

Evaluation Sample

**THE
UNIVERSE
AND
OTHER
STORIES**

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Once that has been said, enjoy!

The Maid's Dress

Urged by my friend, I shall now continue to chronicle the adventures exemplifying his exploitation of the extraordinary resources of his mind. Once again, I open the trunk containing hundreds of cases—yet unpublished, for obvious marketing reasons—involving Sherlock Holmes and his rare gifts. The one I wish to relate to you today, faithful readers, shines less by the fortune of its actors than by the quality of the intellectual puzzle it presented to Holmes and by its unusual resolution.

At that time of the case in question, Holmes and I shared a comfortable apartment at 221b, Baker Street. Following a crime shortage, we were experiencing a period of forced idleness, which, as always, had pushed Holmes into a vicious abyss. This latest inactive period had given birth to an original depravity, which, I must admit, put my nerves on trial. Sherlock Holmes had taken on the deplorable habit of letting his nails grow and grating them on a steel plate which he had ordered tailor-made for this purpose from one of his many London connections.

I do not mean to suggest that life with Holmes contained only painful moments. Far from it. I was largely compensated

when, leaving his steel plate, he would pick up his Stradivarius and brilliantly interpret any of Mozart's string quintets—cello part included—or delightfully adlib on one of my favorite airs.

One day in early June, the second to be exact, I was sitting comfortably in my favorite armchair attentively reading a scientific article where the author illustrated the pointlessness of scientific articles; a masterful demonstration I might add. I was just reaching the conclusion when Holmes took out his dreadful plate and started to play his nails on it.

The appalling squealing paralyzed me for a few moments. The binding of the book in my hands shredded to pieces and sheets billowed to the floor. This was too much! I had always had a policy of avoiding questioning Holmes on his small obsessions—I never forget that he is a boxing champion—but I took exception when the porcelain teapot inherited from my mother exploded into shards, and I attacked him:

“Holmes, you go too far!”

“What are you talking about, my dear Watson?” he retorted, surprised.

“I refer to the noise inherent to the movement of your nails on the plate you're holding on your knees.”

“The sound is disturbing you?”

“Only when I hear it.”

“Please forgive me, dear friend, I am so bored that I had somewhat forgotten your existence.”

Encouraged by the ambiance of confidence set by Holmes' tone, I started to question him on the reasons for this bizarre activity:

“That you take cocaine, I can understand, but I cannot

fathom the reason behind this unbearable noise.”

“You see, Watson, as I have already explained to you, I believe that my brain, normally so involved in the pursuit of my profession, cannot bear the inactivity caused by the irresponsible honesty of our fellow-citizens. Thus, the need for artificial stimulation,” he started to explain.

“So far, Holmes, I comprehend perfectly. You have told me, and I even used some extracts from those conversations in the chronicles I’ve written on your exploits...”

“Ah, yes! Your little stories... Frankly, Watson, you might have omitted the episodes about the cocaine! I am forced, once again, not to congratulate you.”

“However, Holmes, you must admit that the public is not interested in a hero without flaws. I thus saw myself obligated, in the interest of preserving your image, to mention some of them. You have to admit that I’ve chosen the less damaging ones.”

“Undoubtedly, Watson, undoubtedly. From the point of view of a storyteller, your argument is sound. Nevertheless, I persist in the belief that these chronicles, as you call them, should deal more specifically with my crime solving activities rather than my private life. And, above all, they should avoid dramatizing what are, primarily, intellectual problems.”

Piqued in my writer’s pride and in my sincere friendship, I grumbled somewhat and brought the conversation back to its initial subject:

“We’ve already discussed this hundreds of times, I concede you the cocaine. On the other hand, I’m still waiting for an explanation for the nails and steel.”

Holmes interlaced his fingers and brought them back

under his chin. He deliberated for a moment, eyes closed, before answering:

“For a few years now as I practice this unique trade of mine, logical deduction, forming the basis of my system, has become automated to the point of being near-reflex. I will not insult your medical knowledge by elaborating on the fact that the reflexes are located in the vertebral column, that is to say, the spine.”

