

A Rascal in Academia

By Fin J Ross

Featured in the Clan Destine Press anthology:

Who Sleuthed It?

My nostrils flared with the unmistakable whiff of vermin. I'm never wrong about such things. From the moment he darkened our portal like some creepy Nosferatu three days ago, I was suspicious. I could smell the fishiness when he eyed me with that disdainful look camouflaged in a smile. It didn't ring true. I sensed it in his tenuous pat on my back; his hesitant greeting as Mrs Hudson introduced us as her devoted companions. But Mrs Hudson didn't seem to notice it. I put it down to too much wine. She'd fallen into his embrace like a long-lost dog, her eyes closed, her body floating. Under his spell. His eyes, on the other hand, were surveying the room like a searchlight. Like a criminal scanning for a surveillance camera.

Jim Romtiary. Shifty. Up to no good. Why couldn't she see it?

They'd disappeared into the bedroom. The sounds of passion behind the closed door kept me awake for hours, as I sat outside, bereft as a jilted lover. In the morning, he'd kicked me in the side as he scurried down the hall and out the front door in a state of half undress. No accident. No apology. Deliberate.

He'd returned that evening, armed with a bottle of red, and a smarmy swagger. He'd nodded to us as someone would flie on a windowsill. Another night relegated to the passageway. Another quick Romtiary exit in the morning, though I'd got my own back and given him a nasty bite on the ankle as he passed.

Thankfully, he hadn't appeared last night and so we were content to share the sofa with Mrs Hudson in our usual late-night-movie, popcorn-crunching fashion.

But what worries me more than Romtiary himself, is my buddy's apparent lack of interest. His benign casualness. I put *that* down to too much of his abiding drug of preference. But it's time to shake him out of his boredom-induced indifference. He always becomes maudlin like this when there's nothing to set his intellect afire. I saunter into the snug, his 'consulting suite' if you will. There he reclines, blue as ever, on the chaise. Lost in a fug of self-indulgent woe, fiddling away at some mournful dirge. I glance out the window. At least two customers wait outside, kneading the paving stones with impatient feet.

'Come on Sherlock, snap out of it.'

He eyes me disinterestedly, like he can only discern me as a silhouette. I tip-toe over and jump up beside him. Give him a head butt and lick his ear. He pulls away.

'Will you quit with the fiddling. And pong, it stinks in here. You and your darn catnip. Smells stronger than usual. Can't fathom what you see in it. Has no effect on me at all. I'll open the window. Get some fresh air.'

Sherlock grunts. 'Watson. I have made a remarkable discovery. I can't believe it's taken me so long.'

'And what is that?'

'Rubbing catnip on the strings heightens the euphoria as I play. It's so...so liberating.'

Incredible. I shake my head. 'The world's foremost feline detective and you behave like some stoned sixties rock star. Mrs Hudson won't be impressed at what you've done to her violin.'

'What's there to say, Watson? I need a fix. If I don't have a case—'

'Ah, but I believe you do. You've two customers waiting and then there's this Romtiary to investigate.'

Sherlock swipes a disinterested paw at me. 'Seriously Watson, your suspicions have got the better of you. He's just another in an entourage of would-be suitors. She's lonely you know. So, he doesn't like cats. Doesn't make him a villain.'

'Sherlock, if there's one thing you've taught me, it's how to smell a rat.'

Sherlock rolls his amber eyes. 'Yes, I can smell a rat at fifty paces, yet I remain unperturbed at his presence.'

'Not when you're high on catnip you can't. Your sense of smell goes all fliff-flaff.'

'Fliff-flaff? Really?'

'Really. Now pull yourself together and I'll call in your first customer.'

Sherlock sets the violin aside, rolls onto all fours, spills off the chaise in a blue fuzzy blur and heads for the door. 'I must go pee first.'

So that's going to take a while. Always does. I swear to Bast that he spends half his time in there trying to sculpt the kitty litter into the Great Pyramid or the Venus de Milo. I mean really, it's then up to me to smooth things over again so that Mrs Hudson remains unaware she has a budding Michelangelo as a house pet. Mind you, she's no more aware of Sherlock's (and dare I say my) eminence in the realm of super-sleuthdom. We're quite content to perpetuate her delusion that we're just a squishy pair of laid-back, though occasionally mischievous, British Shorthair couch potatoes. How's she to know what we get up to when she's not around?

I beckon the first customer through the window. 'Mr Holmes will be just a moment,' I say as a perfectly-tailored specimen of chocolate-footed, coffee-muzzled fluff, complete with diamante collar pounces onto the windowsill. Birman or maybe Ragdoll. Never can tell the difference. 'And your name?'

'Irene. Irene Adler. I am holidaying temporarily at number 232, though I suspect it may become a permanent arrangement.'

'Baker Street?'

'Yes, just opposite and down a bit.'

'That accounts for my not having met you before. Number 232, Miss Regina Markwell's residence.'

'Oh, you know her?'

