

A Three- Pipe Problem

'Mr Symons has never done anything so wholly delightful'

— *The Sunday Times*



Julian Symons

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Copyright & Information

A Three Pipe Problem

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This is a fictional work and all characters are drawn from the author's imagination. Any resemblance or similarities to persons either living or dead are entirely coincidental.



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About the Author



Julian Symons was born in 1912 in London. He was the younger brother, and later biographer, of the writer A.J.A. Symons.

Aged twenty five, he founded a poetry magazine which he edited for a short time, before turning to crime writing. This was not to be his only interest, however, as in his eighty-two years he produced an enormously varied body of work. Social and military history, biography and criticism were all subjects he touched upon with remarkable success, and held a distinguished reputation in each field. Nonetheless, it is primarily for his crime writing that he is remembered. His novels were consistently highly individual and expertly crafted, raising him above other crime writers of his day.

Symons commenced World War II as a recognised conscientious objector, but nevertheless ended up serving in the Royal Armoured Corps from 1942 until 1944, when he was invalided out. A period as an advertising copywriter followed, but was soon abandoned in favour of full time writing. Many prizes came his way as a result, including two *Edgar Awards* and in 1982 he received the accolade of being named as *Grand Master* of the Mystery Writers of America – an honour accorded to only three other English writers before him: Graham Greene, Eric Ambler and Daphne Du Maurier. Symons then succeeded Agatha Christie as the president of Britain's Detection Club, a position he held from 1976 to 1985, and in 1990 he was awarded the *Cartier Diamond Dagger* from the British Crime Writers for his lifetime's achievement in crime fiction.

He published over thirty crime novels and story collections between 1945 and 1994; with the works combining different elements of the classic detective story and modern crime novel, but with a clear leaning toward the latter, especially situations where ordinary people get drawn into extraordinary series of events – a trait he shared with Eric Ambler. He also wrote two modern-day Sherlock Holmes pastiches. In *A Three Pipe Problem* the detective was '...a television actor, *Sheridan Hayes*, who wears the mask of *Sherlock Holmes* and assumes his character'. Several of Julian

Symons' works have been filmed for television.

Julian Symons died in 1994.

Dedication & Title Quote

For Ngaio Marsh,
who gave me the title

‘What are you going to do then?’ I asked.

‘To smoke,’ he answered. ‘It is quite a three-pipe problem, and I beg that you won’t speak to me for fifty minutes.’

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Introduction

The French call a typewriter *une machine à écrire*. It is a description that could well be applied to Julian Symons, except the writing he produced had nothing about it smelling of the mechanical. The greater part of his life was devoted to putting pen to paper. Appearing in 1938, his first book was a volume of poetry, *Confusions About X*. In 1996, after his death, there came his final crime novel, *A Sort of Virtue* (written even though he knew he was under sentence from an inoperable cancer) beautifully embodying the painful come-by lesson that it is possible to achieve at least a degree of good in life.

His crime fiction put him most noticeably into the public eye, but he wrote in many forms: biographies, a memorable piece of autobiography (*Notes from Another Country*), poetry, social history, literary criticism coupled with year-on-year reviewing and two volumes of military history, and one string thread runs through it all. Everywhere there is a hatred of hypocrisy, hatred even when it aroused the delighted fascination with which he chronicled the siren schemes of that notorious jingoist swindler, Horatio Bottomley, both in his biography of the man and fictionally in *The Paper Chase* and *The Killing of Francie Lake*.

That hatred, however, was not a spew but a well-spring. It lay behind what he wrote and gave it force, yet it was always tempered by a need to speak the truth. Whether he was writing about people as fiction or as fact, if he had a low opinion of them he simply told the truth as he saw it, no more and no less.

This adherence to truth fills his novels with images of the mask. Often it is the mask of hypocrisy. When, as in *Death's Darkest Face* or *Something Like a Love Affair*, he chose to use a plot of dazzling legerdemain, the masks of cunning are startlingly ripped away.

