

“THE EBONY APE”

A
SHERLOCK HOLMES TALE
OF
VICTORIAN HORROR
AND
BIZARRE MYSTERY

BY
CHARLES EDWARD POGUE

Based on the Characters & Stories
of
Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

Revised Production Draft

The use of the Sherlock Holmes characters
created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle is by
permission of Dame Jean Conan Doyle.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

M'TOOMBA
THALIA PRESBURY
JAMES STONER
PROFESSOR OWEN PRESBURY
REVEREND TREVOR BENNETT
ASHA
EUGENIA PRESBURY
CECILY BENNETT
DOCTOR LEON STERNDALE
SHERLOCK HOLMES
DOCTOR JOHN H. WATSON
INSPECTOR LESTRADE
DOCTOR HANS LOWENSTEIN

SETTING

The entire play takes place over several days in Victorian London of the 1880's.

PROLOGUE - THE APE'S CURSE

"Madness and Death..."

The Presbury Estate, Hampstead, A Late Summer Night

SCENE ONE - AN UNUSUAL STORY

"Where there is no imagination, there is no horror..."

221B Baker Street, London, Morning, Two Days Later

SCENE TWO - DISCOVERY IN THE MORGUE

"The scarlet thread of murder..."

Scotland Yard Morgue, London, Early Afternoon of the Same Day

SCENE THREE - A DEAD MAN'S ROOM

"A dog reflects the nature of its surroundings..."

The Presbury Estate, Later That Afternoon

SCENE FOUR - A FIGHT, A THEFT, A FACE IN THE WINDOW

"I have trained myself to see what others overlook."

The Presbury Estate, That Night

INTERMISSION

SCENE FIVE - THE MISSING CIGAR

"Dreams sometime become nightmares..."

The Presbury Estate, Later the Same Night and Following Morning

SCENE SIX - MORE MADNESS, MORE DEATH

"...the fiend is not dead, only sleeping..."

The Presbury Estate, Early Evening and Later That Night

SCENE SEVEN - A DISAPPEARANCE AND AN EXPERIMENT

"The Devil's Foot..."

The Presbury Estate, Later That Night and the Following Day

SCENE EIGHT - THE FINAL CURSE

"...The curious incident of the dog..."

The Presbury Estate, Early Evening of the Same Day

EPILOGUE - THE LAST SECRET REVEALED

"...a remarkable and ghastly business..."

Presbury Estate, Later That Night

Holmes!

WATSON

He scans the room and sees Holmes standing with the smoking revolver.

Holmes, thank heaven, you're safe!

WATSON

Of course, I'm safe, Watson, and though your concern is most gratifying, why on earth shouldn't I be?

HOLMES

Those shots? At whom were you firing?

WATSON

No one.
(gestures to the wall opposite)
Merely a little target practice.

HOLMES

Watson examines the wall. It is pocked with BULLET HOLES. FORMING THE INITIALS "VR". Watson shoots Holmes a dubious glance.

"VR"...very patriotic. Her Majesty might be pleased, but I seriously doubt Mrs. Hudson will be...

WATSON

(puts down gun)
Considering our landlady's princely rates, she should indulge me in my peculiar decorating habits.

HOLMES

Watson takes off his hat and coat, watching Holmes pace in agitated boredom. He also notices as his friend eyes the Moroccan-bound case which houses the hypodermic syringe.

I brought back the papers.

WATSON

(a bit waspish)
And the latest edition of the Strand Magazine. Another of your "penny dreadfuls"?

HOLMES

Watson is rankled by the comment, but hands the magazine to Holmes anyway.

"The Adventures of the Beryl Coronet".

WATSON

HOLMES

(leafs through it with disdain)

The illustrations are as unflattering as the prose, I see. I really cannot congratulate you on these literary efforts, Watson.

WATSON

(irked)

They are quite popular with the public.

HOLMES

No doubt, as you pander to their dubious taste instead of confining yourself rigidly to the facts.

WATSON

I protest, Holmes! You know I record all your cases with diligent faithfulness.

HOLMES

It is your emphasis I object to. Detection is or ought to be, an exact science, treated in a cold and unemotional manner. You have attempted to tinge it with romanticism.

