

The Mysterious Case of the Hampshire Apothecary

Maddie James

It was only as I reached the front door of 221B Baker Street that I saw the shadow of my companion, looking particularly thin and worn out today, imprinted into the large sash windows that were letting the early morning sun in and flooding the front room with light. I dared not enter without knocking, for Holmes had a spontaneous nature that could often cause him to fly into a furious rage, but on this occasion, he seemed relieved of my company and ushered me in at once. The slightly nauseating sensation that filled my nostrils with the all-familiar scent of tobacco washed over me as I, thanking Holmes for his company, followed him into the front room. To my surprise, a small, straw-coloured mane of hair suddenly became visible just above a neatly arranged pile of Holmes' books in the very corner of the room, next to Holmes' prized violin, which, despite its disuse over the past few years, was still kept in its stand, purely out of sentimentality for the object.

I turned to my companion for an explanation, but he, remaining solemn as ever, simply sat me down onto the plush velvet chair facing opposite his.

"My dear Holmes, if I knew you had company, I would have called in later," said I, gesturing towards the pile of books in the corner of the room.

"No, no, Watson. I would like your take on all this, as this is our latest client, Mr William Braithwaite and he kindly is finding the address and exact location of his small apothecary shop in Hampshire," my companion replied, analysing the strange new client from afar.

I presumed this most tedious exercise had a purpose to it, but when Holmes was in this state of observation, I dared not interrupt him and instead, tried my very best to mimic Holmes, his hawk-like features taking in every aspect of what we could see of William Braithwaite's character. In the several minutes that followed this, I had deduced nothing of interest, and it was only when our client sprang up from his uncomfortable-looking position, cat-like in his reflexes and rushed over to the resting Holmes that our client finally spoke.

"Great Scott, I've only managed to find it!" Braithwaite exclaimed, pointing with his fat, sausage-like fingers to a small address that read, 27 Branmoore Lane, Southampton, Hampshire. The man had a distinct Yorkshire accent, one that my companion would have realised almost instantaneously the exact location of his origins were.

It was in this light I could see Braithwaite properly. His hair was a dull, straw-coloured shade that seemed to tickle the back of his neck like a lion's mane and gave him the look of one who had not bothered to care for his self-image anymore. His shabby overcoat drooped to his knees and his once grand top hat had lost its colour and browned slightly. Braithwaite's roughly polished shoes no longer seemed to emit the figure he once was, one with plenty of money to spare on luxuries and clothes. It appeared to me that Holmes had interpreted this too, from the sceptical look that crossed his face for half a second or perhaps more.

Holmes looked, and smiled as if satisfied with his results. "Now, if you would be so kind as to repeat your interesting tale to my good friend, Dr Watson, as any information we can deduce could be most valuable."

I nodded and sat back, waiting in earnest for Braithwaite to begin his tale. The gas-lit lamps illuminated Braithwaite's face and I could now see every freckle on his face and every stain on his top hat in minute detail.

"You see, Doctor, it is all quite a strange business from how I see it and I believe it has quite a simple answer – a group of adolescents most likely. I had visited family for an extended period of time, and I came back to find some of the medicines in their incorrect places or the bottles had been mixed up. Some had even been stolen; I predict that half of my stores have been taken and some of the ingredients are most expensive and near impossible to find. Surely, they would know I have a note of their correct places and bottles, and which ones were the harder ones to concoct, I would think, but I found it a most mysterious business, nonetheless. It is also not good for business. If some of my patients and customers knew, it would ruin my reputation as a shop! It isn't the first time I have found my shop in that state either. I believe it has happened four or five times this year. I thought it moral duty to report it, mostly through fear that it would occur again, hence why I have left a close friend of mine taking care of my shop while I came to report it."

I could already see that certain facts did not add up for Holmes, nor myself. "Undoubtedly. And I presume it is your wife-to-be who you have left in charge of your shop while you came to me?" Holmes asked, fetching his pipe which lay next to a guttering candle on the mantelpiece.

Braithwaite and I shot Holmes a look of confusion as he sat down with his pipe hanging lopsidedly out of his mouth, smiling with an air of superiority over us.

"I – I – how on earth did you deduce that?" our client spluttered, blushing to the roots of his straw-coloured hair.

"Well, the ring on your finger, it is brand new, shiny, and with barely a scratch inflicted on it, which suggests you have recently been engaged, and one would assume that with your distinct accent that you had moved to Southampton recently, perhaps to start your Apothecary business as your previous job, a Chandler, must have been terrible pay. I believe you have come from West Riding, perhaps from the newly founded district, Castleford."

"Ch-Chandler? But, it – it doesn't - HOW?"

"Droplets of wax all over your overcoat. One or two could have been entirely incidental, but eighteen? That is no coincidence, if I do say so myself."

I almost laughed with the simplicity of it as Braithwaite's face displayed the admiration I felt for my companion inside. Holmes chuckled to himself as he strolled over to the coal scuttle to start a fire. Braithwaite checked his pocket watch that had rusted and been dented many a time. I predicted it to be ten years old. Holmes could have given a much more accurate time frame.

"I must get back to Southampton now. It is a fair journey back as you can imagine, however I have more information on the names of nearby shops and those who live near my apothecary here."

Braithwaite passed Holmes a sheet of paper that had been written on in an untidy scrawl that was barely legible. Holmes skimmed through it, uninterested, before tossing it into the fire as Braithwaite left.

"Well Watson, what did you make of the man?" Holmes asked as he watched the fire swallow the paper whole.

"I'd have thought you would have been more focussed on the case he brought to you," said I.

Holmes nodded. "Indeed. However, the man who brings you the case is as important as the case that is brought to you."

"I personally found him a little over-enthusiastic."

"I understand what you mean, but I found the case most intriguing though."

I smiled. "I was more surprised that he had travelled from Southampton to see you. You are, after all, a consulting detective."

"That is possibly the most interesting aspect; he offered a healthy sum of money and yet he looks like he could not possibly afford another handkerchief."

I sat down, drained, even though it could not have been more than a quarter to ten in the morning.

"And now, my dear Doctor, I must ask of you not to speak to me for precisely forty-seven minutes."

"Certainly, Holmes."

And through the corner of my eye, I saw the slender figure of Sherlock Holmes curl up into a ball in his armchair, and close his eyes, with his pipe still hanging out of his mouth in true Holmes fashion.