

The Case Of The Limehouse Golem

by Chris Wright

The family's connection to the famous Sherlock Holmes is something we usually keep under wraps, so to speak. The facts, involving as they do the most unspeakable crimes, do not reflect well on Uncle Perry, and his involvement, quite frankly did little to accelerate the eventual capture of the infernal perpetrators.

The story begins with the Limehouse docks, that it ends on the Southend pier is testament to the inefficiency and boneheadedness of the constabulary, in particular Police Inspector Lestrade, whose inability to entertain any except the most fatuous advice led him to team up with Uncle Perry and devote extraordinary amounts of police time to the increasingly obsessive solving of a crossword puzzle in which Uncle Perry had convinced him, Moriarty was leaving clues. It is at this point that we should hand over to Uncle Peregrine Percival Oatenshaw. I can no longer trust myself to write impartially of this blemish on the family's good reputation...

March 13th 1897

I have by some stroke of good fortune, come across a daguerreotype depicting a woman whose countenance is strangely familiar, the piercing eyes and aquiline features remind me of someone...damned if I know who... The Times today featured another article on the so called Limehouse Golem, the monster has dispatched another poor soul to an end they can scarcely have deserved. The body was found, as were the others, in a state of evisceration, the insertion of a length of copper piping sideways in the mouth producing an unnatural leer, stretching like a jack o'lantern from ear to ear. Ghastly business. I wonder what Holmes would make of it?

Only one clue remaining in today's crossword — damned if I know the answer! 'Light of my life, James? (4, 1, 7)

March 14th 1897

Splitting headache today, don't mind admitting I may have had one over the eight last night. Mrs. Miggins gin surprise certainly struck the right spot. I do wish Holmes was here, this accursed Limehouse Golem has struck again, Lestrade was here at the crack of dawn this morning, brandishing the 'News', for all his bluster, the poor fellow hasn't a clue.

Speaking of which 'Giant Domesticated Citrus (9, 5)'...

March 15th 1897

An early morning stroll in Regents Park, to clear my head, the first faint shoots of green are breaking out on the elm, a leisurely promenade with only the crossword for company. I wondered where Holmes had got to, his sudden disappearances were becoming more frequent and to my chagrin, never explained.

Armory half time anag. (8)?

Moriarty! The damned impudence!

Breaking into a trot, I made good time across the park and it was only 10 o'clock when I reached Baker Street once more.

"There's been a lady asking for you, sir" said the page-boy as I stumbled breathlessly into the hall. "I showed her up to your chambers."

I slipped the boy a sixpence and climbed the stairs. Upon entering the chambers, the first thing that struck me was a foul stench reminiscent of burning dishclothes, I deduced that our visitor was a char and that she had been caught in a downpour.

The figure ensconced in my favourite armchair was bone dry and puffing contentedly on a Meerschaum, exquisitely carved and if my eye did not deceive me strangely familiar. The long thin fingers suggested an academic bent and I reluctantly abandoned my initial theory as to her occupation.

"My dear Professor Meerschaum..." I began.

She looked up from the crossword, a flicker of irritation crossing her handsome features. "My name's not Meerschaum and unless I'm very much mistaken, yours is not Holmes?"

"Peregrine Percival Oatenshaw, at your service" I blustered, unsettled by her curt rejoinder.

She glanced at me, a pair of sharp grey eyes fixed me to the spot. Blowing a perfect smoke ring, she watched it carefully as its wreathes gradually coiled and faded. Finally she spoke: "Of the Stomach, intestinal, ten letters beginning with 'a'."

"Alimentary!" I cried, "Holmes, you're back!"

"Indeed I am back Watson, and not before time!"

He sprang from the chair, tearing the dress from his perfectly toned frame.

"If I'm not mistaken, the games afoot! Come on there is no time to lose. We will need fresh provisions, perhaps one of Mrs. Miggins' Pork Pies. We're off to the docks!"

Irrked as I was by his casual failure to even remember my name, I was startled to see that he had taken his disguise so far as to sport a garter belt and brassiere. Holmes was always extraordinarily thorough in his preparation, if not in his appreciation of my companionship.

