

Sherlock Holmes & the Hungry Ghost

By Katie Magnusson

He had left his violin in his chair when he retired last night. He distinctly remembered placing it there. How could it have moved to the table?

He would have assumed the interference of Watson or Mrs. Hudson, but that was impossible as both were currently out of town. Watson was visiting his wife's relations, and Mrs. Hudson was tending to her sick sister. If either of them had returned early and unannounced, an unlikely scenario in its own right, then they might have moved the instrument but would have placed it back in its case, which was currently standing closed in the corner.

It was not Watson or Mrs. Hudson. Therefore, either he had in fact left it on the table instead of the chair, or someone else had been in the room last night. Any other person would have assumed they had misremembered. Sherlock Holmes scoured his sitting room for signs of an intruder.

The scrapbook of articles he'd begun working on a week ago was undisturbed where it lay abandoned on his desk. His chemistry table was cluttered, but accounted for. There were no footprints at the door or around the window except his own. The remains of yesterday's tea still sat on the table, the saucer covered in cigarette ends, with no trace of dirt or ash or any other sign of anyone being in the sitting room apart from himself.

He checked his bedroom and found nothing amiss. Watson's room was just as deserted as ever, a standing testament to the good doctor's single selfish act. He checked downstairs: kitchen and parlor and Mrs. Hudson's room—all empty. No one had entered 221B Baker Street last night, or if they had, they'd done it in so skilled a fashion as to leave without a trace. Such skill was not entirely unheard of, at least in rumor, but to use such talents for the sole purpose of moving a violin across a room was a preposterous idea.

Yet, if no one moved the violin, then that meant it had been on the table the whole time, and he didn't remember putting it there. That wasn't like him. Lapses in memory were to be expected every now and then. He was only human after all, despite what Watson's readers might have thought, but he had a very clear and distinct memory of putting his violin on the chair.

Were it not for this memory, he would have thought nothing of the incident, but the memory was there, and it nagged at him.

He resolved to put it from his mind until further developments, if any, occurred.

He returned to his sitting room, where the violin sat in his chair.

Holmes froze in the doorway, a slow sense of dread creeping up his spine. Someone was in the building, someone who had somehow remained undetected. It was the only explanation, but to what end? He went to the desk, retrieving his pistol and slipping it into the pocket of his dressing gown. Slowly, he made another examination of the rooms.

There was still no sign of an intruder. "There must be!" he said aloud, frustration growing. If someone had been hiding, there would have been some sort of sound or other indicator. He had looked every place that a person could hide, and he knew them all.

Had he imagined the violin on the table? His gaze reluctantly drifted to the morocco case on the corner of the mantel. A hallucination? He had relied heavily upon the cocaine bottle these last few days, the inactivity simply unbearable. Had his brain finally been damaged by the drug, as Watson so often lectured was bound to happen?

A cold pit settled in his stomach as he considered the possibility.

Irreparable damage to his mind was one of the worst fates he could imagine, but this was not the time for panic or conclusions with no basis in solid data. He would refrain from any cocaine use for the next week and see if his symptoms improved. If gaps in his memory persisted or increased... well. He would consider the implications when the need arose.

The next few days were mundane. Holmes occupied himself with a chemical synthesis, finished updating his scrapbook, played concertos by Tchaikovsky, Mendelssohn, and Paganini, and read every news publication in London. Twice.

His mind raced, an overworked engine threatening to break itself apart at any moment. He hadn't eaten all day. He couldn't. He was exhausted, but he couldn't sleep. He had to do something. Anything. Everything. By God, what he wouldn't give for a puzzle to walk through the door, for some crime to be committed! A horrible murder, a theft, blackmail, an encoded message, just give him work!

In a fit of exasperation, he pulled open his desk drawer. The case and bottle lay there, where he'd shut them away, out of sight. His hand trembled as he reached for the bottle, stopping

just as his fingers brushed the surface. He took a breath and closed the drawer. The only way to know the damage done to his mind was to resist. He had to provide a consistent, controlled environment to assess his faculties, and so he would suffer through the boredom of existence.

Holmes tossed some pillows onto the floor, sitting down with his legs tucked up underneath him. He relit his pipe and closed his eyes, hoping he could manage to calm his mind at least for a moment. Just one moment's reprieve was all he wanted...

He opened his eyes, lying on the floor. He'd fallen asleep. His body had finally rebelled and forced upon him the rest he sorely needed, much to his amused chagrin. He stood slowly, stretching his long limbs, and beheld his correspondence scattered across the room. The jackknife that usually held it in place on the mantel was gone.

He turned, scanning the room. The knife was easy to spot, embedded in the opposite wall from the fireplace. He didn't remember throwing it there.

"You're going mad."

"Who's there?" He looked around and saw no one. He was alone.

