

The Bird That Fished at Dawn

A Cozy Sherlock Holmes Novella

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Preface

BY ALISTAIR CROFT

There are certain Sherlock Holmes stories remembered chiefly for their crimes. Others endure because of their danger, their villains, or their dramatic revelations. Yet there are also a few tales which remain in the memory for entirely different reasons — because they carry a particular atmosphere or an idea that lingers long after the mystery itself has been solved.

The Bird That Fished at Dawn belongs, for me, among those stories.

When I began writing this novella, I wished not merely to create another traditional mystery, but also to explore something I believe fascinated Conan Doyle himself: the relationship between human beings, nature, and the habits that shape us over the course of a lifetime. Holmes is often presented as the supreme logician, yet beneath that logic there also exists within him a profound fascination with patterns — both in people and in animals.

In this story Holmes and Watson move through the fog-bound districts of the Thames, where Eastern traditions, river life, and the rhythms of nature meet in curious ways. What begins as the mystery of several disappearing carp gradually becomes something far more unusual than an ordinary criminal investigation. It becomes a tale about memory, instinct, and the old directions that living creatures continue to follow long after the world around them has changed.

At the same time, I wished to write a quieter Holmes story — one built more upon atmosphere, observation, and mood than upon violence or

sensation. A story in which Watson's experience of the world becomes as important as the solution itself.

If the novella succeeds, I hope the reader will remember not only the explanation behind the mystery, but also the early mornings beside the Thames, the dark ponds in Mrs. Ashford's garden, and the old fishing bird flying through the London fog between nature and memory.

— *Alistair Croft*

Fog upon the Thames

It has often struck me, in these later years, when revisiting the notes and memoranda which still remain from my time beside Sherlock Holmes, that the public possesses but the faintest acquaintance with those quieter investigations which, in truth, occupied him most deeply. The cases which afterwards found their way into the newspapers or were repeated in clubs and drawing-rooms were generally those in which violent events, sensational crimes, or persons of considerable social prominence had played a part. Such a tendency was natural enough. The world has always found it easier to attach itself to drama than to the merely singular, and to scandal rather than to the silent mystery.

Yet it was not infrequently the more modest affairs which left the deepest impression upon Holmes himself. I do not refer merely to those cases in which the result consisted in the exposure of a criminal, but rather to those investigations where the understanding of what had occurred seemed of greater importance than any formal judgment or punishment. There were occasions upon which no one was arrested, no public accusation was ever made, and the matter advanced no farther than the small circle of persons directly touched by it. Yet it was precisely in such instances that Holmes would sometimes display a peculiar kind of interest extending far beyond that of the ordinary criminal investigator.

Among these quieter inquiries there remains vividly in my memory the affair which, in my later papers, came to bear the title *The Bird that Fished at Dawn*. Its entire nature was so singular, so quiet, and at the

same time so inexplicable, that I do not believe it could ever have been properly understood without Holmes's intervention.

I use the word *understood* deliberately rather than *solved*. For although the mystery ultimately found its explanation, it was not the mere unveiling of facts which granted the case its particular place in my memory, but rather the insight to which Holmes gradually led both myself and the persons concerned. It seemed to me then — and seems to me still — that beneath its outward simplicity the matter revealed something deeper than the ordinary question of guilt or innocence. For that reason, perhaps, it is one of those investigations from Holmes's later years to which my thoughts most frequently return.

It was, moreover, something which I increasingly observed in Holmes during the latter years of our acquaintance: namely, his particular interest in those cases in which animals formed, in one way or another, a part of the mystery. I must hasten to add, however, that this interest sprang in no degree from sentimental affection toward animals as such. Nothing could, in truth, have been more foreign to Holmes's nature than the emotional romanticism with which many persons surround their relations with animals. He regarded them neither as miniature human beings nor as objects for that exaggerated sensibility which, during those years, seemed to spread through certain circles in London society.

No, his interest was of an entirely different and far more analytical character. Holmes could often derive an almost intellectual satisfaction from observing the clear relationship between an animal's instinct and its actions. Where man not infrequently conceals his true motives — not merely from others, but from himself — the animal acts with far greater simplicity and consistency. Not because it is more intelligent, but because its impulses and intentions are seldom divided by the countless considerations which render human conduct so difficult to unravel.

In mankind, actions are perpetually mingled with ambition, fear, vanity, affection, jealousy, or the desire to appear other than one truly is. Holmes had often remarked how even the simplest apparent human motive might become obscured by self-deception and conflicting desires. The animal, by contrast, seemed to him in its own fashion more honest.

Its conduct arose from necessity, habit, hunger, fear, or protection, and for that very reason could at times prove easier to comprehend than that of man himself.

I recall that upon one occasion, during an entirely different investigation, Holmes observed that one could often learn more from studying the reaction of an animal than from questioning five witnesses to the same event. At the time the remark struck me merely as characteristic of his peculiar fondness for paradox, yet later I came to understand that a far deeper conviction lay beneath those words. For Holmes believed that within the clear instincts of the animal kingdom there existed a form of logic which mankind had too often lost beneath civilization's many layers of masks, social restraints, and concealed motives.

It was precisely for this reason, I think, that such investigations gradually came to occupy him more than one might initially have expected. Not because they were necessarily greater or more dangerous than other cases, but because they touched upon that curious borderland between human behavior and the more direct order of nature — a region which Holmes found both challenging and, in its own way, profoundly illuminating.

It was during those years around the turn of the century that London itself began, in many respects, to alter its outward face. Not in the sense that the city lost its own character — no city could less cease to be itself than London — but rather because distant regions of the world gradually left their marks upon its ports, districts, and private homes. This was perhaps particularly true along the banks of the Thames, where the ceaseless movement of merchant vessels between England and the farther reaches of the Empire brought not merely goods, but people and customs back into the city.

Among the wealthier classes there arose during these years an increasing fascination with the East, particularly with Japan and those regions of Asia which for many Englishmen still retained an air of something distant and almost ceremonial. Merchants, shipowners, diplomats, and travelers brought home not merely objects of art, porcelain, or silks, but

also a conception of another method of arranging space, gardens, and silence itself.

Yet the influence came not solely through the fascination of the wealthy. Around the docks and eastern districts of the city there gradually emerged small communities of Chinese and Japanese sailors, merchants, and laborers who had found their way to London through the great trade routes. Many lived modestly and comparatively unnoticed, but naturally enough they carried with them the customs, tools, and habits of their native lands. Along certain reaches of the river one could therefore at times gain the impression that the fogs of the Thames concealed small pockets of a foreign world hidden within the very heart of the English Empire.

When I now endeavor to summon this case again into memory, it is curiously enough not the individual events themselves which arise most vividly before me, but rather the peculiar atmosphere in which the whole investigation seemed enveloped from beginning to end. I remember the mornings beside the river, when the fog still lay low upon the water and drifted slowly among the dark paths and reed-lined banks of the gardens. There was a damp stillness over those reaches of the Thames unlike the ordinary noise and unrest of the city. Even the sounds themselves appeared softened there: the gentle wash against the stone embankments, the almost inaudible stirring of the reeds, or the sudden ring upon the dark water caused by a fish beneath the surface.

The oriental gardens which during those years had sprung up along the river acquired in the morning mist an even stranger aspect. Their small bridges, low pines, and dark ponds appeared less a part of London than fragments of some distant landscape which had by inexplicable means found its way among the city's brickwork and docklands. Not infrequently it seemed to me that the fog itself dissolved the boundary between the English and the foreign, so that London and the Orient appeared for a brief while to flow together along the silent reaches of the Thames.

It was amidst this singular mingling of London commerce, eastern fashion, and the silent regions of the river that the strange affair of the disappearing carp first began.

London wore that morning the very aspect which I have ever since most strongly associated with our years in Baker Street. Outside, a light fog hung over the streets — not dense enough entirely to obscure the traffic below, yet sufficient to soften the distant sounds and render them indistinct, as though the whole city had not yet fully awakened. Through the windows I could discern the damp roofs and the dark silhouettes of carriages and passers-by moving slowly through the mist.

Within, the same fog-laden atmosphere seemed to continue in another form through the blue-grey smoke of Holmes's pipe, which drifted in slow layers toward the ceiling and gathered above the fireplace. Holmes sat in his customary chair beside the fire, his long legs stretched before him and his fingertips pressed together beneath his chin, while he enjoyed the first pipe of the morning with that calm concentration which often heralded a day without larger plans. Upon the table beside him the newspapers still lay folded, and the chemical monograph which had occupied him the previous evening remained open among several flasks and test tubes upon the side-table.

The Lady from Richmond

The visitor who was shortly afterwards shown into the room gave at first glance the impression of an elderly lady of both cultivation and considerable means. She was neatly and carefully dressed, without any true ostentation of elegance, yet with that quiet and natural discretion which so often characterizes persons long accustomed to order, self-command, and social assurance. From her very first movements one received the impression of something foreign which could not entirely be placed within ordinary English society. There was in her bearing and manner of entering the room something which distinctly suggested the East — and, in my own estimation, more particularly Japan.

Her face bore the marks of age, yet also of that calm discipline which can sometimes lend even advanced years a peculiar dignity. Her manners and gestures were restrained and precise, almost ceremonial, and one sensed immediately that she was a person long accustomed to being received with attention and respect. At the same time, however, there rested upon her a faint air of disturbance — or perhaps rather of affront — as though something had disrupted an order which she had always regarded as both secure and perfectly controlled.

It seemed difficult for me to associate this cultivated and evidently wealthy lady with anything so simple and commonplace as the ordinary theft of fish from a private garden pond.

At Holmes's quiet invitation our visitor took her seat in the chair near the window, laid aside her gloves and small hat, and remained silent

for a moment, as though searching for the proper manner in which to begin her explanation. Holmes had reclined with half-closed eyes and fingertips joined together — a posture which I knew well, and which frequently caused new clients to imagine, quite mistakenly, that he listened with only limited interest.

“My name is Mrs. Eiko Ashford,” she began at last in a calm and perfectly controlled voice. “I originally come from Japan, where, while still very young, I became acquainted with my late husband, Mr. Ashford. At that time he was engaged in merchant shipping and import business with particular connections to the East.”

She spoke almost flawless English, though with that faint and carefully restrained accent which occasionally betrayed her origins.

“Following his retirement we settled in England, more precisely in Richmond upon the Thames. The transition was naturally a considerable one for me.” A faint smile passed across her face. “I shall not deny that I have often missed my homeland. Yet both my husband and I shared a particular love for Japanese gardens, and in time it became our common project to create something similar beside our own house.”

Holmes opened his eyes a fraction more, but still said nothing.

“When my husband withdrew from active business life,” continued Mrs. Ashford, “the garden gradually became the centre of our existence. We began arranging it according to the principles we both remembered from Japan. Not merely with plants, but with stones, watercourses, and small bridges between the ponds. We would often spend hours together selecting the proper stones and placing them precisely where they ought to lie. Even the sound of water possesses significance in a Japanese garden. Nothing must appear accidental.”

As she spoke, her earlier uneasiness seemed almost to recede into the background. There came over her something nearly meditative — a quiet solemnity — as though her thoughts already wandered once more among the dark ponds and damp pathways of the garden rather than within our smoke-filled room in Baker Street.

