

Nigel Armitage – The Late Cuckoo

The boy in buttons entered with a telegram.

“Good heavens!” I cried. “It is from Hector Fisher: a cousin to my late wife. ‘At wits’ end with this dreadful affair. Can you come down?’ What can this mean, Holmes?”

“Where does your Mr. Fisher live?”

“Near the coast, at Southsea.”

“If he is your relative, of course we must go.”

Thus it fell out that on a bright Sunday morning we found ourselves in a first-class carriage, en route to Southsea, in the county of Hampshire. After two hours we arrived, and the cab from the station deposited us outside a narrow townhouse. Hector Fisher himself answered our knock. He was a man nearly my own age, clad in a simple frock-coat over charcoal trousers.

“James!” said he. “Thank God you have come. And you must be Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Glad to know you, sir.”

A discord of chimes and strikes rang out from a doorway which stood open in the passage.

“You are a collector?” asked Holmes, as we put our heads into the small room. Every wall was filled with clocks, save for where a single window overlooked the street.

“Not I,” said Fisher. “They came with the house. Come into the dining-room: there is a cold luncheon. I suppose that James here has told you all about me?”

“Not one thing,” said Holmes. “So I know only that you are a draper, a member of the Southsea Cycling Club, and that you habitually cycle to your workplace – which, I perceive, faces south.”

Fisher stared at my friend as a child gazes at a conjuror.

“This is almost supernatural,” said he, “and surpasses anything I have heard about you.”

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“Mere trifles,” said Holmes, though I could see that the compliment had pleased him. “The smear of oil on the inside of your left trouser-leg tells a clear story; and I would hazard that those trousers are too smart for leisure pursuits. You have an inch and three-quarters of draper’s tape hanging from your coat pocket. Your membership of the Southsea Cycling Club – I will not insult you by telling how I know that, as you will understand next time you chance to pass a looking glass. When I see that the sleeves of your coat are faded, from cuffs almost to elbows, I immediately perceive the action of the sun. Since we know you are a draper, it is not difficult to surmise that the exposure occurs when you reach into the window. Doubtless you do so frequently, and certainly we have had a fine summer this year, but even so a very strong sunlight would be required to fade the dye from your sleeves; ergo the window faces south—”

“And the display window is found at the front of the shop...” said Mr. Fisher. “I see how naturally one inference leads to another, but I am sure I could not do it given a month of Sundays. I feel sure you will be able to solve this dreadful business. It is murder, Mr Holmes. Extraordinary murder.”

“Splendid!” said Sherlock Holmes. “I congrat—that is to say, you will forgive me, if as a specialist in crime I am refreshed by the extraordinary.”

“It began,” said Hector Fisher, “six months ago when I took on this house. The agents wanted 80 guineas a year, but when I saw the view from the master bedroom, and learned that to be included in the deal was a butler, whose wages were met by a trust fund set up by the owner, I settled there and then.”

“And who is the owner?” asked Sherlock Holmes. “Did the house-agents give his name?”

“They did not,” said Fisher, “but I saw it on the lease. I remember it for it was unusual. It was Timberton Smythe.”

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“Great Scott!” I cried. “You do not mean Timberton Smythe, the notorious Knightsbridge jeweller? Who blew up the young Duke of Westermere with an exploding musical box?”

“I have no idea,” said Fisher. “But what an extraordinary story: how comes it that I have never heard of him?”

“The family wished the affair hushed up,” said Holmes.

“Do you think this Mr. Smythe has been paying me secret visits?”

“Hardly that,” said Holmes, “he died last year – in proximity with four official witnesses, a length of hemp and a trapdoor. Tell us more of this butler.”

“Usborne by name,” said Fisher. “A retired ship’s steward.”

Holmes glanced round. “He is not here today, I take it?” said he. “Since you yourself let us in.”

“Not today or any other,” said Fisher.

“What! You mean—?”

