

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

The Doctor's Case
By Stephen King

I believe there was only one occasion upon which I actually solved a crime before my slightly fabulous friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. I say believe because my memory began to grow hazy about the edges as I entered my ninth decade; now, as I approach my centennial, the whole has become downright misty. There may have been another occasion, but if so I do not remember it.

I doubt that I shall ever forget this particular case no matter how murky my thoughts and memories may become, and I thought I might as well set it down before God caps my pen forever. It cannot humiliate Holmes now, God knows; he is forty years in his grave. That, I think, is long enough to leave the tale untold. Even Lestrade, who used Holmes upon occasion but never had any great liking for him, never broke his silence in the matter of Lord Hull -- he hardly could have done so, considering the circumstances. Even if the circumstances had been different, I somehow doubt he would have. He and Holmes baited each other, and I believe that Holmes may have harbored actual hate in his heart for the policeman (although he never would have admitted to such a low emotion), but Lestrade had a queer respect for my friend.

It was a wet, dreary afternoon and the clock had just rang half past one. Holmes sat by the window, holding his violin but not playing it, looking silently out into the rain. There were times, especially once his cocaine days were behind him, when Holmes would grow moody to the point of surliness when the skies remained stubbornly gray for a week or more, and he had been doubly disappointed on this day, for the glass had been rising since late the night before and he had confidently predicted clearing skies by ten this morning at the latest. Instead, the mist, which had been hanging in the air when I arose, had thickened into a steady rain, and if there was anything that rendered Holmes moodier than long periods of rain, it was being wrong. Suddenly he straightened up, tweaking a violin string with a fingernail, and smiled sardonically. "Watson! Here's a sight! The wettest bloodhound you ever saw!" It was Lestrade, of course, seated in the back of an open wagon with water running into his close-set, fiercely inquisitive eyes. The wagon had no more than stopped before he was out, flinging the driver a coin, and striding toward 22IB Baker Street. He moved so quickly that I thought he should run into our door like a battering ram.

I heard Mrs. Hudson remonstrating with him about his decidedly damp condition and the effect it might have on the rugs both downstairs and up, and then Holmes, who could make Lestrade look like a tortoise when the urge struck him, leaped across to the door and called down, "Let him up, Mrs. H. -- I'll put a newspaper under his boots if he stays long, but I somehow think, yes, I really do think that..." Then Lestrade was bounding up the stairs, leaving Mrs. Hudson to expostulate below. His color was high, his eyes burned, and his teeth -- decidedly yellowed by tobacco -- were bared in a wolfish grin.

"Inspector Lestrade!" Holmes cried jovially. "What brings you out on such a -- " No further did he get. Still panting from his climb, Lestrade said, "I've heard gypsies say the devil grants wishes. Now I believe it. Come at once if you'd have a try, Holmes; the corpse is still fresh and the suspects all in a row."

"You frighten me with your ardor, Lestrade!" Holmes cried, but with a sardonic little waggle of his eyebrows.

"Don't play the shrinking violet with me, man -- I've come at the run to offer you the very thing for which you in your pride have wished a hundred times or more in my own hearing: the perfect locked-room mystery!"

Holmes had started into the corner, perhaps to get the awful gold-tipped cane, which he was for some reason affecting that season. Now he whirled upon our damp visitor, his eyes wide. "Lestrade! Are you serious?"

"Would I have risked wet-lung croup riding here in an open wagon if I were not?" Lestrade countered.

Then, for the only time in my hearing (despite the countless times the phrase has been attributed to him), Holmes turned to me and cried: "Quick, Watson! The game's afoot!"

On our way, Lestrade commented sourly that Holmes also had the luck of the devil; although Lestrade had commanded the wagon-driver to wait, we had no more than emerged from our lodgings when that exquisite rarity clip-clopped down the street:

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

an empty hackney in what had become a driving rain. We climbed in and were off in a trice. As always, Holmes sat on the lefthand side, his eyes darting restlessly about, cataloguing everything, although there was precious little to see on that day... or so it seemed, at least, to the likes of me. I've no doubt every empty street corner and rain-washed shop window spoke volumes to Holmes.

Lestrade directed the driver to an address in Savile Row, and then asked Holmes if he knew Lord Hull.

"I know o/him," Holmes said, "but have never had the good fortune of meeting him. Now I suppose I never shall. Shipping, wasn't it?"

"Shipping," Lestrade agreed, "but the good fortune was yours. Lord Hull was, by all accounts (including those of his nearest and -- ahem! -- dearest), a thoroughly nasty fellow, and as dotty as a puzzle-picture in a child's novelty book. He's finished practicing both nastiness and dottiness for good, however; around eleven o'clock this morning, just" -- he pulled out his turnip of a pocket-watch and looked at it -- "two hours and forty minutes ago, someone put a knife in his back as he sat in his study with his will on the blotter before him."

"So," Holmes said thoughtfully, lighting his pipe, "you believe the study of this unpleasant Lord Hull is the perfect locked room of my dreams, do you?" His eyes gleamed skeptically through a rising rafter of blue smoke.

"I believe," Lestrade said quietly, "that it is."

"Watson and I have dug such holes before and never struck water," Holmes remarked, and he glanced at me before returning to his ceaseless catalogue of the streets through which we passed. "Do you recall the 'Speckled Band,' Watson?"

I hardly needed to answer him. There had been a locked room in that business, true enough, but there had also been a ventilator, a poisonous snake, and a killer fiendish enough to introduce the latter into the former. It had been the work of a cruelly brilliant mind, but Holmes had seen to the bottom of the matter in almost no time at all.

"What are the facts, Inspector?" Holmes asked.

Lestrade began to lay them before us in the clipped tones of a trained policeman. Lord Albert Hull had been a tyrant in business and a despot at home. His wife had gone in fear of him, and had apparently been justified in doing so. The fact that she had borne him three sons seemed in no way to have moderated his savage approach toward their domestic affairs in general and toward her in particular. Lady Hull had been reluctant to speak of these matters, but her sons had no such reservations; their papa, they said, had missed no opportunity to dig at her, to criticize her, or to jest at her expense... all of this when they were in company. When they were alone, he virtually ignored her. Except, Lestrade added, when he felt moved to beat her, which was by no means an uncommon occurrence.

"William, the eldest, told me she always gave out the same story when she came to the breakfast table with a swollen eye or a mark on her cheek: that she had forgotten to put on her spectacles and had run into a door. 'She ran into doors once and twice a week,' William said. 'I didn't know we had that many doors in the house.'"

"Hmmm," Holmes said. "A cheery fellow! The sons never put a stop to it?"

"She wouldn't allow it," Lestrade said.

"Insanity," I returned. A man who would beat his wife is an abomination; a woman who would allow it an abomination and a perplexity.

"There was a method in her madness, though," Lestrade said. "Method and what you might call 'an informed patience.' She was, after all, twenty years younger than her lord and master. Also, Hull was a heavy drinker and a champion diner. At age seventy, five years ago, he developed gout and angina."

"Wait for the storm to end and then enjoy the sunshine," Holmes remarked.

"Yes," Lestrade said, "but it's an idea which has led many a man and woman though the devil's door, I'll be bound. Hull made sure his family knew both his worth and the provisions of his will. They were little better than slaves."

"With the will as their document of indenture," Holmes murmured.

"Exactly so, old boy. At the time of his death, Hull's worth was three hundred thousand pounds. He never asked them to take his word for this; he had his chief accountant to the house quarterly to detail the balance sheets of Hull Shipping, although he kept the purse-strings firmly in his own hands and tightly closed."