“You may perhaps find it strange, Mr. Holmes,” she said more softly, “but such gardens become, in time, more than merely a piece of land.

They become..." She hesitated for a moment, searching for the proper word. "...a form of order in one's life."

I remember that it was precisely at this point that it first struck me that we were not dealing with a woman who had merely lost some costly fish, but with a human being whose deeply personal and carefully constructed world had been disturbed in a manner far exceeding any purely financial loss.

Mrs. Eiko Ashford now seemed almost to have forgotten the true purpose of her visit and continued with that warmth which people show only when speaking of something which has occupied both their thoughts and feelings for many years.

"My fascination with koi carp began in my childhood," she said quietly. "In Japan such fish are not merely decorative. Many families regard them almost as living symbols of tranquillity, endurance, and balance. I still remember the ponds of my childhood — the dark surface beneath which color's would suddenly glide forward like moving paintings."

A faint and almost wistful smile passed across her face at the recollection.

"When later I came to England and learned that these fish could indeed survive here — particularly in the damp and comparatively temperate regions near the Thames — the thought began to occupy both my husband and myself more seriously. Through his commercial connections we succeeded, after some time, in obtaining a few specimens from Japan. At first my husband even imagined that there might be a genuine business in it. English interest in all things oriental was growing rapidly in those years, and he believed that a market for such fish might in time develop considerably."

She laughed softly and shook her head.

"But that project soon foundered upon both of us. We discovered, quite simply, that we could not bear to part with the best fish once they had come into our possession."

Holmes's eyes still rested upon her half closed, but I noticed the almost imperceptible movement of his fingertips which often betrayed a growing interest.

"They are remarkable creatures, Mr. Holmes," continued Mrs. Ashford with quiet seriousness. "The colors alone may be quite extraordinary. Some almost white as porcelain, others deep red or golden with dark markings. And the size..." She made a small gesture with her hands. "People often underestimate how impressive such fish may become with the years."

For a moment it seemed to me almost as though she spoke of rare works of art rather than living creatures.

"Their rarity naturally also plays a part," she continued. "Certain specimens are difficult to obtain even in Japan, and among collectors they command considerable prices. I shall not pretend that this aspect is without importance. Every collector, I suppose, feels a certain satisfaction in possessing something rare. But in time it became less a matter of value and more..." She paused briefly, as though searching for a more precise word. "...more a matter of affection, if you understand me."

As Mrs. Eiko Ashford spoke, I must confess that I myself was gradually drawn in by the peculiar atmosphere with which she described her gardens and her fish. There was in her account such a mingling of calm, pride, and almost meditative devotion that it was difficult not to imagine those misty gardens beside the Thames and the slow flashes of colour beneath the dark water. It became increasingly clear to me that, for this woman, the garden had become far more than a pastime; rather, it was an attempt to create a small enclosed order amid the unrest of the modern world.

Holmes, on the other hand, appeared almost ostentatiously uninterested.

For long periods during the client's account, he sat quite motionless in his chair, his eyes closed and his fingertips joined before him, while the smoke from his pipe rose and partly concealed his face. Only once or twice did I think I detected the slight movement about his eyelids which sometimes revealed that his attention was in truth far sharper than his outward manner suggested.

When Mrs. Ashford at last fell silent, there was a brief pause in the room. Holmes slowly removed the pipe from his lips without yet opening his eyes.

"And the difficulty?" he asked dryly.

The question seemed almost to surprise our client, who for a moment had to collect her thoughts before continuing.

"The difficulty, Mr. Holmes," she said more slowly, "is that the fish have begun to disappear."

Holmes now opened his eyes slightly.

"Disappear?"

"Yes. The largest of them."

She leaned a little forward in her chair.

"When I first became aware of it some fortnight or perhaps three weeks ago, I thought at first that I must have been mistaken in my count. But I must admit that I know my fish exceedingly well. I know precisely how many I possess, and which of them belong in the individual ponds."

Her previously calm voice now took on a clearer note of uneasiness.

"Gradually it became plain to me that there was a kind of system. Almost every day one fish disappeared. Not the small or middle-sized ones — always one of the largest."

Holmes said nothing.

"The strangest thing, perhaps," continued Mrs. Ashford, "is that there are no traces at all. I have observed no dead fish. No damage to the ponds. No disturbance in the water. No broken plants around the banks. No mud. No sign of intrusion."

She made a helpless gesture with her hand.

"And yet, every morning, another fish is missing."

Now, for the first time, Holmes seemed to show a slightly more definite interest. He slowly laid his pipe upon the edge of the mantelpiece and straightened a little in his chair, while his gaze fixed itself more directly upon our client.

"And naturally," said he calmly, "you have formed certain suspicions?"

"Naturally," replied Mrs. Eiko Ashford quickly. "My thoughts have first and foremost turned to those persons who have access to the garden."

She hesitated for a moment.

"The servants, of course. The gardeners. And also, some local boys from the neighborhood, who have from time to time been something of a nuisance."

Her face assumed a faintly embarrassed expression.

"I must unfortunately admit, Mr. Holmes, that I may myself have helped to create the difficulty. On a few occasions I rather incautiously showed a couple of these street boys the fish. They seemed greatly fascinated by them, and I... well, I suppose I feared no real harm. But I have since regretted that carelessness."

Holmes nodded faintly without comment.

"And then, of course, there are the gardeners," continued Mrs. Ashford. "One of the younger men in particular has developed a rather marked interest in the fish. At first I noticed it merely as ordinary curiosity, which seemed natural enough. But in time he began to ask questions which appeared to me..." She searched for a suitable word. "...less innocent."

"In what way?" asked Holmes.

"They were not questions about the fish themselves. Not about their habits or their care. He was interested rather in their value. How rare they were. How difficult they were to obtain. What prices they might command among collectors in London."

Mrs. Ashford drew a slightly heavier breath.

"One must remember, Mr. Holmes, that certain of these fish represent considerable sums. A single one of the largest carp could easily be worth several months' wages to a young gardener."

I remember that at this point our client's suspicion did not appear to me unreasonable. On the contrary, the whole affair suddenly seemed to me quite simple. The temptation must necessarily have been considerable for a young man of modest income who daily moved among such valuables and knew at the same time how comparatively easy it would be

to remove them without great risk. I freely confess that my own thoughts had already begun to turn toward an ordinary theft.

Holmes, however, did not yet appear to have reached any conclusion. He sat silent for several seconds, his gaze fixed upon the smoke of the slowly smouldering pipe, before he put his next question.

I must willingly admit that Mrs. Eiko Ashford's suspicion at that time seemed to me both natural and highly probable. It would, of course, be unjust to say that I condemned the young gardener solely upon the basis of his position or humble circumstances; yet I could not deny that the entire explanation appeared to me exceedingly human, and therefore quite plausible.

One must remember the conditions under which many young laborers lived in those days. The wages of a gardener's boy were modest, his prospects often uncertain, and the temptation must necessarily have been great for a man who daily moved among objects of such value. He had access to the ponds at all hours of the working day, knew the routines of the garden, and was probably better aware than anyone how relatively simple it would be to remove a single fish without immediately arousing suspicion.

And what, after all, was one carp among so many?

I still recall how the thought almost formed itself automatically in my mind: perhaps the young man had first taken one fish in a moment of weakness, then discovered how easily it could be sold, and thereafter found himself caught in the gradual temptation to continue. Perhaps he had already established connections with certain collectors or dealers who were willing to purchase such rare creatures without asking too many questions. And for that very reason he took only one fish at a time — slowly, cautiously, and systematically — so as not to create alarm or sudden attention around the ponds.

All this appeared to me at the time not merely possible, but almost self-evident.

Holmes, by contrast, seemed once more to have slipped back into his former state of half-distant indifference. He had again lit his pipe and now sat with his gaze fixed upon the slowly rising smoke, while our

client's words appeared to occupy him only in a limited degree. Once or twice, however, I noticed that faint and almost imperceptible expression about his eyes which I knew so well, and which often revealed that his thoughts were working along lines quite different from my own.

I remember that it struck me for a moment that perhaps Holmes simply found the matter too commonplace to engage him seriously. There was, after all, no actual violence, no intricate crime, and no great human tragedy — merely some costly fish which, in all probability, had been removed by a tempted young laborer with access to the garden. Even the alleged regularity seemed to me quite easily explained by ordinary caution.

At what hour?

Holmes slowly removed the pipe from his lips and, in his usual calm voice, put the question which was later to prove far more important than any of us at that moment imagined.

“At what hour do the disappearances occur?”

The question appeared to astonish Mrs. Ashford completely.

“I beg your pardon?” said she.

“At what hour?” repeated Holmes quietly. “At what time do you normally discover that a fish is missing?”

Mrs. Ashford blinked for a moment, plainly confused by the direction of the inquiry.

“I... well, that is to say...” She hesitated briefly. “I had rather imagined, Mr. Holmes, that you would ask more closely about the gardeners or the servants.”

“That may possibly come later,” said Holmes dryly.

Mrs. Ashford straightened a little in her chair.

“I usually discover it early in the morning,” she replied. “When I make my first round of the garden after breakfast. But at what hour the disappearance itself occurs, I naturally cannot say with certainty.”

Holmes nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Have you any reason to believe that it occurs during the night?”

“No... not particularly.”

“Or in the middle of the day?”

“No.”

“At what hour, then, would you consider it most likely?”

Mrs. Ashford hesitated once more.

"If I am to answer honestly," she said more slowly, "I should think very early in the morning. The garden is often quite still at that hour. The gardeners have not yet begun their work, and the fog from the river still lies heavily over the ponds."

"Indeed," said Holmes softly.

I still remember how exceedingly odd that whole exchange seemed to me. The question of time appeared, on the surface, almost irrelevant beside the far more obvious suspicions concerning the gardener and the other persons who had access to the garden. Yet at the same time I knew Holmes well enough to detect at once the small, almost invisible alteration in his manner which occurred when his true interest had first been awakened.

It was rarely the great explanations or dramatic details which caught his attention. Far more often it was a single rhythm, a habit, or some apparently insignificant pattern which suddenly set his mind working with that peculiar intensity which I had so often learned both to fear and to admire.

And it was precisely thus that it now seemed to me that something had begun to take form behind Holmes's tranquil exterior.

Mrs. Eiko Ashford appeared for a moment to consider Holmes's last question before slowly rising from her chair with the same quiet and precise dignity which had marked her whole bearing since her arrival in Baker Street.

"Mr. Holmes," said she quietly, "I do not think it will be possible to understand this matter fully without having seen the garden for yourself."

Holmes raised his eyes a little.

"The garden itself is part of the matter," she continued.

There was not merely conviction in the way she spoke those words, but almost a quiet solemnity.

"If you and Dr. Watson would do me the honor of visiting Richmond tomorrow morning, I should be most grateful. It would also give me the opportunity to serve you genuine Japanese tea." A faint smile passed

across her face. "There are, regrettably, many imitations in the London markets, but very little which truly deserves the name."

I noticed the almost imperceptible expression of national pride with which these last words were uttered, and I could not help finding it both dignified and sympathetic.

Holmes nodded calmly.

"I believe, Watson," said he, taking up his pipe once more, "that we shall accept Mrs. Ashford's invitation."