“Exactly, Mr Holmes. A week ago, in the back sitting-room. He staggered in, collapsed, and lay stretched on his back with his hands to his throat. I loosed his collar, rushed outside and sent a passer-by for a doctor. When I returned, poor Usborne lay dead, with a look on his face which I shall not soon forget.

“At the inquest it came out that Usborne had died of asphyxiation – no obvious cause. Dr. Forbes had tested the deceased’s blood and, to the general amazement, announced that he’d found clear indications of a toxic plant extract. He could not specify, but gave it the generic name ‘curare’.”

“Tell me,” said Sherlock Holmes. “Were you and Usborne alone in the house at the time?”

“We were. Usborne had just been going through his night-time routine of locking up. I recall I’d heard him slide the bolts on the front door; though of

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course I paid it no special heed. We were running late, for Cook had turned her ankle that afternoon, and dinner was delayed.”

“Since you are still at liberty,” said Holmes, “I deduce that the jury gave a verdict of Wilful Murder by Person or Persons Unknown?”

“Exactly so,” said Fisher. “Luckily the doctor said that he couldn’t accurately determine when the poison had been administered. The cook had been in the house until two hours before Usborne died, and my lodger had been there that morning.”

“Fortunate for you,” said Holmes. “How comes it that Usborne locked the doors, if the lodger was out?”

“It is Gunnerton – a young doctor in general practice. He sends a message when he knows he will work late, and prefers to overnight above his practice. There is a box-room, I believe, where he has set up a camp-bed.”

“You have told us that Usborne locked the front door,” said Holmes. “In what state were the back door, and the downstairs windows?”

“Shut and locked, Mr Holmes. When Dr. Forbes came in a constable came with him, and he specifically went round and checked.”

“Excellent! Now here is a key point: did Usborne go out at all, or answer the door to anyone, in the hour or so before he died?”

“I am sure that he did not.”

“Hum! I know something of the South American poisons, and we may say that they would act within an hour at the most once introduced to the blood.”

“But surely,” said I, “that means that Usborne was poisoned by someone in the house?”

“Precisely so,” said Holmes. “All the pieces of the puzzle must lie here. We just have to find them, and to fit them together. The cook lives out, I take it?”

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“Yes. She comes in at seven, and we dine at eight thirty. Last Sunday, as I have said, she was late. In fact we dined at half past nine.”

“Why did you go to bed late, as you have implied, just because dinner was late?”

“That is my fault,” said Fisher. “It is my custom after dinner to read the day’s paper before I retire. I am a predictable creature, and always take an hour over it. Ten o’clock chimes as I head up to bed. Usborne said nothing but waited up, like the good fellow that he was.”

“When did the cook leave?”

“She let herself out twenty minutes after dinner was served, as usual.”

“Do you know the exact time of Usborne’s death?” asked Sherlock Holmes.

“I do, because of the clocks. I remember they started to chime eleven just as I heard him lock the front door.”

“And how long after was it that he came in here?”

“Four or five minutes.”

Holmes rubbed his hands. “It is a pretty little problem,” said he. “Is Dr. Gunnerton at home?”

“You have just missed him. He enjoys a long walk on a Sunday afternoon.”

“But last Sunday, he was at work?” said Holmes.

“He has an arrangement with his partner that each works alternate Sundays. Last week was Gunnerton’s turn.”

“That explains it. What say you to a stroll, Watson? Maybe we shall meet the good doctor. I will just look round the house first, if I may.”

I was content to remain with Hector Fisher, while Holmes explored, for we had much to exchange in the way of family news. All too soon Holmes rejoined us and we donned our coats. As we were about to leave, came a rap at the front door.

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“Perhaps that is Gunnerton,” I suggested.

“Tush, Watson,” said Holmes. “He would have a key.”

Inspector Weeks was the caller. He was a short and suspicious-looking man, in a slightly too-large greatcoat and a somewhat quaint peaked cap. He looked hard at Fisher, and I could tell that an arrest warrant was in his mind, if it was not actually in his pocket. He seemed neither pleased nor impressed to meet the famous London detective.

