

Sherlock Holmes  
and the  
San Franciscan Affair



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## Sherlock Holmes and the San Franciscan Affair

FROM THE TRAVEL JOURNAL OF DR. JOHN H. WATSON, M.D.,  
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Many of my readers have requested that I recount the events of the Spring of 1906, when Mrs. Watson and I stayed with her sister and her sister's husband, Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Haas, in San Francisco, California. To that end, I set forth this chronicle.

Mary and I had been in America for scarcely more than a fortnight when the ladies retreated for a week to a health farm recommended by one of Elizabeth Haas's rather vulgar American friends, who for the purpose of maintaining *some* sense of propriety will be referred to only as Mrs. C\_\_\_\_\_. This left Alexander and myself with the entire house to ourselves. Without our gentle ladies to restrain us, we reverted into a state not unlike that each of us had enjoyed in our bachelorhood, until Monday, when Alexander removed himself to Los Angeles to tidy up some business interests. Thus, for a few days in

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April, I found myself alone in the grand house on Octavia street.

I returned to the house from my afternoon constitutional at just before tea time. I hung my overcoat and hat on the tree in the hall, and upon entering the drawing room, I was startled from my reverie by the tall figure of a Red Indian, in a Savage headdress. An open window to the patio revealed to me his mode of unlawful and uninvited entry. He appeared to be leafing through my journal. Thinking to take the fellow by surprise, I raised my cane to strike. Before my blow could fall, he turned, and seeing me there, arm poised, said "If you are finished stretching, Watson, please sit down and join me in some tea, for I have an urgent matter that I have forsaken all other pursuits—at great cost to my research, no less—to bring to your attention."

Shocked beyond speech, I thought of nothing but the swift obeisance of that casually ordered summons. I lowered my cane and sat, where I soon realized that indeed two cups were laid out upon the table, as was a pot of fine Chinese tea, as is only available in cities like San Francisco, where a large number of Chinamen have congregated.

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The native sat in the chair opposite me and removed his feathered head dress. Only then did I recognize him. “Holmes!”

“Of course, Watson. Do you think a real Native would wear a ceremonial headdress with galoshes?”

“I. . .”

“Really Watson, will you never learn the power of acute and accurate observation? Had you my keen senses you would have been able to tell immediately that I had been living with the Lakota for several weeks, then traveled by rail from Chicago to San Francisco. As it is, I can see *you* have been living here without Mrs. Watson or the master and mistress of this house for several days, and while you walked in Golden Gate Park you were pondering the eccentricities of American speech.”

“Impossible!” I exclaimed.

“Not at all Watson. Your shirt is short one button and your waistcoat is a poor match for that tie, a situation Mrs. Watson would not have allowed to go unremedied. The maid who turned me away at the door and forced me to gain alternate entrance to the house through yon window told me that I was prevented from entry because the master and

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mistress were away. That particular cane is a favorite companion on your walks. Golden Gate is the nearest park. And you were musing out loud when you entered the hall. Were you aware that you talk to yourself?”

“No. But I did notice that you had entered by the window.”

“Watson! You astound me. Perhaps there is hope after all for you as a practitioner of the detective arts. As it happens, you have an opportunity to perfect your skills, by accompanying me on an urgent matter.”

“The one which so rudely interrupted your research and brought you here?” I asked.

“The very same. I have had a telegram from the brother of a man we must help. He is here, in the Bay City and is in desperate need of our assistance. We must go to him today. He is being held at the military prison on the Isla de las Alcatrazes.”

“The ‘Island of the Pelicans?’ Alcatraz, as the locals call it. What the devil have you and I to do with some wayward American deserter or treasonous dog

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who betrayed his countrymen?<sup>1</sup> I must wait here. Mary will be home on Friday. I must not involve myself with any strange doings. And besides, we are rather long in the tooth to be chasing about on adventures.”<sup>2</sup>

“But we must! We are obligated by the friendship which brought us together. You see, dear Watson, it is Stamford. We must see him after breakfast tomorrow.”

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1           Until the 1920's, Alcatraz Island was a military prison.

2           Watson, having been in his mid-20s during the Afghan War of 1878 would be approaching 60 at this time, and Holmes is only a few years younger.

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Stamford, as you will recall was that same youth who first brought me to Holmes. He was a fellow of mine at Bart's, and I came upon him quite by accident at the private hotel in the Strand where I resided while recovering from the wound that had finished my war career.<sup>3</sup> It was '78, and when I confided my search for a reasonably priced room to young Paul Stamford, he recounted to me a tale of a

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, "A Study in Scarlet" 16. "Bart's" refers to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London.

strange youth, “An enthusiast in some branches of science,” as Stamford said, who labored in the hospital’s chemical laboratory but aspired neither to medicine nor to chemistry in a professional sense.<sup>4</sup>

And so, Holmes and I became roommates at 221B Baker Street. Those not yet familiar with our adventures in solving crime may refer to my earlier published exploits, “A Study in Scarlet” or “The Sign of Four.”

I had only seen Stamford two or three times since that fateful day. He had established a practice at Brighton. I next saw him in London in ‘91, when he was preparing to depart for the Orient. The last I had heard of him, he was practicing in Hong Kong. Stamford had always been interested in travel, and foreign parts, so hearing that he was in San Francisco came as no shock. However, knowing him to be a man both gentle and law-abiding, I found it strange to think that he was embroiled in some criminal affair, foreign or domestic. But the tale as Holmes imparted it that morning at breakfast was

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4      *ibid*, 17



even more shocking yet.

“I was in a hotel in Chicago, finishing my monograph on the Lakota, when I received this from Stamford’s brother.”

Holmes produced a yellow telegram and slid it across the table.

HOLMES NEED HELP. STOP. PAUL ACCUSED  
OF MURDER. STOP. DETECTIVE BURNS SAN  
FRANCISCO POLICE USA. STOP. WILL PAY  
ANYTHING. STOP. JONAS STAMFORD.

“Apparently, Jonas Stamford came to 221B Baker Street looking for my assistance. His original intent was that I review the facts of the case from London and offer my assistance from there. However, when Mycroft informed him that I was in America, he wired me this telegram.”<sup>5</sup>

“Have you spoken with this ‘Detective Burns’ yet?”

“I went to the station, but he refused to speak with me. Fortunately, the police here are somewhat

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5 Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s older brother.

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less scrupulous than our own Scotland Yard, and I bribed one of them to allow me access to the file, so that I could at least examine the details of the case. I present them for you now.”

As in many times past, I had occasion to envy Holmes' perfect memory.

“Paul Stamford arrived in San Francisco on a boat from Hong Kong a month ago. He has been staying at the Essex Hotel, a deplorable rat-trap north-west of Market Street, very near to Chinatown. A few days after his arrival, he began sending messages to a Mr. Bradley Stark, a resident of this city. He received several messages in return. The manager of Stamford's hotel related all of this to the police.

“A week ago, Mr. Stark was discovered by his housekeeper when she returned from a ladies' function at church. She saw a light in the dining room and there she found her employer, slumped over the table, apparently shot. The table was laid for two, and the other chair was pushed back from the table rather violently. An envelope was found in the dead man's breast pocket which contained \$500 and a letter from Stamford.

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“Stamford left his hotel at 8 o’ clock on the night of the murder and did not return until 4 or 5 in the morning, well after the housekeeper had returned to find Stark. The police were unable to locate anyone at Stamford’s hotel or any other person who could swear to his whereabouts on the date. And the letter itself was quite incriminating.

“It said ‘Stark, I hope you will find this payment satisfactory. Will it be done soon? And it was signed in with what even I would be forced to admit was Stamford’s mark.”

“It sounds most conclusive.” I said. “Is it possible that Stamford *did* kill this Stark?”

“Watson, of course it is *possible*. But whether or not it happened is the question. We will eliminate the *impossible*, and whatever is left, no matter how improbable. . .”

“. . .must be the truth.”

“Quite so, Watson. We should begin by examining those details of the case which trouble me. Firstly, either Stamford has fallen upon hard times, or his choice of hotels is rather odd. There are a number of decent lodgings a few blocks from those Stamford had taken up in, all of which are more

appealing than the 'hotel' which hosted our friend before the police did. Secondly, if Stamford shot Stark, why not remove the envelope of money? Surely he could have saved himself a great sum by doing so. Thirdly, the other chair was pushed back from the table violently.”