The masks he ripped off most effectively were perhaps those which people put on their true faces when sex was in the air or under the exterior. 'Lift the stone, and sex crawls out from under,' says a character in that relentless hunt for truth, *The Progress of a Crime*, a book that achieved the rare feat for a British author, winning Symons the US Edgar Allen Poe Award.

Julian was indeed something of a pioneer in the fifties and sixties bringing into the almost sexless world of the detective story the truths of sexual situations. 'To exclude realism of description and language from the crime novel' he writes in *Critical Occasions*, 'is almost to prevent its practitioners from attempting any serious work.' And then the need to unmask deep-hidden secrecies of every sort was almost as necessary at the end of his crime-writing life as it had been at the beginning. Not for nothing was his last book subtitled *A Political Thriller*.

H R F Keating
London, 2001

Chapter One *The First Murder*

The crimes known to the press first as the Karate Killings and then as Sherlock Holmes' Last Case, began one New Year's Eve. On this evening of rain and blustering wind the usual things happened in central London. The gaiety was, as always, partly synthetic and partly real. The people swarming up the pavements of Regent Street and Oxford Street, straying all over the road, stopping cars, kissing their occupants and wishing them a Happy New Year, could be said to be looking for reality or desperately maintaining illusion. The young men and women who plunged naked into the Trafalgar Square fountain appeared to be enjoying themselves, although one had to be rushed off to hospital suffering from exposure. At parties people, some of whom had met for the first time, sang 'Auld Lang Syne' and then embraced warmly before driving home, often with more than the permitted amount of alcohol in their blood. In thousands of houses people with nowhere to go watched comedians on television wearing paper hats while they sang sentimental songs.

It was a New Year's Eve like any other. The police remained good-humoured in spite of the sparklers and bangers thrown at them. They turned a blind eye to motorists who had had one too many, except the minority involved in accidents. There was an average number of telephone calls from householders who returned home after singing 'Auld Lang Syne' with tears in their eyes, to find that burglars had not only forced locks and taken jewel cases, but had also scrawled obscene messages on bedroom walls. Several cases of incendiarism relating to shops and stores were reported, three of which proved to have been set to collect the insurance. There were a number of assaults, the result of quarrelsomeness through drink. And there was a murder.

The dead man's name was Charles Pole. He was forty-three years old, and he lived in Streatham, which may now be counted as one of London's inner suburbs. The body had been found just before eleven o'clock on Streatham Common, just a few yards away from one of the lighted footpaths that cross it. He had been killed with one or more blows on the back of the neck. His wallet had not been touched, and no attempt had been made to search the body. Beside him there lay an unopened bottle of non-vintage port.

Pole had worked for the past ten years in the research department of Fact Consultants Ltd, a firm that organised opinion polls. He lived in the upper part of a Victorian house just off the Common, with his wife Gillian. They had no children. The case was in the hands of Chief Superintendent Roger Devenish, and it was Devenish who talked to the widow. He knew that most murders are family affairs. Play the variations on a triangle of wife-husband-lover, or on a quartet of two married couples, and you soon came up with the right answer. But Sergeant Brewster's inquiries in the neighbourhood had revealed no entanglement on the part of husband or wife, and certainly Gillian Pole gave little encouragement to such thoughts. She was a thin dark woman of forty, with a strained, intense expression accentuated by the way she wore her hair pulled away from her forehead. She told Devenish the story he had already

heard from his sergeant. It was usual for the Poles to celebrate the New Year with a glass of port, and at ten o'clock they discovered that there was none in the apartment. Charles had said that he would go out and get a bottle. He had not taken the car, because it was not worth the trouble of getting it out of the garage. He had walked across the Common, and then – Devenish, who knew that Pole had been in to a local pub, had one drink and bought the bottle of port, nodded.

'Mrs Pole, did your husband have an enemy? Or had he quarrelled with somebody recently?'

'No enemies. We keep ourselves to ourselves.'

'He didn't have any affair you know of with a woman? Or drink too much? Or have any trouble at the office?'