“I just dropped by, Mr. Fisher,” said he, “to let you know that we at the Yard still take a keen interest in the case. You won’t mind if I come in?”

“So he is a Yard detective,” said Holmes, as we moved away, leaving Fisher behind us. “I have not heard of him.”

We walked south, and soon the Solent stretched before us: the flat calm formed a strong contrast to the turbulent waters which swirled around my poor cousin by marriage.

“How does it strike you, Watson?” asked Sherlock Holmes. “Was Usborne murdered by someone inside the house?”

“I know no ill of Dr. Gunnerton,” said I, “but I confess that when I hear of exotic poison my thoughts turn more readily to a doctor than to a draper – or even a cook. And yet he was not in the house during that day. And I can see no motive for this crime, whoever may be responsible.”

We had paused in the lee of the memorial to the gallant officers and men of HMS Shannon. I turned my back for a moment to the cold, unyielding granite and looked inland for Fisher’s bedroom window, but could not see it.

“Fisher told us that the clocks were there when he moved in,” said Holmes. “What does that suggest to you, Watson?”

“That they were once the property of Timberton Smythe,” said I. “But what danger can there be in a room filled with a dozen clocks?”

“Seventeen clocks, Watson. The danger is that the spirit of Timberton Smythe may be active in their timing and in their movement.”

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“Come, Holmes. Murder by ghost may play well in the music-halls, but I am sure that you do not believe in it.”

“Perhaps I do not. But you will admit that butler did not kill himself. The source of the poison would have been found by now, were that the case. I am intrigued by the clock room, Watson, because I, at least, appreciate the significance of the cook’s sprained ankle. On which point, there is a tram, and I tire of walking.”

Returned to Mr. Fisher’s, we found that Inspector Weeks had departed. Dr. Gunnerton was still out, but we learned that he had returned briefly to collect his medical instrument bag. Apparently he had met a patient’s mother while walking, and must attend. At this intelligence my suspicions flared up. Did Gunnerton wish to avoid meeting Holmes, who Fisher would surely have mentioned was a visitor?

The dinner hour came and went, with still no sign of the doctor. Holmes interrogated the cook, but said that he learned nothing of value. As the evening wore on, I grew more impatient to meet Dr. Gunnerton; the only player in this drama who we had not yet seen.

Eleven had just struck when we heard a key in the front door. We heard a man kick off his boots, and a thump which I conjectured was a medical bag being dropped. Gunnerton joined us two minutes later. He still wore light gloves and a silk scarf, but stood in his stockinged feet. He was as tall Holmes, and his open and honest countenance caused me a spasm of guilt that I had suspected him of involvement in Osborne’s death.

“That’s odd,” said he, before introductions could be made. “My arm tingles.”

As he spoke a slight tremor ran through his body, and his whole right arm grew rigid. His head tilted to one side and stayed there.

“Holmes!” I cried. “It is the beginnings of paralysis.”

Gunnerton took a step, or rather a stagger, back.

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“My God,” he screamed. “Is it the same—”

These were the last words he spoke. At my instruction, Holmes and Fisher ran him to the dining-room and laid him on the table, where I applied every means of artificial respiration, but all without avail.

“It is over,” said I, at last. Gunnerton’s face was set in a hideous distortion; a sad caricature of the jolly young man who had come in just ten minutes earlier.

Holmes stood thoughtfully in a corner of the room, with his chin in his hand. “I see that he is wearing gloves,” said he. “Tell me, Fisher, did your butler also wear gloves?”

“He did. White ones. But what has that to do with this?”

Holmes did not reply, but I saw excitement flash in his eyes.

We soon notified Inspector Weeks, who whistled when he saw the corpse. Had it not been for Holmes and my presence, I believe he would have snapped the handcuffs on Fisher then and there.

As it was, we were able to explain that Gunnerton had died shortly after coming in, and that none of us had been alone with him. With obvious reluctance, Weeks left, to return in the morning. Two constables came to collect the corpse soon after. I noticed that someone – I suspected Holmes – had removed its gloves, which were nowhere to be seen.