“Perhaps the murderer shot Stark, then jumped up and fled.”

“So I thought, until I read the coroner’s report.”

“How so?”

“Stark was shot in the back of the head. Why would someone jump up from the table, and how could he circle around Stark and shoot him from behind without alerting Stark to his purpose?”

The more Holmes revealed of the case, the more troubling it became. “We must see Stamford. Doubtless he can reveal some other fact which will aid your inductive reasoning.” I said.

“Surely. Unfortunately, I have been denied the privilege of visiting him.” Holmes sighed.

“Then how are you going to get into the prison?”

“Holmes can not. But surely the police have no recourse to prevent Stamford from being

examined by his family physician and the physician's faithful assistant."

"But. . .Oh. Of course. My faithful assistant."

"Naturally."

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Whatever opinions I may have held, or may still hold about American vulgarity, I am forced to admit that they have far surpassed we English in the manner of prison building. The few visits I have made, with Holmes, and in my line of work, to prisons on my home isle left me shaken. Newgate especially was a terrible hive of vermin, human and otherwise, until it was demolished four years ago. The only worse place in England that one could keep a human being is Bedlam itself.<sup>6</sup>

Stamford was being held in a cell that, while only a few paces wide and long, was nonetheless clean and dry.<sup>7</sup> When Holmes and I entered, the man before us bore as little resemblance to my old school mate as a boy's bright, new-minted Christmas shilling

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<sup>6</sup> Newgate was a notorious prison, Bedlam a notorious mental hospital. Both were in London.

<sup>7</sup> The size of Stamford's cell is based on reports of cells in Alcatraz prison, which reported the standard cell size as 9 x 13 feet.

does to an old clipped coin found in the gutter.

As a youth, Stamford had been a man of impeccable taste, but plain—he was often known to remark that simplicity was its own reward. Now his clothes, rumped and threadbare, his hair disheveled, and his eyes, black pits sunken beneath his brow, lent his appearance an air of desperation. My cursory examination of him proved his body to be sound, but his countenance was that of a man who had lost all hope.

“Please do not think me ungrateful that you have come, Holmes. However, I think my brother was most dreadfully optimistic to believe that you could help. Oh, do smile in that wry way of yours. Watson’s tales of your ‘deductions’ have even traveled as far as Hong Kong, but forgive me if I have no faith that even a man of your considerable talents can unravel this twisted mess in which I find myself.”

“Nonetheless, we are here to aid you if we can. Perhaps you should tell us of your troubles. Leave nothing out. The smallest piece of seemingly irrelevant information may be a vital clue which reveals the entire story.” Holmes said.

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“Where to begin! So much has happened. I suppose I must begin at the beginning—but which beginning?” Stamford sat on the edge of his narrow cot, his hands in his hair.

“You came to America. . .” I volunteered, an attempt to help poor Stamford.

“Oh, Watson,” said Holmes. “This all began long before Stamford came to America. It began in Hong Kong. Several years ago, I should imagine.”

Stamford’s astonishment was plain upon his face. “Quite so, Holmes. Quite so. Hong Kong. I was living in the colony. I met a girl and married her. We had a son, and. . .my wife died of complications of the birth. You must not think me uncaring; for I love my son, but what has a man to do with a child? I hired a nurse and devoted myself to my practice to ease the pain of my wife’s passing. Once the practice was well established, I had too much time for leisure. ‘Idle hands are the Devil’s tool.’ The Chinese are very fond of gambling. A man can try to keep himself out of it, but it is everywhere! I played a few games, and soon I was a part of a regular mahjong circle.”

“Mah-jong?” I enquired, having never heard

the words before.

“A Chinese game, played with ivory tiles. Each has a word-character carved upon it. An easy game to learn. . .”

“But a difficult one to master.” Holmes said. “You owe money, then?”

Stamford nodded. “They. . .the Hung Mun Tong, a gang of Chinese. I borrowed money from them to pay the debt. I tried to give them their due, but they wanted it returned too swiftly, before I could earn enough to repay. I returned home one day, and they had taken William.”

“Your son.” Holmes sounded as if he had already guessed the tale’s end.

“I discovered that he had been taken on a ship, to San Francisco. Through a friend, I found the name of a man here. One who knew of the Hung Mun Tong and deals in information. Or dealt, I should say.”

“Bradley Stark. Where were you on the night he was murdered?”

“We met that afternoon. He told me to wait outside the Golden Oyster, in Chinatown. The front is a gambling parlor and the back is a brothel. He was



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to meet me at eleven, and lead me to my son. He never arrived. At four o' clock, I finally went back to my hotel. I sent a telegram to Stark, enquiring why he never kept our appointment. I lay down to rest, and soon there was a knock at my door. I thought it would be the manager, since I have had several telegrams each day, and he has instructions to wake me when they arrive, no matter the time. It was the police. You know the rest."

"So you never went to Stark's house?"

"No. We met elsewhere each time. That afternoon, I paid him my hundred. It was all I could afford, since I had very little left after my mahjong indiscretions. Stark said he would help no matter how small the price. He has no love for the Hung Mun, for reasons he declined to share with me. He promised to find out where my son was held, but at our last meeting, he had found nothing. I would dare not kill him! He may have been my only chance to see my son again."

"The devils! Why not inform the police?" I asked. "Surely even these Americans could find one

English boy among a pack of filthy Wogs.”<sup>8</sup> The anguish on Stamford’s face cut into my heart like a racing carriage cuts through a London fog. He did not answer, and Holmes put out a hand, as if to restrain me, or my anger.

“Your wife was Chinese.” From his tone, it was apparent that Holmes had guessed this fact long before.

“Yes. Her name was Liu Mae Xio. I called her ‘May.’ Most English, like yourself, Watson, have an ingrained prejudice against the mixture of Chinese blood with their own which is only surpassed by that of the Chinese, who believe themselves to be the only civilized persons in the universe, and that we are all ‘quai-loh’—foreign devils. But here in San Francisco, such marriages are illegal, and punishable by imprisonment. No doubt the Hung Mun knew this when they brought my son here. They knew I had no way of pursuing them through legal means.”

“Do the Hung Mun know you are in San Francisco?” Holmes’ brow was furrowed deeply, and his manner suggested that he was deep in the

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8 W.O.G. — “Wily Oriental Gentlemen,” a British slur against Chinese.

machinery of inductive reasoning.

“A few days after I first met with Stark, someone visited my hotel room while I was at breakfast. On the bed, they left a mahjong tile wrapped in a piece of my son’s shirt.” He produced a small ivory rectangle from his pocket and handed it to Holmes, who held it up to the lamp. There were two characters upon it, marked in red paint, their serpentine forms writhing and twisting in the flickering lamplight. “It is the tile of the West, the ‘Fire Wind.’ It means death.” Stamford began to weep.

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Our encounter with Stamford left me shaken, and Holmes deep in thought. The pilot of the scow that ferried us back to the mainland looked askance at us several times, no doubt disquieted by such an odd pair of foreign travelers.

Once back in the city proper, Holmes insisted that we proceed at once to the address of the deceased, Bradley Stark. It was a large, three-storey affair with all the hideous ostentation so common in

new American houses.<sup>9</sup> Holmes first paced the length and breadth of the house, examining the paint here, the lawn there. He spent a great deal of time in the bushes on one side of the house where an octagonal turret thrust out from the main structure.

“Let us see if anyone is at home, shall we?” said Holmes when he had finished.

Our knock was answered by the housekeeper, a stout Scotswoman named Mrs. MacDermid, who readily agreed to answer Holmes’ questions, once we expressed that we were looking into the death of her employer.

She showed us to the dining room, where Stark had been found.

“Ah, it were terrible, it were. I returned from church, and I come in from the ‘all because I seen the gas light was on. Mr. Bradley, ‘e were slumped down, ‘e were—sleepin’ like. I went ta the kitchen first, for I thought Mr. Bradley might like a cuppa tay when he awoke. I put the kettle on and then I went ta

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9 The house is almost certainly a “Queen Anne” style Victorian, which a Londoner of Watson’s age would have considered gaudy and disgusting when compared with the quiet simplicity of Jacobean and Georgian architecture so commonly found in his native land.

