

The Costume Party Murder

A stand-alone tale from
The Adventures of Watts and Sherlock

By Katie Magnusson

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Sherlock Holmes lay dead, blood from his head pooling on the hardwood floor. The Sherlock beside me glanced at the police detective who'd called us in. "I must admit, I'm surprised."

Detective Carson was puzzled. "By the murder?"

"No, the costume. He kept the deerstalker, but did without the stereotypical Inverness, a choice of which I personally approve." He knelt down next to me as I examined the body. "I presume cause of death is that wound in the back of his head?"

I nodded, "Someone hit him with something blunt, very hard."

He glanced up at Detective Carson, "What do we know about him?"

"Jeremiah Peabody, made a fortune through investments and stocks, fifty years old, no family. History aficionado."

"That much is obvious," Sherlock stood and gestured around the grand parlour, a perfect replica of an early twentieth century sitting room, "And he was apparently fond of costume parties."

"Every Halloween, invites a small group of business associates and personal acquaintances. Sometimes sets up a 'murder mystery' game for the guests to solve. This year..."

"Indeed. No prints, no weapon to be found?"

"No weapon, prints of every guest are going to be everywhere. Security footage is useless, seeing as how the power went out an hour before the body was found."

A thunderclap shook the windows. It had been pouring all day, the storm growing in intensity as the evening turned to night. A fourth of the City had lost power, and it hadn't been repaired yet. Dynamo Corporation, controlling power for the majority of the City, was still scrambling to figure out what had gone wrong. As it was Halloween, people had taken it pretty well, using their phones and computers for light, or even buying candles.

The late Mr. Peabody had gone with candles, even some antique oil lamps, and their light cast an eerie flicker across his corpse, our shadows crawling up the walls. Sherlock smiled, an odd sort of humor on his face. He loved the prospect of solving a murder by candlelight.

"I would like to interview the guests and staff."

The guests were gathered in the dining room. It was a bit brighter than the parlor, lit by a large candelabra on the table and candles along the windowsills and sideboards.

"You've already given me your statements," Detective Carson said to them, "but I'd like you to repeat them for these gentlemen and answer any questions they may ask."

"Why?" a young woman in a crimson dress and fangs asked.

Sherlock grinned. "It is very difficult to solve a murder without questioning potential witnesses, Miss -?"

"Rose."

“Miss Rose. And I always prefer to rely on my own impressions rather than those of the police. No offence, Detective.”

Carson shrugged, “None taken.”

“Who found the body?”

“I did,” a tall, older man in a khaki ‘big game hunter’ outfit said. The costume was somewhat ruined (or strangely enhanced) by the chrome plated cybernetic left eye and hand. He unconsciously smoothed his yellow mustache, “We’d just finished eating and he’d left to prepare the night’s entertainment. When it took longer than we thought it should, I went to look for him.”

“How long did it take?”

“Twenty-five minutes. He typically has his little mysteries set up in ten or less.”

“And did anyone else leave the room?”

“I was cleaning up in the kitchen,” a woman in a simple black dress with a white apron over it mentioned from her spot in the corner.

“That’s Mrs. Snow, the housekeeper. She’s the only staff on duty tonight,” Carson clarified.

Mrs. Snow nodded. “I’ve done these parties enough times that it’s no trouble. Just takes a while to clean up afterwards.”

“Frankenstein left after Jerry did,” a woman in a blue ball gown and diamond tiara gestured to a man dressed as the monster. He had the musculature, but was a little too short to pull it off.

“And when I got back, the Colonel and Rosie weren’t around,” he protested.

“Let me start at the beginning,” Sherlock interrupted. “You were all called in for supper. After the meal, Mr. Peabody left to prepare the night’s entertainment. While he was gone, Mr...”

“Pine,” Frankenstein supplied.

“Mr. Pine excused himself. After waiting twenty-five minutes from Mr. Peabody’s departure, Colonel...?”

“Gold.”

“Colonel Gold left to see what was taking so long. Miss Rose apparently left soon after-”

“I went to the kitchen. I didn’t want to hang out in here.”

“Quite. And after she left, Mr. Pine returned. Colonel Gold returned shortly after, announcing that he had found Mr. Peabody. Correct?”

“Well, no.” He’d been so quiet, I’d somehow completely missed the dark grey wolfman in the purple suit. “I was gone even before Peabody left, and returned to find everyone gathered in the living room. I’d had an important call during supper, you see.”

“Ah. And everyone has been to these parties before?”

“Every year,” Rose sighed. The woman in blue rolled her eyes.

“And this year was just as any other?” Everyone looked at anything but Sherlock. “Am I to take the silence as a ‘no?’” he stated, eyebrow raised.