"They'll leave you—"

"Where are you?"

"—just like everyone else."

It was a woman's voice, and it seemed to come from everywhere at once. She laughed as he searched, and a tingling feeling crept across his skin as if an insect were crawling down his spine.

His head felt as if his skull was being hollowed out with a red-hot poker. His chest was tight. He couldn't breathe. "Voices that aren't there..." he wondered aloud. Could the damage to his mind be so great?

"No. I refuse to believe it," he pressed his hands to his ears as the woman laughed again, taunting, though it did nothing to dull the sound.

"I am sane! If I were not, then I would not recognize my decline! These experiences have nothing to do with the cocaine," he stalked over to the knife in the wall, yanking it out and firmly sticking it back in its proper place in the mantel, "I refuse to believe it," he said again, softer, slowly absorbing the significance of his statement. "If I am not mad, then what is going on?"

He applied his mind to the problem at hand with feverish fervor. It was almost a relief. Here was a problem he could ponder at last, but he didn't like the only possible solution.

“No man could do these things. No member of humankind at all. It is physically impossible. If I am not mad, if this is not the cocaine, and it is not the result of mortal effort, then the solution must lie in the supernatural.”

He would have preferred insanity. Surely the fact that he was even considering the supernatural was a sign of madness! The knife in the wall, thrown while he was asleep, was easily explained by the presence of another person. The voice appearing to come from everywhere at once could be some sort of sophisticated amplification spread through his quarters... while he was asleep? That didn't make sense. He'd searched the entire building earlier, and found no sign of an intruder. He was utterly alone, or he had completely missed some sign.

Could he have missed something? He paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, trying to light his pipe with frustrating lack of success. No, there was no possible way someone could have entered and performed all of the tasks necessary to create this illusion without him noticing something amiss. It had to be supernatural.

Or in his mind.

He gave up on the pipe and went downstairs to the kitchen. The very idea that he might have damaged his mind was simply untenable. This was just another puzzle. He simply had to find the proper angle from which to view it.

Holmes prepared a pot of tea and ascended the stairs back to his rooms. He felt the weight of the world settling upon him, a black depression engulfing his consciousness. The choice between madness and supernatural activity was not much of a choice at all. He could not accept either possibility, but he could not see his way to a third option either. With a heavy sigh, he sat at his table and poured, the red liquid slowly flowing into the cup.

The teapot crashed as it fell to the table. Sweat broke out across his brow. Red. The red crept across the tablecloth, a macabre stain on the white. Tentatively, he dipped the tip of his finger into his cup, and tasted it.

Blood.

Holmes stood, the chill finger of dread running down his back as he surveyed the table. He had to get help. Pride be damned, he had to contact someone with some sort of experience.

The door slammed shut behind him. He rushed over and pulled at it, but it was stuck fast.

“What are you going to do?” a woman’s voice asked. He turned to find her sitting in his basket chair, dressed simply and conservatively in grey, her dark hair firmly bundled against the back of her head. A schoolteacher, or a governess perhaps. “I can just imagine the press; ‘Famous detective seeks out spiritualist’. Or ‘221B Haunted,’” she chuckled, “Desperation does not become you, Mr. Holmes.”

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, stepping towards her.

“What I’ve always done. It’s so nice to be able to talk like this. Such a refreshing change. Of course, that’s why you’re in such a panic, isn’t it?”

He studied her a moment, taking in the hem of her sleeves and the shape of her fingers, the few lines on her face at the corners of her eyes.

Her regal bearing would have suggested a lady of wealth, were her manner of dress less plain. He could gain no information beyond these most basic of impressions, and yet she seemed so familiar. “Who are you?”

“You know, you haven’t even asked how I got in. Are you such a firm believer in ghosts, now? The supernatural?”

“There’s no other explanation for how you could materialize before me.”

She grinned, “Isn’t there? Well, no matter. As you said, if you were crazy, surely you wouldn’t realize it. Unless that was all a part of your brain fever as well. Have you ever wondered if maybe this whole realm of reality isn’t simply a hallucination? If every man is just asleep, and death is simply waking up?”

“No.”

Her brow rose, unimpressed, “No? Come now, you’re more of a philosopher than that, despite what Dr. Watson may think. He details your grand moments so well, yet understands you so little.”

“He knows me better than most.”

“And isn’t that a pity?”

“No,” Holmes was firm, “it is a marvel that he knows me even as well as he does.”

“And yet he’s abandoned you for a wife.”

“You haven’t answered my question,” he snapped.

“Because it doesn’t need to be answered,” she stood, gracefully, walking to the window to peek between the closed drapes.

He took a breath, and tried again. “Why are you here?”