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wake ‘im. I put my ‘and on ‘is shoulder, ta shake ‘im awake—and it come away all blood! I thought mebbe ‘e’d a hurt ‘imself. He was warm and I thought there was life left in ‘im. That was when I seen the wet mess in ‘is ‘air, an’ I run ta get the doctor. Just at the corner, I met the beat patrolman. He come at once.”

“Was there anyone else on the street?”

“Nay. I saw nobody. I heard one o’ those ‘orrible automobile, though. Backfired as I was comin’ up the road.”

“Which way did the automobile go?”

“I dinnae know. I dinnae see the dratted thing. I only ‘eard it.”

“So the patrolman came to the house, and asked you some questions?” Holmes asked.

“Nay. He dinnae ask me anythin’ at all. He tol’ me not to go back to the ‘ouse. That it was a crime scene, an’ I should stay away for the rest of the evenin’.”

“They asked you nothing?” Holmes was incredulous. The housekeeper shook her head.

“The poor laddie. Known ‘im since I came over, I ‘ave. Worked for ‘is mother until she died, then

for the lad.”

Holmes and I discreetly turned away until the lady’s womanly vapors had dissipated.

“Was there anything unusual about that night?”

“Oh, my yes! Mr. Bradley always sat at supper with his back to the wall. He liked to look out the windows. But the night ‘e died, ‘e sat with ‘is back to the windows. ‘Twern’t like ‘im, ta do so. And the window was open. It was such a windy night, an’ this ‘ouse is drafty besides. I donnae know why Mr. Bradley would ‘ave opened it, even such a little.”

“And the other gentleman, Mr. Stark’s dinner guest?”

“The other setting was for the place against the wall, Mr. Bradley’s s usual place.”

“Did you notice anything missing from the room? Anything at all?”

“Not that I would know.”

“I beg your pardon madam?”

“Mr. Bradley didn’t let me in this room oftener than once a week ta do a bit ‘o cleanin’ an’ such. He conducted ‘is business in this room mostly, an’ ‘e preferred I stay out of it.”

“What line of business was Mr. Stark in?”

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“Now, I wouldn’t know such a thing. And even if I did, I wouldn’t be tellin’ it to ye, some noseybody who stepped in off the street.”

We could get nothing further of use out of Mrs. MacDermid. Before we took our leave, Holmes approached the mantle over the fire and drew my attention to it. A fine layer of dust covered the smooth wood. There was a small rectangular mark in the dust where an item that had recently lain there had been removed.

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“There is something decidedly odd about this entire business, Watson.”

“Which?” I asked. Holmes and I had declined a cab and were strolling along the dusky street. We were nearer than I would have liked to the waterfront, and though the setting sun made beautiful the smoke and soot haze that covered the city, we could see straight downhill, where Van Ness opened onto a pier. The deepening night was punctuated by the calls of fishwives and other hawkers settling the day’s final accounts and packing their wheelbarrows away for the evening. A pervasive scent of salt, fish, and the mingled effluvia of four-hundred-thousand human

beings, millions of rats, cats, and dogs mixed into a horrid stench that hung on the city like a shroud.

“I believe Stamford to be innocent.” Holmes said. “I rarely conduct my investigations on intuition, but I must sometimes do so in the absence of evidence. I feel he is speaking truth to us.”

“Yes. The pain he showed at not being able to locate his son was unfeigned. I do not believe he would kill Stark either.”

“So rather than one task, as gentlemen we have two.” Holmes turned up the collar on his overcoat. “To find Stark’s true killer, so that Stamford may be cleared, and to find his son, so that they may be reunited.”

“Do you think it likely that Stamford’s son is still alive?”

“I know very little about *Chinese*, but I believe my long years of study have put me at an advantage over most to see into the minds of men in general. It seems that if the Hung Mun Tong wanted William Stamford dead they would have killed him in Hong Kong. Why transport a child half a world away to kill him? Stamford himself might have thought of that fact, were not his mind so clouded with grief. The tile



was a sign, yes, but not that the boy was killed, or would be killed, but rather that *Stamford* would be killed if he pursued the issue further. The more I analyze it, the more certain I am that the boy was brought here for some purpose, not just to remove him from his father, and that he lives yet.”

“So where we find the boy, we find the killer as well?”

“Highly unlikely. Stark was killed by someone else.”

“Whom? And why?”

“At this point, I have only vague conjectures. But the man dealt in information. Such a man is sure to make many enemies. Stamford had only to *gain* from Stark’s life; for our friend, Stark’s death served no purpose. We must locate another—one for whom Stark’s death brought either profit or comfort. But I do not believe the murder of Stark was accomplished by a Tong. Their murders are. . . Chinese. This murder was not. Stark was shot. Chinese are not allowed to own firearms.”

“That doesn’t mean they don’t have them.”

“Surely not. But usually a Tong has its own ‘method’ of killing. A ‘calling card’ of death, as it

were. Some garotte and remove the right ear. Some stab and slit the nose. I have never heard of one that shot its victims and left them face-down in a plate of *ragout*. The crime is vulgar. Forgive me, Watson, for the morbid notion, but it lacks *style*. And as such, it is decidedly. . .”

“American!” I interjected.

“Precisely. Our years together have finally wrought some impression on your habit of thinking, Watson. This is the second time in as many days that you have impressed me.”

“Thank you, Holmes. I am trying.”

“Yes, Watson, you are.” Holmes smiled enigmatically. “Now, we must see the police.”

“I thought the Inspector had refused to see you.”

“He had at the first, but this morning, before I collected you on our way to Alcatraz Prison, I received a message from him, asking me to come to the station tomorrow to speak with him.”

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Officer Burns proved to be a middle-aged man, stout and dark. He received Homes and myself in a small room at the police station.

“I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you the other day, Mr. Holmes. I didn’t know your reputation. I don’t read many foreign books about crimes and such. To hear your friend Dr. Wadstone tell it, you’re great at solving mysteries. Did you really do all those things?”

Holmes’ look told me that he, like I, did not think the young Inspector read many books *at all*.

“It is true that *Watson* and I have been involved in many intrigues together over the years, and his tales of the occurrences, while somewhat lurid, are generally factual. As you know, an old friend of ours, Dr. Paul Stamford, is being held on the charge of murder. Watson and I would like permission to investigate the case.”

“Well, I suppose it won’t do any harm for you to

poke around a bit. But anything interesting that turns up had better be given over to me right away.”

“Of course. I often work directly with Inspectors from our own Scotland Yard, and it has never been my intention to confuse or complicate an official investigation by the lawful authorities. You may be sure that any evidence I find will be turned over immediately.”

“Well, that’s all right, I suppose. What else can I do for you gentlemen?”

“Have you by chance any photographs of the crime scene?”

“You’re in luck there. It’s something we just started. The department bought a camera, and I learned how to use it. I’ll let you take a gander, if you think it’ll help.”

Burns retreated into another room and the sound of shuffling papers soon drifted our way. I leaned in and began to whisper to Holmes.

“Does this berk seem a little. . .”

Holmes silenced me at once. He gestured to another policeman, one I had not noticed before, whose back was to us, but who was obviously trying to listen to our conversation. Burns returned.

“Here you are.”

There were two photographs. One was of the room, shot from behind Stark, showing his point of view. The top of the dead man’s head was just visible, showing a table laid out with supper for two. The second showed the room as Mrs. MacDermid and the patrol man must have seen it, taken from the door to the hall. Stark was slumped into his supper and the chair opposite him was on its side, lying on the floor. The window behind him was closed.

We thanked Detective Burns and left the station house. As soon as we were out onto the street I turned to Holmes. “That policeman was eavesdropping.” I said.

“Yes. And Burns was keeping something from us. He also seems a bit daft to be handling a murder case. Let me ask you, what did you notice about the photographs?”

“I saw that the window was closed. Mrs. MacDermid said she found it open. Someone shut it.”

“Good. Anything else?” Holmes asked.