'Not to speak of. But I *am* acquainted with Monty. A very street-smart young tabby that Monty.'

'Indeed. He certainly gives Miss Markwell moments of hysteria. And me. He does like to chase for no apparent reason, but I have learnt, in short order, that atop the armoire in the guest bedroom is a relatively safe haven. I have been here in Baker Street a mere three days, but imagine how honoured and fortunate I am to be staying in such proximity to the great Sherlock Holmes just when I find myself in need of his acclaimed expertise.'

'Ah, here he is now.'

Sherlock minces in the door and oblivious to our guest's presence, adopts his treble-clef pose to lick his fiddlydibs. Then he spots young Miss Adler. His eyes widen like Tom Bowlers and, mid lick, he springs back to a four-footed stance and assumes his debonair genius pose. First time he's looked interested in anything for days.

'And to whom do I owe the pleasure?'

That's it. He's smitten. He advances, somewhat coyly, I note. Presses his nose to hers, then sidles around to sniff her derriere.

This is too much. 'Sherlock. Really.'

'You're new. I take it we haven't met before.'

I short-circuit the pleasantries. 'Irene Adler, temporary resident at number 232.'

'Ah. Welcome to the neighbourhood. You have come from the country I observe. Tunbridge Wells, if I am correct.'

Miss Adler looks stunned. 'Indeed, you are correct. But how can you tell?'

I do like to extol his virtues. 'There's not much the great Sherlock Holmes cannot surmise from a mere glance. He will probably now tell you it comes down to your certain smell, or some such thing which only the most astute and observant nose can detect.'

Sherlock dismisses my remark with another swipe of his paw.

'There is that. A definite air of cod liver oil about yourself. I have it on good authority that a certain Tunbridge Wells veterinarian, Dr Ronald Silverton, is one of the few remaining who still prescribes cod liver oil as a remedy for furballs.'

Irene nods, her jaw slack.

'Ah, but there's more,' Sherlock continues, 'I also know that that very same veterinarian snubs the norm of using a particular shade of shamrock green for those ear tattoos awarded to you when you become, how shall we say, not fully female anymore, and instead uses a distinctive shade of turquoise, known to those in the know as Galapagos turquoise. Observe, Watson.'

I inch closer, without invading Miss Adler's personal space, and indeed observe the unusual hue of her tattoo. 'Marvellous. Mark my words Miss Adler, our Mr Holmes does not miss a thing.'

'He, Dr Silverton that is, is evidently left-handed.'

I laugh at the notion that Sherlock can discern such information without being in the presence of the man. 'Sherlock, such an assumption is surely going too far.'

'Watson, I never assume. It is obvious to me, though evidently not to you, that Miss Adler's claws have been clipped from left to right.'

I shrug in disbelief. As does Miss Adler.

'And,' says Sherlock, 'there is one more thing.'

'Yes?' Miss Adler and I say in unison.

'Your owner, quite evidently, has not yet changed the phone number on your identification tag. 01892 is, of course, the area code for Tunbridge Wells.'

'I say,' says Miss Adler. 'You are, indeed, observant.'

Sherlock reclines smugly. 'Now, Miss Adler, is this a mere casual visitation?'

She bats her eyes at him. Seems quite overcome by his renown. 'Ah, well on the one hand, I am delighted to make your acquaintance—'

'As am I in return.' His tone ingratiating.

Ugh. The charm. Doesn't turn it on very often, but when he does...well pure schmaltz.

'But on the other, I do have a matter of some importance to impart.'

'Yes,' Sherlock replies with a tone of intrigue.

'You must be careful of that man, Romtiary. I have seen him come and go from these premises in the past few days.'

'Hmm, interesting.' Sherlock nods. Looks sideways at me. A tacit acknowledgement of my – in this case – superior judgement. 'Come, sit. Tell me more.'

Miss Adler takes position on the brocade pouffe; sits demurely. 'You see, my human, Constance Nethersole, has had some unfortunate acquaintance with this man, which accounts for why we have been compelled to move from our country manor house, albeit temporarily, to this modest neighbourhood. Miss Markwell is my human's sister, you see.'

Sherlock's eyes are hooded, his paw in swipe mode. That's how he assimilates information.

'Go on.'

'You see, my other human, Professor Bertram Nethersole, passed away quite recently and most inexplicably—'

Sherlock's head snaps up and, in a whirr, he flings himself off the chaise and up onto Mrs Hudson's desk. Miss Adler and I look at each other quizzically.

'It will be something you said,' I whisper, by way of explanation for Sherlock's sudden interruption.

He paws Mrs Hudson's Teledex and the lid flies open. Scrolls the tab down, I presume to 'N'.

'Aha!' he announces with a flick of his tail.

'Are you going to explain Sherlock?'

'I knew the name was familiar Watson. Professor Nethersole is listed right here in Mrs Hudson's contacts. Miss Adler, would I be correct in saying your Professor Nethersole was Dean of Biomedical Engineering at King's College?'