"Devilish!" I exclaimed, thinking of the cruel boys one sometimes sees in Eastcheap or Piccadilly, boys who will hold out a sweet to a starving dog to see it dance...

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

and then gobble it themselves while the hungry animal watches. I was shortly to find this comparison even more apt than I would have thought possible.

"On his death. Lady Rebecca was to receive one hundred and fifty thousand pound'. William, the eldest, was to receive fifty thousand; Jory, the middler, forty; and Stephen, the youngest, thirty."

"And the other thirty thousand?" I asked.

"Small bequests, Watson: to a cousin in Wales, an aunt in Brittany (not a cent for Lady Hull's relatives, though), five thousand in assorted bequests to the servants. Oh, and -- you'll like this, Holmes -- ten thousand pounds to Mrs. Hemphill's Home for Abandoned Pussies."

"You're joking!" I cried, although if Lestrade expected a similar reaction from Holmes, he was disappointed. Holmes merely re-lighted his pipe and nodded as if he had expected this... this or something like it. "With babies dying of starvation in the East End and twelve-year-old children working fifty hours a week in the mills, this fellow left ten thousand pounds to a... a boarding-hotel for cats?"

"Exactly so," Lestrade said pleasantly. "Furthermore, he should have left twenty-seven times that amount to Mrs. Hemphill's Abandoned Pussies if not for whatever happened this morning -- and whoever did the business."

I could only gape at this, and try to multiply in my head. While I was coming to the conclusion that Lord Hull had intended to disinherit both wife and children in favor of a rest-home for felines, Holmes was looking sourly at Lestrade and saying something which sounded to me like a total non sequitur. "I am going to sneeze, am I not?"

Lestrade smiled. It was a smile of transcendent sweetness. "Yes, my dear Holmes! Often and profoundly, I fear."

Holmes removed his pipe, which he had just gotten drawing to his satisfaction (I could tell by the way he settled back slightly in his seat), looked at it for a moment, and then held it out into the rain. More dumbfounded than ever, I watched him knock out the damp and smouldering tobacco.

"How many?" Holmes asked.

"Ten," Lestrade said with a fiendish grin.

"I suspected it was more than this famous locked room of yours that brought you out in the back of an open wagon on such a wet day," Holmes said sourly.

"Suspect as you like," Lestrade said gaily. "I'm afraid I must go on to the scene of the crime -- duty calls, you know -- but if you'd like, I could let you and the good doctor out here."

"You are the only man I ever met," Holmes said, "whose wit seems to be sharpened by foul weather. Does that perhaps say something about your character, I wonder? But never mind -- that is, perhaps, a subject for another day. Tell me this, Lestrade: when did Lord Hull become sure that he was going to die?"

"Die?" I said. "My dear Holmes, whatever gives you the idea that the man believed --"

"It's obvious, Watson," Holmes said. "C.I.B., as I have told you at least a thousand times -- character indexes behavior. It amused him to keep them in bondage by means of his will..." He looked an aside at Lestrade. "No trust arrangements, I take it? No entailments of any sort?"

Lestrade shook his head. "None whatever."

"Extraordinary!" I said.

"Not at all, Watson.; character indexes behavior, remember. He wanted them to soldier along in the belief that all would be theirs when he did them the courtesy of dying, but he never actually intended any such thing. Such behavior would, in fact, have run completely across the grain of his character. D'you agree, Lestrade?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Lestrade replied.

"Then we are very well to this point, Watson, are we not? All is clear? Lord Hull realizes he is dying. He waits... makes absolutely sure that this time it's no mistake, no false alarm... and then he calls his beloved family together. When? This morning, Lestrade?"

Lestrade grunted an affirmative.

Holmes steepled his fingers beneath his chin. "He calls them together and tells them he's made a new will, one which disinherits all of them... all, that is, save for the servants, his few distant relatives, and, of course, the pussies."

I opened my mouth to speak, only to discover I was too outraged to say anything. The image, which kept returning to my mind, was that of those cruel boys, making the

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

starving East End curs jump with a bit of pork or a crumb of crust from a meat pie. I must add it never occurred to me to ask whether such a will could be disputed before the bar. Today a man would have a deuce of a time slighting his closest relatives in favor of a cat-hotel, but in 1899, a man's will was a man's will, and unless many examples of insanity -- not eccentricity but outright Insanity -- could be proved, a man's will, like God's, was done.

"This new will was properly witnessed?" Holmes asked.

"Indeed it was," Lestrade replied. "Yesterday Lord Hull's solicitor and one of his assistants appeared at the house and were shown into Hull's study. There they remained for about fifteen minutes. Stephen Hull says the solicitor once raised his voice in protest about something -- he could not tell what -- and was silenced by Hull. Jory, the middle son, was upstairs, painting, and Lady Hull was calling on a friend. But both Stephen and William Hull saw these legal fellows enter, and leave a short time later. William said that they left with their heads down, and although William spoke, asking Mr. Barnes -- the solicitor -- if he was well, and making some social remark about the persistence of the rain, Barnes did not reply and the assistant seemed actually to cringe. It was as if they were ashamed, William said." Well, so much for that possible loophole, I thought.

"Since we are on the subject, tell me about the boys," Holmes invited.

"As you like. It goes pretty much without saying that their hatred for the pater was exceeded only by the pater's boundless contempt for them... although how he could hold Stephen in contempt is... well, never mind, I'll keep things in their proper order."

"Yes, please be so kind as to do that," Holmes said dryly.

"William is thirty-six. If his father had given him any sort of allowance, I suppose he would be a bounder. As he had little or none, he has spent his days in various gymnasiums, involved in what I believe is called 'physical culture' -- he appears to be an extremely muscular fellow -- and his nights in various cheap coffee-houses, for the most part. If he did happen to have a bit of money in his pockets, he was apt to take himself off to a card-parlor, where he would lose it quickly enough. Not a pleasant man, Holmes. A man who has no purpose, no skill, no hobby, and no ambition (save to outlive his father) could hardly be a pleasant man. I had the queerest idea while talking to him that I was interrogating not a man but an empty vase upon which the face of Lord Hull had been lightly stamped."

"A vase waiting to be filled up with pounds sterling," Holmes commented.

"Jory is another matter," Lestrade went on. "Lord Hull saved most of his contempt for him, calling him from his earliest childhood by such endearing pet-names as 'Fish-Face' and 'Keg-Legs' and 'Stoat-Belly.' It's not hard to understand such names, unfortunately; Jory Hull stands no more than five feet tall, if that, is bow-legged, and of a remarkably ugly countenance. He looks a bit like that poet fellow. The pouf."

"Oscar Wilde?" asked I.

Holmes turned a brief, amused glance upon me. "I think Lestrade means Algernon Swinburne," he said. "Who, I believe, is no more a pouf than you are, Watson."

"Jory Hull was born dead," Lestrade said. "After he remained blue and still for an entire minute, the doctor pronounced him so and put a napkin over his misshapen body. Lady Hull, in her one moment of heroism, sat up, removed the napkin, and dipped the baby's legs into the hot water, which had been brought to be used at the birth. The baby began to squirm and squall."

Lestrade grinned and lit a cigarillo with a flourish.

"Hull claimed this immersion had caused the boy's bowed legs, and when he was in his cups, he taxed his wife with it. Told her she should have left well enough alone. Better Jory had been born dead than lived to be what he was, he sometimes said -- a scuttling creature with the legs of a crab and the face of a cod."

