

Almost Got Him Sherlock

By Jared McDaris

[Sample]

It is the very late 19th Century. The setting is London. The scene is a back room in a seedier bar, trying to look classier than it is. There is a round table just off of CS, big enough to seat five people. Five chairs of mismatched quality surround it. USR is a small bar, typical of such settings and stories. USL are several boxes, crates, and other junk. Clearly, this is a storeroom that has been hastily remade as a backroom for tonight's proceedings. Despite this, there are small tables far SR and SL, each occupied by a trio of disreputable individuals.

BELLE enters. She is your typical, sturdy, no-nonsense barmaid, perhaps a little sturdier than in most stories, and certainly more no-nonsense. She is not particularly well made-up, and makes no apologies for it.

ALL

Belle!

BELLE

Settle down, settle down. *(to someone offstage)* Come on in; here's the place.

Colonel Sebastian MORAN follows her into the room. BELLE is brisk and businesslike, MORAN is hesitant and borderline disgusted by his environs. MORAN is dressed well enough, but his fine clothing has fallen into disrepair in recent times. He is obviously dressed to intimidate more than impress. He carries a moderate-sized case with him. He has not bothered to remove his hat. MORAN is part statue, part wolf.

BELLE

I'd say make ya'self at home, but I don't want ya urinating on the furniture, so don't.

MORAN

I dunno. A splash of color might do this place some good.

BELLE

Sit down already.

MORAN

I don't take orders from you.

BELLE

And who do you take orders from, then, Cap'n?

MORAN

Colonel.

BELLE

Oooooooh, ain't you a sight. I could tell you was military, spite o' your shabby getup.

MORAN

Thank you for your astute judgment, Missus Kettle.

BELLE

That's Belle t' you. "Belle," that's French for "beauty." And none o' your "dearies" or "dollies" or "sweethearts," hear me? I don't want any of you lot tryin' ya sweet talks on me.

MORAN

I assure you, such a thought would die a precise and horrifying death before even speculating about crossing my mind. Where're the others?

BELLE

Blowed if I know. I's just told to let you cretins in and serve ya. Don't suppose you're a famously punctual lot, are ya?

MORAN

Mm. (*MORAN sits in the chair facing the entrance*) I'll have a glass of water.

BELLE

Water? This ain't no pig trough.

MORAN

Well it's cleverly disguised as one. Water. For now. Belle. Please.

BELLE

Toby!

"TOBY" rushes in. TOBY is dressed like your typical eager-to-please urchin/newsie. TOBY is obviously a young woman dressed as a boy, but no one onstage seems to realize this.

TOBY

Oy mum, 'ow can I assist?

BELLE

Water for the gent... for him.

TOBY

Water? Gar, what's this then? Some kinda piggy trough?

MORAN

The comedy routine's over, boy. Serve me a glass of water or I'll serve you the proverbial knuckle sandwich.

BELLE

Cliché's on the menu tonight, I see. Go on, Toby.

TOBY retreats behind the bar for a glass then exits.

MORAN

How long have you known about this meeting?

BELLE

Oh I got word nearly a month ago. Had to redo this whole room. Used to be a storage pantry.

MORAN

And now it's a storage pantry disguised as a rubbish sale with aspirations of a water closet. (*BELLE does not rise to the bait*) You must have been paid quite a bit, to go through all this trouble.

BELLE

Naturally, Colonel, naturally.

MORAN

Call me Moran.

BELLE

Colonel Moran? Little close to "moron," isn't it?

MORAN

Yeah, it's one of those ironic names, like Tiny, or Belle.

BELLE

A'right, a'right, we all get it, Colonel, we don't like each other. All's I know is I'm to keep you all lubricated whilst my benefactor makes his presentation to you all.

MORAN

And who is that benefactor?

BELLE

I'm as well-informed as you, Colonel. Either he's well-bred or his money's well-bred, and one's as good as the other to me.

TOBY (*offstage*)

Right this way, Sir!