'Three questions. Three answers.' Devenish had dropped ash from his cigarette on to the corner of a small table. Mrs Pole leaned forward and carefully pushed it into an ashtray. 'There was no other woman in Charles' life. There was no other man in mine. We have no children, which was a sorrow to us both, but we were happy together.' She indicated the gleaming, empty screen across the room. 'We watched a great deal in the evenings. Charles said it was important for his work, it helped him to understand the way people react to advertising.'

'The second question. Charles drank very little. We should have had two small glasses of port each if he had come back. No more.' She looked as though she might be about to add to this, but went on. 'Charles didn't say much to me about his work at the office. So far as I know there was no trouble of any kind, but you would have to talk to the head of his department, Mr Mantleman.'

'I'll do that.' Devenish gave her the rueful, worried smile which had charmed a good many women into rash remarks. 'The problem is this, Mrs Pole. As you put it there seems absolutely no reason for your husband's death. It looks like an altogether unprovoked attack – there's no sign of any preliminary fight. Of course such things do happen, but generally a gang sets on to one man for some reason. Nobody saw that happen, and as I say there's no sign of it on the ground. Apparently a man simply went up to your husband and made a murderous attack on him for no reason, and that seems very unlikely.'

'I understand what you are saying, of course, but it is more important to you than to me.'

'Really? I should have thought you'd have wanted to know who killed your husband.'

She said impatiently, 'Of course. But I have to get used to the idea that Charles is dead. And since his life was not insured, and I imagine his pension will be small, I have to think about making a living.'

'You don't know of anybody who hated him, perhaps somebody from the past?'

She looked at him levelly. 'Charles and I had no enemies. And very few friends. Perhaps we are not very interesting people.'

The view that Charles Pole was not somebody likely to have made enemies was shared by Mantleman, a big bluff man with a taste for extravagant ties. Pole's work had been the correlation of statistical material, he said. Devenish looked slightly baffled.

'A lot of the work we do is for companies who are making tests of reaction to a

new product. Let's say a new line in after shave or baby powder is being put out in selected areas. When the results of this area testing come in they need detailed analysis. That's the kind of thing Pole did, and he was good at it. He was careful, the sort who never gets to the office late or leaves early.'

'Did he do confidential work of any kind?'

'You're thinking of industrial espionage, selling secrets?' Mantleman laughed heartily. 'The kind of thing we do isn't that important. If anybody really wanted to get hold of information about reactions to Product X they could do it without too much trouble.'

'Women?'

'I suppose he knew they were different from men, but he never showed any sign of it.'

'Drink? Anyone at the office dislike him?'

'He'd have a drink or two, hardly ever more than two. He got quite skittish at the firm's Christmas party after two or three sherries, but don't get me wrong, I've never seen him drunk. What was the other thing you asked? Oh yes, trouble at the office. No, nobody disliked him, you couldn't dislike him.' Mantleman leaned forward. 'Pole was the nearest thing you can get to a cipher, and how can you have strong feelings about a cipher? If it weren't for his empty chair I'd have forgotten by now that he ever existed.'

So Pole had been a cipher. In Devenish's view most people were ciphers, and there must still have been a reason why this particular cipher was wiped out. The reason, however, was not apparent.

The material gathered about Charles Pole made a slim file.

Chapter Two *The Second Murder*

Sir Pountney Gladson stood five foot three in his socks. He had a high, slightly shrill voice, and handwriting so large that he rarely got more than a dozen words on to a sheet of writing paper. His friends called Sir Pountney a character. His enemies, who were more numerous, used words of which mountebank was the kindest. His activities were multifarious, and they only began with his work as a Member of Parliament for West Dorset. He was not seen often in the constituency, but when he did appear the occasion was always newsworthy. There was the time when his Lamborghini had joined the Fords and Jaguars of local farmers in blocking a main road as a protest against a reduction in farm subsidies, the day when he had given away a hundred fivers to a hundred inhabitants of a village, telling each of them to put the money on to Pountney Special, which couldn't lose the Wokingham Stakes. The horse had duly won, and Sir Pountney's name went into village legend.