Holmes's only reaction to this extraordinary (and to my physician's mind rather suspect) story was to comment that Lestrade had gotten a remarkably large body of information in a remarkably short period of time.

"That points up one of the aspects of the case which I thought would appeal to you, my dear Holmes," Lestrade said as we swept into Rotten Row with a splash and a swirl. "They need no coercion to speak; coercion's what it would take to shut em up. They've had to remain silent all too long. And then there's the fact that the new will is gone. Relief loosens tongues beyond measure, I find."

"Gone!" I exclaimed, but Holmes took no notice; his mind still ran upon Jory, the

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

misshapen middle child.

"Is he ugly, then?" he asked Lestrade.

"Hardly handsome, but not as bad as some I've seen," Lestrade replied comfortably.

"I believe his father continually heaped vituperation on his head because -- "

" -- because he was the only one who had no need of his father's money to make his way in the world," Holmes finished for him.

Lestrade started. "The devil! How did you know that?"

"Because Lord Hull was reduced to carping at Jory's physical faults. How it must have chafed the old devil to be faced with a potential target so well armored in other respects! Baiting a man for his looks or his posture may be fine for schoolboys or drunken louts, but a villain like Lord Hull had no doubt become used to higher sport. I would venture the opinion that he may have been rather afraid of his bow-legged middle son. What was Jory's key to the cell door?"

"Haven't I told you? He paints," Lestrade said.

"Ah!"

Jory Hull was, as the canvases in the lower halls of Hull House later proved, a very good painter indeed. Not great; I do not mean that at all. But his renderings of his mother and brothers were faithful enough so that, years later, when I saw color photographs for the first time, my mind flashed back to that rainy November afternoon in 1899. And the one of his father perhaps was a work of greatness.

Certainly it startled (almost intimidated) with the malevolence that seemed to waft out of the canvas like a breath of dank graveyard air. Perhaps it was Algernon Swinburne that Jory resembled, but his father's likeness -- at least as seen through the middle son's hand and eye -- reminded me of an Oscar Wilde character: that nearly immortal rouse, Dorian Gray.

His canvases were long, slow processes, but he was able to quick-sketch with such nimble rapidity that he might come home from Hyde Park on a Saturday afternoon with as much as twenty pounds in his pockets.

"I'll wager his father enjoyed that," Holmes said. He reached automatically for his pipe, then put it back again. "The son of a Peer quick-sketching wealthy American tourists and their sweethearts like a French Bohemian."

Lestrade laughed heartily. "He raged over it, as you may imagine. But Jory -- good for him! -- wouldn't give over his selling stall in Hyde Park... not, at least, until his father agreed to an allowance of thirty-five pounds a week. He called it low black mail."

"My heart bleeds," I said.

"As does mine, Watson," Holmes said. "The third son, Lestrade, quickly -- we've almost reached the house, I believe."

As Lestrade had intimated, surely Stephen Hull had the greatest cause to hate his father. As his gout grew worse and his head more muddled, Lord Hull surrendered more and more of the company affairs to Stephen, who was only twenty-eight at the time of his father's death. The responsibilities devolved upon Stephen, and the blame also devolved upon him if his least decision proved amiss. Yet no financial gain accrued to him should he decide well and his father's affairs prosper.

Lord Hull should have looked with favor upon Stephen, as the only one of his children with an interest in and an aptitude for the business he had founded; Stephen was a perfect example of what the Bible calls "the good son." Yet instead of displaying love and gratitude, Lord Hull repaid the young man's largely successful efforts with scorn, suspicion, and jealousy. On many occasions during the last two years of his life, the old man had offered the charming opinion that Stephen "would steal the pennies from a dead man's eyes."

"The b -- -- d!" I cried, unable to contain myself.

"Ignore the new will for a moment," Holmes said, steepling his fingers again, "and return to the old one. Even under the conditions of that marginally more generous document, Stephen Hull would have had cause for resentment. In spite of all his labors, which had not only saved the family fortune but increased it, his reward was still to have been the youngest son's share of the spoils. What, by the way, was to have been the disposition of the shipping company under the provisions of what we might call the Pussy will?"

I looked carefully at Holmes, but, as always, it was difficult to tell if he had attempted a small ban mot. Even after all the years I spent with him and all the adventures we shared, Sherlock Holmes's sense of humor remains a largely undiscovered country, even to me.

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

"It was to be handed over to the Board of Directors, with no provision for Stephen," Lestrade said, and pitched his cigarillo out the window as the hackney swept up the curving drive of a house which looked extraordinarily ugly to me just then, as it stood amid its brown lawns in the driving rain. "Yet with the father dead and the new will nowhere to be found, Stephen Hull has what the Americans call 'leverage.' The company will have him as managing director. They should have done anyway, but now it will be on Stephen Hull's terms."

"Yes," Holmes said. "Leverage. A good word." He leaned out into the rain. "Stop short, driver!" he cried. "We've not quite done!"

"As you say, guv'nor," the driver returned, "but it's devilish wet out here."

"And you'll go with enough in your pocket to make your innards as wet and devilish as your out'ards," Holmes said. This seemed to satisfy the man, and he stopped thirty yards from the front door of the great house. I listened to the rain tip-tapping on the sides of the coach while Holmes cogitated and then said: "The old will -- the one he teased them with -- that document isn't missing, is it?"

"Absolutely not. It was on his desk, near his body."

"Four excellent suspects! Servants need not apply... or so it seems now. Finish quickly, Lestrade -- the final circumstances, and the locked room."

Lestrade complied, consulting his notes from time to time. A month previous, Lord Hull had observed a small black spot on his right leg, directly behind the knee. The family doctor was called. His diagnosis was gangrene, an unusual but far from rare result of gout and poor circulation. The doctor told him the leg would have to come off, and well above the site of the infection.

Lord Hull laughed until tears streamed down his cheeks. The doctor, who had expected any reaction but this, was struck speechless. "When they stick me in my coffin, sawbones," Hull said, "it will be with both legs still attached, thank you very much."

The doctor told him that he sympathized with Lord Hull's wish to keep his leg, but that without amputation he would be dead in six months, and he would spend the last two in exquisite pain. Lord Hull asked the doctor what his chances of survival should be if he were to undergo the operation. He was still laughing, Lestrade said, as though it were the best joke he had ever heard. After some hemming and hawing, the doctor said the odds were even.

"Bunk," said I.

"Exactly what Lord Hull said," Lestrade replied, "except he used a term more often used in dosses than in drawing-rooms."

Hull told the doctor that he himself reckoned his chances at no better than one in five. "As to the pain, I don't think it will come to that," he went on, "as long as there's laudanum and a spoon to stir it with in stumping distance."

The next day, Hull finally sprang his nasty surprise -- that he was thinking of changing his will. Just how he did not immediately say.

"Oh?" Holmes said, looking at Lestrade from those cool gray eyes that saw so much.

"And who, pray, was surprised?"

"None of them, I should think. But you know human nature, Holmes; how people hope against hope."

"And how some plan against disaster," Holmes said dreamily.