“Jerry was being a jerk,” Miss Rose muttered.

“He kept going on about people’s vices,” the woman in blue explained.

Sherlock sighed, “Can you be more specific, Ms...”

“Byrd. And no, I can’t be specific, because Jerry didn’t say anything specific.” she spoke deliberately, careful to pronounce each word precisely, as if not slurring her words would disguise the red in her cheeks. “He just kept hinting at people’s secrets. Kept going on and on about how even people you thought you could trust could still have so much to hide, and how he knew so much about people that they never told anyone.”

“This apparently ruffled some feathers.”

“Fur, more like,” Pine muttered.

“Go to hell, George,” the wolfman softly growled.

“Enough,” Sherlock commanded, and looked to the exotic, “Mr -”

“Professor Indigo.”

“Professor,” Sherlock amended. “May I ask what the nature was of your long phone call?”

“Personal matters. I went upstairs to talk.”

“And this was after Mr. Peabody had been... confrontational?”

“It was after he’d made a series of thinly veiled accusations, and I’d gotten a little upset, yes. Everyone here was pretty annoyed with him, to say the least.”

“The rest of us didn’t tear a hole in the tablecloth,” Pine scoffed.

“You would if you had claws, you ignorant leech.”

“Gentlemen,” Sherlock warned, “if the two of you would kindly keep in mind that this is a murder investigation in which you are both suspects, and behave accordingly, I would appreciate it.” They glared at each other, but stayed quiet. “Thank you. Miss Rose, kindly explain how everyone in this room knew the deceased.”

Miss Rose was startled he’d called on her. “Um. I’m his secretary, Birdie’s his cousin, George is his lawyer, the professor and colonel are friends, and you know about Snow.”

“Thank you. I must ask you all to remain here for a few more minutes while I take a look around the house.”

They obviously weren’t thrilled with the idea, but nobody complained out loud. Of course, the fact that the storm was still going strong probably helped. Detective Carson offered Sherlock a flashlight. Sherlock half grinned, visibly contemplated using one of the candelabras instead, and decided to do the sensible thing and take the flashlight.

We slowly moved down the dark hallways, Carson and I following Sherlock as he made his way from the dining room, past the stairs, and found ourselves in a study. An array of chess boards were displayed, along with a full bookcase, right next to the old fashioned desk, on which

sat a perfectly modern computer. Oriental rugs were scattered on the wooden floor. A lightning flash shone through the tall windows, pounded by rain, and rattled by the thunder.

I glanced at the titles on the shelves. *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. Well, that wasn't surprising. *Murder on the Orient Express*. *The Maltese Falcon*. "Mr. Peabody'd be overjoyed to learn he was the victim in a mystery," I muttered.

"An interesting observation," Sherlock commented as he idly moved a piece on one of the chess boards.

"Mate in three," Carson said. Sherlock and I stared at him. "What? I like chess."

"So I see..." Sherlock trailed off, his attention suddenly focused on the candle by the board. He carefully picked it up, and held it next to every other candle in the room before returning to where he started.

He blew the candle out, placed it on the table, and closely examined the candlestick under the flashlight. "Mr. Peabody died from a blow to the back of a head with a blunt instrument, correct?"

Carson nodded. "Yeah. There blood on that candlestick?"

"See for yourself."

"Wait, seriously?" We hurried over. Sure enough, there was a stain along the base, smeared from a rushed cloth across it, but still visible.

"The candle adds further credence to the idea," Sherlock said. "It's taller than all the others in the room. If they were all lit at the same time, then this one was out for a period, likely when its base was used as a weapon. It was then relit after the deed was done."

"So why isn't there any blood on the floor?" I asked.

Carson looked down at the rug he was standing on, and quickly moved to flip it over.

"Well. That would do it," I said as I saw the dark stain.

"The murderer then used the rug to transport the body," Sherlock explained, "as there is no other sign of blood in the house, and deposited the body in the parlor. The murderer then returned the rug to the study, and rejoined the others."

"How long would that take?"

"That depends on where that door leads," Sherlock gestured to a door on the opposite side of the room from the one we entered.

Carson opened it and swore. "The parlor. So now we know how they did it, how do we figure out who they are? All of them have been here before, they know the layout of the house."

"Simple process of elimination. We must verify where everyone was in the house when the victim was killed," Sherlock made his way back through the hall to the stairs.

"How do we do that?" I asked. "We've only got their word for it."

“Detective Carson will get precise details as to their movements, while you and I, Watts, will see what sort of traces we might discover to corroborate their statements. We'll start in the kitchen.”