Cruel fate decreed that the double room to which Holmes and I were shown was at the front on the first floor; thus right above the clocks. It was long before sleep found me, as I lay with my eyes shut and listened to their dread ticking.

Holmes was not at breakfast, next morning, and I alone watched Fisher wheel his bicycle through from the back yard, and set off for work.

“Flown the coop, has he?” asked Inspector Weeks, when he called soon afterwards.

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“Say nothing rash, Inspector, I beg of you,” said Sherlock Holmes, who now joined me on the step. “If you will call here this evening, at ten thirty, I venture to say that I can put all the facts of this matter before you, and place the guilty party into your hands.”

“Very well, Mr Holmes,” said the inspector, after a minute’s thought. “Ten thirty it is, then. Sharp, mind, and on your head be it.”

The day dragged intolerably, and I could not concentrate on any of the novels which Fisher possessed. I went along to the dockyard in the afternoon, to admire the warships. Holmes went out to pay a visit unconnected with this case, to a retired colonel of his acquaintance who lived nearby.

Fisher returned at seven o’clock. Over dinner, Holmes shared an amusing story, which he had got from his colonel-friend, about one of the forts on Portsdown Hill, but his listeners were too anxious to appreciate it.

At last ten thirty arrived; heralded by various unmusical flourishes from the clocks. These conjoined with a knock at the door, and soon Hector Fisher led Inspector Weeks into the back sitting-room.

“What do you make of these murders, Inspector?” asked Holmes, the moment our visitor sat down.

The policeman scratched his chin and focused his gaze on the ceiling.

“We’ve no hard evidence to point us to the guilty man, Mr Holmes,” said he, “but I think we may soon make an arrest, and then we’ll see what a jury will make of it. Anyway, I shall go for a confession. You’d be surprised how a villain will crack up once he’s seen the inside of a police cell for a few hours.”

Poor Fisher groaned and put his head in his hands.

“Well, it is one way to approach the case,” said Holmes. “Personally, I should recommend a long walk upon the sea front.”

“It is hardly a joking matter, Mr. Holmes.”

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“Very well. If you would have me be more specific, I draw to your notice the significance of the time of death of each victim. Usborne died at about five minutes after eleven o’clock; Dr. Gunnerton at exactly eight minutes past.”

“Coincidence,” said the inspector.

“The coincidence if there is one,” said Holmes, “is that Gunnerton chanced to come home at that time. An hour after the household’s usual bed-time.”

“What of that, Mr. Holmes? A man may come home late once in a while, I suppose.”

“Then here is another coincidence for you: both dead men wore gloves.”

“Come now, Mr. Holmes. You are speaking in riddles.”

“Do you know whose house this is, Inspector?”

“Why, it is Mr. Fisher’s.”

“When I was out this afternoon I called at the house-agents. This house is part of the estate of the late Timberton Smythe, of ill memory.”

Inspector Weeks’ eyes widened, though he said nothing.

“Aha! It is a quarter to the hour,” said Sherlock Holmes, as the chimes of those clocks which marked the quarters reached us. “I suggest, gentlemen, that we adjourn to the Clock Room. If you will excuse me for a moment, there is something to fetch.”

Soon we all four stood in the small front sitting-room. Holmes, to our puzzlement, had brought in the doctor’s bag. He set it on the table, opened it and rummaged inside for a few moments, but took nothing out.

“Tell me, Dr. Watson,” said he; “if I pricked the end of my finger, what would be the visible result?”

“A small drop of blood would appear,” said I.

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“And if I first put on a glove, and pricked my finger through it? Would the blood still show on my finger when I removed the glove?”

“Most likely it would show on the inside of the glove, not on your finger.”

Holmes took one of Gunnerton’s gloves from his pocket. “I make you a gift of this, Inspector Weeks,” said he. “You will see a tiny tear at the tip of the forefinger. Here is my magnifying lens. And if you turn the glove inside out, I have no doubt a small bloodstain will coincide with the tear.”