“Nothing of consequence. Did the photographs tell you anything?”

“They told me almost everything.”

“How. . .!”

“All in good time, Watson. This is a more dangerous business than I had at first imagined. We must tread carefully, lest we be treated to the same kind of hospitality Stamford has found.”

When Holmes and I returned to the Haas house for tea, we were greeted by Mary and her sister, Mrs. Haas, who had returned for Easter.

“Lizzie and I were speaking to Mrs. C\_\_\_\_\_.” Here Mary uttered the name of that foul woman I have already expressed the deepest contempt for. “She told us that Mr. Enrico Caruso was to be performing Tuesday night, Thursday and Saturday in the Grand Opera House on Mission Street. Tuesday, he will be singing ‘Carmen.’ Do let us go, John, you know how dearly I love the opera. And Mr. Caruso has been a favorite of mine for so very long.”

“Yes. I recall that I was subjected to him on another occasion, in London last year.” I replied.

“Oh, John. You must say yes. Lizzie says Alexander will take her. We must attend! And Mr. Holmes also.”

“I think perhaps it would be an excellent idea,

since I have already met Mr. Caruso and expressed my desire to hear him sing again.”

“Holmes!”

“Oh, yes, Watson. Did I not tell you he was lodging on the fifth floor, the same floor as I, at the Palace Hotel? He arrived this morning, and I spoke to him before I joined you here for breakfast.”

“It’s settled then?” asked Mary, excitedly.

“Yes.” I assented. “We shall go Tuesday night.”

“Excellent. Will you join us for Easter supper on Sunday, Mr. Holmes?”

“I’m afraid I cannot. But I will certainly attend the opera with you on Tuesday.”

“Tuesday evening we shall plan on supper here, then on to the opera house. You will join us for supper then, surely?”

“I am afraid—” Holmes stopped short. “Yes. I will join you for supper, of course. In the meanwhile, I must excuse myself now, for I have some urgent business to attend to. Good afternoon. Watson, may I speak with you privately?”

We moved into the drawing room and closed the door.

“I plan to spend the remainder of this day and perhaps some time tomorrow and Sunday, if necessary, in Chinatown. I have some questions I believe only a Chinese can answer. By Tuesday, I should have all the evidence I need on Stark’s true killer. But I need to find the boy.”

“Perhaps I should go with you.”

“No. I’m sorry Watson. Your talents lie in medicine and in being a stalwart friend. My talents run to secrecy and disguise, and it is these for which our investigation begs. I will meet you here, Tuesday evening.”



TUESDAY, APRIL 17, 1906

My brother-in-law, having returned from Los Angeles late Friday evening, held a dinner party and invited several friends, to celebrate our upcoming evening at the Opera. Fortunately for my digestion, Mrs. C\_\_\_\_\_ was not present. I was, however, introduced to three interesting gentlemen: Mr. James Phelan, formerly the Mayor of San Francisco, Mr. Fremont Older, editor of the *Bulletin*, and Mr. Rudolph Spreckels, of the sugar family.

Since Mrs. Haas refused to begin the meal until Holmes arrived, the ladies retired to the Drawing Room, and the gentlemen and myself occupied the study. Seven 'o clock came and went, and there was no sign of Holmes. At half-past, there was a knock, and the housekeeper called me to the door.

“The gentleman asked for you by name. I’ve never seen him before, but he has a dark look.”

“Thank you, Polly. I’ll attend to it.”

Only our many years of association and my knowledge that he had planned on slinking about the city disguised allowed me to recognize Holmes. He wore a workman’s clothes, well-used and stained in places with what may have been either paint or some darker fluid.

“Let me in, Watson. I must change.”

“What happened in Chinatown?”

“A great many things. I will disclose all to you in due time, but we must not tarry if we are to arrive at the opera on time. If you will excuse me, I will join you in a moment.”

I showed him to an unused bedchamber. He descended the stairs ten minutes later, attired in his opera clothes, and joined us in the drawing room. By this time, the talk had turned to city politics.

“How is the investigation coming along?” My brother-in-law asked.

Phelan’s eyes flickered to Holmes and I, and then back to Alexander.

Alexander answered his unvoiced query.

“Oh, John’s quite safe. I trust him to be circumspect. And he’ll vouch for Mr. Holmes.”

“Aren’t you two detectives?” asked Older.  
“And I’ve heard you’re something of a writer, Doctor?”

“I put my hand to it occasionally.” I answered.

Holmes nodded his assent.

“Well, here’s a story for you. Abe Ruef is going down.” Older sounded positively gleeful. “Let’s hope so.” added Spreckels.

“Perhaps we should fill Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson in on the details.” Phelan’s tone was grave. Older nodded, pulled a cigar out of his coat and began to cut the ends with his cigar-trimmer.

“I’ve been on this for six years. In ‘95, we ran Jim here for Mayor for the first time.” He nodded to Phelan. “It all went pretty good until ‘01, when Jim used the police to keep the traffic moving in the streets during the Teamsters’ strike.”

“I didn’t break the strike.” Phelan interrupted. “They have the right to peaceably assemble, I grant them that. But when they block other persons from getting to their business, persons unrelated to the strike or to the Teamsters—well, I decided to stop it.” Phelan’s argument sounded well-rehearsed, as if he had repeated it many times in recent years. Older continued his narrative.

“When everybody decided Jim was not going to get pushed around, this Ruef comes from nowhere. He sets up a party he calls ‘Labor’ and claims to represent the working man. He matriculated from the University of California with his degree in law—the only working men he’s ever seen are the ones who shine his shoes, leave the milk on the porch, and deliver the ice block! But he sets himself up as the working man’s friend, filling the poor with speeches about how Jim’s not fit for office. Jim, whose father immigrated from Ireland penniless and built a bank from nothing.

“Ruef’s ‘Labor’ party puts up a candidate against Jim. Do they get another lawyer? A banker? Someone with experience? No! They get a two-bit hustler from the music circuit.”

“Mayor Schmitz?” I asked.

“They call him ‘Handsome Gene’ around here.” added Spreckels. “He’s quite popular with . . . ladies.”

“Most musicians are.” Holmes added. I wondered what the other gentlemen would think if they were aware that Holmes could play the violin better than most anyone.

“Schmitz plays *Ragtime*. It’s terrible music—if you could even call it that. Shameless. Bordello-music at best.” Phelan sounded grieved, as if he believed Ragtime music to be the root of all the evil deeds in the world.

“They’re taking bribes. I’m convinced of it, and I’ll find the proof if it kills me.” Older was fierce.

“What kind of bribes?” I asked.

“Utilities mostly. Some work contracts.” said Older. “The city approves a thousand contracts a year. If even 10 or 20 per cent of those were shoddy contracts, given to incompetents who bribed the Mayor and the city council, the whole city could be unstable! Not to mention the police, who are being paid to turn their heads the other way when they see bawdy-houses and gambling parlors in Chinatown. As if having a hundred-thousand Coolies smoking Opium wasn’t enough.”<sup>10</sup> said Older. “Well, I’ve been working on it, and we’ll soon see what will come of it. I’ve got a man ‘inside.’ Unfortunately, he was about to get some very important documents from an information broker, and the man was killed.”

Holmes threw me a look. Just then, Polly

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10 “Coolies” is an American racial slur for Asians.

announced supper.

Part way through the meal, there was a loud series of reports from the street. Each of us jumped up to look, except for Holmes, who behaved almost as if he were expecting it. He caught my arm as I passed.

“Don’t bother looking out the window, Watson. I paid a Chinaman to set off a packet of firecrackers in the street so that I could show you the composition of this table. What do you notice about the arrangement of forks, knives, and plates?”

“What do you mean? They are the same.”

“Are they? What about the setting of say, your brother-in-law, Mr. Spreckels, or Mr. Older, as opposed to mine, or your own?”

“The same, as I said. No, wait—Spreckels’ fork, it is lying on the wrong side of the plate.”

“And what do you suppose is the cause of that?”

It took my mind a moment to formulate. “He is an American. They cut their meat with the fork in their left hand, and the knife in their right, just as we do, but then they switch, eating with fork held in the right hand. I had noticed the switching, since it is

quite disturbing, but I had ignored it out of politeness.”