The Japanese Garden

It was thus on the following morning that Holmes and I set out for Richmond to examine for ourselves the peculiar circumstances surrounding the disappearing carp.

I still remember very distinctly the atmosphere of the place even upon our arrival. The house stood not far from the river, a fact immediately apparent in the damp air, which seemed heavier and cooler than that of the city itself. Even long before the Thames came into view between the trees, one could sense its nearness in the peculiar smell of water, reeds, and wet earth which lay over the whole district.

The house itself, by contrast, was a thoroughly English residence of a prosperous family — solid, well kept, and without any marked desire for outward display. Had one considered the building alone, nothing would immediately have betrayed the curious world concealed behind its walls.

It was the garden which made the truly powerful impression.

Already, when Mrs. Ashford led us through the first opening between the dark shrubs and onto the narrow paths, I became aware of the peculiar calm which seemed to rest upon the place. Everything appeared ordered with a precision which yet seemed entirely natural. The stones seemed placed with almost ceremonial care, the small bridges lay exactly where the eye expected them, and even the movement of water between the ponds appeared measured and deliberate.

It was as though the garden existed according to laws of its own, separate from the surrounding world.

I still recall how strongly it struck me that this silent order corresponded to Mrs. Ashford's own nature. The garden seemed less an arrangement than a direct expression of her character.

Even Holmes, despite his usual reserve, appeared to be affected by the place. He stopped several times along the way without speaking and let his gaze move slowly over the dark ponds, the reeds, and the low trees, as though he too perceived that here was something quite different from ordinary English garden craft.

Mrs. Ashford led us along a narrow stone path through the garden until we reached a small garden house, which stood slightly raised above the largest of the ponds. The building was simple, almost restrained in appearance, yet executed with the same careful sense of proportion and balance which marked the rest of the garden. From the open sliding doors there was a view over the dark water, where from time to time several large carp moved beneath the surface like slow shadows of red, gold, and white.

"I hope you will forgive me, Mr. Holmes," said Mrs. Ashford, indicating our places with a calm movement of her hand, "but I have always believed that a garden should first be experienced in silence."

Holmes inclined his head very slightly without replying and took his seat in such a manner that he could see both the pond and the low bridges farther down among the reeds.

Shortly afterwards a maid entered soundlessly with the tea. Even this seemed performed with an almost ceremonial precision. The tea was placed upon the low table between us, together with small porcelain cups and a little dark kettle, from which the faint scent of green tea rose into the damp air.

"You must drink it while it is warm," said Mrs. Ashford with a faint smile. "Japanese tea does not endure waiting."

I still remember the peculiar stillness which lay over the place during those minutes. Even the ordinary sounds of the city seemed far away. Only the faint stirring of the reeds and the soft lapping from the ponds broke the silence.

Holmes had once more produced his pipe and sat with his gaze directed out over the garden, while the smoke rose slowly about his sharp profile. I noticed that even he appeared less inclined than usual to lead the conversation forward at once.

Mrs. Ashford likewise let her gaze drift over the water.

"My husband used to say," she said quietly, "that a Japanese garden is never finished. It changes continually with those who tend it."

She was silent for a moment before her voice again took on a more troubled note.

"And for that very reason I now reproach myself, Mr. Holmes. I fear I have been far too open about these fish."

Holmes still said nothing.

"The youngest of the gardeners in particular gradually showed a great interest in them. At first it pleased me. He seemed intelligent and attentive, and I often explained to him the different varieties, their ages, and their significance."

She lowered her eyes for a moment to the teacup between her hands.

"But when I think back upon it now, I must admit that his questions did not always concern the fish themselves. He was often interested in their value. How rare they were. How much collectors would pay."

She drew a quiet breath.

"I fear more and more that he has simply been tempted. And I may perhaps have to acknowledge that the fault is partly my own."

After tea Mrs. Ashford rose and offered to show us the garden more closely. Holmes nodded briefly, and shortly afterwards we followed her out of the garden house and along the narrow paths which wound between the ponds and the low trees.

It soon seemed to me that the garden was almost composed as a series of small pictures gradually opening before the visitor. No single view revealed the entire arrangement at once. Each bridge, each turn of the path, and each grouping of stones appeared carefully placed so as to lead the eye slowly onward toward the next small glimpse of water, reeds, or dark branches.

Mrs. Ashford moved through the garden with a certainty which showed that she knew every detail. From time to time, she stopped and pointed out particular fish beneath the surface.

"That one," she said softly, indicating a slow-moving red-and-white creature in the dark water, "originally came from Niigata Province. My husband had it brought here nearly eight years ago."

Watson — or rather I myself — must willingly admit that I became increasingly captivated by the place. Several times I stopped to ask questions about the fish, the plants, and the various elements of the garden, which seemed to me quite foreign when compared with ordinary English garden art.

"Observe how the bridge never connects directly," explained Mrs. Ashford at one point. "In Japanese gardens one seldom seeks the shortest way. The movement through the garden must feel slow."

Holmes nodded politely at such explanations but continued to say very little.

No Footprints

As the tour proceeded, he drifted almost imperceptibly farther away from us. While Mrs. Ashford at one point stood bent over a smaller tree, explaining to me its particular method of pruning, I noticed that Holmes had already moved down toward the edge of the largest pond.

His examination was carried out in the quiet and almost casual manner which I knew so well. He paused now and then without explanation, studying the stones along the water's edge, the reeds, and the dark soil between the plants. Once or twice he bent slightly forward, as though searching for something particular upon the surface near the bank.

But whatever it was, he did not appear to find it.

There were no unusual footprints around the ponds. No traces of mud or trampled plants. Nothing suggested the use of a net or any other implement. Even the reeds along the banks stood almost undisturbed. The whole place preserved the same strange order and stillness which we had observed upon our arrival.

When Holmes after some time returned toward us, he cast one more slow glance over the ponds and said in his calm voice:

"Everything appears remarkably orderly."

It was the only real comment he had so far offered upon the investigation itself.

It was only when we reached the upper part of the garden, where a small artificial watercourse ran between several dark stones and then down toward the largest pond, that Holmes suddenly stopped with a quickness which at once drew my attention to him.

Until that moment he had moved through the garden with an almost absent-minded calm; but now he stood quite still, his gaze fixed upon several larger stones beside the little waterfall.

At first sight there appeared to be nothing unusual.

The stones lay some distance from the watercourse itself and, in my opinion, ought to have been dry. Yet I could see Holmes slowly bend forward and examine their surface with increasing attention.

"What is it, Holmes?" I asked.

He did not answer immediately.

When I stepped nearer, I myself observed the small dark marks scattered across the stones. They were not large splashes of water, but rather isolated droplets which had left darker stains upon the surface of the stone.

At first glance it made no sense.

The watercourse lay too far away to account for them naturally, and the wind that morning was almost absent.

Holmes touched one of the marks delicately with the tip of his finger.

"Curious," he murmured.

I remember very clearly that it was at this precise moment that I first realised his true interest had now been awakened. There came suddenly into his movements a particular precision which I knew so well from earlier investigations, when some small detail had opened a new line of thought in his mind.

He slowly straightened himself and turned to Mrs. Ashford.

"Only the largest fish disappear?" he asked.

"Always," she replied at once. "Never the small ones."

Holmes nodded slowly, as though this in some way confirmed something which he had already suspected.

I must admit that I still found it difficult to follow his thoughts. The whole affair still seemed to me far more probably connected with human agency than with anything else, and since Holmes did not immediately explain the significance of his observations, I attempted to think more practically myself.

"If it is not a human intruder," said I, "then surely it might be an animal. A cat, perhaps. Or an otter."

Holmes still said nothing.

"A clever animal could surely take a fish unnoticed," I continued.

Holmes allowed his gaze once more to pass over the pond, the reeds, and the dark stones around us.

"Perhaps," said he slowly.

He was silent again for several seconds.

"But not without disturbing something."

He made a slow gesture toward the bank.

"No mud. No broken reeds. No confusion in the water. Nothing random."

Then his gaze returned to the small drops of water upon the stones.

"The creature," he said softly, almost as if speaking to himself, "comes and leaves with extraordinary precision."

When at last our tour drew toward its close, and we once more made our way back toward the house along the narrow paths between the ponds, I noticed that Holmes had become unusually silent. He maintained, certainly, his customary courtesy toward Mrs. Ashford, yet his attention seemed already to have turned inward toward the thoughts which the garden and its peculiar mystery had set in motion within him.

I myself thanked our hostess far more warmly for the visit.

"I must admit, Mrs. Ashford," said I, as we paused near the little bridge by the largest pond, "that your garden has made a very strong impression upon me. I do not believe I have ever seen anything quite like it in England."

Mrs. Ashford inclined her head slightly with an almost imperceptible smile.

"You are very kind, Dr. Watson."

Holmes had until then said very little, but just as we were preparing to take our leave he suddenly turned toward her.

"Mrs. Ashford," said he calmly, "I should be obliged if Dr. Watson and I might return tomorrow morning."

She looked at him in mild surprise.

"Tomorrow morning, Mr. Holmes?"

"Very early."

For a brief moment she appeared to consider this more closely.

"How early?" she asked.

"Before sunrise."

A short silence followed, while the fog drifted slowly among the dark trees farther down toward the river.

Mrs. Ashford then nodded calmly.

"Certainly, Mr. Holmes. You are entirely welcome."

She hesitated very slightly before continuing with her usual courteous dignity:

"I only hope you will forgive my absence at so early an hour. I seldom rise before dawn."

"Quite understandable," said Holmes.

A faint smile appeared once more upon her face.

"But I shall see that tea is prepared in the garden house. One must not neglect tea, even in the service of investigation."

For the first time that afternoon I thought I detected the faintest possible gleam of satisfaction in Holmes.

"I quite agree, madam," said he.

Observations before Dawn

It was still dark when Holmes and I left Baker Street the following morning to make our way toward Richmond. I remember the journey as one of the coldest and most fog-bound that I experienced during that season of the year. Even after we had left the city and drawn nearer to the river, the air seemed only to grow heavier and more penetratingly damp, as though the Thames itself exhaled a chill which passed through coat and gloves alike.

Upon our arrival at Mrs. Ashford's property, the garden lay almost entirely swallowed by fog.

Only a few dark outlines could be made out through the mist — a low bridge here, some reeds farther off, or the faint tracing of a tree which seemed to hang almost weightless in the white mass of vapor. The rest appeared hidden in something which resembled a dream-picture or an old oriental legend more than an ordinary English garden.

I still recall how strongly it struck me that the place now seemed even more foreign than it had the day before. In daylight the garden had, after all, retained something recognizable and human; but in this heavy morning fog it appeared almost detached from the world around it.

Holmes paused only briefly at the house before moving without hesitation toward the garden house by the pond.

"This will serve admirably," said he in a low voice.

He pushed the sliding door carefully a little aside and let his gaze move out over the garden.

"From here," he continued softly, "we may observe the pond without ourselves being observed."

We took our places inside the little garden house, where, true enough, tea had already been prepared for us exactly as Mrs. Ashford had promised. I at once poured myself a cup and must freely confess that I received its warmth with considerable gratitude. The cold seemed to hang in the air even within the pavilion, and through the open spaces the fog drifted slowly among the ponds like a living thing.

