
SHERLOCK HOLMES AND THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE STOLEN HAT

I had seen little of Holmes lately. But when the telegram arrived – *Are you free? If you are, come immediately. If not, come anyway.* – I was seized with a keen desire to see my friend again, and to know how he was employing his extraordinary powers. The first hour of the day, at the beginning of April 1988, followed the same narrative structure as all my stories. (Aficionado/as can therefore skip [1] to [6].)

- [1] I arrived at the familiar door, which as always reminded me of the dark incidents of the *Study in Scarlet*. As always I rang the bell, as always I was shown up to the chamber which had formerly been in part my own, and as always I hung my hat on the hat-rack by the door.
- [2] My friend’s attitude and manner told their own story. He was pale, clearly due to a seven-per-cent solution of cocaine from the previous evening. I removed the needle from his syringe, and hid it, as always, inside the skull on the mantelpiece.
- [3] Nevertheless he was pacing the room, clearly hot upon the scent of a new problem, his head sunk upon his chest, his pipe sending up thick wreaths of disgusting blue smoke, his hands clasped behind him.
- [4] In response to the excellent breakfast which Mrs Hudson had prepared, I wielded my egg spoon. In response to his hangover, Holmes munched silently at his toast and drank his coffee.
- [5] There was – and here was the only change in the usual sequence of events – no sound of a hansom cab, but only the footsteps of someone pacing outside the door of 221B. Holmes commented that our client had arrived, was hesitating to ring the bell, and had lost his hat.
- [6] “How in the world can you know”, I asked, “from the sound of his footsteps that he has lost his hat? I suppose you can see his reflection in that mirror above the skull on the mantelpiece?” I had been caught out by such base tricks before.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Watson”, said Holmes. “But at any rate the solution to his problem is clear.”

“And how in the world can you know that?” I asked. “He has not yet told you his problem.”

“It is a capital mistake”, he conceded, “to theorize in advance of the evidence. It biases the judgment. In this case, however, the identity of the criminal is already clear.”

“But we do not yet know what crime has been committed”, I objected. “I have told you”, said Holmes languidly, “his hat has been stolen.”

Mrs Hudson showed in a young man, who took off his hat and hung it on the hat-rack by the door. I have learned much by working with Holmes, and I saw immediately that my friend’s assumption that his client had lost his hat was wrong. But Holmes seemed unperturbed.

“Pray take a seat”, he said. “This is my friend and colleague, Dr Watson, who is occasionally good enough to think that he can help me in my cases. Whom have I the honour to address?”

“Mr Holmes”, said he, “I am one of the attendants from the Sherlock Holmes Museum next door. ... This is all rather embarrassing ... But someone has stolen your deerstalker hat from the display in the museum ... Oh dear, this is very embarrassing.”

“Your summary of the facts is commendably brief and clear, but hardly complete or logically coherent”, said Holmes. “When you say that someone has stolen my hat, you do not in truth mean ‘my hat’, but the copy of my hat which you keep next door to show to the somewhat credulous tourists who think that I am (that is to say, was) a real person, who has (that is to say, had) a hat, and this despite the fact that there is no mention of a deerstalker hat in any of the stories which my friend Dr Watson has been kind enough to write about me (that is to say, which Conan Doyle wrote about me under the pretence that Dr Watson ... well, you know what I mean). So, it cannot be a copy of my hat, since that hat (not to mention its owner) never existed.”

“Em ... yes ...”, said the young man, now even more embarrassed.

“Let us see if Dr Watson has grasped the point: he had better be clear about this when he writes up the story for his readers.”

I had found no break or flaw in my friend’s chain of logical sequences. I have no keener pleasure than in following Holmes in his professional investigations, and in admiring his rapid deductions, as swift as intuitions, yet always founded on a logical basis with which he unravelled problems even before they were submitted to him.

I said, rather proud of my clear reduction of the facts of the crime to one essential point, “Someone has stolen a hat which doesn’t exist.”

“Well, I suppose one could put it like that”, drawled Holmes. This was high praise indeed coming from him, and I blushed with pleasure. “But, why ...”, I pondered, “why steal a hat which doesn’t exist?”

“All this seems strange to you”, continued Holmes, “because you fail to grasp the importance of the single real clue which is presented to us. It is a mistake to confound strangeness with mystery. The most commonplace crime is often the most mysterious because it seems to present no special features from which deductions may be drawn.”

I looked around to see if I could spot the clue.

“We are looking”, said Holmes, “for someone who has stolen a hat. Let us surmise that they have stolen the hat because they do not themselves have such a hat. But who could that be? Elementary, is it not? We have already established that I myself had no such hat. What do you therefore conclude?” His eyebrows rose sardonically, and threatened to vanish over the top of his high-domed forehead. “You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear. For example, how often have you seen the hat-rack by the door of this room?”

“Well, some hundreds of times”, I said.

“How many hats hang there now?”

I was pleased to demonstrate my powers of observation. “Three. There is my hat, the young man’s hat, and your deerstalker.”

“We make progress. But yet again you see, but you neither observe nor deduce,” said Holmes. “Since, according to your own stories, I have no deerstalker, how could my deerstalker hang there?”

I tried hard to follow his logic and to think as he would have done. I quoted to him his own precept: often he had said to me that when one has eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth. “You mean”, I said triumphantly, “since it doesn’t exist, it cannot be there? It is a mere hallucination!”

“My God! You are stupid!”, said he. “You forget the other precept, so well formulated by my predecessor William of Ockham: *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*¹. That, you numbskull, is the hat from the museum, which is the copy of my hat, which has never existed, but which is kept next door to show to the credulous tourists ... bla bla bla ... Do I have to spell it all out for you?”

“You mean, ...?”

¹ For uneducated readers: “Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.”

“Look, before you get your readers completely confused: I borrowed the hat myself, so that we would have an amusing case for this boring April morning – whose date you seem not to have noticed.”

Holmes rang for Mrs Hudson and asked her to show the young man to the door. “Don’t forget your hats”, he said, as he retrieved his syringe from the skull, and stalked off to his room, strumming his violin.

I began fervently to hope that some real case would soon be presented to my friend, so that we would not have to engage in such ridiculous post-modernist vignettes ... That is to say, I began fervently to hope that someone would write a story pretending that Conan Doyle had written a story pretending that I had written a story pretending that Holmes and I had together solved yet another case.