"I say, Holmes!" I began, eager to test my new theory on the great man.

I picked up the paper, discarded by Holmes, running my eye across the clues he had filled in...Jack O'Lantern, Limehouse Golem, Moriarty....

"Never mind that Watson" Holmes interrupted, "Get yourself across to Marylebone post haste and see Lestrade, tell him to meet me at Butlers Wharf at precisely thirteen minutes past three o'clock!"

Suddenly downcast, I sat down, Holmes had solved all of the clues bar one. The theory I had taken three days to construct had taken the detective less than five minutes. I gazed at the one remaining clue.

Peter on top of the world ? (8, 4) — Southend Pier!

Could it be possible that the great man had missed the most vital clue of all? I resolved to keep this to myself. In truth, the years of being the butt of Holmes' tiresome practical jokes and constant, grating failure to remember my name had become irksome and I yearned to show him my true mettle.

It was with a fresh spring in my step that I set out towards Paddinton, there to meet with Inspector Lestrade.

I reached the Police station by way of Marylebone road in less than an hour, and announced myself to the desk sergeant, rubbing my hands in gleeful anticipation. If I could convince Lestrade of the merit of my findings, then we could apprehend the villain and perhaps even spare some unsuspecting soul from an excruciating end.

"Thank you Mr. Oates, if you'll just take a seat, the inspector will be with you shortly."

"eh? The name's Oatenshaw, Peregrine Percival Oatenshaw"

"We have no Inspector Oatenshaw sir?"

"No, the name is Oatenshaw" I replied testily.

"I'm sorry Mr. Oates, sir, I thought you said Inspector Lestrade..."

"No!" I shouted "The name is Oatenshaw, I want to see Inspector Lestrade..."

The constable looked at me, one large hand scratching his head, pushing his cap to one side, giving him the appearance of a music hall turn. Eventually he opened his mouth, closed it, then with a look of sly cunning, leaned forward across the desk.

"Now Mr. Oates, there's no need to get excited sir, we'll soon find your Inspector Oatenshaw." Turning away from me, he appeared to touch his forehead with his index finger, making some curious gesture to somebody I could not see, deep inside the police station.

"Good grief man! Can't you understand plain english?" I yelled, poking a finger deep into his serge clad back "My name is Oatenshaw, I have come here to see Inspector Lestrade!"

I straightened up and suddenly found my arms gripped by two white coated orderlies whose presence I had not previously been aware of. I found myself being dragged at speed along the corridors, my feet unable to keep up, the toes of my shoes scraping along the floor, my spats snagging on every unseen obstacle. My impatience began to get the better of me and I started to kick up a fearful din.

“Lestrade!” I screamed, “Call off these idiots immediately!”

The sound of a robust iron door being opened, and I suddenly found myself weightless, hurtling through space into a darkening void. As suddenly as I had begun to analyse the situation, I was brought to a shocking halt by what I later deduced to be the police station wall. As I sank towards the floor, I heard the sound of a heavy bolt being drawn to and with that I must have lost consciousness.

I was woken by a bright light shining into my eyes. Blinking owlshly, I raised a hand to ward off any further intrusions upon my dignity and was startled to hear the voice of Inspector Lestrade, as if from a considerable distance.

“Well I’ll be blowed, Oatenshaw — what in the name of god has brought you to this pretty pass?”

“Thank heavens!” I mumbled, my lip thick from the impact with the wall, “Inspector Lestrade!”

“You poor old chap” he replied jovially “Wait till Holmes finds out about this!”

My heart sank at the prospect of Holmes' supercilious and condescending manner, the relentless ribbing I would suffer, occasioned by this latest downturn in my fortunes. I could see him now, in my minds eye, murmuring reproachfully in Latin, a raised

eyebrow and the hint of a cruel smile playing across his saturnine features. I groaned.

"My dear fellow," responded Lestrade, "Are you quite sure you're alright — why don't you come along with me and we'll sort this out in no time at all..."