'My gosh, but you are so astute,' Miss Adler says.

Sherlock waves his paw nonchalantly. 'Elementary, my dear. One either knows things...or one doesn't.'

'But *how* do you know these things?'

'One must keep up with the times. And therein lies the answer.' Sherlock launches himself off the desk and is out the door and halfway down the hall before either I, or Miss Adler, take another breath.

'What the--?' Miss Adler says.

'Beats me, but I suspect he will return momentarily with some gem of wisdom.'

We remain silent amid the sounds of rustling paper in the living room. 'Perhaps I'll go and see.' I leave Miss Adler on her perch, her face still all a-quandary, and hot foot it in Sherlock's wake. There he is, scrummaging through the newspapers on the dining table, flicking the top dozen onto the floor. He's making an unholy mess which will turn Mrs Hudson's face to one set upon by Medusa when she arrives home.

'What on earth are you doing Sherlock? Mrs Hudson will have your guts for racquet strings.'

'It's here somewhere. I know I saw it.'

'I'm not following you. You said something about keeping up with the times.'

'No, the *Times*, I said. It was in the *Times* a fortnight or so ago.'

I'm still mystified. 'I would offer to help if I knew what you were looking for.'

'An obituary. Professor Nethersole's obituary.'

'Oh.'

'You're not making the connection are you?'

'Ah--'

'Do you not recall that our Mrs Hudson left here dressed in black on the afternoon of June 27?'

'Yes, I agree that was not her usual attire.'

'How can you be so obtuse?'

'Ah--'

'Which means she was going to his funeral, which therefore means,' Sherlock flips two more papers off the pile. 'Ah. June 23. Yes it was indeed a Monday I now recall,' he kicks three or four pages with his back paws. 'As I was saying, which means that our Mrs Hudson knew him and--'

'Was perhaps working with him?'

'Ah, now you're catching on. Here it is.' Sherlock runs his paw down the column as he reads aloud.

"Professor's death a mystery. Pioneering scientist, Professor Bertram Nethersole, 59, died suddenly at his Tunbridge Wells estate yesterday in what investigating police have deemed a suspected suicide. Professor Nethersole, Dean of Biomedical Engineering at King's College, had spent the past 15 years perfecting an artificial pancreas, which could potentially cure Type I diabetes. Known as the Panclone 12, the technology has been successfully tested on pigs and is now set to go to trial on humans. It is expected his

research will be furthered by his colleague, Prof Victoria Hudson. Prof Hudson, who is said to be shocked and extremely upset by the sudden passing of her associate and mentor, told police she thought suicide was 'highly unlikely'.

"Professor Nethersole was in high spirits and was looking forward to the imminent human trial study of Panclone 12, despite a recent setback due to interference from an unknown third party," Prof Hudson told *The Times*.'

I nod wildly in recollection of Mrs Hudson's erratic and distressed behaviour a fortnight ago. 'So Mrs Hudson thought suicide was unlikely.'

'Yes Watson.' Sherlock nods. 'And so, we must investigate. Back to my consulting suite. We can't let poor Miss Adler languish there in uncertainty.' Sherlock licks his paw and smooths out his whiskers before leaping off the table and heading for the hallway with uncharacteristic alacrity.

'Ah, Miss Adler,' he addresses her as he enters the snug, 'according to *The Times*, your male human committed suicide.'

'I don't believe that to be true. He was not depressed or melancholy,' Miss Adler pauses to scratch her ear, 'though his visitor did have him quite agitated.'

Sherlock looks at me knowingly. 'His visitor you say'.

'Why yes. Your Mr Romtiary was there when my dear Bertie died. Oh, I called him Bertie, as did my female human.'

'Indeed.' Sherlock rubs his chin. 'And how, may I ask, did he, Bertie, meet his fate?'

'Why, he fell from the drawing room balcony and cracked his head on the marble lion.'

'Aha. And where were you when this unfortunate incident occurred?'

'I was performing my morning ablutions on the front porch when Bertie crashed beside me. It gave me such a start. I believe, which is of some comfort to me, that he died instantly. His head was such a mess of blood.'

Sherlock's eyes narrow. 'So you did not actually see him falling?'

'No.'

'And did you look up? Was somebody else on the balcony? Mr Romtiary perhaps?'

'A shadow. A mere shadow was all I saw. I think I saw. I may have imagined that.'

'Mm, and Mrs Nethersole, where was she at the time?'

'Out the back in the rose garden I believe.'

'Was she aware that this Romtiary chap had called?'

'I don't believe so. He left very shortly afterwards. Kicked me and spat at me as he descended the front steps. And then he was away in his motor vehicle.'

Sounds familiar. Evidently not a cat person. 'Sherlock, a question if I may.'

'Provided it is pertinent to the case Watson.'

'How did you come to know this Romtiary's name?'

'Oh, some moments before the...accident, I heard my Bertie shout, "Romtiary what are you doing here?" I then heard raised voices, a scuffle and a thud.'