WATSON

(grumpily)

Don't fob your objections off as scholarly criticism when the extent of your own literary interests rarely go beyond the criminals news of the paper.

Watson snatches the magazine back and slightly limping, moves to the sofa. Holmes fixes himself a pipe with tobacco from the Moroccan slipper.

HOLMES

(without looking at Watson)

The old Jezail bullet wound acting up again, eh?

WATSON

At every change in the weather.

HOLMES

You should not have walked all the way to the Wigmore Street Post Office in this damp.

WATSON

(opens his paper)

No, I suppose...

(stops and turns to Holmes)

How the devil did you deduce where I've been?

HOLMES

I did not deduce it. I observed it.

WATSON

There's a difference?

HOLMES

(lighting a pipe)

Quite, old fellow. Observation tells me you have some reddish dirt adhering to your instep.

(Watson sees he does and, using the fireplace poker, flicks it off)

In front of the entrance to the Wigmore Street Office, they have taken up the pavement and the earth there has that peculiar reddish tint found nowhere else in the neighbourhood. Deduction tells me while there, you sent a telegram.

WATSON

(amazed)

But how...?

HOLMES

Simplicity itself.

WATSON

Not to me, I assure you!

HOLMES

I knew you had not written a letter, since I sat opposite you all morning...In your open desk here you have a sheet of stamps and a bundle of post cards. What could you go into the post-office for, then, but to send a wire? Eliminate all other factors...

HOLMES & WATSON

(as Watson joins in this oft-heard adage)

...and the one which remains must be the truth.

WATSON

Of course. Simple indeed. Childishly simple.

HOLMES

(coldly)

Yes, every problem becomes very childish once it is explained to you.

WATSON

I meant no offense, old fellow.

HOLMES

(wearily)

On the contrary, I'm grateful for even the most trifling diversion to exercise my talents. A small release from this prosaic and unprofitable world.

(looks out the window)
 Look how thick the fog is. On such a day, the thief or murderer could roam London as the tiger does the jungle. It is fortunate for this community, I am not a criminal.

WATSON
 (reading the newspaper)
 It is indeed.

HOLMES
 (almost a lament)
 There are no crimes or criminals these days.

WATSON
 There have been numerous petty thefts.

HOLMES
 My point precisely. This somber stage is set for something more worthy than bungling villainy. The days of the great cases are past. Man, or at least criminal man, has lost all enterprise and originality.

Holmes nervously taps his fingers on the Moroccan case. Watson surreptitiously watches him over his newspaper.

HOLMES
 (without turning around)
 Your eyes are burning a hole in the back of my head.

WATSON
 I thought I had weaned you from that accursed habit. When did you resume it?

HOLMES
 I haven't...as of yet...

WATSON
 Then Good God, Holmes, consider. Count the cost.

HOLMES
 (agitated)
 My mind rebels at the dull routine of existence, Watson.

WATSON
 You'll have no mind at all, if you persist in this beastly folly.

HOLMES
 Nor will I, if I must endure this idleness. My brain is like a racing machine, tearing itself to pieces because it is not connected up with the work for which it was built.

I can dispense with artificial stimulants, only give me problems, give me work.

WATSON

Very well then, you shall have it.

Holmes stares curiously at Watson.

HOLMES

Just like that? Manna from Heaven, old fellow?

WATSON

(picks up a paper)

You are aware of this business the newspapers are calling the "Monkey-god curse"?

HOLMES

(snorts derisively)

One could scarcely not be aware of it. What with newsboys shouting the melodramatic headlines on every street corner.

(suspiciously)

Surely, you're not suggesting I look into the matter?

WATSON

(ill at ease)

Well...I'm inclined to think...

HOLMES

(curtly)

I should do so...First of all, there is nothing to suggest anything criminal has taken place. Secondly, my services have not been requested.

WATSON

They have.

HOLMES

What?

WATSON

The telegram I sent this morning was in response to one I received last night. From Leon Sterndale, a member of the Presbury expedition. As you know, Sterndale and I served together in Afghanistan and have kept up our acquaintance over the years. He wished to speak with you most urgently about these curious doings and asked me to sound you out about the matter.

