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Sample file

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CAT WITH A VESTED INTEREST

It was late morning in a fine but cool autumn and Holmes and I were having a pleasantly lazy day when there was a knock at the door. Mrs. Hudson ushered in a figure we had seen before. I rose from my chair and greeted the lady with a delighted smile, taking the wicker cat-carrier from her left hand.

“Miss Emily! And I see you’ve brought Mandalay.” The handsome brown Burmese cat gave a low throaty squawk of acknowledgement at the sound of his name. Holmes greeted our client and noticing her air of urgency at once prepared to listen to her.

Emily Jackson sat down, released Mandalay, who took time to greet us before returning to curl over his mistress’s lap, and watched us. I noticed that the lady looked a little pale and I poured her a cup of tea, which she began to drink at once. Her hands shook so I handed her a plate of biscuits as well.

After partaking of a biscuit Miss Emily drew from her pocket a package wrapped in brown paper and, opening it, disclosed a partially knitted vest. A length of fine wool dangled from the unfinished edge and Mandalay reached up to bat at it with a furry paw.

Miss Emily smiled at him and then addressed us. “All I can do is explain the circumstances by which I come by this. As you know, Mandalay hunts, and brings back all sorts of strange items.” (We did indeed know that, for he had been the innocent instigator of two strange cases, and I doubt that he would cease his activities any time soon.)

Miss Emily sipped her tea and continued. “I let Mandalay out early this morning, knowing that he would return for his breakfast before I departed for work. Instead he came back with this, and I went at once in search of the owner. As you can see, the wool is fine, expensive, and the knitting is that of someone with experience. It is

very even, and the pattern is complex. I was able to follow the wool back to where Mandalay had found it.”

“How could you do so?” I asked blankly.

Holmes cut in. “The wool, Watson. She followed the wool.” He turned to our visitor. “Mandalay left the ball of wool behind, did he not?”

“I think so, but in climbing from the knitter’s home he also snagged the loose end of the wool on a crack in the wood. The vest, not being completed, then unraveled as he brought it home. I was able to follow the trail of wool to some extent. He had come hundreds of yards, often over walls, but the white wool stood out against the background, and I was able to follow it to a window that was ajar. It was clear the vest had come from that house.”

At which point in her narrative the cat reached up a demanding paw and pulled the vest to him, rubbing his muzzle against the wool and purring, while watching us with lambent eyes. We all smiled; he did not need words to convey his message. It was his prey, hunted, fairly caught, and brought back, and we should all understand that.

Miss Emily grew sober. “But there is something wrong, Mr. Holmes, Dr. Watson. I found the place where the knitter must live, and I knocked on the door a number of times but there was no reply. The house is small, but it is well-kept, and in the end I took a liberty.” She flushed slightly. “I peered through the letter slot in the front door.” She took a final mouthful of her tea and set the cup down. “Newspapers and a number of letters fanned out across the floor.” She hesitated again. “I could have sworn that I heard the faint sound of something shifting, and a whimper. Oh, it may not have been more than my imagination, so faint were the sounds, and yet...”

She clasped her hands. “I have no proof, but I have a feeling that something is amiss in that house. I did not wish to send for the police. What if I am making a foolish fuss over nothing? Or what if they are angry over Mandalay’s actions? Yet I felt that I should do something. What if there is someone in need? So I came at once to you.”

Holmes stood up. “I think you did right, and we shall accom-

pany you back to this place. No,” when she would have left the food. “Take the biscuits and eat them in the cab. Bring Mandalay and we shall go at once.”

I scooped up the cat and tucked him back into his carrier, took it up by the handles while the lady thrust three biscuits into her pocket. We trooped down the stairs and out to the pavement where Holmes hailed a cab. In minutes we were on our way. Holmes regarded Miss Emily.

“Eat your biscuits. Now, since you say that the place you mention is only a few hundred yards from your own rooms, we shall go to your home first. Mandalay can be left there, and we shall follow the trail of wool again. I wish to be sure that the place you found is indeed from where the vest was taken by our burglar here.”

Miss Emily nodded agreement and finished the third biscuit as the cab pulled to the curb. We alighted, I paid the driver, and we entered the large house that contained a number of suites leased to tenants who were mostly single, comfortably situated, sober, and industrious.

Mandalay was permitted his freedom again once we were in Miss Emily’s suite. He at once seized the vest and settled possessively with it into his basket. Miss Emily pointed to the sash window at the rear of the large second room—the first being a spacious bedroom—and I saw an end of wool wound around the latch.

“I fastened it there,” she told us, “so it should not blow about or be easily moved.”

“Very sensible,” my friend approved. “Now let us follow our clue.”

And so we did, along the alleyway behind the houses, and down an extremely narrow gap between two of houses. There we came out in an open area: ahead of us the wool trailed over a brick wall. We circled another yard and took up the trail once more. I marveled that the wool had not broken and said so.

Miss Emily smiled. “It’s a wool and cotton mix,” she explained. “The wool makes it soft to the skin, but the cotton strand twisted into the fibers allows it to be hardwearing. I think that as Mandalay

returned home the unfinished edge snagged, so that between the ball of wool left behind and the portion that unraveled there was sufficient wool to reach my window.”

“From what I saw of the vest that is probable,” Holmes said. “Since here, if I do not mistake, is the end of our trail.”

He halted and we stared at the small house. As Miss Emily had said, it was well kept, paved all around by bricks laid in a pleasing pattern, and with two small trees in tubs, one to either side of the front door. Oddly, it was not matched in aspect with those houses around it: all of those having their backs to it so that it stood in complete isolation and privacy. I commented and Holmes nodded.

“I believe that originally this was a courtyard with the back of each surrounding house letting into it. I would suggest that at some time someone desirous of wasting nothing purchased this block. An extra house was built in the space, while as you can see, the back doors that led to it from other buildings were bricked up.”

“It is unusual,” I said. I had never seen such an arrangement before and stranger still, as my gaze rose, I saw that even the back windows had been bricked up as well. I pointed and Holmes, too, looked surprised.

“That is unusual, as you say, Watson. These buildings may now be used as warehouses, and the back windows closed off to prevent easy access by thieves.” He considered the building and shook his head. “But no, there is a way of passing from this small house to the street on which those building front. See.” And he indicated an offset opening I had not noticed hitherto. “Strange,” my friend said softly. “Strange indeed. But we are currently investigating another mystery: let us continue with that for the moment.”

Turning on his heel he strode to the front door, and stooping, peered through the letter slot in the door. His eyes widened and his jaw set, and even as I protested, he placed his shoulder against the door and thrust. The door opened a small distance and jammed on the post that littered the floor. Holmes shoved again and the door inched open. Miss Emily darted forward, intruded her arm, and cleared the letters and papers to one side before Holmes thrust at the