This very morning Lord Hull had called his family into the parlor, and when all were settled, he performed an act few testators are granted, one which is usually performed by the wagging tongues of their solicitors after their own have been forever silenced. In short, he read them his new will, leaving the balance of his estate to Mrs. Hemphill's wayward pussies. In the silence that followed he rose, not without difficulty, and favored them all with a death's-head grin. And leaning over his cane, he made the following declaration, which I find as astoundingly vile now as I did when Lestrade recounted it to us in that hackney cab: "So! All is fine, is it not? Yes, very fine! You have served me quite faithfully, woman and boys, for some forty years. Now I intend, with the clearest and most serene conscience imaginable, to cast you hence. But take heart! Things could be worse! If there was time, the pharaohs had their favorite pets -- cats, for the most part -- killed before they died, so the pets might be there to welcome them into the after-life, to be kicked or petted there, at their masters' whims, forever... and forever... and forever." Then he laughed at them. He leaned over his cane and laughed from his doughy, dying face, the new will -- properly signed and properly witnessed, as all of them had seen -- clutched in one claw of a hand.

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

William rose and said, "Sir, you may be my father and the author of my existence, but you are also the lowest creature to crawl upon the face of the earth since the serpent tempted Eve in the Garden."

"Not at all!" the old monster returned, still laughing. "I know four lower. Now, if you will pardon me, I have some important papers to put away in my safe... and some worthless ones to burn in the stove."

"He still had the old will when he confronted them?" Holmes asked. He seemed more interested than startled.

"Yes."

"He could have burned it as soon as the new one was signed and witnessed," Holmes mused. "He had all the previous afternoon and evening to do so. But he didn't, did he? Why not? How say you on that question, Lestrade?"

"He hadn't had enough of teasing them even then, I suppose. He was offering them a chance -- a temptation -- he believed all would refuse."

"Perhaps he believed one of them would not refuse," Holmes said. "Hasn't that idea at least crossed your mind?" He turned his head and searched my face with the momentary beam of his brilliant -- and somehow chilling -- regard. "Either of your minds? Isn't it possible that such a black creature might hold out such a temptation, knowing that if one of his family were to succumb to it and put him out of his misery -- Stephen seems most likely from what you say -- that one might be caught... and swing for the crime of patricide?"

I stared at Holmes in silent horror.

"Never mind," Holmes said. "Go on, Inspector -- it's time for the locked room to make its appearance, I believe."

The four of them had sat in paralyzed silence as the old man made his long, slow way up the corridor to his study. There were no sounds but the thud of his cane, the labored rattle of his breathing, the plaintive miaow of a cat in the kitchen, and the steady beat of the pendulum in the parlor clock. Then they heard the squeal of hinges as Hull opened his study door and stepped inside.

"Wait!" Holmes said sharply, sitting forward. "No one actually saw him go in, did they?"

"I'm afraid that's not so, old chap," Lestrade returned. "Mr. Oliver Stanley, Lord Hull's valet, had heard Lord Hull's progress down the hall. He came from Hull's dressing chamber, went to the gallery railing, and called down to ask if all was well. Hull looked up -- Stanley saw him as plainly as I see you right now, old fellow -- and said all was absolutely tip-top. Then he rubbed the back of his head, went in, and locked the study door behind him."

"By the time his father had reached the door (the corridor is quite long and it may have taken him as much as two minutes to make his way up it unaided) Stephen had shaken off his stupor and had gone to the parlor door. He saw the exchange between his father and his father's man. Of course Lord Hull was back-to, but Stephen heard his father's voice and described the same characteristic gesture: Hull rubbing the back of his head."

"Could Stephen Hull and this Stanley fellow have spoken before the police arrived?"

I asked -- shrewdly, I thought.

"Of course they could," Lestrade said wearily. "They probably did. But there was no collusion."

"You feel sure of that?" Holmes asked, but he sounded uninterested.

"Yes. Stephen Hull would lie very well, I think, but Stanley would do it very badly. Accept my professional opinion or not, just as you like, Holmes."

"I accept it."

So Lord Hull passed into his study, the famous locked room, and all heard the click of the lock as he turned the key -- the only key there was to that sanctum sanctorum. This was followed by a more unusual sound: the bolt being drawn across. Then, silence.

The four of them -- Lady Hull and her sons, so shortly to be blue-blooded paupers -- looked at one another in similar silence. The cat miaowed again from the kitchen and Lady Hull said in a distracted voice that if the housekeeper wouldn't give that cat a bowl of milk, she supposed she must. She said the sound of it would drive her mad if she had to listen to it much longer. She left the parlor. Moments later, without a word among them, the three sons also left. William went to his room upstairs, Stephen wandered into the music room, and Jory went to sit upon a bench beneath the stairs where, he had told Lestrade, he had gone since earliest childhood when he was

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

sad or had matters of deep difficulty to think over.

Less than five minutes later a shriek arose from the study. Stephen ran out of the music room, where he had been plinking out isolated notes on the piano. Jory met him at the study door. William was already halfway downstairs and saw them breaking in when Stanley, the valet, came out of Lord Hull's dressing room and went to the gallery railing for the second time. Stanley has testified to seeing Stephen Hull burst into the study; to seeing William reach the foot of the stairs and almost fall on the marble; to seeing Lady Hull come from the dining-room doorway with a pitcher of milk still in one hand. Moments later the rest of the servants had gathered.

"Lord Hull was slumped over his writing-desk with the three brothers standing by. His eyes were open, and the look in them... I believe it was surprise. Again, you are free to accept or reject my opinion just as you like, but I tell you it looked very much like surprise to me. Clutched in his hands was his will... the old one. Of the new one there was no sign. And there was a dagger in his back."

With this, Lestrade rapped for the driver to go on.

We entered the house between two constables as stone-faced as Buckingham Palace sentinels. Here to begin with was a very long hall, floored in black and white marble tiles like a chessboard. They led to an open door at the end, where two more constables were posted: the entrance to the infamous study. To the left were the stairs, to the right two doors: the parlor and the music room, I guessed.

"The family is gathered in the parlor," Lestrade said.

"Good," Holmes said pleasantly. "But perhaps Watson and I might first have a look at the scene of the crime?"

"Shall I accompany you?"

"Perhaps not," Holmes said. "Has the body been removed?"

"It was still here when I left for your lodgings, but by now it almost certainly will be gone."

"Very good."

Holmes started away. I followed. Lestrade called, "Holmes!"

Holmes turned, eyebrows raised.

"No secret panels, no secret doors. For the third time, take my word or not, as you like."

"I believe I'll wait..." Holmes began and then his breath began to hitch. He scrambled in his pocket, found a napkin probably carried absentmindedly away from the eating-house where we had dined the previous evening, and sneezed mightily into it. I looked down and saw a large, scarred tomcat, as out of place here in this grand hall as would have been one of those urchins of whom I had been thinking earlier, twining about Holmes's legs. One of its ears was laid back against its scarred skull. The other was gone, lost in some long-ago alley battle, I supposed.

Holmes sneezed repeatedly and kicked out at the cat. It went with a reproachful backward look rather than with the angry hiss one might have expected from such an old campaigner. Holmes looked at Lestrade over the napkin with reproachful, watery eyes. Lestrade, not in the least put out of countenance, thrust his head forward and grinned like a monkey. "Ten, Holmes," he said. "Ten. House is full of felines. Hull loved em." And with that he walked off.

"How long have you suffered this affliction, old fellow?" I asked. I was a bit alarmed.

"Always," he said, and sneezed again. The word allergy was hardly known all those years ago, but that, of course, was his problem.

"Do you want to leave?" I asked. I had once seen a case of near asphyxiation as the result of such an aversion, this one to sheep but otherwise similar in all respects.

"He'd like that," Holmes said. I did not need him to tell me whom he meant. Holmes sneezed once more (a large red welt was appearing on his normally pale forehead) and then we passed between the constables at the study door. Holmes closed it behind him.