Holmes, by contrast, appeared almost unaffected by either cold or discomfort.

He had seated himself so that he could command the greater part of the garden through the mist, and his whole bearing now possessed that special concentration which I knew so well from other investigations. I observed in particular that he had not yet lit his pipe — a sure sign that his thoughts were working at full intensity. Under such circumstances tobacco smoke seemed rather to irritate than to soothe him.

Thus we sat in almost complete silence while the fog continued to drift soundlessly through the garden around us.

The waiting seemed to me unusually long.

My own condition was far less heroic than I might perhaps wish to admit. We had risen at an hour when even London seemed still half asleep, and I was beginning to feel the heavy fatigue which follows being torn from sleep long before dawn.

I poured myself another cup of tea and held my hands about the porcelain in search of a little warmth, while I let my gaze move across the misty ponds. Nothing moved. No sound broke the stillness save the occasional soft lapping of water somewhere out in the haze.

I remember that at this point I could not entirely suppress the question of whether this early observation was truly necessary. Although Holmes had evidently found something of interest in the garden the previous day, it still seemed to me far more likely that the matter would ultimately prove to be a quite ordinary human theft. And I must admit that a small part of me began to wonder whether Holmes, on this occa-

sion, had perhaps allowed himself to be carried rather too far by his own theories.

Holmes himself, however, formed the strongest possible contrast to my growing weariness.

He sat entirely motionless near the opening toward the garden, his gaze fixed into the fog. Not once did his attention appear to waver. There was over his whole posture a peculiar alertness which seemed to me almost instinctive in character. I have often thought since that Holmes, in such moments, sometimes resembled less an ordinary thinking man than an animal in the forest, whose entire being is gathered about the slightest movement or sound around it.

Even his silence had altered in character.

It was not the relaxed silence of Baker Street, where his thoughts often drifted freely among chemistry, music, or the morning papers. This was a wholly concentrated silence, in which even the smallest disturbance seemed unwelcome.

The Bird in the Fog

Then, without my being able at first to say why, I suddenly felt that something had changed.

Not dramatically. Not through any sound or sudden movement. But I sensed at once that almost electrical tension which could sometimes arise in Holmes at the instant when his attention gathered itself entirely upon one particular point.

He now sat even more motionless than before.

Slowly he raised one hand a little. The movement was hardly more than a shadow in the half-light, yet I understood its meaning immediately. It was partly a silent warning that I should remain entirely still, and partly an indication of where I was to direct my gaze.

I followed the line of his hand toward the farthest ponds, where the fog lay heaviest among the reeds.

At first, I saw nothing.

Then a dark shape glided soundlessly forward through the mist.

It was a bird.

Not with the heavy, flapping motion one associates with many larger waterfowl, but almost as a shadow floating through the fog without weight or effort. Its dark body showed only faintly against the grey morning haze as it moved low over the garden with a precision almost uncanny in its calm.

It circled once.

Then again.

Not hesitatingly, it seemed to me, but rather as if adjusting its height and distance with a movement which revealed complete familiarity with

the place. There was something almost professional in its conduct — as though it were a creature performing a task which it had repeated many times before.

Then suddenly it sank lower.

Almost without sound it landed at the edge of one of the ponds.

I still remember the strange speed with which all that followed took place.

A quick dark motion.

A short thrust forward.

Then something pale gleamed for an instant in the fog.

The fish was in its beak.

There was no great splash. No violent disturbance in the water. No struggle between bird and fish. The whole movement was so swift and precise that it seemed almost impossible to apprehend with the naked eye.

And in the very next moment the bird rose again.

It lifted low over the reeds and glided once more soundlessly into the fog, until even its dark form had vanished completely in the grey dawn.

The whole affair could hardly have lasted more than a few seconds.

I must willingly admit that for several moments I sat quite paralysed by astonishment.

Even after the bird had disappeared back into the fog, I continued to stare out over the pond like a man who has not yet entirely understood what he has just witnessed. The entire conception which I had so far formed of the case seemed suddenly to collapse.

I had — without really reflecting upon it — expected a human being.

A thief concealed among the trees.

Perhaps a boat by the river.

A net.

A cunning gardener.

Something human.

But not this.

Not this dark and almost soundless creature, which had come and gone again with a precision that seemed far more mechanical than accidental.

"Good heavens..." I murmured. "What extraordinary creature was that?"

Holmes had not moved.

He still sat with his gaze fixed upon the fog where the bird had vanished, and his face bore not the slightest trace of surprise. On the contrary, it seemed to me that the whole observation had merely confirmed something he had long suspected.

"Precisely," said he quietly.

Then he turned slightly toward me.

"There it was, Watson."

Holmes showed no inclination to continue our observation after the bird's sudden appearance and equally swift disappearance. On the contrary, he rose almost immediately from his place in the garden house with that quick decisiveness which always told me that he already regarded one phase of the case as concluded.

"That will do, Watson," said he softly.

I cast one more glance toward the ponds, where the fog again lay thick and undisturbed, as though nothing whatever had taken place.

"Should we not remain a little longer?" I asked. "The creature may return."

Holmes shook his head calmly.

"There is no reason to remain. We have seen precisely what I wished to see."

There was such certainty in his voice that I followed him without further protest out of the garden house and onward through the misty paths toward the gate of the house. The garden seemed now even quieter than before, almost as though it itself concealed the strange little drama which had just taken place among the reeds and the dark water.

Shortly afterwards we were seated in a cab on our way back toward London.

Morning was still only slowly breaking through, and the city seemed yet half asleep around us. A few carriages had begun to appear in the streets, and here and there one could see the first workmen moving through the mist with their coats drawn more closely about them against the cold. The windows of the cab were faintly misted by the sharp morning chill.

It was only then that it truly struck me how uncommonly early Holmes had forced us from our beds.

I myself, however, was far too occupied with what we had just witnessed to think any longer of cold or fatigue. The whole episode still appeared to me so extraordinary that I almost found it difficult to trust my own eyes.

As soon as the cab was properly in motion, and I saw Holmes sink calmly back into his seat with that expression of quiet concentration which so often followed an important observation, I could no longer restrain the question.

“What on earth was that creature?” I cried.

A Most Unusual Explanation

Holmes slowly drew off his gloves and laid them beside him before replying in that calm, almost lecturing tone which he sometimes assumed when a subject touched upon matters of particular technical or historical interest.

“A cormorant, Watson,” said he. “Though among certain sailors along the southern coasts one occasionally encounters the older expression eel-crow.”

For a moment he let his gaze wander toward the foggy street beyond the window of the cab.

“The practice is by no means new. Indeed, it is exceedingly ancient. For centuries — perhaps millennia — cormorants have been used for fishing in parts of China and Japan.”

I must confess that my astonishment was hardly diminished by this explanation.

“You surely do not mean to suggest,” I began, “that such birds are deliberately trained?”

“Most certainly they are.”

Holmes’s voice remained perfectly matter-of-fact, almost as though he were reading aloud from an encyclopedia.

“The birds are commonly taken young from their nests and gradually accustomed to human handling. With patience they become remarkably manageable creatures. Indeed, their intelligence in matters connected with fishing is considerable.”

He folded his hands quietly before him.

"The essential feature of the method lies in a small ring or band placed around the lower part of the bird's neck. Tight enough to prevent the swallowing of larger fish, yet loose enough to allow breathing and the passage of smaller prey."

I looked at him involuntarily.

"The creature cannot swallow its catch?"

"Not the larger specimens, no. It is therefore compelled to return with them to its owner."

Holmes continued with the same calm precision.

"When a sufficient number of fish has been secured, the ring is loosened and the bird permitted to feed itself. In this manner the animal remains both useful and willing to continue the labour."

He spoke of it all with a curious absence of sensation, as though the training of fishing birds were the most natural thing in the world.

"The practice has been observed both from small boats and along riverbanks or coastal regions," he continued. "A properly trained bird may become extraordinarily effective. In poorer districts of the East a single cormorant has on occasion been capable of providing the principal food supply for an entire household."

I leaned back in my seat and must admit that the whole account seemed so foreign to me that it was almost difficult to reconcile it with the foggy London through which we were at that moment rolling.

And yet I had seen with my own eyes the dark bird glide through the mist above Mrs. Ashford's ponds with a precision which now appeared suddenly far less mysterious — and at the same time far more disturbing.

"Then the case is in truth solved!" I exclaimed, almost before Holmes had finished his explanation.

For the first time since our observation in the garden house, the whole mystery suddenly began to appear both logical and almost elegant in its construction.

"Someone is using the bird for the theft," I continued eagerly. "That must be the explanation. Perhaps a fisherman from the docks. Possibly

a smuggler or a former performer who has kept one of these birds and now employs it to steal the carp.”

I still remember how satisfyingly the entire theory seemed to fall into place in my own mind. The bird’s precision, the absence of footprints, the systematic disappearances — all at once appeared to fit together with almost mathematical clarity.

“An exceedingly ingenious method, Holmes,” I continued. “No one would suspect a bird.”

Holmes, however, did not reply at once.

He still sat with his gaze directed toward the foggy street beyond the cab window, where London was now slowly beginning to wake around us. A few shops were being opened, and the first carriages rolled through the grey morning air. But Holmes appeared only slightly aware of his surroundings.

“Possibly,” said he at last.

After several more seconds of silence he added only:

“Perhaps.”

It was plain that he was far from regarding the matter as concluded.

By this time, I knew him well enough to detect at once the difference between the satisfaction which followed a confirmed theory and the peculiar inward concentration which still possessed him now. His thoughts were still at work.

“Surely the matter is plain enough now?” said I.

Holmes did not answer immediately. Only when the cab was approaching Baker Street did he turn suddenly a little toward me, and I observed the sharp expression in his eyes which always announced that he had reached some important point in his reflections.

“We must discover,” said he slowly, “whether the bird acts on instruction... or instinct.”

The words made a far greater impression upon me than I at that time fully understood.

For in that moment the case began to alter its character once more.

The Nets across the Water

When, some time later, we were again seated in Baker Street with the warmth of the fire about us, the fog-bound garden beside the Thames seemed almost unreal and distant. Mrs. Hudson had just brought in tea and the morning papers, and I must admit that both the warmth of the fire and the familiar surroundings were exceedingly welcome after the cold hours in Richmond.

Holmes, however, still appeared almost entirely absorbed in his own thoughts.

He had thrown his coat over a chair but otherwise sat in his customary position near the fireplace, his fingertips joined and his gaze fixed upon the fire, as though he still saw the misty ponds before him rather than the walls of our sitting-room.

It was only after a considerable silence that he suddenly spoke.

“Watson,” said he calmly, “I should be obliged if you would return to Richmond later today.”

I lowered my newspaper.

“Alone?”

“Preferably.”

He reached for his teacup without yet looking at me.

“With the assistance of the gardeners, I should like you to arrange a net over the principal ponds.”

“A net?” I repeated in surprise.

“Precisely.”

I must confess that the plan appeared to me quite extraordinary.

"But surely," said I, "the creature will simply fail to catch a fish?"

Holmes now slowly raised his eyes to mine.

"That," said he quietly, "is precisely what I wish to observe."

He was silent for a moment and then continued with the calm precision which always characterised his instructions.