“Quite, but I fail to see the connection.”

“Well, just like my brain, my spinal cord works double time when I am on a case and is reduced to near idle in periods of calm...”

“And the vibrations caused by the abominable squealing triggers its stimulation!” I exclaimed in revelation.

“Exactly, Watson. I tried several alternatives before remembering the powerful effect of nails screeching on a blackboard. After some research, the results led to the development of a personal steel alloy which maximized the vibrations...”

A noisy carriage halting in front of our door, undeniable sign of a promising affair, or of an unfortunate coincidence, ended Holmes’ confidences. He closed his eyes for a second, and, as if reading a prophecy contained in his mind, he declared:

“It’s a forty-year-old man. He weighs approximately 230 pounds and he’s married to Helena Smith (born Russell). He works for a coffee importation firm and quarreled with his employers two days ago.”

“Holmes, you must be joking!”

“Ah, yes! I almost forgot... His name is John Smith.”

“Sounds like a mystification,” I commented.

“Not at all, Watson. Don’t tell me you had not deduced all that?”

“Come on, Holmes, how could I have guessed such assertions?”

“Not guessed, deduced. You know how much I abhor suppositions.”

“Do you dare claim that you arrived at these eccentric conclusions by reason alone?”

“Completely, it’s elementary. It couldn’t be more elementary, actually.”

“At least tell me what has escaped my poor brain.”

“It’s six o’clock.”

“Holmes, there you go again! I thought you were serious. You’re going too far this time. Six o’clock! How impressive!”

I was really beside myself. Holmes’ giddiness made me lose my cool. My face must have betrayed that I did not appreciate his little joke because Holmes seemed contrite. His eyes widened and he clapped one hand to the side of his face looking quite embarrassed. I believed that he was about to cease his childishness and that we could go back to more constructive conversation.

“I owe you my deepest apologies, my dear Watson. I hope that you will not be too resentful.”

“Certainly not, consider yourself forgiven. I really thought for a moment there that you were going to insist on your absurd assertions.”

“You are mistaken about the reason for my excuses, Watson. These absurd assertions, as you so impolitely call them, are veracious. My repentance was for my absentmindedness

concerning a second clue, which I consider capital.”

“What is this hint? I warn you, Holmes, it had better be a good one.”

“This morning, while you were taking your daily walk, this letter came.”

He handed me the letter, which read as follows:

“Mr. Holmes,

I am in urgent need of your assistance. My wife (Helena, born Russell) and I are living a horrible drama. In spite of my 40 years and my 230 pounds, I will be at your apartment, at six o'clock sharp, in a noisy coach.

John Smith.”

Seeing me baffled, Holmes burst into loud laughter, a little forced and always surprising coming from this usually taciturn character. I did not hesitate to join him, and we hooted until cramps forced us to stop. However, one detail drew my attention.

“Holmes. I've read and re-read this letter but I cannot find the slightest clue from which you could have deduced his occupation and the quarrel with his employers.”

“Turn the sheet over,” Holmes told me.

I did so immediately, without results. I saw nothing unusual.

“I meant to draw your attention to the back of the sheet, Watson, the back.”

I hastened to comply with his instructions, a little embarrassed, and read, in the same commercial writing, what I have reproduced here:

“Memorandum June 1

Hon. Directors,

As a result of our dissension of yesterday, I feel compelled to submit my resignation.

John Smith.”

In the top-left corner, I noticed the company logo, the image of a coffee plant transposed over a geographical map of South America beneath which read: “Duran and Duran, coffee importers.” All became clear to me and I said, smiling:

“It was, after all, quite elementary.”

“All shout ‘childish!’ as soon as I finish exposing the chain of hints and inferences that I used.”

“Yes, but, in this case...”

“I admit it, Watson, I was kidding.”

After a short pause, he pointed out to me:

“I believe, Watson, that we have made our visitor wait for sufficiently long. We should, perhaps, let him in.”

“I had completely forgotten him,” I acknowledged.

Holmes pulled on the bell chord, which hung close to his armchair, and Mrs. Hudson appeared.

“Please show our visitor in.”