Several hours later, I was sitting in front of a roaring coal fire in Lestrade's quarters nursing a cup of the finest Darjeeling, a tea I find preferable to almost any other between the hours of three o'clock and four thirty — save for the possible exception of a Lapsang Souchong or even an Earl Grey. I was able to demonstrate to him the crossword puzzle, ending triumphantly in the answer "Southend Pier"

"But don't y'see man!" I exclaimed, "Moriarty is letting us know the location of these heinous crimes in advance — there's absolutely no time to lose..."

Lestrade looked pensive for a second. His back to the fire, he rubbed his head and spoke.

"Do you mean.." he said "That Moriarty is inventing that damn puzzle in the News?"

"Precisely" I responded, helping myself to a slice of Mrs. Madison's splendid fruit cake, "it's quite clear that Moriarty has taken over the Evening News crossword, with the express intention of making a monkey of the forces of law and order!"

"Well it's a damn difficult puzzle" Lestrade replied after a few seconds thought.

"For a man of my highly developed deductive powers..." I began.

"Five across, yesterday's edition — don't mind admitting, got the better of me!" he continued happily, seemingly oblivious to the import of my revelation.

I became dimly aware of a peculiar smell, and I dare say if my wits had been about me I would have acted rather sooner than I did. I wondered for a moment how Holmes would have responded to Lestrade's extraordinary stupidity.

"It is devilishly cunning" I continued, taking a sip of the Darjeeling and closing my eyes in order to concentrate "...only a man of considerable and specialized knowledge would have been able to decipher his infernal mission. The fact of the matter is that the sophistry brought to bear upon this apparently innocent puzzle has turned it from a harmless pastime into a potentially lethal...Great Scott!"

Lestrade was staggering about the hearth, flames leaping up the tails of his coat — jumping to my feet I thrashed inexpertly at him with the rolled up newspaper, to little avail, succeeding only in fanning the flames to the point that the newspaper combusted. Hurling the damn thing into a corner I seized the teapot and poured the contents into Lestrade's collar. The flames died down and Lestrade sank exhausted into the armchair, a raised finger pointing feebly to the corner where the blaze had now spread to the newly papered walls. Calmly I rang the bell for Mrs. Madison and sank with some relief onto the ottoman. In a crisis, a calm head and decisive action are called for. The housekeeper would surely know what to do.

Later, as we stood outside the smoking ruin that only hours previously had been a fully functional Police Station, I turned to Lestrade, who, wrapped in a tartan blanket, looked for all the world like a romany gypsy. I passed him my flask, filled that very morning by Mrs. Miggin with a rather superior imported Armagnac and

remarked "Well Lestrade, it was deuced fortunate that I happened along, what?"

His response, as he was led away by the nurse was indistinct, but I could have sworn I picked out the word "Imbecile". Shrugging it off as the untrammelled babbling of a mind gone haywire I reflected for a moment on the catastrophic impact that such a shock could have on even the most finely honed intelligence. Shaking my head sorrowfully, I made my way back towards Baker Street, determined not to let this minor setback deflect me from the job in hand.

After pausing for a restorative brandy at the Turks Head in Marylebone High Street, I found myself ascending the stairs at Baker Street somewhat later than I had anticipated — the page boy had long since departed for bed. On opening the door, the sight that awaited me left me reeling in shock. The place was in tatters, contents scattered willy-nilly, furniture upended. I rushed to the telephone and called the operator. The line was dead, and remembering Holmes stern instruction to have Lestrade meet him at Butlers Wharf I was plunged into a blue funk. It had all gone horribly wrong and it was my fault. Holmes, hopelessly outnumbered, was probably being held captive in some ghastly dungeon while Moriarty went about his infernal business. The room seemed to reel about me and I staggered to the chair and sat down, my head in my hands.