The room was long and relatively narrow. It was at the end of something like a wing, the main house spreading to either side from an area roughly three-quarters of the way down the hall. There were windows on two sides of the study and it was bright enough in spite of the gray, rainy day. The walls were dotted with colorful shipping charts in handsome teak frames, and among them was mounted an equally handsome set of weather instruments in a brass-bound, glass-fronted case. It contained an anemometer (Hull had the little whirling cups mounted on one of the roofpeaks, I supposed), two thermometers (one registering the outdoor temperature and the other

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

that of the study), and a barometer much like the one, which had fooled Holmes into believing the bad weather, was about to break. I noticed the glass was still rising, and then looked outside. The rain was falling harder than ever, rising glass or no rising glass. We believe we know a great lot, with our instruments and things, but I was old enough then to believe we don't know half as much as we think we do, and old enough now to believe we never will.

Holmes and I both turned to look at the door. The bolt was torn free, but leaning inward, as it should have been. The key was still in the study-side lock, and still turned.

Holmes's eyes, watering as they were, were everywhere at once, noting, cataloguing, storing. "You are a little better," I said.

"Yes," he said, lowering the napkin and stuffing it indifferently back into his coat pocket. "He may have loved em, but he apparently didn't allow em in here. Not on a regular basis, anyway. What do you make of it, Watson?"

Although my eyes were slower than his, I was also looking around. The double windows were all locked with thumb-turns and small brass side-bolts. None of the panes had been broken. Most of the framed charts and the box of weather instruments were between these windows. The other two walls were filled with books. There was a small coal-stove but no fireplace; the murderer hadn't come down the chimney like Father Christmas, not unless he was narrow enough to fit through a stovepipe and clad in an asbestos suit, for the stove was still very warm.

The desk stood at one end of this long, narrow, well-lit room; the opposite end was a pleasantly bookish area, not quite a library, with two high-backed upholstered chairs and a coffee-table between them. On this table was a random stack of volumes. The floor was covered with a Turkish rug. If the murderer had come through a trap-door, I hadn't the slightest idea how he'd gotten back under that rug without disarranging it... and it was not disarranged, not in the slightest: the shadows of the coffee-table legs lay across it without even a hint of a ripple.

"Did you believe it, Watson?" Holmes asked, snapping me out of what was almost a hypnotic trance. Something... something about that coffee-table...

"Believe what, Holmes?"

"That all four of them simply walked out of the parlor, in four different directions, four minutes before the murder?"

"I don't know," I said faintly.

"/ don't believe it; not for a mo -- " He broke off. "Watson! Are you all right?"

"No," I said in a voice I could hardly hear myself. I collapsed into one of the library chairs. My heart was beating too fast. I couldn't seem to catch my breath. My head was pounding; my eyes seemed to have suddenly grown too large for their sockets. I could not take them from the shadows of the coffee-table legs upon the rug. "I am most... definitely not... all right."

At that moment Lestrade appeared in the study doorway. "If you've looked your fill, H -- " He broke off. "What the devil's the matter with Watson?"

"I believe," said Holmes in a calm, measured voice, "that Watson has solved the case. Have you, Watson?"

I nodded my head. Not the entire case, perhaps, but most of it. I knew who; I knew how.

"Is it this way with you, Holmes?" I asked. "When you... see?"

"Yes," he said, "though I usually manage to keep my feet."

"Watson's solved the case?" Lestrade said impatiently. "Bah! Watson's offered a thousand solutions to a hundred cases before this, Holmes, as you very well know, and all of them wrong. It's his bete noire. Why, I remember just this last summer --

"I know more about Watson than you ever shall," Holmes said, "and this time he has hit upon it. I know the look." He began to sneeze again; the cat with the missing ear had wandered into the room through the door, which Lestrade had left open. It moved directly toward Holmes with an expression of what seemed to be affection on its ugly face.

"If this is how it is for you," I said, "I'll never envy you again, Holmes. My heart should burst."

"One becomes inured even to insight," Holmes said, with not the slightest trace of conceit in his voice. "Out with it, then... or shall we bring in the suspects, as in the last chapter of a detective novel?"

"No!" I cried in horror. I had seen none of them; I had no urge to. "Only I think I

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

must show you how it was done. If you and Inspector Lestrade will only step out into the hall for a moment..."

The cat reached Holmes and jumped into his lap, purring like the most satisfied creature on earth.

Holmes exploded into a perfect fusillade of sneezes. The red patches on his face, which had begun to fade, burst out afresh. He pushed the cat away and stood up. "Be quick, Watson, so we can leave this damned place," he said in a muffled voice, and left the room with his shoulders in an uncharacteristic hunch, his head down, and with not a single look back. Believe me when I say that a little of my heart went with him.

Lestrade stood leaning against the door, his wet coat steaming slightly, his lips parted in a detestable grin. "Shall I take Holmes's new admirer, Watson?"

"Leave it," I said, "and close the door when you go out."

"I'd lay a fiver you're wasting our time, old man," Lestrade said, but I saw something different in his eyes: if I'd offered to take him up on the wager, he would have found a way to squirm out of it.

"Close the door," I repeated. "I shan't be long."

He closed the door. I was alone in Hull's study... except for the cat, of course, which was now sitting in the middle of the rug, tail curled neatly about its paws, green eyes watching me.

I felt in my pockets and found my own souvenir from last night's dinner -- men on their own are rather untidy people, I fear, but there was a reason for the bread other than general slovenliness. I almost always kept a crust in one pocket or the other, for it amused me to feed the pigeons that landed outside the very window where Holmes had been sitting when Lestrade drove up.

"Pussy," said I, and put the bread beneath the coffee-table -- the coffee-table to which Lord Hull would have presented his back when he sat down with his two wills, the wretched old one and the even more wretched new one. "Puss-puss-puss."

The cat rose and walked languidly beneath the table to investigate the crust.

I went to the door and opened it. "Holmes! Lestrade! Quickly!"

They came in.

"Step over here," I said, and walked to the coffee-table.

Lestrade looked about and began to frown, seeing nothing; Holmes, of course, began to sneeze again. "Can't we have that wretched thing out of here?" he managed from behind the table-napkin, which was now quite soggy.

"Of course," said I. "But where is the wretched thing, Holmes?"

A startled expression filled his wet eyes. Lestrade whirled, walked toward Hull's writing-desk, and peered behind it. Holmes knew his reaction should not have been so violent if the cat had been on the far side of the room. He bent and looked beneath the coffee-table, saw nothing but the rug and the bottom row of the two bookcases opposite, and straightened up again. If his eyes had not been spouting like fountains, he should have seen all then; he was, after all, right on top of it. But one must also give credit where credit is due, and the illusion was devilishly good. The empty space beneath his father's coffee-table had been Jory Hull's masterpiece.

"I don't --" Holmes began, and then the cat, who found my friend much more to its liking than any stale crust of bread, strolled out from beneath the table and began once more to twine ecstatically about his ankles. Lestrade had returned, and his eyes grew so wide I thought they might actually fall out. Even having understood the trick, I myself was amazed. The scarred tomcat seemed to be materializing out of thin air; head, body, white-tipped tail last.

It rubbed against Holmes's leg, purring as Holmes sneezed.

"That's enough," I said. "You've done your job and may leave."

I picked it up, took it to the door (getting a good scratch for my pains), and tossed it unceremoniously into the hall. I shut the door behind it.