Sir Pountney was – what else was he? The list of his directorships filled half a column in *Who's Who*, he was the president of the Union Jack League, chairman of the Motorists' Society and of the group that called themselves Britain's Heritage. In the House he made few speeches, but asked a great many of the kind of questions that make news. 'Is my right honourable friend aware that his rigidly sectarian policies in relation to education have made him the most execrated man in public life in this country?' was the kind of thing. Sir Pountney was much against the creeping Communist menace, and opposed also to long-haired students, and to spineless intellectuals who brought the sewer waste of the Continent to England's green and pleasant land. He was in favour of fast cars and Rugby football and fox hunting, as representative of the British way of life. 'There's not much wrong with a man who drives fast, tackles clean, and doesn't flinch at a five-foot hedge,' he said once.

At four a.m. on the seventh of January, Sir Pountney was found dead in Hamborne Mews in Mayfair, a hundred yards away from the Over and Under Club where he had ended the evening. He was at the steering wheel of his Lamborghini. He had been killed by a blow on the gullet, succeeded by one on the back of the neck.

The death of Charles Pole had been worth no more than a paragraph in the national press. Sir Pountney Gladson, in death as in life, made headlines. It was natural that crime reporters should notice that the murder method was identical, that they should connect the two cases, and that they should ask questions of Roger Devenish. The Superintendent, who did not regard himself as vain, but still got a warm feeling in the pit of his stomach when he saw his name in the papers, was friendly but non-committal. His most persistent questioner was Phillips of the *Globe*.

'Can you confirm that just the same karate chop was used in both cases?'

'Karate is your word, not mine. Both men were killed with blows on the neck, that's right.'

'Do you know of any link between Pole and Sir Pountney?'

'Obviously we're working on the assumption that there is a connection between

the two cases.'

'But so far you haven't discovered it?'

'I said, we're making that assumption.'

'It might be, though, that the two murders are completely unconnected? It might be some madman going round practising karate?'

'I don't think I'll comment on that suggestion.'

'Leaving the first case aside, do you have any leads to Gladson's killing?'

Devenish smiled. 'I have a dozen.'

A reporter from the *Enquirer*, a sensational tabloid, leaned forward. 'Has it struck you Superintendent, that there was just a week between these murders? So that if it were a sequence, we might expect the next one on the night of the fourteenth or the early morning of the fifteenth?'

'I had noticed the length of time between the two cases.'

'You don't think it's of any significance, that there will be another—'

'I don't go in for that sort of speculation,' Devenish said sharply. 'And now, if you'll excuse me.'

'If it was strangulation, I know who I'd put my money on,' the *Enquirer* man said afterwards to the man from the *Mirror*. 'Thumbs himself.' Devenish's thumbs were indeed gigantic, quite out of proportion to his well-shaped hands, and they had earned him the nick-name, which he did not much like. The *Mirror* man responded with a joke about the size of Devenish's thumbprint. They agreed that he obviously had no real lead.

They were right, in the sense that the inquiries put in hand had turned up no connection of any kind between Pole and Gladson. On the other hand, there were a good many people who had reason to dislike Sir Pountney. One was the actress with whom he had spent the evening before his death, Sarah Peters. Brewster had talked to her in her Paddington flat. The sergeant was a painstaking, methodical man, an opponent of the permissive society.

'Just let me go over it again, miss. Sir Pountney called for you here at about seven o'clock, you had a drink here, and then he took you out to dinner at Veglio's restaurant, Dean Street. Have I got that right, V-e-g-l-i-o? Good. Then you met two friends of his, Mr Lancelot George and Mr Wilmer Traven, and you all went to the Over and Under Club. Mr George and Mr Traven were American, and you say they were keen to see what this club was like, because they were interested in getting into gambling over here?'

Sarah Peters was tall and dark. 'Right. They were all joking about it. Pow owned part of the Over and Under, I don't know how much.'

'And these two gentlemen weren't too impressed?'

'They liked the club, but they kept saying it didn't give enough scope, they'd need half a dozen like it.'

