

Ornamental, My Dear Watson

By Art Taylor



**CRIPPEN & LANDRU, PUBLISHERS,
CINCINNATI
2020**

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With appreciation for William Maxwell, from whose story "The Lily-White Boys" I borrowed the outlines for this pale imitation. With thanks to my wife, Tara Laskowski, for the Sherlock Holmes figures that grace our own Christmas tree. And with apologies to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

This Christmas was the Tartts' first in their new home. More than a step-up from their old townhome, it was their dream house really, hard-earned after much searching and scrimping and saving.

The design was archetypal Mid-Century Modern: simple lines, flat planes, lots of windows, lots of light. At one with nature, the house seemed to nestle within the landscape.

"It's classy and elegant and functional," said Adam, an architect himself. "The open floorplan gives you room to breathe. Lots of different directions we can go with decorating, too. Lots of room to grow."

"I can see it already," Laura said. "Children racing in the yard, giggling."

"I can't wait." Adam took her hand.

Life had, they both knew, been good to them already.

Almost as soon as they'd moved in, they'd kicked up a flurry of activity and acquisitions: traffic jams of workers in and out of the house some days, fresh wallpaper and fresh coats of paint, new window dressings, a Sputnik chandelier

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for the dining room, several pieces of new furniture, an eclectic mix of traditional and classic mid-century and art deco—plus one orange velvet armchair that matched nothing else but that Adam adored.

Most of the Christmas presents under the tree were still geared toward home improvements. Husband and wife both had snuck a few surprises that the other didn't know about, but most of the presents were things the two of them had chosen together: a countertop convection oven, a decadent espresso maker, an elegant glass sculpture for the dining room table.

"We've become *those* people!" Laura said. "Recklessly extravagant."

"We've worked hard," Adam said, and it was true. His reputation as an architect had risen quickly in the area, more projects steadily coming his way. Laura helped manage a bookstore and café that had gradually become a neighborhood treasure. "We've saved, we've earned it. It's not reckless to try to build a future for ourselves."

But as the future opened fresh, some traditions remained firm.

"*Our* traditions," Laura often stressed—since they'd long been building those too.

Their first Christmas Eve together, years before, they'd made fondue, and so fondue had become a cornerstone of each Christmas Eve's routine. They always headed out afterwards—rain or snow or shine—for the Winter Wonderlight show at the nearby botanical gardens, and weather permitting on this step, they roasted s'mores at the firepit by the concession stand. Back home, they sampled some new whiskey and—Adam recognized how cheesy it was—measured two drops of red food coloring in his glass and two drops of green in hers.

"This turns them into *holidays* spirits," Adam said, each and every time.

They posed with the glasses for a quick selfie and then sipped the whiskey while Adam read a mystery story aloud by the tree. A ghost story was the older tradition, they knew, the British tradition, but crime fiction was what they loved best, and as Laura had said, they'd made these traditions their own.

At the end of the evening, they stepped once more through their favorite ornaments on the tree—many of them souvenirs of trips they'd taken, experiences they'd shared. A hot-air balloon to commemorate one of their first dates, a miniature Golden Gate Bridge from a trip to San Francisco, a ceramic castle from their honeymoon in Ireland, a chef's hat from a cooking class that they'd received as a wedding present.

Among the newest ornaments were the Sherlock and Watson figures she'd given him the previous Christmas—a nod back a year further still, to "The Adventure of the Blue Carbuncle" he'd read *that* Christmas Eve.

Building memories, building a future—all part of the same life.

#

This first Christmas Eve in their new home, however, traditions did not go as planned.

They did parry fondue forks, same as always, and split most of a bottle of Montepulciano. They bundled up against the dropping temperatures before heading out to the botanical gardens, and the light show turned out better than ever. An elaborate new segment this year depicted a couple ice skating, even with a short pirouette in the air.

"How in the world?" Laura asked.

"It's like a life-sized flipbook—just in LED." Adam pointed to the series of metal frames that made up each stage of the choreography. "The lights change so quickly, it makes it look like they're moving."

"Like they're alive."

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When they returned home, Adam slid his key in the door, but it was already unlocked.

"Did you forget...?" Laura asked.

"I must have," Adam said.

Already both of them had a sinking feeling.

Thefts weren't uncommon around Christmas. On the listservs for their new neighborhood, they had already heard about packages being swiped from front porches and about the occasional burglary of a car (never a broken window, simply opportunistic thieves and an owner who regretted leaving the driver's door unlocked). But an actual house break-in? That seemed the stuff of movies—at least until it happened in real life.

"More common than you'd think," said the officer who showed up to take a report. "Not much consolation, I know, but at least you don't have kids yet. Shaking the presents, counting the days, and suddenly everything's gone? Heartbreaking."

Beyond the presents they'd bought and wrapped together, each of them had looked forward to seeing the other's face with the surprises they'd picked up. Instead, they simply heard about them as they reconstructed the inventory for the police report.

"Want to hear some irony?" Adam said, as they worked through the list. "I'd gotten us a doorbell camera. If only I'd put it up earlier instead of waiting."