HOLMES

Then why didn't you?

WATSON

Holmes, you know what a black, uncommunicative mood you've been in. I thought it best Sterndale simply show up here. I told him so in the telegram. I expect him any moment.

HOLMES

(irritated)

Really, Watson, are we to give serious attentions to such things? This agency stands flatfooted upon the ground, and there it must remain. The world is big enough for us. No "ghosts" need apply.

WATSON

At least have the courtesy to hear him out.

HOLMES

(resigned)

Anything is better than this stagnation, I suppose.

There is a KNOCK on the door.

WATSON

That must be him now. Do try to be civil, Holmes.

Watson opens the door. Sterndale stands in the frame. Watson stares at his old friend in amazement.

STERNDALE

Watson, old man, good to see you. What's it been? Three years?

WATSON

(still stunned)

A...yes...yes...You're looking...remarkably fit!

(composing himself)

Please, come in...come in...

STERNDALE

(sees Holmes)

And you must be Mr. Sherlock Holmes. An honour, sir. Your reputation is well known to me.

HOLMES

It pales when confronted with your own, sir. The honour is mine. It is a rare privilege to meet the foremost explorer, African authority, and Orientalist of our day.

STERNDALE

You flatter me, Mr. Holmes.

HOLMES

Nonsense. Your exploits are the dream of every schoolboy and the pride of every British subject, from exploring the Mountains of the Moon to tracking the source of the Nile, to fighting alongside "Chinese" Gordon...

(refers to photo on wall)

...and crushing the slave trade.

(points to the scar on Sterndale's cheek)

This is, no doubt, where you caught the Afghan lance at Maiwand. Watson has told me the story many times.

STERNDALE

Yes, we were both fortunate to escape with our lives that grim day. But our friend Watson has not been remiss in recounting your many feats to me, sir.

HOLMES

Yes, I should be lost without my Boswell.

Holmes shoots an amused glance at an unamused Watson.

STERNDALE

He said that you could solve anything.

HOLMES

(a look of surprise to Watson)

He said too much.

STERNDALE

He said that you are never beaten.

HOLMES

I have been beaten four times -- three times by men, once by a woman.

STERNDALE

What is that compared with the number of your successes?

HOLMES

True. I have been generally successful.

STERNDALE

Then may you be so with me.

HOLMES

That will depend. Just why have you come?

Holmes gestures to a chair. Sterndale sits. Though vigorous and aggressive, Sterndale's eyes are sunken, marked by dark circles. A nervous, edgy quality lurks beneath his bravado.

His knuckles are bruised and scabby and he rubs them self-consciously.

STERNDALE

I've come for advice.

HOLMES

That is easily got.

STERNDALE

(darkly)

And help.

Pause.

HOLMES

That is not so easy. And quite frankly, I am unable to see just how I might be of assistance in this matter which the press has so capriciously dubbed the "Monkey-god Curse."

STERNDALE

You are familiar then with the events?

HOLMES

Somewhat. I know a member of your party died the other night. Apparently of a fit brought on by the nervous shock of all this curse talk.

STERNDALE

Mr. Stoner indeed died. And died in great fear. But I cannot think it was fear of the curse.

Holmes is immediately struck by this.

HOLMES

Why not?

STERNDALE

He scoffed at the whole business. Stoner was a geologist. And like his speciality, very much of the earth. He did not have enough imagination to be afraid of the curse.

HOLMES

Curious. A sound, sensible man dies in great agitation and fear. If he was not afraid of this curse, then it must have been something else. But what?

STERNDALE

Perhaps the Speckled Band.

WATSON

Speckled Band?

STERNDALE

They were his dying words.

HOLMES

Do you have any idea what they mean?

STERNDALE

None at all.

HOLMES

Why do you come to me about this?

STERNDALE

(pauses, at a loss)

I...I don't know really. I supposed because I'm afraid.

WATSON

Of what? Why, man, you're the most courageous chap I know. I've seen you in battle against the enemy. Nothing could shake you.