'Then they left at about two a.m. and after that you quarrelled with Sir Pountney.'

'For God's sake, I've told you all this.'

Brewster's face was square and red. The eyes, large, brown and reproachful, might have belonged to somebody else, even some other species, perhaps an ox. 'I didn't quite understand why it was you quarrelled, Miss Peters.'

'Pow was in a filthy temper when they'd gone. He wanted to leave at once and go

back to my place. I was on a winning streak at baccarat and I said no. Do you know, from that moment I began to lose.’ She looked at her nails, then up again. ‘At the Over and Under I played with Pow’s money. It was understood that if I won I kept it, as long as it wasn’t too much. If I lost I gave an IOU, but I never paid them. Once a month Pow would tear them up.’

‘Very generous.’

She looked at him sharply, continued. ‘But that night he said I was on my own. I asked what he meant, and he said I could pay my own losses. I was more than fifty pounds down then, and five minutes later it was a hundred. I stopped playing, and told Pow what I thought of him.’

The sergeant looked at his notes. ‘Ferguson, the manager, said you told Sir Pountney you had friends who would look him up. Did you say that?’

‘I might have done.’

‘What did it mean? Who are the friends?’

Her gaze slid away. ‘Just words. I was angry because he was so bloody mean. Then I cleared out and left him to it, and went home.’

‘That was just before three a.m. After you got home, what did you do? Ring up your friends?’

‘Of course I bloody didn’t.’

Inquiries showed that some of Sarah Peters’ acquaintances might have been ready to look anybody up. She knew Jack and Harry Claber, two brothers who ran the best-organised of South London’s gangs. When she was not working she sometimes went to race meetings with them. Harry Claber was said to have been sleeping with her, but it was a long step from that to ordering the death of a man as well known as Gladson. Devenish did not think that Claber would have done it. And in any case, why would Claber have wanted Charles Pole killed?

A lot of other people disliked or detested Sir Pountney Gladson. He was on the Extermination list compiled by a group who called themselves the Black Beastlies, a man named Reynolds had threatened him after losing a court case in which he claimed to have been cheated in relation to an agreement for the commercial development of a disused Cornish tin mine, there was another recent case in which Gladson had driven his Lamborghini up on to a pavement, injuring an old woman. All of these were investigated. The Black Beastlies expressed pleasure at the extermination of this particular rat, but denied any connection with it. Reynolds was living down in Cornwall and had a convincing alibi, and the victim in the car case could not say too much in praise of Sir Pountney. Devenish saw her himself. She was the wife of an old-age pensioner named Page, and they lived in a couple of rooms in North London off the Marylebone Road.

‘A real gent,’ Mr Page said. ‘One of the old school. Out of his car in a flash, he was, ’ad the wife in ’is arms, got ’is suit all bloody. There was a lot of blood.’

Mrs Page took up the theme. ‘And travelled with me in the ambulance to the hospital. Sent flowers. Oh yes, a real gentleman, Sir Pountney.’ She indicated her leg, which was in plaster. ‘Of course, they say it’ll be a long time before I can walk again properly. I mean, you have to expect it at my age.’

‘What exactly happened?’

‘I was at the bus stop, see, and Bert was just a few feet away, when this car came

round the corner like *that*, and then it seemed to go out of control like, and the next I knew I was on the ground, with Bert and Sir Pountney bending over me. I recognised him at once, mind you, from seeing his picture.'

'What sort of speed was he going at?'

'I don't know, but it was fast, I should say—' A warning glance from husband to wife.

'—It was inside the limit,' Page said. 'I saw it. The thing was 'e skidded, that's what caused it, a greasy road, couldn't 'elp it.'

'That's what you said when the police came? You didn't want to make a charge.' Page muttered something. 'What's that?'

'I said, we didn't want any trouble. Not with someone like him. I mean, I belong to the Union Jack League myself. There's too many foreigners here already.'

'What did he pay you to keep quiet?' When the man started to protest, Devenish said, 'You may as well tell me, I'm not saying you did anything you'll be in trouble for.'

