who at least enjoys poetry, otherwise the idea of a poem for sale would seem quite far-fetched."

"You said you have her name."

"Of course. Does it not stand to reason that she was aboard the same ship—or even the same life-boat? She would have noticed that something was quite 'off,' or indeed mannish, about one of her fellow passengers. There is little point in our speculating on how she uncovered his true identity, but it is likely she made use of the ship's manifest,—just like we can do in order to find *her* identity."

"It still seems an extraordinarily difficult task, especially without conducting any research into their characters or speaking to them directly."

"Not so, Watson. Consider what we know. The blackmailer wrote her instructions for Mr. Holgate on the back of a piece of scribble-paper, the front of which is adorned with some rather esoteric sketches and what appears to be a list. Well, a list of what? Why not the poems collected in her new volume, *The Baseless Fabric of Vision*, including such works as *In the Garden of Gossamer Threads* and *Gales of Pretence*? Ah, I cannot detect that spark of recognition in your eye which would betray a familiarity with the topic. You are not as well-versed in the subject of young and promising literary talents as I am, or perhaps it is simply because you have not studied your own collected materials very thoroughly at all."

After having it pointed out to me, I read the advertisement for the new collection of poetry by one Céleste Le Blanc.

"It seems reckless of her," I said, "to still release the poem within this collection after having committed a murder and leaving behind the name of the poem as a piece of evidence against her."

"It is likely that the poem itself does not contain any names and cannot be used to blacken anyone's reputation. If she came forward to explain to whom the poem referred, that would be another story, but such an event is unlikely to happen now after the murder. You should also know that Céleste Le Blanc is merely a pseudonym. The name is not to be found within the manifest."

"Surely it is simply a matter of making an inquiry of her publisher?"

"A logical next step, indeed. Although I took the liberty of supplying her real name in my letter to Inspector Winks."

"How on earth did you do that?"

Holmes leaned back, a faint smile playing on his lips. "Come now, Watson. I shall leave the matter as an exercise for you. The answer, as so often, is in plain sight."

"Well then," said I. "I may not be able to rise to that challenge, but I must say you have done so admirably, as always. This case has been a most fascinating test of your methods."

"Pray sit, Watson. We have only come halfway, if indeed so far as that. The greatest challenge remains, for we have yet to find Edward Holgate's killer. There is much to unlink the blackmailer from the crime, yet little to link the true murderer to it. Until these threads are drawn together, the case cannot be laid to rest."