'Oh, so Romtiary had come uninvited, though evidently Bertie knew him?'

'Yes, he strode in the front door, bold as brass.'

'Aha,' Sherlock says. 'And, to your knowledge, was anything disturbed in his study?'

'Now I come to think of it, yes. I adjourned to his study – I did so love to sprawl on his desk and that was most often where I groomed myself – while Connie awaited the police, and noted that things were not in their usual place. If my memory serves me correctly, I believe Romtiary had a file of papers under his arm as he left.'

I note that Sherlock has a glint in his eye.

'Watson, come. The game is afoot.' He flings himself off the chaise.

'Where to Sherlock? Surely we're not to travel to Tunbridge Wells at this late hour.'

'No, I think we can skip that. I do not believe we will solve this mystery there.'

'Then where to?'

'The Diogenes Club my friend.'

Oh no. Not Mycroft. I do so find myself out of my depth when Sherlock and his brother pit their intellects against each other. My first acquaintance with Sherlock's corpulent older brother – he of the ridiculously expansive jowls – in that haven of intellectual anti-sociability was one I shall not forget. Why, I was almost expelled from the establishment by a gruff, yet tacit, Maine Coon, for daring to speak in that hallowed cone of silence. Sherlock had neglected to advise me that one should not make eye contact with any member present, nor utter a mew, save for in the Stranger's Room. Sherlock appears not to notice my sigh. 'You believe Mycroft can help?'

'Perhaps not Mycroft himself, though I feel sure he might offer some insight should he not digress from the matter at hand as is his wont. But he has, as you may be unaware, an acquaintance at King's College – the caretaker's Burmese no less – who I believe may be of great service to us. Now, Miss Adler, you take yourself off home and await our return. I expect to have some insight into your human's fate before the day is out.'

Miss Adler bounces off the pouffe and skips to the window. 'I bid you adieu and thank you for taking up my concerns.' She pounces to the windowsill and turns. 'Don't forget you have another customer waiting.'

Sherlock waves his paw dismissively. 'He'll have to wait. Your concerns are of greater import. Come Watson, we must be away, so as to return before Mrs Hudson arrives home.'

I wave my paw to indicate that he should, as usual, exit the window first and I follow, landing beside the still waiting customer, a black long-haired chap with a pained expression. 'Sorry,' I say to him, 'we have an important case to attend to. Your audience with Mr Holmes will have to wait.'

'Actually, it is you I have come to see. You are, I take it, Dr Watson.'

Oh, such a pleasant change for me to be the sought-after one. 'Yes, yes I am. I can be of assistance if it is an emergency only, otherwise you will need to wait.'

'It's my paw. A thorn.' He lifts his front paw and I clearly see the offending instrument of torture. I get my teeth into it and pull it free. 'Best off home now and get some soap onto that.'

'Thank you so much doctor. Already I can walk on it again.'

'Come Watson,' Sherlock hisses impatiently.

He strides off down the street and I quicken my pace to keep up. It's a good three blocks to the Diogenes Club but we cover the distance to Pall Mall in short order. Sherlock scans the street to satisfy himself we're not being observed and taps the two-three-two password on the door. Momentarily the cat flap, by way of magnetic magic, flips open and we squeeze ourselves through. A svelte Russian blue greets us in the hall and bows in deference to Sherlock, before nodding our way into Mycroft and his associates' exclusive quarters. There's no missing Mycroft sprawled in his usual fashion along the windowsill. He yawns at us distractedly; no doubt as high on catnip as was his younger brother prior to Miss Adler's visitation. He puts his paw to his lips, flops off the sill and beckons us to follow him to the Stranger's Room. I stifle a sneeze at all the shelves of musty books, as Mycroft leads us to the bow window.

'Ah, little brother, come for a lesson in the artful power of deduction?'

Sherlock snarls. 'I defer to your superior intellect. Such a shame you do nothing with it.'

Mycroft tips his head to me. 'He knows I am the sharper blade but honestly, who can be bothered with all that sneaking around and problem-solving?'

I nod in agreement.

'I note little brother, that you did not consult me in the instance of the Cornish fishmonger, but I see we arrived at the same conclusion. One cannot assume to substitute pollock for wrasse; leastways not to a discerning clowder of cats. You could have saved yourself an arduous journey had you sought my counsel in advance.'

Mycroft so loves to belittle his brother, yet Sherlock, as usual, takes it on the chin and brushes off his remark. 'My dear colleague Watson and I were in need of a change of scenery, that is all. Weren't we Watson?'

'Why yes. And a fine time we had of it.'

'So what brings you here today?' Mycroft asks with feigned interest.

'What do you know of a malefactor by the name of Romtiary?'

Mycroft shrugs. 'Can't say I have heard of him. What's his game?'

'You have no doubt heard of the untimely and somewhat suspicious death of Professor Bertram Nethersole.'