A glance between the two of them, then he nodded. Mrs Page said in a hushed, reverential tone, 'Two hundred.'

The trouble with the working class, Devenish quoted afterwards to Brewster, is the poverty of their desires. And their ambitions, he added. If they'd put it into a solicitor's hands, Gladson would have been pleased to pay a thousand to avoid a charge of dangerous driving when he'd knocked somebody down. Brewster, who thought the workers were too uppity anyway, and also that Gladson had had some good ideas, did not comment.

In any case, it was clear that Page was not in the running as an executioner. And there was no other obviously suitable candidate.

Chapter Three *Enter Mr Sherlock Holmes*

Sherlock Holmes closed the door of the living-room, walked along the passage, opened the door of his Baker Street rooms and walked down the stairs to the world outside. On the way he paused, as he often did, to look at the mementoes of the past that lined the walls. Here, preserved under glass, were the crumpled piece of paper, the key, the metal discs and the peg of wood, that were reminders of almost his first case, that of the Musgrave Ritual. There was a letter of thanks from James Ryder, whose felony he had forgiven in the affair of the Blue Carbuncle, the small sealing-wax knife used in the matter of the Golden Pince-Nez, and – upon the whole most pleasing of all – relics also of half a dozen cases unrecorded by Watson. Among them were the envelope involved in the Tropoff affair, which if it had been opened at the time of its receipt would have meant death. The seal was still intact, although of course the poison that impregnated the envelope had long since lost its venom. Here was a fragment of the curiously flexible crutch that had played a part in the unveiling of the Austrian Monster, a newspaper picture of Vigor the Hammersmith Wonder, a photograph of Baron Maupertuis inscribed: ‘To Mr Sherlock Holmes, who brought about my ruin. With undying hatred. Maupertuis.’ The great detective contemplated this last with something between a smile and a frown. It was satisfying to possess a unique relic, regrettable that the story relating to it would never be told.

As he descended the stairs he reflected how attractive and tellingly descriptive was the word ‘rooms’, in relation to his lodgings. *I left my Baker Street rooms* – splendidly appropriate. Why did wretched house agents insist upon using not the word rooms, nor apartment, nor even flat, but the atrocious *maisonette*? *I left my Baker Street maisonette* – abominable!

Within the rooms, double glazing restricted the traffic noise to a continuous but not unpleasant hum. Now, however, a blast of sound from Baker Street met him as he opened the door. He stood in the street for a minute, taking it all in, hating it. The cars were bad enough, sleek vulgar vehicles filled with vulgar people, heavy-jowled men reminiscent of that worst of blackmailers Charles Augustus Milverton, or hard-faced women with hair of brass, all of them manoeuvring for advantage. But worse, because noisier, were the shiny red buses, cattle-trucks going from nowhere to nowhere, and worst of all the great thundering lorries with their cargoes of mechanical rubbish, much of it blessedly unknown in Holmes’ day. He stood there as he did every morning, soaking it all up, and the grim reality of modern Baker Street had its usual effect. The image of Sherlock Holmes faded, and he became again Sheridan Haynes.

The day was frosty but fine, and he decided to walk to the rehearsal rooms in St John’s Wood. Such a walk was almost always a pleasure. It was common for him to be stopped by somebody who recognised him as the actor playing Sherlock Holmes in the TV series. Sometimes they called him Mr Haynes, sometimes they asked if he was Sherlock Holmes, a suggestion he did not exactly deny. On half-a-dozen occasions people had told him of troubles and problems in their own lives, and although he had

been able to do nothing more than offer advice, experiences like these warmed his heart.

But first, as he turned the corner to get out of Baker Street, he was greeted by a man wearing a blue jacket and serge trousers. On the jacket was a yellow flash which said 'Traffic Warden' and gave a number. A peaked yellow and blue cap completed an outfit familiar to all Londoners. The man's name was Cassidy. He had a long horse-face which accorded well with what seemed a miserable disposition. Traffic wardens were often regarded as snoopers, because part of their job was giving parking tickets to motorists, but most of them seemed happy in their work.