I have no idea how long I sat there, hours, days what did it matter? My doleful countenance stared back at me from the mirror over the hearth. How long had it been since a smile cracked that haggard visage? Rubbing my hand across my cheek I was startled to find a rough beard scratching my tender fingers. Examining myself anew, I was encouraged to note an air of some dignity had attached itself to me in a quite inexplicable manner. I pulled a face, swept the hair back across my brow, there was no doubt. The beard lent me an air of magisterial authority. Excitedly I rushed to the cabinet and pulled

out a selection of inks, razors and brushes; working the lather to a froth, I softened the hair on my top lip and applied the razor, leaving a small square of moustache directly beneath the nose. The hair I swept left to right across my forehead, applied ink to the eyebrows and stared back at myself, I raised my right arm as if in salute. Wild eyed and with ink smudged across my cheek I resembled nobody more than the music hall comedian, Charles Chaplin. The air of authority had been nothing more than wishful thinking. I sank feebly onto the linen basket, lowered my head and wept.

I awoke to find Mrs. Murgatroyd, busying herself with breakfast. Tottering into the drawing room I found a table laid for one, a bowl of steaming porridge, piping hot Kippers and if I'm not mistaken, a splendid pot of Assam tea.

"By Jove! Mrs. Murgatroyd that's a sight for sore eyes!"

The portly housekeeper turned, screamed and dropped the teapot, "Mr. Oatenshaw! Whatever 'ave you done to yerself?"

"Why Mrs. Murgatroyd, nothing that a plate of your estimable kippers won't cure!"

"But... you look a sight sir!"

"Yes well, that's as maybe Mrs. Murgatroyd..."

"What were you thinking of, that silly moustache, and blimey what 'ave they done to yer eyebrows, I've never seen such a show — wait till I fetch Maisy!"

"That's quite enough thank you very much, Mrs. Murgatroyd"

"Was it fancy dress Mr. Oatenshaw? My word!, wait till I tell Bert..."

"Mrs. Murgatroyd!" I snapped, "You will not tell Bert, Maisy, Uncle Tom Cobbley or anyone else for that matter — I'm engaged in a most important investigation and I'll thank you to keep your opinions to yourself in future."

"Whatever you say Mr. Oatenshaw sir!" she bustled down the passageway and I heard whispering and ill concealed giggles from the stairs. A few seconds later Maisy knocked at the door.

"Yes, Maisy, what is it?" I said crossly, tucking the napkin into my shirt collar and reaching for the cream.

Speechless with mirth, Maisy was doubled up in the doorway, hands clutching her sides, face scarlet with the effort. Grimly I ignored her and poured the cream distractedly over my plate of kippers. The sight was too much for Maisy, who collapsed breathless to the floor, pointing a shaking finger in my general direction. It seemed I was a figure of fun to everyone these days, not just Holmes and Lestrade but half the domestic staff in London were apparently queuing up to enjoy a good laugh at my expense. I'd show them. Hurling my napkin to the floor, I strode past the helpless maid and descended the stairs.

Outside in the street, the sun shone and I began to feel better about myself. I hailed a passing cab and eyed the cabby suspiciously as I gave directions to Butlers Wharf, but he was sour faced and irascible, not a glimmer of mirth crossed his features and reassured I climbed into the cab and settled back to read the News.

"Limehouse Golem strikes again!" I read. With mounting horror I read of a chase in the area surrounding Butlers Wharf. Police had been called to a disturbance involving a woman of ill repute and a stevedore. In the confusion, the doxy had vanished and it was not until the stevedore had been subdued that the police noticed the blood, dripping from a pair of legs, swinging gently in the Thameside breeze. Following the legs, the police had discovered a

fresh atrocity, the torso was suspended from a dockside crane. The head was nowhere to be found. It seemed the police were now looking for a woman with a thick European accent and a blood soaked wig.

In despair, I alighted at Butlers Wharf and made my way down to the dockside. The bloodstains were still fresh on the quay and looking up I could see the chain where the poor devil must have been suspended, high over the Thames. What kind of a monster were we looking for? I was certain this was Moriarty's doing, but where the devil was Holmes?

Walking back to the bridge, the sound of a violin rent the morning air, As I entered the subway I saw a young woman, sawing away at the instrument, playing a tune that was oddly familiar. I groped in my pocket for a florin, and prepared to issue a stern lecture to the waif. As I came abreast of the girl I made to toss the florin into her violin case but was startled to find my wrist caught in a vicelike grip before I could release the coin. In thickly accented tones, the figure spoke "Mr. Oatenshaw at last. It is my pleasure..."

