

Detective Holmes *and the mystery at the Louvre...*

The moonlight splintered its way through the trees as Harry Freeman sprinted along the forest path, his eyes scanning the horizon in every direction, looking for some sign of movement. He continued to run, picking up even more speed until, all of a sudden; he stopped dead in his tracks. The path became eerily quiet, the only sound was of Mr Freeman's raspy breathes as he clutched at his chest. Then, without another movement, Mr Freeman keeled forwards and fell face down on the forest path. As Mr Freeman lay there, somewhere in the distance police sirens were wailing, trailing off towards a distant crime...

Half-an-hour later, the phone at Mr Mark Holmes' office rang.

"Hello, detective Holmes here," answered Holmes rather sleepily.

He looked at his watch. It was 2:30 in the morning.

"Yes, detective," came the reply from the other end of the line, "we have a problem."

"Oh yes," Holmes replied unenthusiastically, "and to whom am I speaking?"

"Oh, um, to Mr Drew Thurman, head of the police force here in France. Early this morning one of our undercover agents turned up dead in the Burns Forest on the edge of the city." Replied Mr Thurman.

"I'll be right there," snapped Holmes and he hung up before Mr Thurman had a chance to say anything more.

Twenty minutes later, detective Holmes had arrived at the scene of the crime to discover Mr Thurman already there.

"His name is Mr Harry Freeman, and he is, was, an undercover officer hoping to uncover a plot to rob the Louvre. We received a tip-off several months ago and when our intelligence suggested that the tip was credible we put Mr Freeman on the case." Mr Thurman explained.

Holmes looked around, surveying the scene. Holmes walked backwards and forth around the body, mumbling to himself, excluding Mr Thurman from his thoughts.

"Come up with anything Sherlock?" asked Mr Thurman irritably, obviously annoyed at not being told what Holmes was thinking.

"I would appreciate," replied Holmes softly, "that you do not refer to me as Sherlock."

Being called Sherlock had always irritated Holmes. Just because he shared the same surname and profession as a classic detective of literature seemed to make people think they could call him Sherlock.

Holmes cleared his throat before continuing "as a matter of fact I have come up with a few theories. The victim was running at full speed from the West when he stopped very suddenly, probably due to a stitch. It was then that he was killed."

"How on earth did you assume that?" asked Mr Thurman, bemused at Holmes' deductions.

"Quite simple really, the footsteps of our victim approach from the West, and are a fair distance apart, that is, right up until here," explained Holmes, pointing to a spot on the ground where the footsteps were beside one another, "I can deduce that the victim got a stitch because when his footsteps shorten he begins to limp. The footprints from his right shoe are quite a size deeper than those of his left, indicating that he was placing more pressure on his right foot. This combined with the sudden nature of his stop, leads me to assume he got a stitch just before he died," concluded Holmes, looking pleased at the dumbfounded expression on Mr Thurman's face.

"Okay then," stated Mr Thurman, "but how did he die?"

"That is more difficult to answer," replied Holmes pensively, "we can assume that he did not die of a stitch though. Allow me to re-examine the body," continued Holmes as he stepped towards Mr Freeman's body.

Holmes began examining Mr Freeman's back. He stood up satisfied.

"That should do it," said Holmes firmly.

"Um, Detective Holmes," inquired Mr Thurman tentatively, "shouldn't you be looking at his front as well?"

"No." replied Holmes sharply.

"Uh, okay, but shouldn't you really be looking at all the evid..." argued Mr Thurman before he was cut off abruptly by Holmes.

"Mr Freeman was running at full speed from the West, running from someone or something. There are no roads close by, so the attacker must have been following him. The footprints on the ground do not show Mr Freeman turning around and therefore it is obvious," stated Holmes impatiently, obviously getting frustrated by his companion's stupidity, "that he was attacked from behind."

"Does that mean that you've found out what killed him?" asked Mr Thurman again.

"Not what, but how," said Holmes, pulling back Mr Freeman's shirt to reveal two puncture marks on the right side of his back about half-way up. Mr Thurman walked around Holmes, circling the body.

"But what could have made those?" inquired Mr Thurman, intrigue now overpowering his desire to stop asking stupid questions.

"I'm not sure yet" concluded Holmes, looking around. His eyes fell on a pronged fork lying in the grass. He walked over and inspected the weapon.

"Could that be the murder weapon?" asked Mr Thurman.

"Possibly," stated Holmes rather unsure.

"I have a suspect in mind already," stated Holmes, after looking at the prong for a moment, "the pronged fork is the signature weapon of the wanted local criminal, Wesley Thorn. Thorn is wanted for two previous murders where a pronged fork was used as the murder weapon."