'Ah yes. Terrible affair. Wasn't suicide, I'd bet the last of my kibble on that.'

'Indeed. He was, of course, the head of our Mrs Hudson's faculty.'

'As I am aware.'

'We now believe our Mrs Hudson to be in imminent danger. This Romtiary fellow has made his presence felt at our abode of late.'

'Sounds fishy indeed. Have you observed any untoward behaviour from this chap for whom I have an immediate and suspicious dislike?'

'It appeared to me his intrusion was of an amorous bent, given that he spent all his visitation time in the bedroom,' Sherlock replies, 'yet Watson here thought it more, shall we say, opportunistic or underhanded even.'

Mycroft plucks some dried catnip from a tortoiseshell box beside him, inhales deeply, and turns his orange-eyed gaze to me. 'And you thought this why?'

'Something about the look of him. Like he was up to no good. Like he was looking for something.'

'Hmm. You are sure he remained in the bedroom for the duration?'

'Yes,' I reply. 'I was outside the door...wait a minute. He did exit the room during the night, on the second visitation. I assumed it was for a call of nature yet...yet he went to the dining room and not to the lavatory. What was he doing in the dining room?'

'Aha. The plot thickens,' Sherlock announces. 'Yet you neglected to mention this to me.'

'I did Sherlock, but you were too strung out on that stuff,' I point to Mycroft's box, 'to pay heed to my concerns.'

He ignores my remark. 'How long was he in there?'

'Afraid I can't say. I, I must have fallen asleep.'

'So he was looking for something, I deduce,' Mycroft says. 'What was he looking for do you suppose?'

'Oh gosh, I feel so stupid. I now recall Mrs Hudson's frantic search for her research papers after his departure.'

Sherlock rolls his eyes at me. 'So, he steals papers from Nethersole before presumably throwing him off the balcony and—'

I don't give Sherlock the chance to finish his train of thought. 'He doesn't get what he's looking for so he sweet-talks his way into our home to—'

'To steal the patent application for Panclone 12,' Mycroft states smugly.

Sherlock's and my shoulders droop in unison, but Sherlock is the first to ask. 'How did you know?'

'Evidently, little brother, it's not what you know but who you know. Right there in the other room is The Bard, the inexplicably beloved – given his recalcitrant nature – Devon Rex of one E.B. MacBeth.'

Mycroft awaits a flash of recognition from Sherlock. It doesn't come.

'You're not following me, are you?' Mycroft says.

Sherlock shakes his head dejectedly.

'E.B. MacBeth is just London's foremost patent attorney.'

The penny drops. Sherlock's eyes dilate. 'Pray continue.'

'Just today, in fact shortly before you arrived, The Bard had me aside in here, telling me about a visitation at his human's premises yesterday by a furtive-looking chap lodging a patent application for the Panclone 12 artificial pancreas.'

'By gosh,' Sherlock exclaims. 'One Mr Romtiary I'll wager. Claiming the invention as his own.'

Mycroft nods slowly. 'Yet the name Romtiary didn't ring a bell when you mentioned your interloper. Wait just a moment and I shall fetch The Bard.'

Mycroft slouches out the door and returns momentarily with a funny-looking chap who appears to have had an argument with a set of hair curlers. The Bard looks less than pleased at making our acquaintance. Looks at Sherlock with an air of hauteur and me with plain everyday contempt. Mycroft explains our mission to him.

'The man you saw yesterday, his name was Romtiary, yes?' Sherlock asks.

'No.' The Bard laughs scornfully. 'The great Sherlock Holmes has it wrong. The gentleman's name, I believe, was Moriarty. Professor Moriarty to be precise.'

So much for our powers of deduction.

Sherlock sighs, but not to be outsmarted he replies, 'An accomplice perhaps.'

But then...

Mycroft laughs heartily. 'Oh Sherlock, little brother. Catch on, catch on, before I beat you to the punch.'

I can almost see Sherlock's brain cogitating and then he and Mycroft doff their heads in synchronicity. Me, I'm still in the dark.

'Rom-ti-ar-y,' Sherlock pronounces the syllables, 'Moriarty!'

I still don't get it, and my face obviously shows it.

'It's an anagram Watson. An anagram.'

'Oh, of course,' I say, though I'm still not sure I get it.

'So what do we know about this Moriarty?' Sherlock asks.

'Evidently you're not abreast of the latest news this week,' Mycroft says. 'According to a report in *The Times* yesterday, one Professor – although that title is somewhat dubious given that he allegedly studied at CATS College, and yes such a place really exists – James Moriarty has been revealed as the mastermind behind a series of theft and fraud-related crimes in our fair city. According to New Scotland Yard's Inspector Lestrade, this Moriarty was the instigator of the Notting Hill jewel robbery, the London gold bullion heist, and last week's Wembley Stadium ticket fraud.'

'Ah yes,' I say, 'all those people left dangling outside that concert with dud tickets.' My comment falls on deaf ears.