The panelling in the kitchen disguised the modernity beneath it, giving an appearance that fit with the rest of the early 20th century feel of the house. Candles and lamps lit the spotless room.

Sherlock picked up a lone glass on the counter. “It appears Miss Rose was here.” He held the glass to me. There was crimson lipstick on the rim. “She's the only one wearing that shade.”

“But how do we know she used the glass while she was here with Snow during the murder?”

“Look at the state of this kitchen, Watts. Mrs. Snow is the pinnacle of efficiency. A lone glass left on the counter must have been put there after she'd cleaned, which is what she was doing while the guests ate. Thus, Miss Rose was here after the meal, and wouldn't have had enough time to kill Mr. Peabody.”

“So, Rose and Snow were in the kitchen. Two down, four to go.”

“I'd like to eliminate myself from your suspicions,” said a voice from the doorway.

“Ah, Colonel,” Sherlock said. “You escaped Detective Carson.”

“I told him I wanted to speak to you in person. He said you were in the kitchen. Nothing against the young detective, but it's obvious you're the one running this investigation.”

“I'm not 'running' it, I am giving advice, and that advice is being taken. Detective Carson could kick me out into the storm at any moment, if he so chose.”

The Colonel chuckled, “Then he'd be a fool, or so the rumors would have us believe.”

“Fortunately, Detective Carson is rather intelligent. It's one reason I'm happy to help.”

Sherlock half grinned. “What can I do for you, Colonel?”

The Colonel sighed, hands behind his back, his back ramrod straight. “After I retired from the Army, Jerry provided a bit of normalcy, some routine to keep me on track with the rest of my life. I'd like you to succeed in finding who killed him, and I'd like you to do it before any of the others get the thought in their pampered heads that storms are just noise and water, and there's no legal cause stopping them from leaving.”

“Kindly describe your precise actions when you found the body, from the moment you left the dining room, to the point you returned to announce your discovery.”

“There isn't much to tell. I went from the dining room straight to the parlor, found the body on the floor. I tried to see if there was anything I could do for him, but he was dead. Looked around for some sign of a weapon, maybe a heavy tool of some sort, but I didn't see anything. I went back to the dining room and told everyone. Called the police immediately.”

“Everyone's reactions?”

“They all wanted to see. Didn't believe me, thought it was a joke. Everyone was there, except Alex - ah, Professor Indigo. He came down the stairs and found us in the parlor. He said

we should wait for the police, not that anyone was too keen on going out in the storm anyway. We all went back to the dining room to wait.”

“Colonel, it’s clear that Mr. Peabody managed to irritate every single one of his guests tonight by hinting at their secrets. Would anyone be enraged enough to kill him?”

“I don’t know what everyone’s secrets are, so I can’t answer that.” He hesitated, “I know what he was implying about me, and about the professor, and while I didn’t give a damn, Alex was upset.”

“I take it you’re involved in Professor Indigo’s ‘personal matters.’”

“He’s getting a divorce. Pine implied it was because he’d been sleeping with students, which enraged Alex, but he wouldn’t say what the real reason was. Jerry said he knew exactly why, just kept teasing him about it, which only made him angrier. There wasn’t a phone call; he went upstairs to cool off.”

“Why wouldn’t he say why he’s getting a divorce?” I asked.

“Because it isn’t anyone’s business.”

“Sure, but wouldn’t telling be better than being suspected of something worse?”

Col. Gold sighed. “That’s my opinion as well. Unfortunately, Alex is still…”

“Figuring things out,” I finished for him, understanding.

“Would the secretary be privy to everyone’s secrets?” Sherlock asked, getting us back on track.

Gold shrugged, “She did her job well. Maybe she’d have picked up on something.”

Sherlock nodded once, “Thank you, Colonel. Let’s rejoin the others.”

Detective Carson met us in the hall. “Hey, I see the Colonel found you.”

“Yes. What of everyone else’s statements?”

“Ms. Byrd claims she spent the whole evening in the dining room. Judging by the empty wine bottle, and her overly careful enunciation, I’m inclined to believe her.”

Sherlock half grinned. “We verified Mrs. Snow and Miss Rose’s locations, and Col. Gold gave us a description of his actions tonight.”

“Indigo still won’t say why he was on the phone for half an hour, but Byrd made some comment about marriage troubles, which started Pine smirking, which got Indigo riled again. Managed to calm things down by focusing on Pine for a while.”

“And what did you discover?”

“Not much,” Carson sighed as we paused outside the dining room. “He’s Peabody’s lawyer, and the executor of the estate. He says when he left the room, he wandered to the study.”

“The study!” I exclaimed.