"Do you know where we can find Thorn?" asked Mr Thurman.

"Unfortunately, I do not, but I will put my resources into finding him," said Holmes, "is there anything else I need to know?"

"Yes," replied Mr Thurman, bracing himself, "the Louvre was broken into last night."

The weight of Mr Thurman's words hit Holmes hard.

"What did they take?" inquired Holmes suspiciously.

"Nothing," replied Mr Thurman, "that's what we can't understand. Why go to so much trouble to kill off an undercover cop and break into the Louvre, and yet not take anything?"

"Interesting," pondered Holmes, "could you please let me examine the Louvre?"

"Uh, yeah, I suppose so, but I don't know what you'll find." Replied Mr Thurman.

Holmes shrugged; he was not going to let this oaf run the investigation by himself. He indicated towards the path's exit.

Mr Thurman stood there, bemused as to why Holmes had not been thrilled to find the murder weapon.

"I'll meet you there," stated Holmes as he walked silently away, still pondering what he had seen and heard.

Forty minutes later, Holmes arrived at the entrance to the Louvre, Mr Thurman was already there.

"What kept you?" asked Mr Thurman inquisitively.

"I had to stop to pick up something, but I'm ready now. One question though, where is the murder site in relation to here?" Holmes asked.

"Directly to the East. Now, this way please," insisted Mr Thurman.

Mr Thurman led Holmes down the stairs into the main foyer. Holmes surveyed the scene.

"Satisfied?" asked Mr Thurman.

"Very," replied Holmes, "may we continue?"

"Of course," said Mr Thurman, and he led Holmes down another corridor to the left.

They arrived at an open room. Holmes recognized it at once.

"This is where the Mona Lisa is kept, am I right?" stated Holmes with almost certainty.

"That is correct." Mr Thurman replied, and he pointed to it in the centre of the room.

"This is where the alarms went off, I personally checked this room this morning and every painting that should be here is here," stated Mr Thurman.

"Are you absolutely sure?" inquired Holmes.

Mr Thurman nodded. Holmes walked up and down the rows of paintings. He stopped at the Mona Lisa. He glanced up and down the painting, checking every detail. Mr Thurman looked concerned.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Nothing," Holmes replied, "everything seems to be in order."

Holmes made one final lap of the room and stopped at the cheapest of all the paintings. He examined the case and found a silicon gel type substance stuck to the front corner of the glass. Holmes noticed Mr Thurman staring so he moved along, examining each painting in turn once more.

"Thankyou," stated Holmes when he had finished, "and I must ask where will you be the next two nights should I need to contact you?"

"Tonight I will be at the office, tomorrow I will not be in town," replied Mr Thurman.

Holmes nodded and walked silently out the door, back along the corridor and out of the Louvre into the bright sunlight.

Later that evening, Holmes walked around to Mr Thurman's office and knocked on the door.

"Come in," came Mr Thurman's call from inside.

"I'm sorry, I can't stay long I just need to ask you a question," stated Holmes purposefully.

Mr Thurman nodded but Holmes' attention had been grabbed and was directed elsewhere. Holmes was examining Mr Thurman's office. He had quite an array of artefacts and jewellery. His bench to the left of the room contained a glass cabinet with a small, silver, sparkling necklace wrapped around a dark plastic neck. Holmes read the plaque with great interest.

The Brazilian Speckled Band

Holmes looked up, clearly impressed.

"You had a question, Detective Holmes?" asked Mr Thurman.

"Yes," answered Holmes, "how many men were involved in your undercover operation?"

"Just myself, Mr Freeman and Mr Ted Perrott, who is the intelligence operator I was telling you about," replied Mr Thurman.

"Where is he now?" inquired Holmes, his eyes squinting.

"I don't know probably in his office," replied Mr Thurman.

"Thankyou again," finished Holmes and he left without another word.

Holmes went to sleep that night with thoughts flowing through his mind but by the time he had awoken the following morning he had finalised his plan.

Holmes rang the local police sergeant, Mr Derrick Jones, and asked him to meet him at Thurman's office at 5pm that evening.

Five o'clock drew nearer and Holmes set out for Mr Thurman's office. Mr Jones was already waiting when he arrived.

"What are we doing here?" asked Mr Jones in his gruff tone.

"I'll ask you to be quiet, Mr Jones, for we have events in motion to catch a murderer," whispered Holmes.

"Come sit with me in Mr Thurman's office," Holmes instructed Mr Jones as the two of them entered Mr Thurman's office and sat in the corner.