TOBY, bursting with nauseatingly helpful energy, enters with a glass of water. Behind TOBY comes Henry "HOLY" Peters, a well-dressed gentleman. He is odiously offended by his surroundings. HOLY was once confident, but is now all pretention.

TOBY places the glass of water in front of MORAN, then stands at attention next to him.

HOLY

What. A. Sty.

MORAN

Yes, we've been through that. Pull up a sow and have a seat.

HOLY

I beg your pardon, sir. Who are you?

MORAN

No on to trifle with.

HOLY

Of course. You may call me Mister Winters.

MORAN

I might, but I'd be lying. You're Henry Peters. "Holy" Peters you're sometimes called, yes? I'm afraid your proverbial reputation, much like this odiously servile imp, has preceded you into the room.

BELLE

Ooh, listen to Lord Byron and his fine sentences. Have a seat then, Henry, or Mister Peters, or... Lor', you've got two first names. (*silence*) What will you drink?

HOLY

Wine. The oldest you have.

BELLE

That'll be last Tuesday's red.

HOLY

Of course it will.

BELLE

Lucky break for you: we was just about to throw it out. Toby!

TOBY

Ay-and-I, mum!

BELLE

Last Tuesday's red for Mister Henry Peters Paul John George.

TOBY

Ring-o-ling, right a way!

TOBY scurries behind the bar and prepares a glass of red wine. HOLY stands looking at the table. He is torn between wanting to face the entrance and wanting to sit as far from MORAN as possible. MORAN is aware of his dilemma, and faces him down. HOLY eventually elects to sit with his back to the entrance. TOBY scurries over to him like a novice, places the red wine in front of him, and bows with ceremonious unctuousness.

HOLY

I believe you have the advantage, sir.

MORAN

Yes. I have.

BELLE

Ooh, aren't we so intimidating. His name's Moran. Not moron, mind ya, as ya might be inclined to suspect: that'd be rude; but Moran. Colonel something Moran.

HOLY

Sounds familiar. Do you have a reputation yourself?

MORAN

Don't we all?

BELLE

(imitating MORAN) "Don't we all?" Ain't he the mysterious one?

Silence. BELLE is cleaning glasses and other clichés. TOBY stands near the bar, arms crossed. MORAN and HOLY stare at each other. Silence. Eventually, never taking his eyes away, MORAN reaches into his jacket and produces a folded piece of paper. He puts the folded paper on the table. HOLY glances at it, then produces his own folded piece of paper and places it on the table. HOLY takes a drink, then winces visibly.

MORAN

I was drawn here by an offer of employment. You don't look like you need employment.

HOLY

Not yet. As you are no doubt aware, I was something of a confidence man. However, after being found out and summarily dragged through the streets on a pillory, I have lost my reputation. And my confidence, for that matter. I am gifted with something of a silver tongue, however, and the writer of this letter has assured me that he has found use for it elsewhere.

MORAN

Hm. I've got some unique skills myself. I wonder if this fellow's got some elaborate scheme lined up.

HOLY

(leans forward) And what's your unique skill? Obviously not diplomacy.

MORAN

Sharpshooting. I am adept at killing people.

HOLY

(leans backward) I see. *(Silence)* This mysterious benefactor, whoever he is, seems to be gathering highly skilled specialists, no doubt for some complex endeavor, something requiring both precision and subtlety.

An obnoxious, fall-over-drunken nitwit stumbles loudly into the room. John WOODLEY is odious in appearance, reeks of alcohol, and his shabby attire makes MORAN look like a king. Everyone watches as WOODLEY collapses to the floor and attempts, several times, to stand up straight. Somehow, he continuously gets in his own way until finally BELLE crosses to him and helps him into the nearest chair, right next to HOLY. BELLE then returns to her bar.

WOODLEY

Holla, folks. This here's the backroom, isn't it?

Silence. HOLY stands and crosses to sit next to MORAN.

HOLY

This room has been set aside for a private affair, sir. I'll thank you to excuse us and... evaporate.