STERNDALE

Oh, yes, stand me up against a horde of blade-whirling fuzzy-wuzzies or a charging rogue elephant and I'm as cold as ice. But something I can't see or touch, only...only sense...and...I..It's this curse, this bloody curse! That's what I'm afraid of!

WATSON

Surely, old man, you're not saying you believe it.

STERNDALE

If you had been in Africa as long as I have, Doctor, you'd come to believe a great many things no ordinary man does...

Holmes and Watson just stare at him. Sterndale is embarrassed, feeling foolish.

STERNDALE

But I should not have come. There is no way to make you believe, understand. And even if I could convince you, as you say, Mr. Holmes, just how could you help? I'm sorry to have wasted your time, gentlemen.

Sterndale starts for the door. Holmes stops him.

HOLMES

Dr. Sterndale, it has been my experience to doubt much, but to discount nothing...Perhaps, you're right and there is no way to help you. But I should prefer to decide that for myself. Perhaps if you told us your story from the beginning.

STERNDALE

It begins with The Ebony Ape...
(sitting down)
God forbid it ends there...

WATSON

The Ebony Ape...

STERNDALE

A statuette of a manlike ape carved from ebony wood and encrusted with priceless jewels. An icon of an old African god, Zem. Perhaps the oldest African God. And once the most powerful, worshipped all across the continent. Mentions of Zem have been found among the writings of the ancient Egyptians. Little of the lore and myth surrounding him survives, but it is rumoured he is still secretly worshipped by some -- particularly in the darkest, most unexplored regions of the continent. It was also there that the ancient temple of Zem was said to be.

HOLMES

It was to find this Temple that the Presbury expedition was formed, was it not?

STERNDALE

Yes...Presbury has been obsessed with the legend of Zem and the temple's existence for years. He has spent both the better part of his life and his rich wife's fortune in search of it. Determined to make one final expedition, he gathered together a team of the greatest scientists and African authorities, myself among them, to search not only for the Temple of Zem, but as well explore the dense, uncharted section of the continent we penetrated.

HOLMES

The press has dutifully recounted your rousing success.

STERNDALE

Indeed, we found the Temple. And inside...the fabled Ebony Ape.

WATSON

And the curse?

STERNDALE

Over the temple door were several inscriptions in different runes and symbols...Egyptians hieroglyphics among them. Those that could be translated all issued the same warning -- all violators of the temple or any infidel who laid profane hands upon the sacred image of Zem would be driven to death through madness.

HOLMES

Whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad.

A pause as all look at Holmes.
Sterndale rises and paces.

STERNDALE

We were scientists, scholars. Educated, practical men. What mummy's tomb, what buried treasure did not have a curse attached to it? Silly mumbo-jumbo to frighten away superstitious primitives. We took the idol and all the offerings and artifacts -- a cache of both archeological and financial riches -- left by the pilgrims over the centuries.

WATSON

Presbury's wife, if I recall correctly, was the first victim of this so-called curse.

STERNDALE

Yes, Eugenia. It happened in a village outpost on our return. A lion broke loose from one of our cages and all but tore her face off, leaving her hideously mutilated.

WATSON

Good God! How horrible.

STERNDALE

Indeed, she was a great beauty. Presbury went wild with despair and shot every cat we had trapped.

HOLMES

A tragedy, of course. But how does it figure into the cryptic wording of the curse? Eugenia Presbury still lives and is not mad.

STERNDALE

Depends on your definition of madness, Mr. Holmes. She has withdrawn utterly into a secluded silence, never leaving her room, an African servant her only companion. She wears a veil over her face at all times. Even when she sleeps. Twice she has tried to take her own life. She is a desperate, distraught woman who longs for death. To a callous, morbid press hungry to twist the facts into headlines, Eugenia Presbury is an ideal victim of Zem's dark revenge. Of course, it would have remained only an unfortunate accident, had it not been for what happened to MacPhail.

HOLMES

MacPhail?

STERNDALE

Percy MacPhail, a young biologist with the expedition. On the ship to England, he fell sick with fever. Died three days later, raving out of his head mad with delirium...Felt rather badly about it.