Holmes was sitting down. "My God," he said in a nasal, clogged voice. Lestrade was incapable of any speech at all. His eyes never left the table and the faded Turkish rug beneath its legs: an empty space that had somehow given birth to a cat.

"I should have seen," Holmes was muttering. "Yes... but you... how did you understand so quickly?" I detected the faintest hurt and pique in that voice, and forgave it at once.

"It was those," I said, and pointed at the rug.

"Of course!" Holmes nearly groaned. He slapped his welted forehead. "Idiot! I'm a perfect idiot!"

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

"Nonsense," I said tartly. "With a houseful of cats -- and one who has apparently picked you out for a special friend -- I suspect you were seeing ten of everything." "What about the rug?" Lestrade asked impatiently. "It's very nice, I'll grant, and probably expensive, but -- "

"Not the rug," I said. "The shadows."

"Show him, Watson," Holmes said wearily, lowering the napkin into his lap.

So I bent and picked one of them off the floor.

Lestrade sat down in the other chair, hard, like a man who has been unexpectedly punched.

"I kept looking at them, you see," I said, speaking in a tone which could not help being apologetic. This seemed all wrong. It was Holmes's job to explain the whos and hows at the end of the investigation. Yet while I saw that he now understood everything, I knew he would refuse to speak in this case. And I suppose a part of me -- the part that knew I would probably never have another chance to do something like this -- wanted to be the one to explain. And the cat was rather a nice touch, I must say. A magician could have done no better with a rabbit and a top-hat.

"I knew something was wrong, but it took a moment for it to sink in. This room is extremely bright, but today it's pouring down rain. Look around and you'll see that not a single object in this room casts a shadow... except for these table-legs." Lestrade uttered an oath.

"It's rained for nearly a week," I said, "but both Holmes's barometer and the late Lord Hull's" -- I pointed to it -- "said that we could expect sun today. In fact, it seemed a sure thing. So he added the shadows as a final touch."

"Who did?"

"Jory Hull," Holmes said in that same weary tone. "Who else?"

I bent down and reached my hand beneath the right end of the coffee-table. It disappeared into thin air, just as the cat had appeared. Lestrade uttered another startled oath. I tapped the back of the canvas stretched tightly between the forward legs of the coffee-table. The books and the rug bulged and rippled, and the illusion, nearly perfect as it had been, was instantly dispelled.

Jory Hull had painted the nothing under his father's coffee-table, had crouched behind the nothing as his father entered the room, locked the door, and sat at his desk with his two wills, and at last had rushed out from behind the nothing, dagger in hand.

"He was the only one who could execute such an extraordinary piece of realism," I said, this time running my hand down the face of the canvas. We could all hear the low rasping sound it made, like the purr of a very old cat. "The only one who could execute it, and the only one who could hide behind it: Jory Hull, who was no more than five feet tall, bow-legged, slump-shouldered."

"As Holmes said, the surprise of the new will was no surprise. Even if the old man had been secretive about the possibility of cutting the relatives out of the will, which he wasn't, only simpletons could have mistaken the import of the visit from the solicitor and, more important, the assistant. It takes two witnesses to make a will a valid document at Chancery. What Holmes said about some people preparing for disaster was very true. A canvas as perfect as this was not made overnight, or in a month. You may find he had it ready, should it need to be used, for as long as a year -- "

"Or five," Holmes interpolated.

"I suppose. At any rate, when Hull announced that he wanted to see his family in the parlor this morning, I imagine Jory knew the time had come. After his father had gone to bed last night, he would have come down here and mounted his canvas. I suppose he may have put down the faux shadows at the same time, but if I had been Jory I should have tip-toed in here for another peek at the glass this morning, before the previously announced parlor gathering, just to make sure it was still rising. If the door was locked, I suppose he filched the key from his father's pocket and returned it later."

"Wasn't locked," Lestrade said laconically. "As a rule he kept the door shut to keep the cats out, but rarely locked it."

"As for the shadows, they are just strips of felt, as you now see. His eye was good, they are about where they would have been at eleven this morning... if the glass had been right."

"If he expected the sun to be shining, why did he put down shadows at all?" Lestrade grumped. "Sun puts em down as a matter of course, just in case you've never noticed

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

your own, Watson."

Here I was at a loss. I looked at Holmes, who seemed grateful to have any part in the answer.

"Don't you see? That is the greatest irony of all! If the sun had shone as the glass suggested it would, the canvas would have blocked the shadows. Painted shadow-legs don't cast them, you know. He was caught by shadows on a day when there were none because he was afraid he would be caught by none on a day when his father's barometer said they would almost certainly be everywhere else in the room."

"I still don't understand how Jory got in here without Hull seeing him," Lestrade said.

"That puzzles me as well," Holmes said -- dear old Holmes! I doubt that it puzzled him a bit, but that was what he said. "Watson?"

"The parlor where Lord Hull met with his wife and sons has a door which communicates with the music room, does it not?"

"Yes," Lestrade said, "and the music room has a door which communicates with Lady Hull's morning room, which is next in line as one goes toward the back of the house. But from the morning room one can only go back into the hall, Doctor Watson. If there had been two doors into Hull's study, I should hardly have come after Holmes on the run as I did."

He said this last in tones of faint self-justification. "Oh, Jory went back into the hall, all right," I said, "but his father didn't see him."

"Rot!"

"I'll demonstrate," I said, and went to the writing-desk, where the dead man's cane still leaned. I picked it up and turned toward them. "The very instant Lord Hull left the parlor, Jory was up and on the run."

Lestrade shot a startled glance at Holmes; Holmes gave the inspector a cool, ironic look in return. I did not understand those looks then, nor give them much thought at all, if the whole truth be told. I did not fully understand the wider implications of the picture I was drawing for yet awhile. I was too wrapped up in my own re-creation, I suppose.

"He nipped through the first connecting door, ran across the music room, and entered Lady Hull's morning room. He went to the hall door then and peeked out. If Lord Hull's gout had gotten so bad as to have brought on gangrene, he would have progressed no more than a quarter of the way down the hall, and that is optimistic. Now mark me, Inspector Lestrade, and I will show you the price a man pays for a lifetime of rich food and strong drink. If you harbor any doubts when I've done, I shall parade a dozen gout sufferers before you, and each one will show the same ambulatory symptoms I now intend to demonstrate. Please notice above all how fixed my attention is... and where."

With that I began to stomp slowly across the room toward them, both hands clamped tightly on the ball of the cane. I would raise one foot quite high, bring it down, pause, and then draw the other leg along. Never did my eyes look up. Instead, they alternated between the cane and that forward foot.

"Yes," Holmes said quietly. "The good doctor is exactly right, Inspector Lestrade. The gout comes first; then the loss of balance; then (if the sufferer lives long enough), the characteristic stoop brought on by always looking down."

"Jory would have been very aware of how his father fixed his attention when he walked from place to place," I said. "As a result, what happened this morning was diabolically simple. When Jory reached the morning room, he peeped out the door, saw his father studying his feet and the tip of his cane -- just as always -- and knew he was safe. He stepped out, right in front of his unseeing father, and simply nipped into the study. The door, Lestrade informs us, was unlocked, and really, how great would the risk have been? They were in the hall together for no more than three seconds, and probably a little less." I paused. "That hall floor is marble, isn't it? He must have kicked off his shoes."

"He was wearing slippers," Lestrade said in a strangely calm tone of voice, and for the second time, his eyes met Holmes's.