"It is not enough to observe the bird when successful, Watson. One must also observe its conduct when prevented from succeeding."

I must admit that this explanation by no means satisfied me completely.

"You believe its reaction will reveal something further?"

"I am certain of it."

Holmes now rose suddenly and went over to the writing-table, from which he took a small piece of paper.

"There is a fishing-tackle dealer near Lower Thames Street," said he. "Ask specifically for a light river net of narrow weave. Strong enough to prevent a strike, yet not so heavy that it becomes visible at once across the pond."

He quickly wrote down the name and address.

"The gardeners should be capable of securing it before evening."

I took the paper from him, still somewhat confused by the whole undertaking.

"And what precisely do you expect will happen?" I asked.

An almost imperceptible smile appeared about Holmes's mouth.

"That," said he, "I should prefer to discover before explaining."

I still remember that at this point I felt a certain reluctance at being once again dispatched as the executing arm of one of Holmes's often peculiar schemes without knowing its full purpose. And yet it was precisely at such moments that my long experience of his methods usually prevailed over my doubts.

For even when Holmes appeared most enigmatic, there was almost always some design behind his actions which became visible to the rest of us only later.

It was thus later that same afternoon that I once more made my way to Richmond — this time alone, and with Holmes's rather singular instructions in my pocket.

The fog had lifted somewhat since the morning, but the air around the river remained damp and cool, and the garden still possessed the same strange stillness when I was shown in.

Mrs. Ashford appeared genuinely surprised to see me again so soon after our previous visit. Her surprise, however, was quickly replaced by the courteous kindness which I had by now come to associate with her whole manner.

"Dr. Watson," said she, "I had not expected to see you again so soon."

I explained, somewhat apologetically, that Holmes had asked me to return in order to make a small arrangement about the ponds.

"A net?" she repeated with mild wonder when I explained the purpose.

"Yes," said I. "Holmes wishes the ponds to be covered temporarily. I assure you, Mrs. Ashford, that it will not harm the fish or disturb the garden more than is absolutely necessary. He has particularly emphasised that the work should be carried out as discreetly as possible."

She regarded me for several seconds, as though she did not yet entirely understand the connection; but Holmes's name still seemed sufficient to overcome any real doubt.

"Very well, Dr. Watson," said she calmly. "I shall have the gardeners assist you."

Shortly afterwards the two men arrived.

One was older, silent, and somewhat heavy in his movements, with the weather-beaten face and steady working rhythm one often sees in men who have spent the greater part of their lives out of doors. The other was considerably younger — a straight, well-built fellow who could hardly have been much over five-and-twenty.

I understood at once that this must be the gardener of whom Mrs. Ashford had spoken.

And I must confess that it now seemed almost impossible for me not to watch him repeatedly with particular attention during the work.

He appeared quite calm and carried out his tasks without visible nervousness, yet this very fact almost made me more uncertain. For I could not free myself from the thought that, if Holmes and I were indeed dealing with a human theft, this young man must still be the most probable explanation.

Together we began to spread the net across the largest of the ponds.

The work proved more difficult than I had imagined. The net had to be stretched in such a way that it covered the water effectively without at once attracting attention from a distance, and in several places, we were obliged to secure it between stones, trees, and low posts along the bank.

As we worked, I found myself again and again secretly studying the young gardener — his hands, his expression, his responses to my questions — as though I hoped to discover some sign which might confirm or dispel my suspicions.

The final part of the work proved far more practical and troublesome than I had expected. The net had to be stretched with considerable care if it was both to cover the pond effectively and yet not immediately attract the notice of anyone who approached the garden.

I therefore conveyed Holmes's instructions as exactly as I could.

"It must be done as discreetly as possible," I explained to the two gardeners. "Mr. Holmes does not wish the net to be visible at once from a distance."

The older gardener merely nodded silently and set about the work methodically, while the younger cast a few more questioning glances at me, as though the whole undertaking appeared to him somewhat odd. Neither of them, however, asked any direct questions.

Together we fastened the net between the low posts, certain trees, and the stones along the bank, until at last it lay stretched across the pond at such a height that it still allowed one to see the water below, but would prevent any bird from making a swift descent upon the surface.

I still remember how strange Holmes's theory continued to seem to me during this work.

Even after the morning's observation I found it difficult fully to accept the notion that a trained Eastern fishing bird, acting on its own, should

lie behind the entire mystery of the vanished carp in an English garden beside the Thames. The explanation seemed at once perfectly logical and almost incredible.

And yet I carried out the work conscientiously.

For my long experience had taught me that even when Holmes's theories appeared most outlandish, there was usually some connection hidden behind them which became visible to the rest of us only later.

When the net was at last in place, I stepped back with the two gardeners and examined the result. From a distance it seemed difficult to detect at once, particularly in the damp afternoon air, where the light was already beginning to soften over the garden.

I still recall that it was then that the thought struck me that we had, in some curious fashion, transformed Mrs. Ashford's peaceful garden into a kind of trap.

It was late in the afternoon before I returned once more to Baker Street after the work at the ponds in Richmond. I still remember the peculiar fatigue which had gathered in my body after the hours spent in the damp cold by the river. My boots still bore traces of the wet earth about the ponds, and I must admit that the whole proceeding with the net now appeared to me more and more extraordinary.

Holmes was seated, as usual, by the fire when I entered, and at once raised his eyes to me with an attention which showed plainly that he had awaited my report all day.

"Well, Watson?"

"The work is done," said I, slowly drawing off my gloves. "The net is stretched over the ponds precisely as requested. The gardeners assisted without difficulty."

Holmes gave a brief nod.

"Excellent," said he at once. "Then we must return tomorrow morning."

I doubt whether I fully succeeded in concealing the almost despairing expression which must have crossed my face at these words.

At the mere thought of it I felt again the cold of the previous morning, the penetrating fog, and the lack of sleep which Holmes's increasingly

early investigations so often imposed upon me. To this was added the peculiar character of the whole enterprise, which still seemed to me halfway between scientific observation and an oriental fairy-tale.

"You truly believe the creature will return?" I asked.

"I am quite certain of it."

Holmes said this with the calm assurance which almost always rendered further argument useless.

I therefore merely sighed lightly and laid aside my coat.

"Very well," said I. "At the same hour, I presume?"

"The very same."

Despite my fatigue, I must admit that my curiosity remained stronger than my reluctance. For even though the whole affair still seemed improbable, the dark bird's soundless appearance through the fog had made a far stronger impression upon me than I was at first willing to acknowledge.

Holmes seemed satisfied with my answer. He rose at once, went to the writing-table, and quickly wrote a few lines upon a small card.

"A simple note to Mrs. Ashford," said he. "Merely informing her that we shall once again avail ourselves of her hospitality tomorrow morning."

Shortly afterwards he rang for Mrs. Hudson and asked her to have the message sent off at once by a messenger.

Then he seated himself again by the fire with the same inward and concentrated expression which told me that his thoughts were already far advanced in the matter — possibly much farther than he yet wished me to understand.

The Returning Flight

When Holmes and I set out once more for Richmond before dawn the following morning, London at first sight appeared to me little changed from the day before. The same damp cold seemed to hang over both city and river. A few carriages were already moving through the mist, but for the most part London lay silent and half asleep around us.

And yet there was one essential difference.

Myself.

That morning I was far more awake and far more expectant than during our first visit to the garden house. I was still far from knowing what Holmes actually expected to discover, but I was now fully aware that we were no longer merely watching an ordinary suspicion. Something would happen. I felt it with a certainty which neither fog nor cold could wholly suppress.

Upon our arrival at the garden the place lay once again almost hidden in the grey morning haze, but this time the surroundings seemed less foreign to me. I had already begun to recognize the dark outlines of bridges, reeds, and trees through the fog, as though the garden were gradually permitting us to approach its true character.

Holmes moved without hesitation directly toward the garden house.

When we entered, I discovered with some pleasure that Mrs. Ashford had once again provided tea for us. But this time there was also a small plate of little cakes upon the table beside the teapot — a modest but perceptible kindness which, in some curious fashion, made our strange undertaking more human and less like a purely scientific observation.

"I begin to think, Holmes," I remarked softly, while pouring the tea, "that Mrs. Ashford has taken rather better care of us than we deserve."

Holmes scarcely answered.

His attention already seemed entirely fixed upon the garden outside.

I noticed at once that his concentration that morning was even stronger than it had been on the previous day. He seated himself almost immediately in the same position near the opening toward the ponds, and scarcely allowed his gaze to leave the fog for more than a moment at a time. There was about him a tense and almost restless alertness which stood in sharp contrast to his usual calm self-command.

For the first time it almost seemed to me that Holmes was a little impatient.

I myself, on the other hand, was far more observant from the first moment. Fatigue had less power over me now that I knew what we were awaiting. Even the slightest movement out among the reeds caused me to lean forward a little, while the fog moved slowly over the ponds outside.

The waiting seemed even longer this time than during our first vigil in the garden house. And yet it was far easier to endure.

For now, we knew what we were waiting for.

The dark bird, which the previous day had appeared almost soundlessly through the fog and vanished again with equal swiftness, now seemed to hang like an invisible tension over the whole garden. Would it return? And if it did — what would happen when the pond no longer lay open to it?

I felt my own attention much sharper than it had been the day before. Every movement among the reeds made me lean forward, and several times I already fancied that I could discern the bird's dark form through the mist.

But once again it was Holmes who saw it first.

I suddenly noticed the slight tension in his posture, and in the next instant he slowly raised his hand without turning his eyes from the garden.

I must confess that it almost irritated me a little that he should again be the first to detect it.

But there it was.

It glided forward through the fog with the same dark and almost soundless motion as on the previous day, though now it appeared to me larger and more distinct in the lighter morning haze. The fog was no longer quite so thick as during our first visit, and therefore I could follow the bird's movements far more clearly.

And yet the sight seemed almost even more extraordinary.

There was something nearly fabulous — almost supernatural — in the manner in which the dark bird moved through the grey morning air, like a creature from another world rather than from the modern London surrounding us.

Again, it circled several times above the ponds.

Then it descended lower.

But almost immediately something seemed to change in its movements.

The bird did not strike directly down toward the water as it had done the day before.

Instead, it circled once more.

Rose a little higher.

Returned.

Observed.

I now clearly perceived the peculiar examining quality in its conduct. There was nothing accidental or panicked in its movements. On the contrary, it seemed to me as though the bird were, with growing certainty, registering that something about the pond had been altered.

It dipped briefly down toward the water once more.

Circled.

Seemed almost to pause in the air for an instant.

Then it happened.

Instead of striking at the pond, it suddenly rose higher through the fog. Slowly at first — then with greater assurance. And in the next moment it turned sharply eastward and set its course away from the garden.

I noticed at once what Holmes had also observed: Its direction was in no sense accidental.

It did not fly searchingly or uncertainly, but with a distinct purpose, like a creature which knew precisely where it wished to go.

Holmes rose almost immediately.

For the first time since the case began, I saw in him something approaching genuine excitement.

"Did you observe, Watson?" said he quickly.

He turned toward me with that keen light in his eyes which always appeared when an important thought had suddenly been confirmed.

"That," said he, "is precisely what I wished to know."