“And do you recall the composition of the plates and utensils at Stark’s table?”

“No. I’m sorry, I cannot.”

“I can, however, for I noticed it at once, and only arranged this demonstration to show you what I already had learned. The man having supper with Stark left his fork on the right side of his plate when he jumped up from supper.”

“So he was an American. It could not have been Stamford!”

“As we already knew.”

My reply was cut short by everyone’s return to the table. Mary and her sister chattered on about the disturbance for some time, and I had no other chance to speak to Holmes.

After supper, we departed for the Opera House in two cabs, one shared by Mr. and Mrs. Spreckels, the Olders and Phelan, who were sharing the Spreckels’ box. The other by the Haases, Mary, and myself. Holmes insisted that he needed to send a message, and that he would meet us there. We were already seated in the Haas’ box when he

arrived. I attempted to ascertain the nature of his lateness, but he silenced me.

“We have a little time yet. I shall explain after the opera.”

Caruso’s singing was delightful, to judge by the rapture on Mary’s face. Although Holmes had professed to enjoy the opera well enough he had spent very little of the evening watching the stage. During a particularly brutal aria, when I was hard-pressed to not stuff my fingers into my ears, I saw that Holmes seemed to not even hear the noise. Instead, his attention seemed to be affixed on another box in our balcony, one in which several men sat talking. At one point, one man left, only to return a short while later, and then he and another man left and did not return.

After an interminable time, the curtain fell and the house lights came up. The five of us shared a cab back to the house on Octavia Street where Holmes bid farewell to Mary and the Haases. I stayed for a moment at the side of the carriage.

“Watson, does your brother-in-law happen to have a revolver?”

“I believe he keeps one.”



“Could you persuade him to allow you to carry it this evening? We may have need of it.”

“I shall ask presently.”

“Good. Now, whether or no he will allow you to carry it tonight, you must meet me at my hotel at four o’clock sharp. Wear dark colors, but not your best suit. It would not do for you to appear prosperous enough to attract a pick-pocket or some other such person.”

“Am I permitted to know the nature of our intrigue this evening?”

“I am sorry, Watson, but not yet. When you arrive at the hotel, I shall explain as best I can. Time is of the essence. I must prepare some things before tonight.”

With that, Holmes shut the door to the carriage and thumped the side wall with his hand. The driver engaged his team and pulled into the street.

It was nearly 2 o’ clock, and so I chose to not even pretend to sleep. Instead, I changed from my opera clothes into a dark suit, with a dark waistcoat and tie. I began to mount my pocket watch to my ensemble; then, moved to sudden suspiciousness by Holmes’ talk of pickpockets, I thought better of it and

placed it on the dressing table for safe-keeping. I descended to the drawing room and smoked, listening to the steady tick of the clock in the hall and contemplated the nature and details of our adventure so far. At half past three, I set out for the Palace Hotel, with Mr. Haas's Colt weighing heavily in my coat pocket.

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“Now, will you kindly explain to me what we are doing here? What was the nature of the message you sent before the opera?” I may have been cross, but it was either very late evening, or very early morning depending upon whether one keeps the hours of a banker or a fishmonger, and Holmes' endless circumlocutions and evasions of our true purpose in stationing ourselves in the alley behind the opera house were beginning to stretch even the wide bounds of such a long and profitable friendship as ours. Holmes was wearing the same stained workman's outfit he had affected the previous evening.

“When we visited Stark's house, an

examination of the flower bed outside the dining room window revealed two sets of very interesting footprints. One man, thin and tall, approached the window from the street wearing hard-soled shoes. He leaned against the house, presumably into the window. He stood there for a few moments, then walked toward the front of the house, then returned to the window and departed again. The other set of footprints belonged to a small man who exited from inside the house. Do you recall that the housekeeper thought she heard an automobile backfire?"

"Yes. Do you think the men who killed Stark escaped in an auto?"

"No. I do not believe there was an auto at all. The housekeeper said Stark was warm, she thought he might still be alive. He had only been dead for a few minutes' time. She heard the shot that killed her master. The beat patrolman sent her away from the house, and asked her no questions because he already knew what had happened. He knew Stark was dead.

"Here is what happened that night. A man met Stark for supper. He insisted on sitting in Stark's usual place at the table, with his back to the wall.

This forced Stark to sit with his back to the window. The guest also unlatched the window at some time, and the tall man came to the window from the street, shot Stark, and fled—but in fleeing, he saw the housekeeper returning, and returned to the window, notifying the other man that the housekeeper would soon be upon him. The second man fled through the window, pulling it shut behind him, but he could not latch it. You may have noticed that when a door or a casement window is open in one part of a house, and a door is opened in another part, the wind pulls the first door or window open, or shut, as the case may be. When Mrs. MacDermid opened the front door, the wind created a vacuum, which pulled the dining room window open because it was unlatched.

“My message was to the man who was inside the room with Stark when he was shot. It said ‘I know you stole the picture. Meet me behind the opera house at 4 o’ clock.’”

“Stole which picture?”

“The picture whose frame made a small, rectangular mark in the dust on Stark’s mantle. In the first crime-scene photograph, that which showed the room from Stark’s point of view, a small picture frame

was visible on the mantle. It was a picture of two men, however I could not tell who they were. I believe it to be a picture of Stark and the man he was eating with, one who did not want it known that he was a familiar of this information broker and thus removed the picture. The second crime-scene photograph told me who the man was.”

“How?”

“In the second photograph, the picture was gone. It was removed from the mantle after the first photograph was taken, and before the second.”

“But the pictures show an empty room! The only person in the room was Stark, and he was in no position to be stealing objects off his own mantle.”

“There was one other person in the room, Watson. The photographer. And there he is.”

Inspector Burns had stepped off the street, and into the alley.

“Are you alone?” asked Holmes warily.

“Yes.”

“And were you followed?”

“I don’t think so, but I wouldn’t be surprised if I was.” Burns’s demeanor had changed somehow. I gained the impression that the whimpering man-child

Holmes and I had met at the station was some kind of disguise—to what purpose I was not certain.

“May I see the picture?” Holmes held out his hand. Burns produced a small gilt frame from his breast pocket. The picture was of a young man, presumably Stark, and an even younger Burns standing on the stoop of a building, smiling.

“You were friends. Why not warn him that he was to be killed?” asked Holmes.

“I didn’t know. I was supposed to talk to him—make him give up the books. They said if he did, they wouldn’t kill him.”

“What books?”

“Ledgers. City ledgers. The mayor, the Board of Supervisors, some of them are about to be indicted. Fraud, graft. You name it, they’re in it.”

“I was watching Mayor Schmitz and Abraham Ruef at the opera. They were talking to the same officer who was watching Watson and myself when we spoke to you at the station.”

“Max Fenner.” The hatred in Burns’s voice was nearly palpable. “Bradley knew everything they were involved in, and he had the proof. He was going to expose them, unless they gave him whatever he

wanted.”

“And what was that?”

“Brad’s mother was in the same business he was in—information brokering. She crossed one of the Tongs, and they killed her. He told Ruef that he would give up the books if the City cracked down on the Tong that killed his ma.”

“Hung Mun?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”

“That is of no consequence. Why pick Stamford to hang for the crime?”

“He won’t. Brad was watched. He’d met with this Englishman a couple of times. That afternoon, Brad got a letter delivered by messenger. It was from this Stamford. Ruef wanted him arrested—to throw the Special Prosecutor off the trail.”

“You arrived at Stark’s house. You insisted that he sit with his back to the window.”

“They said they’d sneak in the window, grab him from behind. They were only supposed to scare him. Shake him up a bit. I didn’t know Fenner was going to shoot him.”

“So when you entered the room, you unlatched the window, so it could be pushed open from outside.

Then, you watched. When you saw Fenner, you assumed he would come in through the window quietly and harangue Stark. But when you saw his revolver, aimed at Stark's head, you knew they would kill him. You dove out of your chair, to avoid catching a stray bullet."

Burns was plainly astonished at Holmes' knowledge.

"Yes. That's just the way it happened. Fenner ran off, but then he came back and said the housekeeper was coming down the street and I'd better run. So I jumped out the window behind him. I pulled it shut, but it must have blown open again."