"Ah," I said. "I see. Jory gained the study well ahead of his father and hid behind his cunning stage-flat. Then he withdrew the dagger and waited. His father reached the end of the hall. Jory heard Stanley call down to him, and heard his father call back that he was fine. Then Lord Hull entered his study for the last time... closed the door... and locked it."

They were both looking at me intently, and I understood some of the godlike power

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

Holmes must have felt at moments like these, telling others what only he could know. And yet, I must repeat that it is a feeling I should not have wanted to have too often. I believe the urge to repeat such a feeling would have corrupted most men -- men with less iron in their souls than was possessed by my friend Sherlock Holmes. "Old Keg-Legs would have made himself as small as possible before the locking-up happened, perhaps knowing (or only suspecting) that his father would have one good look round before turning the key and shooting the bolt. He may have been gouty and going a bit soft about the edges, but that doesn't mean he was going blind." "Stanley says his eyes were top-hole," Lestrade said. "One of the first things I asked."

"So he looked round," I said, and suddenly I could see it, and I suppose this was also the way it was with Holmes; this reconstruction which, while based only upon facts and deduction, seemed to be half a vision. "He saw nothing to alarm him; nothing but the study as it always was, empty save for himself. It is a remarkably open room -- I see no closet door, and with the windows on both sides, there are no dark nooks and crannies even on such a day as this.

"Satisfied that he was alone, he closed the door, turned his key, and shot the bolt. Jory would have heard him stump his way across to the desk. He would have heard the heavy thump and wheeze of the chair cushion as his father landed on it -- a man in whom gout is well-advanced does not sit so much as position himself over a soft spot and then drop onto it, seat-first -- and then Jory would at last have risked a look out."

I glanced at Holmes.

"Go on, old man," he said warmly. "You are doing splendidly. Absolutely first rate." I saw he meant it. Thousands would have called him cold, and they would not have been wrong, precisely, but he also had a large heart. Holmes simply protected it better than most men do.

"Thank you. Jory would have seen his father put his cane aside, and place the papers -- the two packets of papers -- on the blotter. He did not kill his father immediately, although he could have done; that's what's so gruesomely pathetic about this business, and that's why I wouldn't go into that parlor where they are for a thousand pounds. I wouldn't do it unless you and your men dragged me."

"How do you know he didn't do it immediately?" Lestrade asked.

"The scream came several minutes after the key was turned and the bolt drawn; you said so yourself, and I assume you have enough testimony on that point not to doubt it. Yet it can only be a dozen long paces from door to desk. Even for a gouty man like Lord Hull, it would have taken half a minute, forty seconds at the outside, to cross to the chair and sit down. Add fifteen seconds for him to prop his cane where you found it, and put his wills on the blotter.

"What happened then? what happened during that last minute or two, a short time, which must have seemed -- to Jory Hull, at least -- almost endless? I believe Lord Hull simply sat there, looking from one will to the other. Jory would have been able to tell the difference between the two easily enough; the differing colors of the parchment would have been all the clew he needed.

"He knew his father intended to throw one of them into the stove; I believe he waited to see which one it would be. There was, after all, a chance that the old devil was only having a cruel practical joke at his family's expense. Perhaps he would burn the new will, and put the old one back in the safe. Then he could have left the room and told his family the new will was safely put away. Do you know where it is, Lestrade? The safe?"

"Five of the books in that case swing out," Lestrade said briefly, pointing to a shelf in the library area.

"Both family and old man would have been satisfied then; the family would have known their earned inheritances were safe, and the old man would have gone to his grave believing he had perpetrated one of the cruelest practical jokes of all time... but he would have gone as God's victim or his own, and not Jory Hull's."

Yet a third time that queer look, half-amused and half-revolted, passed between Holmes and Lestrade.

"Myself, I rather think the old man was only savoring the moment, as a man may savor the prospect of an after-dinner drink in the middle of the afternoon or a sweet after a long period of abstinence. At any rate, the minute passed, and Lord Hull began to rise... but with the darker parchment in his hand, and facing the stove rather than the safe. Whatever his hopes may have been, there was no hesitation on

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

Jory's part when the moment came. He burst from hiding, crossed the distance between the coffee-table and the desk in an instant, and plunged the knife into his father's back before he was fully up.

"I suspect the post-mortem will show the thrust clipped through the heart's right ventricle and into the lung -- that would explain the quantity of blood expelled onto the desk-top. It also explains why Lord Hull was able to scream before he died, and that's what did for Mr. Jory Hull."

"How so?" Lestrade asked.

"A locked room is a bad business unless you intend to pass murder off as suicide," I said, looking at Holmes. He smiled and nodded at this maxim of his. "The last thing Jory would have wanted was for things to look as they did... the locked room, the locked windows, the man with a knife in him where the man himself never could have put it. I think he had never foreseen his father dying with such a squawl. His plan was to stab him, burn the new will, rifle the desk, unlock one of the windows, and escape that way. He would have entered the house by another door, resumed his seat under the stairs, and then, when the body was finally discovered, it would have looked like robbery."

"Not to Hull's solicitor," Lestrade said.

"He might well have kept his silence, however," Holmes mused, and then added brightly, "I'll bet our artistic friend intended to add a few tracks, too. I have found that the better class of murderer almost always likes to throw in a few mysterious tracks leading away from the scene of the crime." He uttered a brief, humorless sound that was more bark than laugh, and then looked back from the window nearest the desk to Lestrade and me. "I think we all agree it would have seemed a suspiciously convenient murder, under the circumstances, but even if the solicitor spoke up, nothing could have been proved."

"By screaming, Lord Hull spoiled everything," I said, "as he had been spoiling things all his life. The house was roused. Jory must have been in a total panic, frozen to the spot the way a deer is by a bright light. It was Stephen Hull who saved the day... or Jory's alibi, at least, the one, which had him sitting on the bench under the stairs when his father was murdered. Stephen rushed down the hall from the music room, smashed the door open, and must have hissed at Jory to get over to the desk with him, at once, so it would look as if they had broken in together -- " I broke off, thunderstruck. At last I understood the glances, which had been flashing between Holmes and Lestrade. I understood what they must have seen from the moment I showed them the trick-hiding place: it could not have been done alone. The killing, yes, but the rest...

"Stephen said he and Jory met at the study door," I said slowly. "That he, Stephen, burst it in and they entered together, discovered the body together. He lied. He might have done it to protect his brother, but to lie so well when one doesn't know what has happened seems... seems..."

"Impossible," Holmes said, "is the word for which you are searching, Watson."

"Then Jory and Stephen went in on it together," I said. "They planned it together... and in the eyes of the law, both are guilty of their father's murder! My God!"

"Not both of them, my dear Watson," Holmes said in a tone of curious gentleness.

"All of them."

I could only gape.

He nodded. "You have shown remarkable insight this morning, Watson; you have, in fact, burned with a deductive heat I'll wager you'll never generate again. My cap is off to you, dear fellow, as it is to any man who is able to transcend his normal nature, no matter how briefly. But in one way you have remained the same dear chap you've always been: while you understand how good people can be, you have no understanding of how black they may be."

I looked at him silently, almost humbly.

"Not that there was much blackness here, if half of what we've heard of Lord Hull was true," Holmes said. He rose and began to pace irritably about the study. "Who testifies that Jory was with Stephen when the door was smashed in? Jory, naturally. Stephen, naturally. But there are two other faces in this family portrait. One belongs to William, the third brother. Do you concur, Lestrade?"