“Good heavens!” said Fisher. “I begin to see what you are hinting at, Mr. Holmes. But if you think the trap is in this room, how did Gunnerton come to be poisoned?”

“My conclusion,” said Holmes, “is that he came in to draw down the blind. It was night: he knew there was no butler. He had a doctor’s neat and orderly mind. He would have seen the blind up as he arrived at the house. We know that two minutes elapsed between his opening the front door and joining us in the sitting-room.”

“Then the poisoned thorn, or whatever it is, is on the blind?” said Inspector Weeks. He went slowly to the window.

“If that were so, Inspector,” said Holmes, “Usborne would have been poisoned a long time ago. Wherever the poison is, it cannot strike through any commonplace activity. Winding the clocks or turning out the gas will not do it.”

“I give it up,” said Weeks. “Where is the poison?”

“I have no idea. But you see why it must be in here?”

“Wait!” I cried. “It must be in here, because time is critical to it. The reason it has not previously killed in the six months you have lived here, Hector, is because last Sunday was the first time anyone stayed up past ten o’clock.”

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Holmes clapped his hands. “Bravo, Watson. Death enters this room at eleven o’clock, and at no other time. It is one minute to eleven, now, gentlemen. I must ask you to keep perfectly still.”

We did as he said, and I believe that we may have held our breath. The clocks began to strike. They did not keep the same time, and so began at different moments. Some merely struck eleven times; others accompanied the hour with little melodies and jingles. At one point there was a loud click and all eyes turned to the tall clock in the corner. I am sure that three of us at least expected the long wooden door to swing open and some devilish thing – we knew not what – to leap out.

Eventually the last bell fell silent. Weeks laughed. I felt deeply for Holmes, whose careful reasoning had for once clearly been entirely in error.

“Time’s up, Mr. Holmes,” said the inspector. “This has been a fine parlour-game, and you almost had me going, for a moment. Mr. Fisher, it is late now, but if you will step along to Victoria Road police station, at nine tomorrow morning, we will go into this matter further.”

I have said that the room fell silent, but there was one continuing noise. Not a chime, but an odd repetitive sound like faint cooing.

“Why, it is a cuckoo,” said Fisher. “Look, there. It has obviously jammed.”

I saw the clock: an ornate Bavarian affair, with a fairly small dial, above which were two doors which stood open. Evidently a small carved cuckoo was supposed to pop out on the hour. Its dim shape could just be seen.

Inspector Weeks, who was nearest, reached a long finger towards it; intending no doubt to reach in and see if he could wiggle the bird loose.

“Don’t move!” shouted Holmes. “Stand still for your life!”

He grabbed a pair of forceps from the late doctor’s bag, reached quickly into the clock and after a twist of his hand wrenched the little wooden bird from its nest.

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“Let me introduce you,” said he, “to the prime mover in these murderous attacks!”

Hector Fisher stood dumbfounded, while Inspector Weeks sank into the armchair which stood hard by.

“But what is it?” asked the inspector, when he had mopped his brow. “Answer me that, Mr. Holmes.”

Holmes held the wooden bird up to a lamp. “It is Cuculus canorus,” said he. “As we may fairly call it, the late cuckoo.” The clock’s little doors snapped shut. “Clearly they are set to close after a minute or two,” said Holmes. “Probably the mechanism halts at 11 a.m., too – when of course no one ever is here.”

“I must go,” said the inspector, “and write this extraordinary case up. Mr Holmes, I thank you, sir. I should be proud to work with you again. I leave you, Mr Fisher, with a sincere apology for having doubted you. Goodnight.”

The door slammed behind him. Fisher took the forceps and fell to studying the instrument of destruction. I leaned closer, and could just discern the gleam of a needle. It protruded from the beak, and was liberally coated with a dark though translucent paste.

Sherlock Holmes smiled and pointed to the still ticking cuckoo clock. “Come, Watson,” said he. “Let us pack our bags. If my memory of Bradshaw serves, the last train for Waterloo departs at a quarter to twelve.”