WOODLEY

Thass old Woodley. Never wanted anywhere he goes. Tragic story of my life.

HOLY

I can certainly empathize with that, and I suspect Colonel Moran can as well, but I'm afraid—

WOODLEY

Colonel Moran? That sounds awfully familiar, did we go to university together?

MORAN

No.

WOODLEY

Aw, come now.

MORAN

No.

WOODLEY

Are you sure?

MORAN

Yes. Belle, please eject this sentient stain from the room.

HOLY

Barely sentient. "Belle?" How does a repellent creature like you get a name like "Belle?"

BELLE

Because I'll ring ya bells if ya call me 'repellent' again. (to *WOODLEY*) All right, window-dressing, let's go.

WOODLEY

Wait! Stop the wedding! I'm an invitation. I mean, *I've* an invitation.

WOODLEY produces a folded piece of paper and slams it on the table. MORAN, HOLY, and BELLE stare with open disbelief. Pause.

TOBY

Beer for the gentleman!

TOBY rushes behind the bar again to prepare a beer.

HOLY

And by what enticement have you been induced to join us this evening?

WOODLEY

... Heh?

MORAN

The letter. What's it say?

WOODLEY

What's yours say?

HOLY

What does yours say?

WOODLEY

What's yourses says...ez?

MORAN

(standing threateningly) What's in your bloody letter!?

MAN (offstage)

An opportunity.

A MAN has stepped in and is standing in the entrance. He is wearing a heavy coat, wide-brimmed hat, and several scarves, regardless of the weather. His appearance is heavily and obviously disguised. Everyone stands up. Although no one knows who he is, everyone is staring at him with a guarded, suspicious eye. Everyone except WOODLEY, who has his back to the entrance.

WOODLEY

What? What's we all looking at?

WOODLEY turns, spies the MAN, and once again tumbles to the ground. WOODLEY again goes through his routine of stumbling over himself, before finally giving up and lying on the ground. The MAN takes a single step closer and offers a hand. WOODLEY accepts it and, with extreme effort, manages to pull himself to his feet. He then collapses. Again, he uses the MAN'S hand to pull himself up, then collapses into his chair. WOODLEY twists around to eyeball the MAN.

TOBY moves with a slight stumble to WOODLEY and places a very yellow beer in front of him. WOODLEY immediately takes a drink. TOBY stands before the MAN, waiting.

MAN

Tea. Black as night.

TOBY moves cautiously back to the bar, grabs a mug, and moves to exit. TOBY reaches the MAN and waits, deferentially. The MAN nods and moves out of the way, and TOBY exits.

The MAN moves to the most upstage chair and stands by it.

MAN

Mister John Woodley, Colonel Sebastian Moran, and the recently disgraced Mister Henry "Holy" Peters. As you may have surmised, this meeting is scheduled for five participants, of which I was intended to be the final. Our penultimate associate, however, will be here presently.

TOBY reenters with a mug of black tea.

MORAN

How presently?

MAN

Presently. (*accepts the tea from TOBY*) Thank you, Irene, please join us.

HOLY

Irene?

WOODLEY

I reen where?

TOBY, IRENE, removes the hat, letting her hair fall down and revealing her for the woman she obviously is.

IRENE

(sighing defeatedly as she speaks, her former boyish enthusiasm now replaced with a bit of world-wise maturity) I had hoped to learn more about you before revealing myself. But I did manage to learn a little about our three associates beforehand.

MAN

Quite admirable. Worthy of the man himself.

HOLY

Blast! Hoodwinked by a music-hall farce.

MAN

Oh, do not berate yourself, Mister Peters. I expect a number of Shakespearean revelations this evening. Indeed, the shocking twists to be found tonight may prove downright Dickensian.

WOODLEY

Dick ends where? Who's Dick?

MAN

Really, John, you're laying it on a bit thick. Irene, please have a seat.

IRENE sits next to the MAN'S so-far-unoccupied seat, which also puts her next to WOODLEY.

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