The bird's dark form had scarcely disappeared completely into the grey morning air before Holmes rose from his place in the garden house with sudden energy.

It was as though his whole being had changed character in a single instant.

The silent and almost motionless observer of the preceding hours seemed now replaced by the swift and purposeful Holmes whom I had so often seen when an important idea had begun to take concrete shape in his mind.

"Quickly, Watson," said he briefly.

In the next moment he had already stepped out of the garden house and was moving down toward the bank of the largest pond, where the cold morning air still lay heavy with fog and moisture from the river.

I followed him and saw him at once take a small compass from his bag with the same precise movement with which he might have produced a surgical instrument. He stood for a moment quite still at the water's edge, his gaze fixed in the direction in which the bird had vanished.

Then he quickly began to take measurements.

He compared the bird's line of flight with the positions of the ponds and with the direction of the river, turned several times toward different points in the garden, and all the while made short, precise notes in his small pocket-book.

From time to time, he drew rapid sketches between the notes — small lines, angles, and markings which seemed to me almost impossible to understand at once.

I still remember how strongly I was again struck at that moment by Holmes's particular ability to transform even the most fleeting observation into something measurable and systematic with almost scientific precision.

Several times I heard him murmur certain place-names softly to himself as he worked.

"Limehouse..."

"Wapping..."

"Rotherhithe..."

All districts along the Thames.

The fog was now slowly beginning to lift around the garden, while Holmes continued his measurements with the same intense concentration, as though the bird's invisible trail still hung in the air before him.

While Holmes continued his measurements about the ponds, the morning sun began slowly to break through the fog over the garden.

It happened almost imperceptibly.

First as a faint light behind the haze, then gradually stronger, until the dark bridges, stones, and reeds began to stand out more clearly around us. The garden slowly lost something of the dreamlike and almost supernatural quality which had marked it in the concealment of night and fog and appeared now more real — though in no way less beautiful.

It was at this moment that the door of the house farther up by the terrace was opened, and Mrs. Ashford stepped out.

She moved with the same quiet dignity which seemed to mark everything about her and wore a dark Japanese morning robe with discreet patterns along the sleeves. The sunlight, now slowly breaking through the mist, for a moment gave her figure an almost painterly quality against the garden behind her.

She stopped briefly, plainly somewhat surprised to find us already active among the ponds.

"Dr. Watson," said she kindly, as I went to meet her. "I had not expected you to be at work so early already."

"You must forgive us, Mrs. Ashford," I replied with a smile. "Mr. Holmes appears to have come into possession of a considerable amount of energy this morning."

A faint and almost understanding smile appeared upon her face, while her glance passed briefly toward Holmes, who still moved among the ponds with compass and notebook in hand, apparently heedless of everything around him.

"But allow me first," I continued, "to thank you for the tea — and not least for the cakes. I assure you they were most highly appreciated during these very early investigations."

"Then I am sincerely glad," said she calmly. "The morning cold by the river can be quite penetrating."

"It certainly can," I answered, laughing. "I almost believe your tea this morning was of as much service as Holmes's observations."

Certain Calculations

There was something almost homely and human about this brief conversation in the midst of the strange mystery in which we found ourselves. The contrast with Holmes's intense and almost restless work a few paces away seemed to me particularly striking. While we spoke of warmth, hospitality, and the garden in the morning sun, Holmes already appeared entirely absorbed in invisible lines, directions, and connections which he alone could yet perceive.

It was, however, evident that Holmes's thoughts were already moving along wholly different lines from our own.

He approached us quickly through the garden, his notebook still in his hand and the compass returned to his pocket; and although his manners remained, as always, entirely courteous, it was impossible not to perceive the intense absorption which now wholly possessed him.

"Mrs. Ashford," said he without much preamble, "do you by any chance possess detailed maps of the surrounding districts?"

She looked at him in some surprise.

"Maps, Mr. Holmes?"

"Yes. Particularly of the river districts."

She reflected briefly.

"I believe my husband certainly owned several," she replied slowly. "He was much interested in the country around the river and the docks. But precisely where the maps are..." She hesitated slightly. "I am not entirely sure."

"Any maps would be of assistance," said Holmes quickly.

Mrs. Ashford nodded calmly.

"I shall look into it."

She then disappeared back toward the house, while Holmes almost immediately turned and returned to the garden house without further explanation.

I followed him and found him a few minutes later bent over the table, where he had already opened his notebook and once more taken out the compass. The sunlight was now beginning slowly to fall through the open sides of the pavilion, while the fog still drifted in thin bands over the ponds outside.

A short time later Mrs. Ashford returned.

She carried several rolled maps under her arm, which had evidently been stored for some considerable time.

"These should include maps of the property itself," said she, laying them upon the table, "and of the district around Richmond and the river. I believe some of them also continue farther down toward the Thames."

Holmes's eyes at once lit up with an intensity which he rarely managed entirely to conceal.

"Excellent, Mrs. Ashford. You have been most helpful."

He immediately began to spread the maps across the table in the garden house with almost feverish concentration. One by one they were smoothed out between teacups, notebook, and compass, while Holmes rapidly began to compare his earlier measurements with the course of the river and the various districts farther east.

From time to time, he drew swift lines across the maps with his pencil, measured angles with the compass, and noted fresh calculations in the margins.

I must freely admit that at this point I still understood only very imperfectly what he was actually seeking.

To me the bird's flight still seemed merely a direction through the fog. To Holmes, however, it had plainly already become a clue.

While Holmes continued his work inside the garden house among maps, compass, and his ever-growing notes, I remained outside in the garden with Mrs. Ashford.

The morning had now altered the place quite considerably.

The dense fog had almost entirely lifted, and where the garden had earlier seemed foreign, dreamlike, and almost hidden from the world, it now appeared far clearer in the morning sun. The water in the ponds lay dark and still between the stones, and the small bridges and paths stood out sharply against the damp plants around us.

"It is curious," said I after some time in silence, "how different the garden appears now."

Mrs. Ashford nodded faintly.

"Japanese gardens are seldom intended for one hour of the day only," said she quietly. "The light changes them continually."

I still remember how peaceful the place seemed at that very moment. Had one not known of the missing fish and the dark bird from the fog, it would have been difficult to imagine the garden as the centre of any mystery at all.

Only after a considerable period of work did Holmes reappear from the garden house.

He came quickly toward us with his notebook under his arm and the same keen, concentrated expression upon his face. And yet it seemed to me at once that something important had now fallen into place in his mind.

He appeared satisfied.

Not relaxed — far from it — but possessed of that particular inner certainty which I had so often learned to recognize in him when a decisive pattern had begun to emerge.

His gaze fell briefly upon the net over the ponds.

"Mrs. Ashford," said he calmly, "your gardeners may remove the nets tomorrow."

She looked at him with a trace of incomprehension.

"Tomorrow, Mr. Holmes?"

"Yes. At midday."

For a brief moment she appeared to consider the rather precise instruction.

"Very well," said she courteously. "I shall instruct the gardeners to remove them tomorrow at luncheon time."

"Thank you," said Holmes quickly. "The exact hour is important."

He cast another glance toward the ponds, where the net still lay stretched above the dark water.

"The experiment," he continued calmly, "has served its purpose."

Then he added: "The nets may then be stored for possible future use."

It was those last words which immediately made me understand that the case was by no means concluded. On the contrary, it seemed to me now quite plain that Holmes regarded the whole morning as merely one further step in a much larger investigation.

Holmes then slowly gathered together the maps from the garden house.

"Mrs. Ashford," said he, "I should be greatly obliged if I might retain these maps for a few days longer."

"Certainly, Mr. Holmes," she replied without hesitation. "You are entirely welcome to them."

Holmes inclined his head slightly.

"You have been of considerable assistance."

Shortly afterwards we took our leave and departed from the garden.

A Journey to Limehouse

I still remember very clearly the feeling of the journey back toward London. Holmes said scarcely anything on the way. He sat with his gaze fixed upon the window of the cab, where the last morning mist still drifted over the city, while his thoughts were plainly working far in advance of my own.

And I was obliged once more to recognize that he had now reached a point in the case where I could follow him only with difficulty.

When Holmes and I found ourselves later that same day once more in Baker Street, he almost immediately resumed his work upon the case.

The maps from Mrs. Ashford were again spread across the table by the window, and during the following hour Holmes moved almost continuously between his notes, the compass, and the various measurements he had already taken beside the ponds.

I sat meanwhile by the fire with a cup of tea and watched his work.

From time to time, he drew fresh lines across the maps with his pencil, measured angles with the same precision as before, and connected the various flight directions with places along the Thames, whose names I only occasionally caught when he read them half aloud to himself.

It became increasingly clear to me that the bird's movements had now, in Holmes's mind, become something almost mathematical.

Only after a long period of work did he finally stop.

He settled back into the chair by the fire, slowly lit his pipe, and for several seconds let the smoke rise before him without speaking. I noticed

at once that his manner now seemed considerably calmer than it had earlier in the day.

Something important appeared to have fallen into place.

"Tomorrow, Watson," said he suddenly, "the observations will be conducted elsewhere."

I must admit that at these words I felt an almost instinctive weariness return.

Another morning before dawn.

Another journey through fog and cold.

"Elsewhere?" I repeated.

"Near Limehouse."

The name at once summoned certain images to my mind.

I had not often had occasion to frequent Limehouse, and still less often voluntarily. The district in those years was marked by the docks, sailors, immigrants, and small dark streets in which foreign tongues and customs seemed to live on almost undisturbed by the rest of London. There rested upon the quarter something both exotic and raw — an atmosphere of sea, trade, and distant worlds pressed close together along the fog-bound banks of the Thames.

I had, however, attended a few patients there and still remembered the peculiar sensation of finding oneself in another world in the very midst of London.

Holmes removed the pipe briefly from his lips.

"We shall require our field glasses," said he calmly.

I still remember that it was precisely at those words that it truly became clear to me that we were no longer merely investigating some missing fish from a garden in Richmond.

We had been set upon the track of something living.

Something which moved along the Thames with its own habits, its own directions — and possibly its own secrets.

The Old Eel-Crow

It was now the third morning in succession that Holmes and I found ourselves out before sunrise along the banks of the Thames, and I must willingly admit that the cold seemed to me this time even more penetrating than during our earlier observations.

Perhaps this was because we were now much closer to the river itself.

At any rate, I had dressed considerably more warmly on this occasion.

That much Holmes's investigations had quickly taught me.

The environment around us differed, moreover, quite drastically from the quiet and well-ordered neighborhoods about Richmond, where Mrs. Ashford's gardens lay hidden behind walls and trees.

Here there was no ornamental tranquillity.

Only small dark fishing-houses along the water, the damp smell of harbour and tide, masts of moored boats, narrow alleys between old warehouses, and a few sailors of plainly foreign origin already moving through the fog despite the early hour.

I still remember how strongly it struck me that London could so completely alter its character within a few miles.

Scarcely had we left the cab before Holmes was already standing motionless at the quay, his field glass raised toward the mist.

It seemed almost uncanny to me how certain his direction appeared to be. He did not observe in a searching manner, but with a precision as though his calculations had already led him to a particular point in the sky where he expected the bird's appearance.

Without a word I followed his example and directed my own field glass toward the same portion of the grey morning air above the river.