"And Fenner was the beat patrolman the housekeeper came upon at the corner."

"Yes. She knows me, so he told her to stay out of the house. Then he telephoned back to the station. As soon as I got in, they told me to go back with the camera and take away anything that could point to any police involvement."

"Why did you assent to speak to us finally?"

"At first, they told me to refuse to see you. Then, when you kept asking questions, they told me to talk to you, to seem like I was going to help you.



They wanted to find out how much you knew, and if you knew where the books were.”

“The ledgers still haven’t been found?”

“No. Brad told me he put them somewhere safe. He said ‘Nobody is ever going to find them, especially not a city man.’”

“Were those his words, exactly?”

“Yes.”

I had thus far held my tongue, but at this point it got the better of me.

“Why are you suddenly so eager to offer help?”

“I was hired several months ago by someone, I can’t say who, but let’s just say it’s someone who’s planning to put Ruef and Schmitz and all their cronies away for good. My job was to play pigeon. Pretend to be stupid, get them to trust me enough to let me in on something. Then, we grab them. I never thought it would get my best friend killed.”

“You’re Older’s ‘man inside’.”

Burns was shocked.

“I don’t know how you know that, but you’re right.”

“Why is Stamford being held on Alcatraz

Island, instead of in the regular city jail?" Holmes asked.

"It's supposedly because since he's a foreigner, he might flee the country, and the Island is harder to escape from. Really, it's to keep Ruef's men from killing him in the jail. If he can't offer evidence in his own defense, it sews the case up nicely. That's why you weren't allowed in to see him. We didn't know who you were, and if you were really someone working for Ruef."

"What is to become of Stamford?" I asked.

"He'll be released when this mess is over. Right now, I need Fenner, Ruef and Schmitz to think they got away with killing Brad."

"And if I were to find the ledger books?" Holmes asked.

"You'd be doing justice a great favor if you turned them over to the Special Prosecutor, Francis Heney."

"We shall see what can be done."

We left Burns and headed back down town. The streetcars were not yet running and Holmes and I were unable to find a cab at that early hour. All over the city, shopkeepers were beginning to set up there

wares in the streets around us. We were walking along Market, toward Chinatown.

“Watson, I have been a fool. It is all so clear to me now.”

“The entire case?”

“Yes.”

“Would it be too much trouble to beg a recitation of this knowledge, since it still eludes me?” As I have already attested to, I am a man of patience, but it is not infinite.

“Of course, Watson. How crude of me. Stamford was staying in that horrible hotel for two reasons. One was that he was closer to Chinatown, where he believed his son to be held. But there was a second reason—Stamford had nearly run out of money. Stark was found with \$500 in his breast-pocket, along with Stamford’s note, but when we visited Stamford, he said of Stark ‘I paid him my *hundred*. . .’ If Stamford only paid one-hundred dollars, someone else must have paid Stark four-hundred more, and he was keeping it in the same breast-pocket. That someone was undoubtedly Ruef or one of his agents. It was an attempt to purchase the ledger books.”

Holmes and I turned onto Taylor street.

“When I disguised myself as an opium-fiend on Easter week-end and prowled around Chinatown, I inquired as to where a man in need of some ‘action’ as the current American colloquialism goes could find himself a Mahjong game. I was eventually directed to an opium-den where the Hung Mun Tong holds sway. There I learned that the Tong’s old leader from Hong Kong, a man named Liu Qui Shing, had recently emigrated to San Francisco from the colony, after his only remaining child, a daughter, had died.

“You may not have known it, Watson, but the Chinese custom is to give the surname first, then the given names. Liu Qui Shing was the father of Liu Mae Xio, or as we know her, May Stamford.”

“He stole his own grandson.”

“Yes. It is a thorny problem. I believed the child to be safely with his grandfather, since it was an inter-family abduction, but now I believe that Ruef and his lackeys may have already guessed what we have just now discovered.”

“And what is that?”

“The whereabouts of the missing ledgers.

Stark needed a place to hide them. A place ‘no city-man would ever find them.’”

“And where would that be?”

“In a place no city-man would go. Within Chinatown, there is a section a few blocks long and wide where even the Chinese seldom venture. Within these blocks I found a brothel, gambling parlor and opium den which is owned by the Jin Hao Tong.<sup>11</sup> They are the arch rivals of the Hung Mun.”

We had passed into Chinatown proper shortly before, and we were now coming up to an intersection where the houses and shops all had red characters painted on the doors and walls. The street was too quiet, even for the pre-dawn hour.

“Holmes, why is this portion of the town avoided?”

“Because, Watson, many of the Chinese in this section carry plague. Stark had already found Stamford’s child and removed him, but he needed to find a place to hide the child *and* the ledgers until after his meeting with Burns. He trusted Burns, since they were friends, so he arranged to meet Stamford outside of the house where his child and the ledgers

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11 “Jin Hao” means “Golden Oyster” in Cantonese.

were being kept. If Stark had not been killed, he would have met Stamford here, our friend would have been re-united with his son, and Stark would have reclaimed the ledgers. What better place than this? The white officials will not search here for fear of plague, and the Hung Mun will not for fear of the Jin Hao.”

We were standing in front of a three-storey shop. A sign mounted to its red-tiled roof proclaimed it to be the Golden Oyster. Holmes circled around the building. In the alley behind, there was a small wooden door, upon which he knocked five times in rapid succession.

“Wei?”<sup>12</sup> An old Chinese woman, so tiny she barely stood above Holmes’ waist had opened the door.

“We would like Ya Pian.”

“So sorry. No Ya Pian here.” The old woman tried to slam the door in Holmes’ face, but he pushed a foot into the doorway.

“Please, my friend and I need Ya Pian. We will

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12 “Wei” means “Hello” in Cantonese. “Xing-xing” means “sexual intercourse.” “Xanadu” was a mythical Chinese city, meant to represent heaven. “Quai-loh” means “foreign devils.”

pay.” Holmes produced a gold piece which the old woman eyed for a moment before snatching with a speed I would not have credited her with. She looked warily at Holmes as she bit the coin, then opened the door and admitted us into a dark room that smelled heavily of cabbage.

“You sure you want Ya Pian? Not like xing-xing?” The woman reached into a dark corner and pulled out a Chinese girl of perhaps ten whose rags barely covered her young body. The old woman spat on the filthy floor.

“Good God!” I exclaimed. Holmes held me back.

“No.”

“You English? May-be you like xing-xing boy?” On the other side of the passage she drew forth a boy of twelve or thirteen.

“No. Ya Pian only.”

“Ya Pian no good for quai-loh. Quai-loh smoke Ya Pian, not find Xanadu. Not find own backside! You want Xanadu, you xing-xing.” She cackled gleefully, showing a mouth devoid of teeth.

“We wish Ya Pian.”

The woman made a sound of disgust, that we

should spurn the attentions of her child prostitutes for this 'Ya Pian.' She shrugged and turned, gesturing for Homes and I to follow her deeper into the gloom.

"Who is Ya Pian, and will he know where the child is?" I whispered as the old woman led us down a flight of stairs.

"Ya Pian is the word for 'opium' in the dialect of Hamma, which is spoken in Hong Kong. We are being taken to an opium den where foreigners are allowed to partake of the pipe."

Soon we were admitted to a small room which was made stifling by the number of bodies pressed into it. Steam and a foul-smelling smoke arose from a contraption in the corner where a fat Chinese reclined on a bed of pillows, taking a long pull on a stem which protruded from the monstrous machine. Others, some men, some women— both Chinese and white—were lounging on the floor or on narrow pallets, drawing a bubbling liquid through small pipes of carved jade and alabaster. In another corner, scraping opium sap from the pods of the poppies with a dull blade was a small child whose Chinese-influenced features did little to distract from the fact that he was Stamford's son. In his lap were



two slim volumes.

“Watson, draw your revolver, if you please.”

I did so just as Holmes picked up the child. The fat man on the couch yelled a string of words—the composition and tone of which led me to believe they were obscenities—in our direction and we retreated quickly the way we had come, first Holmes with the child, and myself, walking backwards behind him with the revolver leveled at the darkened passageway.