“That’s a slightly more sensible question, but ultimately just as fruitless. It really doesn’t matter, does it? If I’m a figment of your imagination, or a real entity? What’s the difference? Either I am real, and you are utterly and completely powerless to do anything about it, or I am all in your mind, and you are utterly and completely powerless to do anything about it.”

She turned away from the window to face him, hands loosely clasped in front of her, a smile on her face of practiced ease and forced pleasantry. “I see your mind whirring, the gears and cogs moving as you try to think of some way to banish me,” the forced smile turned to one of genuine amusement, “dwelling on all your experiences, all the sin you ever committed, thinking back to anything that might possibly aid you in dealing with a creature of your own creation, your eternal self-torment.”

Holmes glared at her, his voice low, “Leave me alone.”

“If there are ghosts, why not the rest of the supernatural as well? Vampires? Witches? Werewolves? Demons? The Devil?” She laughed quietly at his frown, his brow furrowed in wary suspicion, “That hits a chord, I see. The one aspect of superstition you do secretly ascribe to, deep in the depths of your soul,” she began to walk towards him, slowly, with frightful nonchalance. “And why shouldn’t you? You’ve seen too much of the evil of the world not to believe in it, the horror that man does to itself every day. If man is entirely to blame, if there is no force of evil combating some abstract force of good, then what point is there? What is the meaning of it, this circle of violence and fear, this pathetic and futile life? You reach, grasping, and what is left in your hands at the end? A shadow, or worse. Misery.”

“You are merely repeating every thought that has already passed through my head. You say these things to discourage me, to shock me, but this is nothing I have not considered before, many times over.”

“In your black depression and cocaine fueled dreams, yes. It hurts, doesn’t it? Knowing it’s so close.”

His eyes unwillingly drifted to his desk.

“Sherlock—I hope you don’t mind my shocking informality, but I know you so well, after all—do you know what the real comedy of this scene is? You’re doing this to yourself.” She was close, prohibitively close, the smell of dead violets and sulphur on her skin as she leaned towards him, mere centimeters from their bodies touching, her voice quiet as a pale,

nearly skeletal finger tapped his temple, its icy cold touch making him gasp. “That’s what the puzzles are for, after all,” she whispered, gleeful light in her dead black eyes, “to keep me away.”

“Go back to Hell where you belong,” he breathed, forcing down the panic he felt, the walls that kept his mind secure from any foreign emotion at long last closing their gates. “I will not listen to your lies. You will not force me into madness. I deny you.”

She smiled. There was no humor in it. The lights of the room seemed to dim. “Madness is already upon you.”

“Not while I can still think,” Holmes tried to step away, but couldn’t move. He strained to break the invisible bonds, but in vain. The woman’s face leered even closer, more drawn and even paler than before, her skin visibly dry like old parchment. “I do not fear you,” he said. “Do what you want with me and be done with it!”

The prickling feeling began across his skin. Insects, dozens of them, emerged from nowhere as they crawled across his body, up his arms and down his back, across his chest, even over his face. He swallowed the urge to brush them away, repeating to himself over and over that they were not real, that it was an illusion of the senses brought on by this apparition.

His stomach turned at the sensation nonetheless, nausea and dizziness forcing him to his knees. “Why me?” he muttered, thinking furiously, “why are you doing this to me?”

“I’m not,” she said, her voice dry and harsh, “you are.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” he swore through clenched teeth. It was impossible to consider the options, if he had any. It was impossible to think! He was going to lose his mind, and possibly his life. His gaze returned to his desk. Slowly, staggering, he made his way across the room. “I have to think,” he said. “I have to be able... to think...”

“It won’t change anything!” the demoness hissed, “You’ll still be alone! You’ll still be cursed with your own mind, and I will still be waiting!”

“I am not alone,” Holmes said as he opened the morocco case, filling the syringe from the bottle, “I have Watson, whether he be present or not,” he surveyed his scarred left arm, “and I have my work.” The needle pricked, the plunger compressed, and the world faded out of focus. The woman’s desiccated face was smiling, angry... and patient. Then everything went black.

Holmes stirred, noonday light pouring through his sitting room window. Slowly he sat up, finding himself on the settee. Hadn't he been at his desk? Had he managed to lie down before blacking out? He couldn't remember.

Warily, he examined the table. The teapot sat perfectly on the white tablecloth, the half-filled cup beside it now cold. There was no sign of blood. With a deep sigh, Holmes shook his head and got dressed, collecting the newspaper from downstairs as he went to the kitchen to fix breakfast for himself.

He read as he forced himself to eat. Nothing of any interest in the paper, once again. Some small mention of a domestic murder, the usual petty thefts, but it seemed the police had everything well in hand for once. Watson couldn't return soon enough, Holmes mused. Even with a wife, at least he could count on the good doctor for the occasional bit of conversation.

Discarding the paper onto the table, Holmes picked up the morocco case from his desk.