Carson nodded, “Said Mr. Peabody wasn’t there, he glanced at some books, came back.” He glanced at Col. Gold. The Colonel got the hint, and returned to the dining room. Carson

continued, “Just because he was in the study, doesn’t mean he murdered the guy. He could have gone in while the murderer was dumping the body in the parlor.”

“And completely overlooked the missing rug?”

“Not everyone has your eye for detail,” Carson drawled.

Sherlock smirked. “There is that.”

“What about the Colonel? He’s certainly got the strength for the job.”

“He claims he wasn’t bothered by Peabody’s teasing,” I ventured, “but he could have been lying.”

Sherlock shook his head, “It’s as you said, Watts, the best defense for Professor Indigo is to simply be open about his affairs, rather than risk rumor leading to disciplinary action. The Colonel realizes this. Besides, if he was defending his lover, he’d kill Pine instead of Peabody.”

Carson blinked. “I missed something.”

“The reason Professor Indigo is getting a divorce is his feelings for Col. Gold,” Sherlock explained, “but that’s not important. The solution to the case has presented itself to me.”

“What?” Carson and I exclaimed, but he was already headed into the dining room.

“Thank you for your patience,” he said to the group, “most of you will be permitted to leave shortly. I have a few last questions, to clarify a few details. Professor Indigo, were you entirely alone upstairs?”

“Yes.”

“Did anyone here see him actually ascend the stairs?”

Everyone shook their heads. “You didn’t have to see him,” said Mrs. Snow, “you could hear him running up.”

“Detective Carson, kindly run upstairs, and then try to quietly come back down.”

We heard the echo of his steps on the wooden stair as he bounded up, and then softer steps and a clear creak as he tried to come down. “Miss Rose and Mrs. Byrd, you two remained here the longest, do you recall hearing anyone come down the stairs?”

“No,” they said.

“Mr. Pine, you told Detective Carson that you went to the study shortly after Mr. Peabody left, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“Did you see or hear anything unusual?”

“No.”

“Given that Miss Rose and Mrs. Snow were in the kitchen, Professor Indigo was upstairs, Mrs. Byrd was in the dining room, and Mr. Pine was in the study, we are left with Colonel Gold in the parlor, where Mr. Peabody was found.” All eyes went to Colonel Gold. He stood tall, coolly gazing at Sherlock, waiting. Sherlock continued, “Mr. Peabody was struck over the head

with a blunt instrument, which could not be found in the parlor. Additionally, while some blood was present under his head in the parlor, it was not nearly as much as there should have been. The reason for this is quite simple.”

“He was killed somewhere else,” the Colonel said, a small smile on his face.

“Precisely,” Sherlock nodded. “We found the weapon, and the rug used to transport the body to the parlor. Given all of these facts, the only possible solution is that Mr. Peabody was murdered by Mr. Pine, in the study, with a candlestick.”

“That’s outrageous!” Pine shouted, leaping up from his seat. “Why would I want to kill a client?”

“You’ve been scamming your clients for their money for years,” Miss Rose rolled her eyes. “And you’ve been screwing with the estate papers. Jerry was going to call you out on it and you got scared, so you killed him.” Everyone stared at her. “What, you think I just sat at that desk all day, bored?”

“Mr. Pine,” Detective Carson cut in, “would you like to come down to the station quietly, or is this going to be harder than it has to be?”

“Everyone here had just as much motive as me!” he protested.

“But unfortunately for you, none of them were in the study,” Sherlock said.

“You don’t have any real proof this is true!”

“It’s the only explanation that makes sense. There wasn’t time for anyone else to have done the deed. Logic may not be enough to convict you, but it is certainly enough to have you arrested.”

“Which is what’s happening right now,” Carson stated, flatly. “Come on, Mr. Pine. Easy way or hard way?”

Mr. Pine walked out with Detective Carson. “Don’t bother with the whole speal, I know my rights.”

“That’s exactly why I’m going to tell them back to you,” Carson said, cheerfully putting Pine in cuffs. “Try not to insult my intelligence, Mr. Pine. You have the right to remain silent...” they headed out through the rain.

“Thank you all for your patience and cooperation,” Sherlock said to the shellshocked group. “You’re free to go, the storm seems to have died down at last. I would not recommend leaving the City for a while, as I’m certain you’ll be called upon again until the investigation is officially closed, and leaving would look like fleeing.”

We walked out just in time to see a clean up crew arrive. “Took them long enough,” Carson muttered as he came up to us. We could see Pine sulking in the car. “Thanks for the help.”

“Thank you for the opportunity,” Sherlock half grinned as we turned to leave. “Happy Halloween, Detective. Let us know if we can be of any further assistance.”