'Now it appears he is assuming to take credit for a world-first medical patent which could ostensibly earn millions,' Mycroft observes.

'Not if we have anything to say about it,' Sherlock says.

'Aren't we forgetting something?' I ask.

Sherlock and Mycroft stare at me. 'And what is that?'

I swear they're like twins, saying the same thing at the same time. 'He killed, or presumably killed, Professor Nethersole, so what's to stop him killing Mrs Hudson? Though admittedly he has had at least two opportunities.'

'Perhaps he was witnessed entering or leaving our premises by someone other than Miss Adler. A human personage perhaps rendering the opportunity for murder too risky,' Sherlock offers.

'Or perhaps,' says Mycroft, 'perhaps, he is, in fact enamoured of your Mrs Hudson. He is, I believe, a man of great intellect and it is therefore not unthought of that he might seek a companion of an equal mind. And your Mrs Hudson is not to be considered an unlikely matrimonial prospect.' That's Mycroft for you. Always speaking in negatives when a straight out 'she's quite attractive' would suffice. 'The other possibility, which is borne out by reading yesterday's article further, is that he is seldom witnessed at the scene of a crime, which means—'

Sherlock interjects. 'He has others do his dirty work.'

'Precisely. So the potential risk to Mrs Hudson may not come from the man himself, but I dare say it is imminent. Moriarty's claim to the patent will not succeed once Mrs Hudson becomes privy to the application.'

I'm already turning for the door. 'Oh gosh, we must warn her.'

'Wait Watson,' Sherlock looks at the clock on the wall, 'we don't know whether she'll be on her way home, or at the university. Wednesday. It's Wednesday, which means—'

'She'll be working late. Come Sherlock.'

'Patience Watson. Mycroft, your friend, the Burmese who frequents the university—'

'Should be here any moment. Always arrives at 4.15. I could set my clock by him.'

'We may need his assistance to gain entry to the university.'

'Sure he'd be happy to assist. Ah, there's the password. Here he is now.'

Allowing for the fact that it's a brisk half-hour walk to King's College and we have little time to spare, we head off the Burmese, with the unpronounceable name of 'Hlaing' – which upon Mycroft's introductions we learn means 'Plenty' – in the foyer. In turn, we pop through the cat flap. Hlaing immediately stops and waits, unconcerned at our apparent urgency.

'Quicker to catch the bus,' he says, 'the N550 or N551 should be along any minute.'

I confess I'd never thought of that, but just as I'm about to mouth my thought, the bus appears. We wait for an impatient horde of humans to embark and disembark, carefully avoiding their brogues and lethal-looking stilettos, before we hop aboard, plopping ourselves on the lower step as the door closes.

'Why walk when you can ride,' Hlaing says rhetorically. 'Besides, it does wonders for the psyche to have so many humans fuss over you. Just ensure no-one snatches you up under the assumption that we're lost, stolen, or strayed. Humans can be so dim.'

I tell Hlaing that I don't mind a bit of fuss, some head scratching and the occasional belly-rub from strangers but Sherlock, well what can I say, Sherlock won't even raise a purr for Mrs Hudson. Her advances are entirely unrequited and yet she loves him so. Humans are mysterious.

We cover the distance in a mere 12 minutes, during which time Sherlock has picked Hlaing's brains about the university's security systems, establishing that they leave much to be desired. We follow Hlaing through a maze of ugly grey buildings, thankful that the place is now almost deserted, until we arrive at the medical engineering faculty. I have but one recollection of the place, though I saw it through the bars of my carrier the day Mrs Hudson collected me from the vet and brought me here to recover while she finished for the day. A dose of the 'flu you understand, so I was feeling poorly and barely cognisant of my surroundings. I am no more impressed this time.

'Your Mrs Hudson is in Room 334, just along here a bit,' Hlaing announces as we scamper down a nondescript corridor. 'Darn it. Her door is closed, but I can sort that.'

With that, Hlaing flings himself into the air and grasps the handle. 'Push with your head, one of you,' he instructs.

I oblige and Sherlock pushes his way past into the deceptively sizable office. To say that Mrs Hudson, sitting there wide-eyed, is surprised to see us probably goes without saying.

'Shirley, Wattie (*yes, that's what she calls us*), what on earth are you doing here? And what are you up to Hlaing, you naughty boy?'

You know, life would be much easier if Mrs Hudson – or any human for that matter – understood cat speak. We could warn her to be on the look-out for suspicious characters appearing out of nowhere with malice aforethought. I jump onto the desk and she scratches me under the chin just the way I like it. 'Oh, Wattie,' she says (adoringly I might say), 'stop drooling'. I hate to be embarrassed, and so I prop myself on the furthest corner of her desk. Nothing untoward seems to be happening here and my relief is palpable. Sherlock springs onto the desk, right on top of today's edition of *The Times*. He scrummages through a few pages, much to Mrs Hudson's disdain, until he finds the mugshot of Moriarty, grainy and indistinct though it is. He stamps on the column until Mrs Hudson finally glances down. She shoos him off and peruses the article; her hand over her mouth as she reads.

