

## **The First Two Pages of “The Curious Case of Miss Amelia Vernet”**

**by Dana Cameron**

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An Essay by Dana Cameron

I had several requirements when I started writing “Miss Amelia Vernet,” and interestingly, that always makes it easier for me, like having to adhere to certain poetic structures. As I had a contract for three short stories set in my Fangborn ’verse, I knew I’d have to feature my vampires, werewolves, and oracles who secretly fight evil to protect humanity. I also knew that this story would have an historical setting; I used short stories about the Fangborn to fill in the history of the Fangborn through time. It was a fun way for me, trained as an archaeologist, to play with history and culture. I settled on late Victorian London (a setting with which I was reasonable comfortable), and I went a step further, setting in the fictional world of Sherlock Holmes, something I’d been exploring in depth at the time.

In order to describe life in the rooms of 221B Baker Street to those not familiar with the stories by Arthur Conan-Doyle, I knew I’d need an outsider, someone to help readers learn about Holmes’s adventures. An outsider would also help in describing the Fangborn to those not familiar with my urban fantasy characters. A young person, then, someone who was also Fangborn, learning the ropes about the Family’s secret mission and Holmes’s detective work. It would have been easy to choose a boy—after all, the Baker Street Irregulars all have boys’ names in the Canon—but since the Fangborn have

to operate in secret, I thought the added restrictions Victorians placed on young women, especially young “ladies,” would accomplish several things. First, it would help delineate the problems the Fangborn have with blending in the society they live in. Second, it was a way of underscoring the social history and women’s restricted roles at the time. I’ve always written about how gloriously wonderful it feels to be a werewolf—raw power and righteousness. How much more wonderful would it feel if the character was also throwing off corsets *and* the conventions imposed on a young woman? And since an insider at 221B must be Fangborn (as I’d decided that in this story, Sherlock Holmes was a Fangborn vampire), it should be a young one, who’s being taught the ways of the Fangborn. The young character should either be a relative of Sherlock Holmes or pretend to be one, as young Fangborn learn from their elders. As Vernet is a family name associated with the Holmes (in the Canon, Holmes’s grandmother was the sister of the French artist “Vernet” but doesn’t indicate a specific member of that artistic family), I chose that; “Amelia” was a nod to Elizabeth Peter’s character Amelia Peabody, another fictitious detective (and archaeologist).

That gets us to the name, age, and gender of the POV character. Whew! Next the physical setting:

It had been a very quiet September at 221B Baker Street, and the evening in question was almost unbearably so. I found myself nodding, yet again, over my volume of mathematics. I wished for the Irregulars to appear, so that I could go off with them and find trouble. But they were occupied elsewhere, and I was trapped in a tranquilly boring domestic snare. ...

I sighed; the best I could hope for tonight was that one of Sherlock’s eternal chemical experiments would go awry. Most frequently, there was

awful smoke, but sometimes there was a fire, and once in a great while, there'd be a terrific explosion. It was wrong of me to wish for excitement, but I do love a good explosion.

The warm mugginess made my heavy skirts and petticoats unbearable. My Cousin was out investigating a string of thefts, though Scotland Yard was adamant that the crimes were unconnected. Not having that proof that would demonstrate his superiority put him into a bleak, distracted mood, but Sherlock forgave them their obtuseness because he himself could not yet positively gainsay them.

With these paragraphs, I wanted to orient the reader within the space of the flat, and the season. I decided to go with September, for both the changeable weather—oppressive then brisk—and a way to reinforce that Amelia's situation leaves her outside the direct route to action as a Fangborn family member. Her very clothing weighs her down, and the social mores keep her from pursuing the adventure she craves. It also hints that Amelia loves explosions, suggesting there might be one in the offing.

Another beat to underscore the unsettled mood of the household and to foreshadow the trouble that will follow: In addition to Amelia's own low spirits, Sherlock Holmes is baffled—most unusually so—and Doctor Watson arrives in a moment of chaos with several of the Baker Street Irregulars, one of whom is gravely wounded.

There was a horrific pounding on the door, such that at first I thought it was the rumble of sudden thunder. I jumped up, glanced out the window, and my heart contracted painfully: I recognized all four figures. Doctor Watson supported a bleeding and unconscious youth, his medical bag fallen by his feet, while two other young men shouted and knocked.

The maid answered, and falling into my role, I gathered up my books and pencils and papers and scuttled off to the far side of the sitting room to await the moment when an Ordinary girl would be aware that something was badly amiss. Then crying, "What is the matter?" I raced to the top of the stairs and stopped, my fist to my mouth.

In spite of this emergency, both Holmes and Amelia must play their roles, concealing their “hypernatural” Fangborn abilities, even from those “Ordinary” folk closest to them and most trusted by them. Amelia’s reaction when she recognizes one of the Irregulars is emotional, even as she observes Doctor Watson treating the boy. She, too, has Holmes’s ability to attend to details large and small.

I fancied that I saw the doctor as the military officer he had once been, and no longer a London gentleman. He was not tall, but very vital, and the ease with which he arranged the prone lad showed that he retained the strength of a younger man. If the vicissitudes of war had contributed to the premature graying of his light hair, his training also gave him an air of calm yet intense focus, which reassured me as he examined the boy, searching for deep wounds. I held my breath until he sat back and grunted with satisfaction. He rummaged through his medical bag, emerging with a surgeon’s needle and suture as the maid and lad returned with the water and bandages.

Cousin Sherlock appeared from behind me, his hair damp-dark and sleeked back, a little disheveled. His long face was scrubbed clean of makeup, and the hair at his temples was artfully colored so that he appeared to be older. The carelessly tied sash on his dressing gown, the bulge in the sleeves that indicated his shirtsleeves were still rolled up, and his crooked collar were more than enough clues for me: My Cousin had come in through the back way, from an investigation, in a disguise that he’d shed too rapidly. The look on his face was mixed confusion and alarm, a combination I’d not seen him display before. He glanced down the stairs, then at me. I indicated his various untidinesses, and he adjusted them before he made a deliberate noise and caught the eye of his old friend.

And in a turnabout of his usual characterization, not only is Holmes forgetful and confused but he’s so distracted that he neglects removing his disguise carefully. Even if the reader isn’t yet familiar with the world of the Fangborn, they should get the idea that there is something very wrong if Holmes is ignoring details. And, I hope, that with the great detective’s unusual lapses, Amelia’s emotional response, Doctor Watson’s

consternation, and the bloodied Irregulars, the reader will be ready for momentous something that is about to affect the Fangborn Family in Baker Street.

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Dana Cameron writes across many genres, but especially crime and speculative fiction. Her work, inspired by her career in archaeology, has won multiple Anthony, Agatha, and Macavity Awards and has been nominated for the Edgar Award. Dana's Emma Fielding archaeology mysteries were optioned by Muse Entertainment and appear on the Hallmark Movie & Mystery Channel. *Pandora's Orphans: A Fangborn Collection* is available for order everywhere. For more information, check out [www.dcle-publishing.com/pandoras-orphans](http://www.dcle-publishing.com/pandoras-orphans).