"Yes," Lestrade said. "If this is the straight of the matter, William also had to be in on it. He said he was halfway down the stairs when he saw the two of them go in together, Jory a little ahead."

"How interesting!" Holmes said, eyes gleaming. "Stephen breaks in the door -- as the

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

younger and stronger of course he must -- and so one would expect simple forward momentum would have carried him into the room first. Yet William, halfway down the stairs, saw Jory enter first. Why was that, Watson?"

I could only shake my head numbly.

"Ask yourself whose testimony, and whose testimony alone, we can trust here. The answer is the only witness who is not part of the family: Lord Hull's man, Oliver Stanley. He approached the gallery railing in time to see Stephen enter the room, and that is just as it should have been, since Stephen was alone when he broke it in. It was William, with a better angle from his place on the stairs, who said he saw Jory precede Stephen into the study. William said so because he had seen Stanley and knew what he must say. It boils down to this, Watson: we know Jory was inside this room. Since both of his brothers testify he was outside, there was, at the very least, collusion. But as you say, the smooth way they all pulled together suggests something far more serious."

"Conspiracy," I said.

"Yes. Do you recall my asking you, Watson, if you believed all four of them simply walked wordlessly out of that parlor in four different directions after they heard the study door locked?"

"Yes. Now I do."

"The four of them." He looked briefly at Lestrade, who nodded, and then back at me. "We know Jory had to have been up and off and about his business the moment the old man left the parlor in order to reach the study ahead of him, yet all four of the surviving family -- including Lady Hull -- say they were in the parlor when Lord Hull locked his study door. The murder of Lord Hull was very much a family affair, Watson."

I was too staggered to say anything. I looked at Lestrade and saw an expression on his face I had never seen there before nor ever did again; a kind of tired sickened gravity.

"What may they expect?" Holmes said, almost genially.

"Jory will certainly swing," Lestrade said. "Stephen will go to jail for life. William Hull may get life, but will more likely get twenty years in Wormwood Scrubs, a kind of living death."

Holmes bent and stroked the canvas stretched between the legs of the coffee-table. It made that odd hoarse purring noise. "Lady Hull," Lestrade went on, "may expect to spend the next five years of her life in Beechwood Manor, more commonly known to the inmates as Pox Palace... although, having met the lady, I rather suspect she will find another way out. Her husband's laudanum would be my guess."

"All because Jory Hull missed a clean strike," Holmes remarked, and sighed. "If the old man had had the common decency to die silently, all would have been well. Jory would, as Watson says, have left by the window, taking his canvas with him, of course... not to mention his trumpery shadows. Instead, he raised the house. All the servants were in, exclaiming over the dead master. The family was in confusion. How shabby their luck was, Lestrade! How close was the constable when Stanley summoned him?"

"Closer than you would believe," Lestrade said. "Hurrying up the drive to the door, as a matter of fact. He was passing on his regular rounds, and heard a scream from the house. Their luck was shabby."

"Holmes," I said, feeling much more comfortable in my old role, "how did you know a constable was so nearby?"

"Simplicity itself, Watson. If not, the family would have shoed the servants out long enough to hide the canvas and 'shadows.'"

"Also to unlatch at least one window, I should think," Lestrade added in a voice uncustomarily quiet.

"They could have taken the canvas and the shadows," I said suddenly.

Holmes turned toward me. "Yes."

Lestrade raised his eyebrows.

"It came down to a choice," I said to him. "There was time enough to burn the new will or get rid of the huffer-muffer... this would have been just Stephen and Jory, of course, in the moments after Stephen burst in the door. They -- or, if you've got the temperature of the characters right, and I suppose you do, Stephen -- decided to burn the will and hope for the best. I suppose there was just enough time to chuck it into the stove."

Lestrade turned, looked at it, then looked back. "Only a man as black as Hull would

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

have found strength enough to scream at the end," he said.

"Only a man as black as Hull would have required a son to kill him," Holmes rejoined.

He and Lestrade looked at each other, and again something passed between them, some perfectly silent communication from which I myself was excluded.

"Have you ever done it?" Holmes asked, as if picking up on an old conversation.

Lestrade shook his head. "Once came damned close," he said. "There was a girl involved, not her fault, not really. I came close. Yet... that was only one."

"And here there are four," Holmes returned, understanding him perfectly. "Four people ill-used by a villain who should have died within six months anyway."

At last I understood what they were discussing.

Holmes turned his gray eyes on me. "What say you, Lestrade? Watson has solved this one, although he did not see all the ramifications. Shall we let Watson decide?"

"All right," Lestrade said gruffly. "Just be quick. I want to get out of this damned room."

Instead of answering, I bent down, picked up the felt shadows, rolled them into a ball, and put them in my coat pocket. I felt quite odd doing it: much as I had felt when in the grip of the fever which almost took my life in India.

"Capital fellow, Watson!" Holmes cried. "You've solved your first case, become an accessory to murder, and it's not even tea-time! And here's a souvenir for myself -- an original Jory Hull. I doubt it's signed, but one must be grateful for whatever the gods send us on rainy days." He used his pen-knife to loosen the artist's glue holding the canvas to the legs of the coffee-table. He made quick work of it; less than a minute later he was slipping a narrow canvas tube into the inner pocket of his voluminous greatcoat.

"This is a dirty piece of work," Lestrade said, but he crossed to one of the windows and, after a moment's hesitation, released the locks which held it and opened it half an inch or so.

"Say it's dirty work undone," Holmes said in a tone of almost hectic gaiety. "Shall we go, gentlemen?"

We crossed to the door. Lestrade opened it. One of the constables asked him if there was any progress.

On another occasion Lestrade might have shown the man the rough side of his tongue. This time he said shortly, "Looks like attempted robbery gone to something worse. I saw it at once, of course; Holmes a moment later."

"Too bad!" the other constable ventured.

"Yes," Lestrade said, "but at least the old man's scream sent the thief packing before he could steal anything. Carry on."

We left. The parlor door was open, but I kept my head down as we passed it. Holmes looked, of course; there was no way he could not have done. It was just the way he was made. As for me, I never saw any of the family. I never wanted to.

Holmes was sneezing again. His friend was twining around his legs and miaowing blissfully. "Let me out of here," he said, and bolted.

An hour later we were back at 221B Baker Street, in much the same positions we had occupied when Lestrade came driving up: Holmes in the window-seat, myself on the sofa.

"Well, Watson," Holmes said presently, "how do you think you'll sleep tonight?"

"Like a top," I said. "And you?"

"Likewise, I'm sure," he said. "I'm glad to be away from those damned cats, I can tell you that."

"How will Lestrade sleep, d'you think?"

Holmes looked at me and smiled. "Poorly tonight. Poorly for a week, perhaps. But then he'll be all right. Among his other talents, Lestrade has a great one for creative forgetting."

That made me laugh.

"Look, Watson!" Holmes said. "Here's a sight!" I got up and went to the window, somehow sure I would see Lestrade riding up in the wagon once more. Instead I saw the sun breaking through the clouds, bathing London in a glorious late-afternoon light.

"It came out after all," Holmes said. "Marvelous, Watson! Makes one happy to be alive!" He picked up his violin and began to play, the sun strong on his face.

I looked at his barometer and saw it was falling. That made me laugh so hard I had to sit down. When Holmes asked -- in tones of mild irritation -- what the matter

Stephen King - The Doctor's Case

was, I could only shake my head. I am not, in truth, sure he would have understood, anyway. It was not the way his mind worked.