'Morning, Mr Haynes. And a cold one.'

'Good morning, Cassidy. *That* doesn't seem to get any less.' He jerked a thumb behind him at Baker Street. 'I wonder we have any hearing left. Filthy things, belching out poison.'

'Nothing wrong with cars, just too many of them, that's all,' Cassidy said gravely, as though enunciating a profound truth.

'If I had my way I'd have special roads made. All these things could go along them, but they'd never be allowed to move off. Don't ask me how we'd manage, we managed very well without cars in the past.' He smiled. 'Back in my day.'

'Things were different back in Sherlock Holmes' day, right enough.'

'And better, Cassidy.'

'I dare say you're right. Are you off to rehearsal, sir?'

'I am. First day.'

'I'll wish you luck then. Not that you'll need it, no fear of that.' The warden had been glancing at meters as they strolled along, and now he stopped beside one, wrote out a ticket, put it under the windscreen wiper. 'Twenty minutes over. People complain, but we're only carrying out the law.'

'Exactly. If they don't want to be fined, let them park their cars for the right time. Or get rid of them.' He walked on. Cassidy raised a hand to his cap in what could almost have been interpreted as a salute.

The rehearsal rooms had formerly been a Christian Mission. On the ground floor a blackboard said, 'Sherlock Holmes, The Naval Treaty,' with an arrow pointing upwards. In the room upstairs the studio area was marked out with tapes on the floor, and a group of actors huddled round a table with the producer of the series, an energetic little Pole named Willie Lowinsky, and Richard Spain, who was directing this episode. Willie flung his arms wide in greeting.

'Sherlock is here, now we can solve the problem.' He came close to Sheridan Haynes, whispered, 'The puzzle is, what has happened to the central heating. We are all freezing.' He rolled the 'r' emphatically. At that moment a young man with a small face lost in a forest of hair put his head round the door and said in a hoarse voice, 'Okay now, it was an air bubble, we've bled the rads.'

'Ron, you are an angel.' Willie blew a kiss to the face, which vanished, and beamed round the table. 'Now you are all warmer, or you will be in a minute, let's get on. If you'll sit here, Sher, we'll read it through. Ready, Basil? Go ahead.'

"Listen to this, Holmes." Basil Wainwright said. He began to read the letter from Percy Phelps. "My dear Watson, I have no doubt that you can remember 'Tadpole' Phelps, who was in the fifth form when you were in the third..."

Sheridan Haynes read the script almost automatically, but as it continued he found that he could not help being annoyed by Basil. In appearance Basil Wainwright was a perfect Watson, with a square honest face framed by mutton-chop whiskers, a splendidly bewildered look when Holmes made a surprising deduction, and a general air of dogged stupidity that was just right. When he was Basil Wainwright rather than John H. Watson, however, he camped about outrageously. Sheridan Haynes had met a lot of queer actors in his time, and told him-self that he didn't mind them, but during this read-through Basil seemed to go out of his way to try to make the story sound ridiculous.

He was annoyed also by the introduction of Irene Adler. When the series began, the idea had been that they should stick to the themes and characters of the original stories as closely as possible. Through three series of thirteen episodes that plan had been adhered to. When the fourth set of thirteen was planned, however, it was decided that the formula must be varied to provide Holmes with an opponent, who should appear in several stories. Moriarty had been considered, but Irene Adler was preferred. She was played competently enough by Sarah Peters, but her presence in stories where she had no place set Sher's nerves jangling. Irene had been turned into an international spy, who in this story was the agent to whom Joseph Harrison hoped to sell the secret of the naval treaty. At the end of the reading, when Willie asked for comments, he could not refrain from saying something.

'I hope Basil won't go on talking like that when we rehearse.'

The Watsonic look of bewilderment appeared. 'But Sher, love, it was only a read-through. You don't expect me to *act*.'

'If we all camped about, there'd be no point in reading through at all.'

'Well, Sher, *you'd* never camp it up, we all know that.'

Willie intervened. 'Remember you're a straight man, Basil. Anything else?'