We had not stood long upon the quay before Holmes suddenly lowered his voice still further and said:

“There.”

The curious thing was that he uttered the word with an almost instinctive caution, as though he feared to startle the bird, although it must still have been several hundred yards away.

At first, I could see nothing.

Only the grey morning haze above the Thames.

But then I discerned, far off upon the horizon, a small dark speck which slowly grew out of the mist. I followed it with my glass, and after only a few seconds it became clear to me that Holmes had once again been right.

It was the same kind of bird.

Yet here, above the open river and against the pale morning sky, it seemed to me in some strange way larger and more real than it had appeared over the ponds at Richmond. Perhaps this was due to the more open surroundings, or perhaps simply to the fact that the whole affair had now become far more concrete in my own mind.

The bird came directly toward us.

Its flight was swift, steady, and entirely purposeful.

“Observe the precision, Watson,” said Holmes softly, without lowering his glass.

“It is not wandering.”

He was silent for a moment.

“It is returning.”

I continued to follow the bird through my glass and now observed how it gradually lowered its height above the water.

It was plainly descending toward the dockside district itself.

Suddenly Holmes lowered his glass.

“Quickly,” said he. “Down.”

We at once threw ourselves behind some old crates and a heap of fishing tackle which had been stacked against a piece of dark masonry beside the quay.

And yet, a few seconds later, the bird passed almost directly over us.

I should think it cannot have been more than five or six yards above our heads.

The sound of its heavy wing-beats seemed surprisingly loud in the damp morning air.

The bird continued without hesitation toward a row of small dark fishing-houses at the very edge of the river, almost upon the water itself.

Then it disappeared behind one of them.

When Holmes and I had come round to the far side of the little fishing-house, we halted almost simultaneously.

The bird sat there plainly before us.

It had taken its place upon an old wooden post near the water, as though it had used that very perch for many years. There was nothing restless or nervous in its attitude. On the contrary, it appeared almost remarkably composed. Its head moved slowly and observantly from side to side, whilst the dark eyes followed the surroundings with that peculiar attentiveness one so often notices in animals which know their territory and their daily habits completely.

I still remember that, at this moment, the creature seemed to me less like a wild bird than like some old working animal which still faithfully retained its habits long after the labour itself had perhaps ceased.

The Fisherman by the River

Beneath a small overhanging roof beside the house sat an elderly man upon a low stool, slowly smoking a pipe.

He appeared in no way surprised by the bird's arrival.

Indeed, he scarcely seemed even to notice it.

It was precisely this complete lack of reaction which immediately made Holmes understand that we were witnessing nothing unusual, but rather an entirely ordinary part of the man's daily existence.

The sailor himself made a curious impression upon me.

His face was dark and heavily weather-beaten, marked by many years of labour against wind and water. Several tattoos could be seen running along his hands and disappearing beneath the sleeves of the old working jacket he wore. Even the skin itself seemed almost interwoven with those faded signs of a long seafaring life.

His features plainly revealed an Eastern origin, and though age had now bent him somewhat, there still remained a certain enduring strength in his movements. The hands which held the pipe were rough and worn by labour, possessing that particular hardness one sees in men who for many years have lived by the sea and by the work of their own hands.

Holmes observed him for several seconds without speaking.

Then he stepped quietly nearer.

Holmes halted a few paces from the old sailor and studied the bird for another moment before speaking in his usual calm and courteous fashion.

“Is the bird yours?”

The old man slowly raised his eyes toward us through the smoke of his pipe.

“Aye,” said he simply. “We have known each other many years.”

His voice was low and roughened by age and sea-air, yet without the least trace of suspicion or uneasiness. It struck me at once that Holmes’s calm bearing had made a far greater impression upon him than any display of authority could have done.

Holmes allowed his gaze to return to the bird upon the post.

“It appears remarkably well trained,” he observed.

At those words something almost imperceptible passed across the old sailor’s face — not quite a smile, but perhaps rather a quiet recollection.

“Yes,” said he slowly. “I trained him myself.”

He drew once more upon the pipe, whilst his gaze drifted out toward the fog-bound waters of the Thames.

“Many years ago. Back in Vietnam.”

I observed how the man’s voice altered slightly at the mention of his homeland, as though the memories returned with a peculiar clarity.

“He was very young when I first took him,” continued the sailor. “Barely feathered. The nest hung low above one of the river branches north of my village.”

He made a small gesture toward the bird.

“He was the first bird I trained properly by myself.”

There followed a brief silence, whilst the creature above us slowly turned its head and preened a few feathers with its beak.

“In those days,” the man continued, “my family lived from the river. Fish, eels... whatever the water gave us.”

His gaze remained fixed upon the bird.

“The bird learned quickly. Faster than the others.”

He nodded faintly, almost with satisfaction at the memory.

“Every morning we went out together before sunrise. The mist on the river looked much like this.” His eyes wandered slowly across the Thames. “Only warmer.”

I still remember how singular it seemed to stand there beside the fog-bound London river and hear this quiet tale from the waterways of the distant East, whilst the dark bird sat calmly above us like a living bond between the two worlds.

“For many years he fished for me,” the old man continued. “Then later... when I went to sea...”

He shrugged slightly.

“I thought the bird would remain behind.”

He laughed softly and slowly shook his head.

“But one morning, after we had already left the coast, there he was.”

He pointed out toward the river.

“Sitting on the railing of the ship as though he had always belonged there.”

Holmes listened without interruption.

“So he followed you?” he asked.

“Aye.”

The old man looked once more up at the bird.

“It is an old bond,” said he quietly. “Stronger perhaps than either of us fully understands.”

Holmes now moved slowly nearer to the bird.

I noticed at once the particular kind of interest which had seized him. There was nothing sentimental in his manner — such a thing would indeed have been wholly foreign to Sherlock Holmes — but rather a form of analytical respect which he sometimes displayed toward especially remarkable phenomena in nature or among men.

He examined the bird with the same concentrated attention with which a scientist might study some rare instrument or unusual biological specimen.

The bird itself appeared entirely calm in his presence.

Holmes halted close beside the post and for several seconds observed the dark plumage, the powerful wings, and the long beak. Only then did I myself notice that which immediately seemed to attract his particular interest.

There were feathers missing about the creature’s neck.

Not in the manner of disease or injury, but rather as an old and worn mark left by something which for a long period had rested tightly about the throat.

Holmes turned quietly toward the old sailor.

"But you still fish with the bird?"

The man slowly shook his head.

"No."

He removed the pipe from his mouth and glanced briefly upward toward the bird.

"The ring was removed long ago. During the voyage from Vietnam."

Holmes still said nothing.

"I thought," continued the sailor quietly, "that after so many years the creature deserved its freedom."

He shrugged faintly.

"So now it flies where it wishes."

There followed a brief silence.

I still remember very distinctly the particular expression which appeared upon Holmes's face at that moment.

It was not surprise.

Rather the quiet and almost satisfied confirmation which comes when a number of scattered observations suddenly fall perfectly into place within one complete pattern.

I could almost see the thoughts working behind his calm gaze:
the largest fish...the precise behavior ...the two directions of flight...the purposeful route through the fog...the bird's return to Limehouse whenever the catch failed...

Everything now appeared explained.

Holmes allowed his gaze to rest once more upon the bird.

"It is a remarkable creature," said he quietly.

Then he looked toward the old sailor.

"And you are an extraordinary pair. You have taught it very thoughtfully."

The old man did not answer immediately, but merely inclined his head very slightly, as though the words required no further explanation

between men who both understood something of long-standing bonds and old habits.

Holmes bowed faintly.

"I may return," said he.

"Aye," replied the sailor quietly. "You will be welcome."

Then Holmes turned away without further words, and I can still recall how we silently departed the place together, whilst the bird remained seated calmly upon its old post beside the fog-bound reaches of the Thames.

When Holmes and I found ourselves once more in Baker Street later that same day, he appeared to me noticeably altered.

Not excited — he rarely was — but far calmer and possessed of that peculiar quiet satisfaction which would sometimes reveal itself when a difficult theory had almost entirely arranged itself within his mind.

Mrs. Ashford's maps still lay spread across the table beside the window, but Holmes no longer worked with the same intense rapidity as before. For several minutes he stood silently by the fire before at last seating himself and slowly lighting his pipe.

The smoke rose quietly about his sharp profile whilst for a moment he seemed wholly absorbed in his own reflections.

"Habits," said he suddenly, almost as though continuing a conversation with himself, "remain long after command disappears."

I still sat with a cup of tea before me, and I confess that the whole discovery continued to occupy my thoughts far more deeply than I truly wished to reveal.

"It is an extraordinary story, Holmes," I exclaimed. "That the bird followed him all the way from Vietnam... and that we should ultimately find it there amongst those fog-bound fishing huts in Limehouse!"

Holmes did not answer immediately.

I continued with almost a kind of boyish enthusiasm at which I have since been obliged to smile.

"And the entire connection! The directions, the ponds, the missing fish... I must say, Holmes, it is one of the most remarkable explanations I

have yet heard you produce. Frankly, it seems to me that the matter must now be considered entirely concluded."

Holmes slowly raised his eyes through the smoke of his pipe.

"We are still missing one final observation," said he quietly.

I nearly sank back into my chair at the words.

"One direction has been explained," he continued. "The other has not."

I willingly admit that inwardly I could scarcely suppress a faint groan.

For I knew perfectly well what those words implied.

Another morning. Another journey to the Thames before dawn. Yet more hours amidst fog and cold.

And yet I felt at the same time that my own curiosity had now grown almost as strong as Holmes's. The bird, its strange habits, and its two differing directions had gradually seized my imagination far more deeply than I could ever have believed possible at the beginning of the case.

Holmes probably observed something of this in my expression, for a faint and almost imperceptible smile briefly appeared about the corners of his mouth.

"You need not look so alarmed, Watson," said he drily. "I believe tomorrow morning will conclude the matter."

And strangely enough, even at that moment, I already knew that he was right.

The Dead Forest

On the following morning Holmes and I once more found ourselves beside the Thames long before sunrise.

This time, however, the surroundings differed entirely from both the quiet gardens of Richmond and the foggy fishing huts of Limehouse.

Here there was no true harbor activity. No voices. No boats in motion. Only reeds.

Long stretches of dark reeds beside the motionless water, a few old and half-collapsed boathouses, and a line of dead trees rising like white skeletons through the fog farther along the riverbank.

I still remember the strange impression the place produced upon me.

At a distance the trees resembled a dead forest half consumed by mist. Even the air seemed different here — heavier, rawer, and more damp — whilst the civilization of London suddenly appeared very far away, as though we had left the city altogether and wandered into some far older and untouched landscape.

There rested something almost natural-historical about the place.

Indeed, I scarcely believe I exaggerate when I say that the entire region in the fog appeared almost prehistoric to me.

Holmes, however, seemed entirely unaffected by the peculiar character of our surroundings.

He already stood motionless at the water's edge with his field-glasses raised toward the grey morning sky, whilst I took my place beside him and attempted to orient myself through the mist.

Neither of us spoke during those first minutes.

Only the distant sound of water against the reeds and the occasional almost imperceptible beating of wings somewhere far out in the fog could be heard around us.

After some time Holmes briefly lowered his glasses.

"It should be here," said he quietly.