"Do you think there's any chance of finding everything?" Laura asked the officer.

"I wish I could promise a Christmas miracle, but without any witnesses...." The officer shrugged. "Hate to say this, but that doorbell camera might've been your best bet."

#

After the officer left, Adam poured their two glasses of bourbon. Angel's Envy.

"Somebody had envy," he said. "I guess we should be glad

they didn't steal the liquor too." Dutifully, he dropped some food coloring in each tumbler.

"Or the ornaments from the tree," Laura said. "Hopefully insurance will handle a lot of this, but the memories there..."

They stood together to admire it.

"Here's my favorite." She touched a small wooden frame that Adam had made himself, a picture of the two of them inside it from their first Christmas as a couple. Adam had hand-lettered it too: *YOU Are The Only Present I Need*.

"True this year more than ever," he said, tugging her close.

"Your favorite?" she asked.

He picked the Sherlock ornament. The magnifying glass in its hand caught a glint of the tree's lights as he turned it. The deerstalker hat, the Inverness cape, those lean legs in purposeful mid-stride.

"If only you'd been on the case, friend," he said. "No criminal would've been safe." He raised his whiskey glass, tilted it in a toast, gave a small wink. "And Watson's around here somewhere, isn't he? Other side of the tree?"

"Still want to read a new story?" Laura asked. "Did you pick one out already?"

"I did," he said. "Peter Lovesey. 'The Haunted Crescent.'"

"Ooh! A ghost story too!"

"Traditions are important... as a very wise someone has reminded me."

She laughed. "As long as being robbed doesn't become one of them!"

"Cheers to that too." He clinked his glass against hers.

"Bright side," she said. "We've got more open floorplan again."

"More room to breathe," he agreed. "And a story to tell to the kids... someday."

Laura stretched out on the couch by the tree—bereft of presents now but glistening still. Adam settled into his orange chair, turning it just the slightest so he could prop his

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feet on the coffee table, so he could have a better view of his wife as he read, glancing her way every few paragraphs, grateful despite the evening's turn.

#

Later that night, after they'd turned in, a voice in the darkness.

"Watson."

"Holmes? Is that you?"

"Who else?"

"Why, it's been years!"

"I've been here, Watson, simply alone with my thoughts."

"One of your—how did I once put it—your poetic, contemplative moods?"

"In a manner, Watson—and with one question nearly all-consuming."

"What question has that been, Holmes?"

"Where might I find a pinch of tobacco for this empty pipe glued so desperately to my hand?"

"A valid concern. But if that's why you called me, I'm afraid I can't help."

"No, Watson. It seems we have a case."

"A new one?"

"Our hosts in this fine house have been robbed."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Holmes. They seem quite a decent couple."

"Certainly you were aware of the theft."

"Do you mean the commotion earlier? Two people carrying boxes? Everyone does shuffle things around here a bit. I assumed we might be moving again."

"As always, Watson, you see, but you do not observe."

"In my defense, my perspective is fairly limited."

"Such has consistently been your fate."

"No, no, Holmes, I mean between the forest on this one side and a blank wall on the other, there's little to see, and I also seem to have found myself in a cluster of colored

lights—nearly blinding.”

“The proper point of view does confer advantage.”

“Plus, I’ll admit it, there’s a comely lass here whose eye I’ve been trying to catch. A can-can dancer, I believe, but not a word yet in return for my attention.”

“Not susceptible to your charms, Watson? Perhaps she only speaks French.”

“You said it yourself, Holmes. When you eliminate the impossible... A language barrier, that must be the answer.”

“As to the case, Watson, we must first establish our list of possible suspects. A full parade of them, I fear. New neighbors paying holiday greetings. A stream of delivery people with packages in all shapes and sizes. Handymen of various skills, what with the improvements our young couple has been completing throughout the house. That pair of interior decorators as well. And then you saw the carolers who arrived on the doorstep early evening two nights ago.”

“Heard. Sadly. But you say you can actually see the doorstep?”

“Apologies, Watson. I forgot again my privileged view. Yes, a large window here, offering a vista of the front yard, the front walk, and the steps from which the carolers... ‘entertained us’ would perhaps be charitable.”

“Either way, Holmes, you’ve established quite a list. I would ask how to narrow it, but surely with your window, you *saw* the perpetrators clearly.”

“On the contrary. Night had fallen outside, the lights had been extinguished here within, and the figures remained in shadow. Additionally, my direct view is through the window, and even part of that is obscured by this magnifying glass in my other hand, refracting the light. Only by sidelong glances can I view what’s happening in the room where we’ve found ourselves. The bookcase, part of the sofa, that carrot-colored chair in the corner—of these I have the slimmest view. But even they were shrouded in darkness.”

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"I didn't see the thieves clearly either. And they were so quiet."

"They had planned their business beforehand, I believe."

"So you have clues, Holmes?"

"Several. First, while it's commonplace that Christmas might occasion robbery, I've been considering who specifically might know the extensiveness of the gifts under this tree. Thieves might well target a home because of some significant volume of goods delivered to it."