And then...

A shadow in the corridor catches my eye and Sherlock's also. We freeze as a jockey-sized man, with a ski-jump nose and onion weed hair, clad in a trench-coat and wielding a scary, glinting knife, crosses the threshold. It is manifest that this man means to inflict harm on our dear human, and I take a second to praise myself for being so astute. But there's no time for self-aggrandisement. Sherlock, I see, is all winks and blinks – his brain formulating a plan. The would-be felon's gaze is transfixed on Mrs Hudson as he inches closer. Then, from the corner of his eye, I see he spies me and then Sherlock. His face collapses into a grimace, his eyes all squinty, and then it happens. His head tilts backwards, his mouth opens and he lets fly an almighty sneeze.

Sherlock seizes the moment. 'Haha,' he laughs. 'He's allergic. Attack now boys.'

Without a second thought, I launch myself at the miscreant's chest, dig my claws in. Sherlock flies at his wrist and bites down hard, compelling him to drop the knife. Hlaing springs on his back and scratches through his coat. I tell you, I have never heard such screams – Mrs Hudson's included – and then we're being spun around as the recreant bids a hasty retreat to the corridor. We let go our holds and chase him, ignoring Mrs Hudson's pleas for us to come back. His forward progress is punctuated by occasional stops to sneeze. He exits the building and heads at speed south along Strand Lane, then veers right into Temple Place towards the river, the mighty Thames. Hlaing is the fastest of us and manages to keep up the pace, while Sherlock and I seem weighed down by our short legs and flopping girths, to say nothing of our advancing age.

Oh no! He's heading for a boat, just a rowboat mind, moored there beside The Yacht dock. How can we follow? We skid to a halt. Defeated.

'Wait and see which way he goes,' Sherlock instructs. 'If he heads across to Bankside Pier, we can cross over Waterloo Bridge and accost him on the other side. But it's more pertinent to follow him. He may well lead us to Moriarty.'

'Sounds like a plan,' I say short-breathed, 'given that I don't feel up to a swim.' I turn to see Mrs Hudson, standing there on Victoria Embankment shouting into her phone. No time to determine who she is talking to. Hopefully the police. As we set off, I hear her shriek, 'If you can't follow the rowboat, follow the cats.'

As we cross Waterloo Bridge, dodging the traffic, pedestrians, and cyclists, we observe our boatman veer past Bankside Pier and disappear under the bridge.

'He's heading to Festival Pier,' Hlaing calls out. By the time we arrive on the other side, our quarry is disembarking his watercraft.

'Stay back,' Sherlock says. 'Don't let him see us. He'll think he's given us the slip.'

We, being experts in the art of tailing a perp by ducking under parked cars and hiding behind lamp-posts, fall in step fifty metres or so behind, but Hlaing seems overcome with excitement at the chase and is at risk of betraying our pursuit. Sherlock admonishes him, yet he seems intent on skipping along a few paces ahead. We pass the concrete dogbox of Royal Festival Hall and follow jockey-man across the forecourt of an apartment complex to Sutton Walk, traversing beneath the railway line. I make the assumption that our quarry is heading to Waterloo Station, and I prepare myself for the prospect of a train ride. But my assumption is incorrect, he changes tack and heads along Mephram Street. He stops suddenly and Sherlock just manages to snag Hlaing by his collar and pull him in behind a rubbish bin.

Sherlock peeps out, his paw to his lips. 'He's heading into the Hole in the Wall,' he whispers. 'Quiet now. You two stay here. I'll case the joint, see if I can get a glimpse of Moriarty.'

I hear a siren approaching, just as Sherlock crawls, belly to ground, towards the Hole in the Wall – an uninviting drinking establishment set under an arch of Waterloo Bridge. Its reputation as the waterhole of choice for London's low-life element precedes it, though I have never entered to ascertain that for myself.

Hlaing and I watch as Sherlock slips through the grille and disappears from view. But I realise, all too soon, that our cover is blown as a police car pulls up right beside me.

'There, there, two of the missing cats,' a man calls from the car window.

Missing? We're not missing you fool. 'Quickly,' I say to Hlaing, 'follow me. We can cut through this alleyway and check out the back.' I hear footsteps approaching behind and turn. I spring onto a pile of wooden pallets to avoid being scooped into an officer's arms. 'Keep going. Round the back,' I call to Hlaing. But it's too late. He's been nabbed by a second uniform. He protests wildly. Gosh, I never knew a Burmese could holler so loud. Even a train passing overhead doesn't drown him out. I scoot around the back and jump onto a windowsill to see what I can observe. The glass is grimy. The kitchen I expect. I make my way along to another window and peer in. There, sitting at a table with his back to me in a small room is Moriarty. Even from behind I can tell it's him; his slick hair a dead give-away. Jockey-man is there before him, all a fluster, jabbering away.