Then he raised them once more and continued his silent observation of the fog above the river.

Then — almost at the same moment that the first pale rays of morning sunlight began to break through the mist — the bird appeared again.

This time it did not come from Limehouse.

Its course lay directly toward the white line of dead trees farther ahead through the haze.

I immediately lifted my own field-glasses and followed it almost instinctively. To my surprise I discovered how quickly I had already grown accustomed to recognizing its peculiar manner of movement. After only a few days of observation, its dark form already appeared strangely familiar to me, almost like a fixed part of the mornings beside the Thames.

This time, moreover, it was far easier to see that the bird carried something in its beak.

A large fish.

Even at a distance I could perceive that the catch was considerably heavier than the smaller fish we had previously imagined. The bird flew lower than before and seemed to labour harder with its wings as it continued its purposeful course toward the dead trees.

And yet its direction did not waver in the slightest.

Not searching. Not circling.

It knew precisely where it was going.

Holmes still said nothing.

He merely raised one hand and pointed toward the dead forest through the mist.

Then he at once began moving in that direction.

I followed him through the damp reeds whilst the bird disappeared farther ahead amongst the pale tree-trunks.

The nearer we approached; the stranger the place appeared to me.

The trees were not merely dead.

They were almost entirely white and grayish, as though life had long ago been drawn from them. Some stood crooked and twisted against the sky, whilst others resembled vast pieces of ancient driftwood which by some inexplicable means still remained upright in the earth.

There rested something almost unreal about them.

I remember still that for one moment I thought less of trees than of petrified remains.

Holmes paused briefly and regarded the trunks around us.

"Cormorant droppings," said he quietly.

I looked at him questioningly.

"The birds destroy the trees over time. Their colonies poison them."

Once more he raised his gaze toward the dead branches, where the fog still drifted in long ribbons between the trunks.

"The forest dies," said he softly, "but the colony remains."

The nearer Holmes and I came to the dead forest, the stronger the sounds around us became.

At first, I had perceived only occasional distant cries through the fog.

Now it swelled into genuine clamor.

Not from one bird alone, but from many.

Deep harsh cries from the adult birds mingled with a far shriller and more restless noise from the young, whilst heavy wingbeats echoed through the branches above our heads. In several places I could hear the dry scratching of claws against bark and limbs, and ever more dark shapes came gliding amongst the trees.

It was only now that I truly realized we were confronted not with a single bird, but with an entire colony.

There must have been twenty-five. Perhaps thirty. Perhaps fifty or even more.

The effect was, I confess, almost shocking.

Everywhere among the dead trees I now began to distinguish movement.

Nests.

Dozens of them.

They lay crowded upon the pale branches in dark masses of sticks and reeds, whilst long-necked young birds stretched themselves upward from nearly every nest with open beaks and harsh, impatient cries toward the newly returned parent birds above them.

And there — unmistakably — was our own bird.

I followed it through the glass as it descended heavily among the dead branches with the large fish still hanging from its beak.

Immediately a violent commotion broke out in the nearest nests.

The young birds cried out more furiously than before, wings beating wildly against the branches as neck after neck stretched upward toward the catch.

Yet only one nest received it.

Only one.

Our bird settled awkwardly upon a pale branch near the upper part of the colony, steadied itself for a moment with half-spread wings, and then lowered the great fish into the waiting nest beneath it.

The cries around us continued on every side.

Wings beat through the fog-filled branches overhead. Dark bodies moved among the dead trees. More birds arrived from the river with fresh catches.

The whole white forest seemed suddenly alive with noise, hunger, instinct, and movement.

Two Directions - Instinct and Memory

Holmes stood entirely still beside me, his eyes fixed upon the colony.

“There,” said he quietly at last.

For several moments more he remained silent whilst the glamor of the birds echoed through the dead trees around us.

Then he spoke again, slowly and almost thoughtfully.

“When the bird succeeded in securing a catch,” said he, “its course led here — to the colony, the nest, and the waiting young. To its natural existence.”

He turned his gaze briefly toward the distant river behind us, still half hidden beneath the morning mist.

“But when the attempt failed...” he continued, “it returned instead to Limehouse. To the old sailor. To habit. To memory. To the place where labour and feeding had once been inseparable.”

I remember that his voice had altered slightly as he spoke these last words. Not emotionally — Holmes rarely permitted sentiment to influence his manner — but with that quieter and more reflective tone which sometimes emerged when a case touched upon something broader than crime itself.

“You see, Watson,” said he, still watching the colony through the dead branches, “the creature lives between two conditions. Between instinct and training. Between its former life and its natural one.”

Far above us another dark bird descended through the fog with a fish in its beak, whilst the noise from the nests swelled once more among the pale trees.

"It possesses two loyalties, Watson," Holmes continued quietly. "Two lives — and therefore two directions. When successful in its fishing, it returned to nature. When unsuccessful, to memory."

I confess that I stood for some moments deeply affected by the scene before us.

Not merely by the extraordinary explanation itself, but by the strange melancholy which seemed to rest over the entire place — the dead white forest, the clamoring nests, the heavy river mist, and the dark birds moving endlessly between instinct and old habit.

It came over me then, perhaps more strongly than at any previous moment in the case, why Holmes had found the matter so singularly fascinating.

For it had never truly concerned stolen fish.

Rather it concerned the persistence of old patterns of life long after their original purpose had disappeared.

And as I looked once more through the fog toward the pale dead trees beside the Thames, I felt almost as though one could sense the lingering wings of time itself moving silently through that strange and forgotten colony.

When in later years I have reflected upon this singular affair, it has often struck me that perhaps it was not the mystery alone which remained so vividly in my memory, but equally the peculiar atmosphere in which the entire investigation unfolded.

Even now, after so many years, I can still summon the image of those fog-bound mornings beside the Thames with almost uncomfortable clarity.

The cold. The still water. The damp smell of river and reeds. The dark ponds in Mrs. Ashford's garden. The grey morning mist through which bridges, trees, and birds seemed to drift perpetually between reality and dream.

There rested over the whole matter a curious feeling of something half concealed and half forgotten, as though the very fogs of the Thames hid remnants of much older worlds amidst the modern life of London.

And perhaps it was precisely this which so deeply occupied Holmes.

For along the river there still existed in those years small pockets of life where old customs and foreign traditions continued almost unnoticed by the rest of the city. Sailors from distant lands, merchants, immigrants, and old dock workers all carried something with them — habits, stories, and manners of living which survived far from the places where they had first arisen.

And at times these old patterns seemed to survive most strongly precisely where one least expected them.

Not merely among men.

But among animals also.

I still remember Holmes's words concerning habits which survive long after command has disappeared. And I do not believe he referred solely to the bird.

For in that old eel-crow from Vietnam there existed something which Holmes instinctively recognized as profoundly and almost tragically true: that living creatures sometimes continue to follow old directions long after the world around them has changed.

The bird had survived its rivers, its former labour, and its original life.

And yet it still retained both its directions through the fogs of the Thames.

A Solution without a Crime

That very same day I paid one final visit to Mrs. Ashford in Richmond.

I travelled there alone, bearing Holmes's compliments, returning the maps we had borrowed during the investigation, and thanking her sincerely for the hospitality she had shown us throughout the affair.

The garden now lay quiet and almost peaceful in the afternoon light. It was difficult to imagine that the dark ponds had only a few mornings earlier stood at the centre of so much uncertainty and speculation.

Mrs. Ashford received me with the same calm courtesy as before, and I answered as best I could the questions she still possessed concerning the matter and its singular explanation.

To my surprise, she appeared not merely relieved but genuinely fascinated by the solution.

Perhaps precisely because the entire affair so strangely united her two deepest interests:

animals and the Eastern culture to which she had remained so strongly attached throughout her life.

At any rate, I was able to assure her completely that there had never been any human theft.

No gardener. No servant. No conspiracy.

I believe this relieved her more than she openly wished to reveal, particularly where the younger gardener was concerned, upon whom suspicion had plainly rested for some time.

"Mr. Holmes asks only one further precaution," said I, as we walked slowly beside the ponds.

She looked at me questioningly.

"At the very least for another month, the nets should remain over the ponds."

She paused slightly at these words.

"Another month?"

"Until the nesting season is over," I explained. "The bird was not stealing for profit, Mrs. Ashford. It was feeding its young."

I still remember the almost troubled expression which appeared upon her face.

"And what will become of the creature," she asked quietly, "if the ponds remain covered?"

I willingly admit that the question surprised me somewhat. Only a short time earlier she had regarded the bird as a nuisance and a threat to her valuable fish. Now her first concern appeared instead to be for its survival.

"Mr. Holmes believes it will find other waters," I answered reassuringly.

And yet I confess I did not know this with complete certainty.

Mrs. Ashford nodded slowly and allowed her gaze to wander across the dark ponds, where the nets now once more lay stretched over the water beneath the fading afternoon light.

"Then perhaps," said she softly, "we have both been permitted to keep what belongs to us."

I still remember that Holmes, later that same evening when I repeated these words to him, merely inclined his head slightly without comment.

Yet I do not think they were without significance to him.

Mrs. Ashford appeared sincerely relieved by my explanation, and I even believe I detected in her a faint trace of shame regarding the suspicion which had for a time rested upon the young gardener.

She paused for a moment beside the largest pond and looked down toward the dark water beneath the nets.

"I am glad," said she quietly, "that no man proved dishonest."

Then, after a brief silence, she added:

"It would have saddened me far more than the loss of the fish themselves."

I still remember the profoundly human relief which rested upon her in that moment. For it seemed clear to me that the thought of greed, deceit, and mistrust had disturbed her almost as deeply as the loss itself.

After some further conversation she paused once more and allowed her gaze to wander out across the garden.

"Perhaps," said she slowly, "it is better this way."

I looked at her questioningly.

"If the fish were taken merely because another living creature sought to feed its young..." She smiled faintly. "Then it belongs more to nature than to crime."

And thus, the strange affair of Mrs. Ashford's disappearing carp proved in the end to be no true crime at all, but merely an echo of an older life which still survived along the fog-bound reaches of the Thames.

And in that singular bird Holmes believed, I think, that he had caught a rare glimpse of something most unusual:

a creature which was not — as men so often are — divided by deceit or contradiction, but simply by memory and instinct.

Closing Note

BY ALISTAIR CROFT

This story forms part of a larger world of Sherlock Holmes tales that I have been developing over recent years.

Some are shorter, more atmospheric mysteries such as *The Bird That Fished at Dawn* — stories in which Holmes and Watson move through fog-covered gardens, docklands, and curious small enigmas that may reveal as much about human nature and time itself as about the mystery being investigated.

Others are larger and darker novels.

Most notably, this includes *The Secret Letters* series, in which Holmes's investigations gradually unfold into a far broader network of secrets, international intrigues, and hidden forces moving through the shadows of Europe during the 1890s. The series is presented through letters and records later examined by Watson as he attempts to understand the full meaning behind Holmes's final great investigations.

Though the stories differ in tone and scale, I have tried in all of them to preserve something of what I have always loved most in Conan Doyle's world: the atmosphere, the observation, the fog, the friendship between Holmes and Watson — and the sense that even the smallest mystery may sometimes open the door to something far greater.

— *Alistair Croft*