"Ah! So the postman! After all, who would know better those packages than the one who has delivered them himself? As well, who could approach the house so boldly as someone simply doing their duties? And with a vehicle at the ready to transport the bounty."

"The invisible man, as one of our own contemporaries so rightly called him, though in this era, there is no longer a single postman but a veritable fleet of delivery people. While any of them might know the value of what they're conveying... the answer is no. The crime took place at night—after any regular rounds of delivery and therefore beyond an easy excuse for a delivery person being here. Additionally, the timing would also have required the thief to know when the couple would be away this evening at the 'Winter Wonderlight' I believe they called it. No random delivery person would have access to that information."

"Who *would* have known that, Holmes?"

"I did overhear the husband talking with an electrical technician on the subject of this Winterlight—how many kilowatts of power might be used nightly for such a project, what he thought of these types of extravaganza, whether he himself put up Christmas lights—for himself or his clients—and if there were any dangers inherent in such displays."

"Angling perhaps for this technician to do similar work here?"

"Perhaps, but more importantly, mentioning in the

conversation their habit of always attending this light show on Christmas Eve."

"So this technician is the thief?"

"Not necessarily, Watson. In fact, not at all.. He was only *one* of the people to whom the couple mentioned the light show. It tended to be a topic our hosts indulged at any lull in the conversation—regularly talking about several of their holiday traditions. I only zeroed in on that specific encounter because of my own interest in the subject, having written a monograph on the electrical impulse and its adverse effects on the human body."

"That seems a little cold-blooded."

"Hot, actually—as the experiments proved. But do you know how many criminal cases might have hinged on such information?"

"But if not this technician, then... who? Our suspects remain numerous."

"In truth, the solution is already clear to me. I am now only working you through the steps by which I have already solved the case."

"You don't say, Holmes! Have you indeed?"

"I have—by careful examination of two clues and of the questions of means, opportunity, and motive. The thieves were, in fact, the interior decorators."

"Of course! I heard the wife call them highway robbers herself!"

"A conductor of light always, Watson."

"Thank you."

"To explain. Because these decorators have been regularly inside the house, they knew firsthand the range and value of the items beneath the tree. You may also recall that the decorators have been personally delivering several items from their own showroom and workspace: new furniture, window treatments, several decorative items. Often these deliveries take place while the couple is here, but last week, I

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heard the wife on the phone, saying she would leave a key under the mat—a key from which, it's quite possible, the decorators quickly made a putty cast."

"It is possible, Holmes, but possibility isn't proof."

"Of course, Watson. But there's more. I assume you can't see it from your own vantage point, but I mentioned earlier that carrot-colored chair. This chair was purchased *not* from the decorators themselves but from, as I understand, a *catalog*. It arrived in a box outside the door, and the husband set it up himself near the bookcase in this room. This chair seemed to disturb the decorators inordinately—for several reasons. It seemed an affront that the couple had ordered it from someone other than their firm. The style did not coordinate aesthetically with other furnishings in the room, according to the decorators. And, added insult, the husband had positioned it at an angle about which those decorators disapproved. An improper aesthetic, I believe they said."

"Simple pettiness, if you ask me, Holmes. But why is this chair so important to *you*?"

"Moments before the thieves left, one of them paused to look at this chair and gave a short sigh of disapproval. He stepped away from it and then came back and moved it just slightly—imperceptibly, I would say, to anyone examining the chair itself but the movement stood out, a person intent on some small measure of control. Pettiness perhaps, as you said, but even the wicked have perhaps their own standards to adhere to. These peculiarities of human nature can reveal other truths as well—about the husband here too, who readjusted the chair later in the evening before he sat in it."

"Brilliant, Holmes! Another case solved. Now we must simply inform the authorities, tell our young couple."

"My dear naïve Watson. Our case is indeed closed, but those next steps are not so simple."

"Whatever do you mean, Holmes?"

"Do you remember our first case together?"

"Our study in scarlet? Certainly. Published for another Christmas, so I often think of it at the holidays, in fact."

"During that investigation, we visited a constable, the man who had discovered the first body. He was a blundering fool, as I mentioned to you as an aside after we'd questioned him. But several times over all these years, I've regretted the stinging rebuke I offered him at the close of our interview."

"It must have singularly stinging for you to remember it after all this time. What was it you said?"

"These were my very words: 'That head of yours should be for use as well as ornament.'"

"Oh, no, Holmes. I believe I see where you're heading here."

"I'm afraid so, yes. The devil's agents may be of flesh and blood—but so are our hosts, who will only hear their own kind. Alas, we—head and body both—are merely glass and paint and scraps of felt. Ornamental, my dear Watson, and ultimately in our current circumstances of little use beyond."



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Ornamental, My Dear Watson

Ornamental, My Dear Watson by Art Taylor is set in the Geneva font. One hundred seventy-five copies were printed for subscribers as a holiday treat and are not for sale separately. The pamphlet was published by Crippen & Landru Publishers, Inc., Cincinnati, Ohio.