We emerged into the weak light of day and Holmes ran toward the now-operating streetcar. In an instant, we were away from Chinatown, and heading up the hill, toward Octavia Street.

When we reached the Haas’ House, I awakened Mary and informed her of the situation. We put young William to bed. Holmes and I prepared to take the ledgers to Older later that morning, but first Holmes wanted me to join him at his hotel so we could discuss the evening’s events. We boarded a streetcar which took us downtown, just as a clock somewhere in the city struck five o’ clock. We had disembarked on Market, in front of the Palace Hotel. Just as we were about to enter, a man

shoved Holmes from behind. He fell into me, and we both crumbled to the ground. The man stooped near us for a moment and then ran.

“Fenner—Watson, he has the ledgers!”

Fenner ran like a fox before the hounds. He darted between two buildings and disappeared from sight, but Holmes was after him like a shot. Fenner was a tall, thin man, like Holmes, and their strides, though a good match for each other, were far too long for me. Soon, I lagged behind.

I stopped for a moment, to catch my breath and to listen for cries or footsteps, but I could hear nothing. After a bit, I continued and presently I found myself on Oak, at the crest of the hill. A movement in the long shadow of a building alerted me to a human presence. It was Holmes. A moment later, he moved from the building’s side and hid himself in the darkness of a shop’s door, waiting and watching. I did likewise. Holmes seemed to be watching another shadow across the street. The road sloped sharply down, and there was a brick-lined tunnel entering the hillside beside the street. At that moment, I was distracted. Not by a sound precisely, but rather by a lack of sound. Every animal in the city but for the

human ones seemed to have ceased their scuffling, cooing, and fluttering.

I had little time to wonder at this marvel, for suddenly, a shadow detached itself from the wall of a building and dashed into the mouth of the tunnel. Holmes reached the tunnel's entrance a second after Fenner ducked into it. I saw Holmes disappear into the dusky mouth of the hole. Then, the ground began to shake.

The earth seemed to sway, almost gently at first, as when one is in a hammock. Then, the shaking grew more violent, as if I were standing in the saddle of a galloping horse. From my vantage at the top of the hill, I could see most of the North side of the city. Chinatown was below and to my left, the tenements South-East of Market Street below and to my right. Near the center of the tenements, a great cloud of dust went up where a building collapsed. Then another followed it. The ground beneath the buildings liquified and tenements sunk into the earth like stones dropped into a pond. Masonry began to fall in gross amounts from the buildings around me, and I cowered in the frame of the door. There was a great rumbling. The ground was now rising up,

undulating like a ship's deck rolling in a turgid sea. My shock was fleeing and was replaced by fear.

*How can it last so long?* I wondered.

A new noise joined the first, the sound of breaking glass—the swaying motion had left them intact, but the earth's new dance had shattered windows all over the city. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the shaking ceased and I gasped for air. I had not realized I was holding my breath. Below, a cloud of dust was settling, revealing a city in shambles. The sun was rising over the hills to the east. Somewhere, a woman was screaming.

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People were pouring out of buildings and into the street. There was smoke in the air from a hundred broken oil lamps. The noise and the press of people fleeing in terror was great. Those who could not run were trampled beneath the feet of those who could. I managed to escape to the street's other side and to find the mouth of the tunnel where I had last seen Holmes. It was filled with rubble where the tunnel's poorly shored walls had caved. Vainly, I called.

“Holmes! Holmes are you in there, man? Can you hear me?”

I scraped at the rocks and soil with my hands, looking for some sign, some scrap of skin or cloth that would lead me to him. I could hear sirens and the wails of women and babes. A fire brigade was trying to navigate the press of bodies, living and dead, which were lying in the street. The fire wagon

swerved around a group of frightened people and into a pile of rubble which overturned it. The horses screamed and one fell, a leg broken and tangled in the fallen masonry.

Later, it may have been a few minutes or many, a young man in an automobile came to my aid. I had dragged much of the refuse away from the tunnel's mouth, but some large pieces proved too heavy for me.

"Is somebody in there?"

"Yes, my friend—he had just entered when the shaking began."

The young man helped me shift the largest stones and to clear away the rubble we could dislodge beyond them. My hand encountered a man's shoe. With trepidation, I uncovered the body. It was Fenner. The young man and I kept digging. Soon, I spied a piece of cloth, no bigger than my hand. It was a pocket handkerchief with the initials "S.H." embroidered on its linen edge.

"Holmes!" A bit more digging and we broke through into a space which had not been crumbled in by the quake. There sat Mr. Sherlock Holmes. He was unconscious. A cursory examination of him

proved that he was stabbed by a folding knife, and had lost much blood.

“We’ll carry him out to my auto. Where do you live?”

“I am staying presently with my brother-in-law, Mr. Alexander Haas, of Octavia Street, but perhaps we should take Mr. Holmes to his lodging, for it is closer—he is staying at the Palace Hotel.”

“Oh we can’t go there, the fire’s spread South of Market. The Palace is on fire.”

“On fire!”

“Yes. You might not have noticed, since you were busy trying to save your friend here, but the whole city is on fire, mostly.”

It was as he said. I had been so intent on recovering Holmes that the sounds of fire brigades and the smell of smoke had eluded me. We loaded Holmes into the automobile and the young man drove recklessly back to Octavia Street.

“Is it quite safe to move at this speed?” I cried over the noise.

“We’re only going 27 or 28. . .when I race I can get ‘er up to 45!”

At that moment, I envied Holmes’ unconscious

state. When the crash came that killed us both, he would at least meet it senseless. Much to my shock, we arrived at the Haas' house unscathed. Holmes was carried in and lain on a couch in the parlor where I tended to his wounds.

“John! We thought you dead!” Mary was not easily consoled, but her affection and concern for Holmes—whose condition was far worse than my own—soon overrode her love for me and she began to help me tend him. The young man dismissed himself.

“I'd better get back out there. My auto's coming in pretty handy. Lotta horses are scared because of the fire and the falling bricks. I've got all five autos from my showroom out there now, with drivers. One's pulling a fire wagon whose horses got killed, the others are rescuing people and driving them out of the path of the fire.”

“A remarkable machine!” remarked Mr. Haas.

“Well, after this mess is all cleaned up, if you're still in that mind come and see me. I have the Buick dealership on—oh, wait. The fire's gotten there by now. Well, my name is Charles Howard, and I'll have a new dealership as soon as I can rebuild.”



“Thank you again Mr. Howard. You’ve saved my friend’s life.” I said.

“No problem, mister. . .”

“Dr. Watson.”

“No problem. Good day!”

Polly showed Mr. Howard out.

Later that day, the lights went out. A proclamation, issued by the Mayor, E.E. Schimtz, and published in all the newspapers proclaimed the reason:

THE FEDERAL TROOPS, THE MEMBERS OF THE REGULAR POLICE FORCE AND ALL SPECIAL POLICE OFFICERS HAVE BEEN AUTHORIZED BY ME TO KILL ANY AND ALL PERSONS FOUND ENGAGED IN LOOTING OR IN THE COMMISSION OF ANY OTHER CRIME.

I HAVE DIRECTED ALL THE GAS AND ELECTRIC LIGHTING CO.’S NOT TO TURN ON GAS OR ELECTRICITY UNTIL I ORDER THEM TO DO SO. YOU MAY THEREFORE EXPECT THE CITY TO REMAIN IN DARKNESS FOR AN INDEFINITE TIME.

I REQUEST ALL CITIZENS TO REMAIN AT HOME FROM DARKNESS UNTIL DAYLIGHT EVERY NIGHT UNTIL ORDER IS RESTORED.

I WARN ALL CITIZENS OF THE DANGER OF FIRE  
FROM DAMAGED OR DESTROYED CHIMNEYS, BROKEN OR  
LEAKING GAS PIPES OR FIXTURES, OR ANY LIKE CAUSE.<sup>13</sup>

The fire continued for five days. At first, we feared that it would spread as far as the Haas house, but the Army arrived and fought the fire as best they could. As a last resort, they dynamited several grand homes along Van Ness—the city’s widest street. The fire burned there for two days, and though all South of it was inundated with smoke and ash, the fire did not jump the road.

