

Elementary, My Dear Watson

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The phrase "Elementary, my dear Watson," I understand, does not actually occur in the writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes' creator. However, since it has become a byword I thought it would be fun to work it into as many forms as possible. The phrase occurs five times here but never in its supposed original form.

It was some few years following my marriage, and the constraints of my practice had so occupied my attention that my contacts with that singular personage with whom I had shared diggings on Baker Street had shrunk to a minimal level. Moreover, the domestic responsibilities incumbent upon a conscientious husband had further reduced that conviviality which Sherlock Holmes and I had formerly enjoyed, if indeed the admiring chronicling of astounding feats of deduction may be accurately characterized as conviviality. So it was with no little surprise that, upon answering the ring of our bell one morning as I sat at our breakfast board, I encountered a commissionaire bearing a missive addressed to me in the distinctive, yet evidently hurried, hand of the resourceful detective himself.

Dismissing the messenger with a shilling for his trouble, I tore open the envelope in haste and applied myself to the note therein:

‘A most curious case [it said] has come to my notice, my dear Watson, and if it would be expedient for you to appear at your former quarters, I am greatly desirous of your attentions upon the matter. I shall expect you at ten of the clock, should I not be otherwise advised. — Holmes’

‘I suppose I must go,’ I said to my wife. ‘We have not been inundated with patients this fortnight, and our neighbor can take up for me during my absence.’

‘You seem peaked of late,’ replied she. ‘I truly believe a change would serve you well. For my part, I shall be with the literary society to-day, and out of the house. You need have no concern on my account.’

Thus it was that, in short order, I found myself hailing a hansom on our street, by which I was forthwith conveyed to the residence of London’s greatest practitioner of the sleuthing arts.

I was admitted by Mrs Hudson, who found no need to direct me to Holmes’ rooms as I am well familiar with the arrangement of my own former place of abode. With a tap at the door, I entered without waiting for his answer.

I found Holmes bending over his table, where he appeared to be at work amongst the beakers and tubes that comprised his apparatus for the testing of various chemicals, a pastime of his through the years that had borne much fruit in the solution of a goodly number of mysteries. He seemed not to have noted my entrance. His haggard appearance testified to a night occupied with the opium pipe, a habit from which I had sought, without success, to dissuade him.

‘I am come, Holmes, in response to your summons.’

He looked up from his work, and immediately his visage was transformed. The spent look of the night gave way instantly to the alert, piercing gaze which always signified his unflinching pursuit of some conundrum.

‘Ah, Watson! I perceive that your practice is lagging a bit, and your wife has left your domicile for the day to attend her literary society.’

‘Quite so, Holmes, but how could you know those things?’

‘Easily enough. A well-occupied physician should not have appeared so quickly when beckoned by a mere trifler such as I, nor should a husband who, when freed from his daily occupation, must surely be pressed into service upon some household errand. That such has not befallen you is fair proof that your wife has departed leaving no further instruction. I know of her interest in the literary arts, and how upon those occasions when her society is to gather her mind is taken up with little else.’

‘You astound me, Holmes, as ever. But, I say, what is that device upon which you bend your efforts, and to what end?’

‘In process of experimentation with camphor of phosphate, I yielded to the arms of Morpheus at an unpropitious time. When I bestirred myself, the apparatus had overheated in the Bunsen flame and become clogged. I am attempting to ream it out.’

I examined the instrument, still warm to the touch. ‘You have made only slight progress, Holmes. You have reamed it only half way.’

‘All I meant to ream, my dear Watson. The piece is well beyond repair, as you observe. I have chosen to consign it to the dustbin.’ He laid the apparatus carelessly upon the table. From a sheaf of papers strewn thereupon, he drew a page and thrust it into my hand.

‘This, my dear fellow, should pique your interest.’

I surveyed the sheet, which appeared to be nothing more than a list of passengers disembarked last evening from the *Penelope*, of Charleston in South Carolina. I returned it to Holmes with a quizzical look.

‘Do you not see, Watson? Our old friend, Mr Gleason, has come back to haunt us.’