My blood ran cold and I saw a vision of myself, grinning ear to ear, hoisted high above the Thames, my blood thundered in my ears and I must have staggered. The next thing I heard was high pitched giggles before a moist linen pad was pressed across my mouth, the fumes invading my breath and I fainted clean away.

I was awoken by a sharp pain, there was salt water, lapping at my face. I was lying on a strip of sodden sand, a curious seagull pecking at my head. I shooed the creature away and looked around me. The crepuscular gloom yielded little detail, but I appeared to be surrounded by water, lights glimmering who knows how far away to my left hinted at some human settlement, but of my captor there was no sign. I got to my feet and set off towards the lights, the water slopping over the top of my shoes and as the minutes passed, rising

steadily up my legs. I surmised that the tide was rising and that I would drown if I did not reach civilisation soon. I picked up my pace and half swimming, half walking, eventually made dry land. Shaking a shrimp from my sodden breeches, I made my way to the high street, determined to find a police station.

It seemed there was some kind of carnival going on. Soon, I found myself in the thick of a merry throng, a marching band and a gang of tumblers, lascars by the look of them. Girls on horseback exposed alarming expanses of thigh. My attention was drawn hither and thither and when a painted hussy presented me with a glass of amber fluid I felt that refusal would be churlish and knocked it back with gusto. Several hours later I found myself dancing the light fantastic, the roar of the crowd, the sawdust and the lights blending into one another as I leaped and twirled. I felt larger than life and appreciated for once. My new friends made me feel at ease and as I eagerly accepted another glass of the mysterious amber nectar, I resolved to leave the city and stay with the circus. The warmth of these people compared to the froidure of life in Baker Street made me realise there were alternatives and exciting ones at that.

When I awoke, I was quite alone in a deserted field, a horse nuzzling at my ear. Of the circus there was no trace. Unsteadily I got to my feet, a blinding headache making it difficult to focus. Gazing down I saw two feet clad in monstrous shoes surmounted by a vividly checked ensemble that appeared to have been made for a giant. Yellow braces held up the trousers, whose circumference could easily have encircled my waist twice and the tails of the coat appeared to drag along the ground several yards behind me. Upon my head, a miniscule bowler completed the outfit. I groaned and the horse snickered and cantered away.

I reached Baker Street that evening at ten o'clock. To my great surprise, Holmes was sitting smoking a pipe in his favourite chair,

and I rushed into the room, my outsized shoes causing me to trip and fall, “Holmes!” I exclaimed from the floor.

“Ah. Oatenshaw, whatever kept you?” Holmes enquired, one eyebrow raised, a cup of tea poised inches from his lips.

“I’ve had the very devil of a day” I began, struggling to regain my composure.

“I should say you have” replied Holmes “if I’m not mistaken, that costume you are wearing belongs to the travelling circus run by one Franklyn Smart. His principal act if my memory serves me correctly is a trapeze artist — Ellie Monterey?”

My spirits sank to my oversized boots — another voice spoke up, I had not seen Lestrade, warming his breeches by the fire.

“No, I think you’ll find, Holmes, it was the tumbler, Ollie Mantar...”

“Eh! My dear chap, I think not...it was the....

“Never mind the bloody circus” I roared “What happened to the Limehouse Golem?”

For once Holmes looked startled. I had had enough, standing there in Baker Street dressed as a clown, I wanted an explanation and wanted it fast.

Holmes languidly raised a hand, “The case of the Limehouse Golem” he began.

I sank exhausted into my chair and poured myself a cup of Mrs. Murgatroyd’s excellent Lapsang Souchong. Helping myself to a portion of fig cake I snuggled down into the chair. The room was warm and I was tired. As Holmes mellifluous and self congratulatory

tones outlined the capture of the Limehouse Golem I realised that the outcome really didn't matter. What mattered was here, in Baker Street, clown shoes or not, I was home and amongst friends. My head felt heavy and I rested my chin on my chest. Soon I was fast asleep. The last thing I recall was the sound of a violin playing an oddly familiar tune.