'I'm still worried about Sarah. That scene where I try to kiss her and then Basil comes in – it's right out of character. In fact, her whole presence is wrong.'

'Thanks very much,' Sarah said.

Willie waved an arm. 'We'll talk about it. Any queries, Richard? No? Right then, break for lunch. All back at two o'clock, please.'

Most of them went round to the local pub for lunch. Willie steered Sher and Sarah to the table he had booked. The men drank pints of beer, Sarah a Bloody Mary. Over nondescript food, Willie deployed his smoothing-over technique.

'Darlings, I love you both. I hope you aren't going to cause any fuss and bother for Richard.'

'Am I causing it?' Sarah pushed away her plate, and lighted a cigarette.

'Sher, I have to tell you. It's very naughty of you to say things like that in public. Very naughty indeed.'

'I'm sorry,' Sher said, and meant it. 'Sarah, I apologise. I let Basil get under my skin, and I shouldn't have done. But, Willie, I've told you before how it does outrage my sense of what's right for a Sherlock Holmes series to have a master spy appearing in half of them. We made a success by sticking to the originals, and now—'

'Sher, I'm not going to let you go on.' Willie's smile was still there, but his voice was brisk. 'One, viewing figures were falling at the end of the last series. That's a fact, and you can't get round it. And two, all this was settled at the planning conference.'

He was silent. It had been put to him by the Director of Programmes almost in the form of an ultimatum, although such a word had of course not been used. Phrases had been used like the old formula getting a little worn, marvellous show but it needs new blood, Sherlock's superlative but Sherlock alone can't carry an hour on the box. He had argued against this, but in the end he had accepted it.

Willie said softly, 'Let's remember something else too. You aren't Sherlock Holmes.'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'It isn't so ridiculous. I've been in from the beginning, remember, I wanted you, I said you were the one who could do it. It was a plus that you knew all about Holmes and the stories. But don't push it too far, don't start kidding yourself.'

From the bar came Basil's high-pitched laughter, the clank of glasses, the persistent yapping of the manageress's toy poodle, a rumble of altercation from a group playing darts. Everything was too noisy, it was impossible to think. And outside in the busy street, permeating the pub noise, was the whine of cars. He became aware that Sarah had spoken.

'What was that?'

'I said I wish you were Sherlock, then you might be able to solve these Karate Killings, and stop the bloody police from pestering me. They seem to think that just because I've let Harry Claber take me around, I asked him to have old Pow knocked off. I don't do that, not even when people say my presence is wrong.'

'I said I was sorry.'

'Okay, I don't hold it against you. It would be nice if you cleared up the murders, but being questioned wasn't so bad. The sergeant was just a clot, but the chief or Super or whatever he's called was quite civilised. And a knockout to look at, one of the dishiest men I've seen for a long time. Present company excepted, of course.' She ducked her head. Willie smiled, and looked more than usually like a pixie. There came into Sher's mind what Conan Doyle said about Irene Adler: 'To Sherlock Holmes she is always *the* woman.' Well, he reflected, Sheridan Haynes certainly couldn't say that about Sarah Peters. Beautiful in her way, but for him not half as attractive as Val. 'You're supposed to go in for Sherlock Holmes deductions, though. All right then, deduce.'

'That's a parlour game,' he said, although that was not quite how he regarded it. 'If I were Sherlock I might go round examining the hands of all the suspects and see which of them looked as if they could kill somebody with a karate chop, but I'm just myself. And don't worry, I'll be good from now on.'

'Me too.' Her lips brushed his cheek.

Willie stayed for an hour of rehearsal, then slipped away. After the first day, he left things to the director, reappearing at the rehearsal rooms only once, when they had been at work for a week. Then he would come to the last couple of days, when they were in the studio.

That afternoon everything went smoothly for Richard Spain. Basil was suitably solid, gruff and bone-headed, Sheridan Haynes forgot some lines as usual but was finely Sherlockian, Sarah played her part with verve. By the end of the day another Sherlock Holmes episode was promisingly under way.