"Now we must wait," Holmes said softly, "for I hope it will not be too long."

Sure enough, they were only there about twenty minutes when the door to Mr Thurman's office crept open.

"Now!" bellowed Holmes as they both drew their weapons and Mr Jones threw on the light.

"Freeze! Don't move" barked Mr Jones.

There, standing in the doorway was Mr Thurman and another man, whom Holmes presumed was Mr Ted Perrott.

"What in the blazes," exclaimed Mr Perrott.

"Sorry old chums, but this is where it ends," exclaimed Holmes triumphantly.

"You are under arrest for the murder of Mr Harry Freeman and for the robbery of the Louvre." Stated Mr Jones, clearly also very pleased with himself.

"But how? How? How did you know?" stammered Mr Thurman in a mixture of anger and surprise.

All Holmes could do was smirk, as he watched Mr Jones lead Mr Thurman and Mr Perrott downstairs to the waiting police car. Meanwhile Holmes paced Mr Thurman's office.

A few minutes later, Mr Jones returned to the office.

"That's it then," said Mr Jones.

"Not quite," interrupted Holmes, "for I think the curators at the Louvre will be wanting their paintings back."

"But I didn't think any paintings were stolen," inquired a puzzled Mr Jones.

"Oh yes, they were, and they're downstairs in the black van in the carpark," replied Holmes, "they were replaced with fakes."

"But how did you know all that?" asked Mr Jones, still puzzled.

"Take a seat, Mr Jones for this story is truly bizarre," began Holmes, "the story began two nights ago when the Louvre was broken into, by Mr Thurman, Mr Perrott and Mr Freeman. As Mr Thurman is the head of law enforcement in France he has all the security codes to the alarms. They opened each glass cabinet with a glass cutter and replaced the real paintings with simple fakes, then sealed the glass cases with a clear silicon gel. They started on the cheapest painting because it was the frame that would attract the least attention. I, therefore, inspected it and saw exactly what I thought I might, that the cabinet had been opened and re-sealed. I then inspected all the others and found that the quality of the seal improved with each attempt, right up to the Mona Lisa, which was indistinguishable from a proper seal."

"But how did you know they would flee tonight?" asked Mr Jones.

"The answer to that lies in this room. You see, for whatever reason, Mr Freeman got cold feet and fled, probably hoping to cut a deal with the police, he was chased away from the Louvre and into the forest where he was killed. I found two puncture marks in his back. These didn't make sense until I saw what was in Mr Thurman's cabinet over there."

Mr Jones walked over to the cabinet, clearly puzzled, "a necklace?" he inquired.

"No," replied Holmes, "the Brazilian Speckled Band is not a necklace but a snake, and a snake that has unusual properties. For one, it is extremely cold blooded and goes rigid at night, making it easy to manipulate into a necklace, or a dart, without fear of being bitten. It is also extremely poisonous. Mr Thurman used it as a dart to kill Mr Freeman, explaining the puncture marks in his back. It also explains why Mr Freeman had stitch-like symptoms in his chest," continued Holmes.

"This snake was the last piece of evidence remaining that could tie Mr Thurman to the crime. I had already asked him when he would be in town, and he had told me that he would be away today, I then deduced that he must not want me at his office today. It was also apparent that he must leave at night so that he could take the snake with him and not be in danger of being bitten. As I was in his office with him last night, the only time for him to leave was tonight. I also noticed

when I arrived, that the only vehicle in the area was a black van parked in the back carpark," concluded Holmes.

"What about the pronged fork?" asked Mr Jones.

"It was a plant, by Mr Thurman himself in an attempt to pin the crime on a notorious criminal, but when I examined the back of the victim I noticed that Mr Thurman had wandered behind me and dropped something. At the time I dismissed it until I put my head up and saw the weapon, which I knew wasn't there moments before. That, combined with the fact the prongs were about a centimetre wider than the puncture marks in Mr Freeman's back made the matter simpler."

"I'm impressed," admitted Mr Jones, "but how did you know Mr Perrott was involved?"

"Mr Thurman mentioned that they had a tip-off that the Louvre would be robbed. He made that tip-off himself. The Louvre is almost impenetrable, and no intelligence agency would take the threat seriously. The only way that the French intelligence would agree to an undercover officer to investigate a plot they weren't even sure existed was if the intelligence agent responsible was in on the plan. As it turned out, my initial feelings in this matter were correct."

"What are you going to do now?" asked Mr Jones.

"I'll leave the prosecution to you, Mr Jones, right now, I'm going to get some sleep," replied Holmes and he walked out of the office, leaving Mr Jones with an expression of utter amazement.