Holmes recovered. He had wrestled the ledgers away from Fenner just before the tunnel collapsed, and had secreted them in his coat. In due time, they were delivered to the Special Prosecutor, Mr. Heney. Stamford was released, and he came to stay at the Haas house with Holmes and I. A merrier reunion than that between father and son I have never seen.

There was a great clattering about the city, for the work of rebuilding had begun in earnest as soon

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13 Eugene E. Schmitz. “A Warning” published in the San Francisco Call-Bulletin, April 18, 1906.

as the fires were out. Row houses had begun to replace the destroyed tenements along Market and Main. The Dowager Empress of China had volunteered 100,000 *taels* of silver for the rebuilding of Chinese businesses and the succor of refugees in the city, but the American President, Roosevelt had refused to accept it. The rumor about town was that the Chinese businesses and aid associations had discretely taken the money anyway.

A few weeks later, Mary and I planned to return to England. Holmes and Stamford were planning on leaving as well. Holmes expressed a desire to see the Orient, and chose to accompany Stamford back to Hong Kong. On the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, we stood on the pier, watching their ship prepare to leave.

“A most satisfying conclusion to this San Franciscan affair, would you not say so, Watson? Ruef will go to jail. Stamford is reunited with his son. With a new Mayor and council, San Francisco will begin to clean up the gambling and prostitution in Chinatown, so Stark’s original mission is completed as well.”

“And Mary was able to see Caruso once

again.” I grimaced.

Holmes and I both laughed.

“But so much of the city was destroyed. . .” I said.

“Yes. Destruction follows us all, Watson. But have you ever found a Roman relic in some small corner of England. A piece of wall, perhaps, or an old temple?”

“Of course.”

“Fear not for San Francisco. Cities outlive men by far. They have already begun to rebuild the grand city, and that which they forge from the ashes of this one will be grander still.”

“I suppose you are correct, as always.” I said. The ship was preparing to disembark, and Holmes turned to go. “Holmes. . .”

He turned. “What is it, Watson?”

“There is but one question which yet plagues my mind.”

“And what might that be Watson?”

“How can you stand the opera?”

When Holmes produced from his pocket two small balls of bees’ wax, we laughed in the way only those who have been friends through such times as

we can do.

## **A Note on the Characters in The San Franciscan Affair**

The characters portrayed in “The San Franciscan Affair” can be placed in three categories: historical persons, fictional characters created by another author, and fictional characters created for this short story.

Characters based on historical persons:

### **Eugene E. Schmitz (1864-1928)**

Mayor of San Francisco 1901-1906

“Handsome Gene” was a musician and former bandleader when he surprisingly beat the incumbent Mayor, James Phelan in 1901. He was the first mayor ever elected in the United States running on the Union Labor ticket. Unfortunately, he was put forth as the party’s candidate because he was seen as an easily manipulatable puppet—controlled by corrupt Labor organizer Abraham Ruef. When the indictments were handed down, Schmitz was charged with 27 counts of bribery and graft. Though his conviction was overturned by the State Appellate Court, his political career was never

able to gain the momentum it had enjoyed before the trial.<sup>14</sup>

### **James Duval Phelan (1861-1930)**

Mayor of San Francisco 1897-1901

Before his election as Mayor of San Francisco in 1896, Phelan ran the bank his Irish-immigrant father had built.<sup>15</sup> Generally regarded as a good Mayor by his contemporaries, Phelan instituted an urban renewal project at the beginning of his tenure which included the construction of many of the city's parks and public art pieces. His political writings clearly reflect the anti-immigrant and particularly anti-Asian views so common in the city at the turn of the century, and it was he who first suggested a quarantine area for the Chinese who were believed to carry the Bubonic Plague.

### **Officer William J. Burns (1860-1932)**

Burns began his career as a police detective, assisting Special Prosecutor Francis Heney in the graft investigations against Eugene Schmitz and Abraham Ruef. After making his reputation in San Francisco, Burns moved to the East Coast. He opened the William J. Burns

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14 <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/schmitz.html>

15 <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist1/phelanbio.html>

Detective Agency, and published 'true crime' stories in dime magazines, featuring himself as the hero—crusading selflessly against corruption and graft. This fame led to his appointment as Director of the FBI in 1921. In an ironic twist that would have been more suited to one of Burns' own stories, he lost the Directorship in 1924, when President Harding asked Burns to step aside after he was implicated in Teapot Dome—a scandal that eerily replayed the San Franciscan graft scandal, wherein private companies paid commissions to Government officials in order to secure the lease of national reserve oil lands.<sup>16</sup>

### **Abraham Ruef (1864-1936)**

Organizer of the Union Labor Party, Ruef was a lawyer whose representation of several utility companies gained him the notoriety of being the mastermind of the San Francisco graft conspiracy. The particular incident which seems to have sparked the graft investigation evolved from the city's decision to adopt cable cars with overhead power lines, in opposition to another plan, put forth by philanthropist Rudolph Spreckels, who favored underground cables. According to the California Historical Society, "the United Railroads of San Francisco sought an ordinance from the city to convert its cable cars to electric trolleys. The company paid Ruef an attorney's fee of \$200,000. Ruef then divided \$85,000 among the members of the city board of supervisors who promptly voted to pass the ordinance."<sup>17</sup> Ruef was convicted of

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16 Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Directors Then and Now" <http://www.fbi.gov/libref/directors/burns.htm>

17 [http://www.californiahistory.net/8\\_pages/reform\\_bossRuef.htm](http://www.californiahistory.net/8_pages/reform_bossRuef.htm)

bribery and spent four years, seven months in San Quentin.<sup>18</sup>

### **Charles Howard (1881-1950)**

Though best known as the owner of famed racehorse Seabiscuit, Charles Howard began as a bicycle repairman. He soon moved up to Buicks, and established a Buick dealership in San Francisco at the age of 24. Before the Earthquake, the general mood about automobiles was that they were a way for the idle rich to waste their money. Many city ordinances prohibited or restricted their use. During the fires, several automobile owners, including Howard, distinguished themselves by using their cars to haul fire engines, to carry wounded and to evacuate people to ships or to the surrounding countryside. Several newspaper articles, a few featuring Howard himself, soon helped to turn the tide of public feeling, and automobiles became accepted.<sup>19</sup>

### **Fremont Older (1856-1935)**

A staunch Progressive, Older became the Editor of the San Francisco Bulletin in 1895. He soon encouraged James D. Phelan to run for Mayor, and the Bulletin published a pro-Phelan piece. Older claimed to abhor corruption and he used his influence and writing skills to

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18 San Francisco Sheriff's Department "Famous and Infamous" <http://www.sfsheriff.com/inmates/inmate05.htm>

19 Laura Hillenbrand. *Seabiscuit: An American Legend*. [book online] Westminster, MD, USA: Random House Adult Trade Group, 2001. Accessed 10 February 2005. *Ebrary*. Available from <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/portlandcc/Doc?id=2002327>; Internet.



lambaste any politician, policeman, or other citizen he felt opposed to. He and his wife, Cora, lived at the Palace Hotel, considered the world's most sumptuous and one of the most expensive, until it was destroyed in the fire that followed the great earthquake in 1906.<sup>20</sup>

### **Rudolph Spreckels (1872-1958)**

Spreckels, an heir of the famous Spreckels Sugar empire, was active in Progressive politics, and was a noted philanthropist.

### **Officer Max Fenner**

Officer Fenner was mentioned in the graft indictments, but he was never able to testify in his own defense, since he died during the earthquake, crushed by masonry that fell from the Essex Hotel, near Chinatown.

### **Enrico Caruso (1873-1921)**

Enrico Caruso was a famed Italian tenor. He wrote a personal account of the earthquake and fire which appeared in *The Theatre* magazine in July, 1906.

Characters invented by others:

**Sherlock Holmes, Dr. John H. Watson, Mycroft Holmes, Paul Stamford, and Mary Watson** were created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

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20 Cora Older. "Biography of Fremont Older" <http://www.sfmuseum.org/hist8/olderbio.html>

**The Hung Mun Tong** feature prominently in James Clavell's *Tai Pan*.

All other characters are original to this short story.

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