I reexamined the listing. Indeed, I had forgotten the case of the Gleason Gastric Anomaly. But there, amongst the list of other traversers of the Atlantic newly arrived upon our shores, was the name of ‘Mr and Mrs Al M. Gleason.’

‘Ah! I recall the case, now,’ said I. ‘Their child’s tutor was found slain, with a rapier thrust through his abdomen severing his digestive organ: his canal.’

‘Indeed. Alimentary, my dear Watson.’

‘And it was curious, for Gleason, being himself Headmaster of a school, had taken great pains to engage a most competent tutor for their child. It seems the child was a precocious but headstrong one, who could only be brought to heel by the severest application of pedagogical techniques. What was the child’s name? It has slipped my mind.’

‘I was never apprised of his Christian name, Watson. He was known to me only by his initial, “E.” But you are quite correct; the tutor must needs be most diligent in his efforts, for one could not casually mentor E., my dear Watson.’

‘This Mr Gleason, then. His name is not Albert? nor Allan? Surely “Al” is but a truncation of his own Christian name.’

‘To the contrary, Watson. Neither is he known by that name of our Sovereign’s beloved Consort, nor by that name of their poet, the same who indited, “Quoth the raven: ‘Nevermore.’” By that most curious of customs of those denizens of our lost colony, in particular those from the southern portion of that territory, his Christian name is, indeed, Al. And his wife’s name is—I should say her full name is Wisteria, but she, likewise, is known by a shorter appellation, which escapes me at the moment.’

I overheard some commotion in the alley alongside the house. Stepping to the window of Holmes’ sitting-room, I observed that the dustmen were at work, emptying the neighbors’ dustbins into their wagon. Their drayhorse was making slow progress along the alley.

‘I say, Holmes, the dustmen have near made an end of emptying your dustbins. You intended to discard that ruined apparatus. Let me take it down for you. Do you think I can overtake them before they have passed onward?’

‘Truly, I have no idea how long those alley men tarry, my dear Watson. I should not trouble myself about it. The instrument can go into their next collection. But, further with regard to the Gleason case, you will recall that the police at first considered E. to have murdered his tutor, in a fit of anger over the harsh application of his pedagogy. Of course, E. was insistent in his denial of any complicity.’

‘Yes, Holmes, now it is all coming clear. And then the authorities changed their assessment of the situation, and brought a charge against the child’s parents, on some trumped-up excuse; perhaps it was claimed that they, being in some dire financial straits, conspired to avoid payment for the tutor’s services. I must confess, Holmes, that I have once again forgotten the Christian names of Mr and Mrs Gleason. I fear I was preoccupied with the dustmen.’

Holmes rose and began to pace back and forth, a habit of his when pondering a matter. ‘Their names—ah! at last the shortened form of Wisteria comes back to me. Al M. and Terry, my dear Watson.’

‘Quite. But by a simple process of observation and deduction, you proved that the tutor had unwittingly dislodged the tip of his rapier in returning the weapon to its closet after a fencing lesson, and had tripped upon the threshold, thrusting himself through as he fell.’

‘So there was no murder of poor Jukes, for that was the tutor’s name. You have it all, Watson.’

‘But then, why did you summon me here to-day? Is this case to be re-opened, with the arrival of Mr and Mrs Gleason in London? Has Lestrade brought you in, through their involvement in some mystery here that he, with all his perspicacity, cannot resolve?’

Holmes threw back his head and laughed at the mention of the police detective’s name. ‘No, indeed, Watson. The good Inspector has no interest whatever in Mr and Mrs Gleason. I requested your presence simply because, of all my “adventures,” as you style them, you have never taken pains to chronicle the Gleason Gastric Anomaly. It was, after all, the only case into which I was drawn on the other side of the Atlantic. It deserves a chapter of its own.’

‘Then I shall take it up forthwith. But, Holmes, you reminded me that Gleason was Headmaster of a school. What sort of school was it?’

‘It was one that offered only the lower forms, through the sixth if I am not mistaken. It is sometimes called a grammar school. They have some other common term for it, my dear Watson, but for the life of me I cannot bring it to mind.’