'You mean to tell me you failed in your mission?' Moriarty shouts.

'I, I...yes, I failed.'

Moriarty shakes his head. 'It was so simple. Go there. Kill her. Leave without being seen. What am I to do with you?'

'I, I—'

'Did she attack you? You're covered in blood man.'

'No. 'Twasn't her. It was, oh my goodness, I was pursued by a bunch of crazy cats.'

Moriarty roars with laughter. 'Cats you say? You stupid man. I can think of 101 ways to deal with cats. You can kick them, step on them, poison them, stab them, starve them – though that might be a touch slow – throw them under a bus, a train...need I go on?'

Just then I see the door open a tad. In strides Sherlock, bold as a lion. *No, no.* 'He'll kill you,' I scream. I wave frantically but he doesn't see me; his eyes are fixed on Moriarty. I swear, sometimes his bravado is foolhardy.

Moriarty leans forward menacingly. 'And who have we here? A tiger? A lion? No, it's just a wee garden-variety cat. A domestic I believe. Where are your balls man, that such a blob of fluff should scare you so?'

Blob of fluff? How dare you malign the great Sherlock Holmes? Ah oh. He has a pistol. I didn't see that coming. He's waving it from side to side, aiming first at his gopher and then at Sherlock.

'Now, who wants to go first?'

'Drop your weapon Moriarty!' The shout comes from behind the door.' The voice is deep, authoritative, but Moriarty appears to ignore it.

Another voice. 'You shoot my cat and I'll have you put away for cruelty to animals, on top of your many other crimes.' It's Mrs Hudson!

Moriarty raises his hands in mock fear. 'Oh, so the little lady is afraid for her pussy cat.'

The scenario plays out before my eyes in slow motion, and I can do nothing to influence the outcome. The door flies open and there stands the inimitable Inspector Lestrade, his gun pointed at Moriarty's chest. Another officer and Mrs Hudson hover behind him. Realising the opportunity of the diversion, Sherlock leaps at Moriarty. A gun goes off. And then another shot. All is a blur. Through the cloud of gun smoke, I see Sherlock flopped on the table.

Motionless.

Oh, my giddy aunt. My companion is dead. My colleague is dead. My friend is dead.

My Sherlock is dead.

Moriarty is...not dead. Merely wounded and protesting wildly as Lestrade wrests the pistol from his injured arm and snaps handcuffs onto his wrists. Mrs Hudson rushes to Sherlock. Smothers him so that I can't see.

Oh tragic day. I am bereft. Too stunned to think. I have to get in there. I paw wildly at the window and an officer comes forward and opens it. I leap from the sill to the table. Mrs Hudson is sobbing. I lick wildly at Sherlock's rump, the only part of him free of Mrs Hudson's clutches. *What will I do without my buddy?*

'What will I do without my Shirley?' Mrs Hudson sobs.

I head butt her arm – as consolation, but also to remind her that I am here. She pats my head and lifts her body away from Sherlock.

And then I see it. He is breathing. He is still breathing! Blood trickles from a tiny wound on his right leg, but he is alive. He lifts his head and winks at me.

'Sherlock. Really. It's just a flesh wound. You're such a drama queen,' I say. 'A bit of patching up and some well-earned catnip and you'll be right as rain.'

He sits up and we watch as Moriarty and his now-handcuffed accomplice are hauled to the door. I notice that Moriarty is limping, just as he spits at Mrs Hudson, 'you need to do something about that darn cream cat. He bit me and it's caused a nasty infection'.

'No less than you deserve, you appalling scoundrel,' Mrs Hudson replies.

'Pooh,' Sherlock echoes at Moriarty's departing back.

It is but an hour later and Sherlock and I are happily ensconced on the chaise in our shared consulting suite. Mrs Hudson has stopped her fussing now. I swear that both of us have been patted, scratched, and combed to near Nirvana. Honestly, these humans do carry on. The veterinarian anaesthetised the wound, popped in a single stitch and bandaged Sherlock's paw in an unsightly, gaudy tape. He's floating on a

cloud of fresh catnip, while I am studiously watching the six o'clock news, as Mrs Hudson prepares a hearty dinner of tuna, rice and carrot for us.

'There, Sherlock,' I say, as the visage of our nemesis appears on the screen.

'Tell me, tell me Watson. I can't focus on the screen,' he drawls sleepily.

'It would seem that Moriarty has been charged with at least a dozen offences. Murder, attempted murder, burglary, theft, fraud, threatening police, fire-arms charges...oh, and animal cruelty. I should think he will be locked up for some considerable time.'

'Another successful case, Watson. All in a day's work, I say. I say, would you mind popping over to advise Miss Adler of my brilliance in solving her human's murder puzzle?'

'Oh but of course, though I was sure you might hanker for a further acquaintance with her.'

Sherlock has not the energy to raise a paw. 'Trivialities my dear Watson. Trivialities.'

I am smug, snug, and contented.

Sherlock is snoring.