

CHAPTER 24: THE GREAT DETECTIVE AND THE RIPPER

by Paul Watson

Henriques Street, Whitechapel, London. The lights of the kebab shop are on bright, even in the afternoon sunlight. The pillar of meat slowly turns under the heat. Across the street, Lord Stone's gaze is directed at the windows above. "You're sure?"

"This unit has established the telephones are located on the second floor."

"Good. Let's hope this goes better than last time I did this."

Whitechapel, 1888. Stone walks down the cobbled streets, his hobnailed boots landing heavily on the raised stones. A patched coat wraps around him. His hair is blackened with a mix of mulberry, myrtle, fig, senna and raspberry leave. His gloved hand grips his cane tight as the days light fades. "Match, sir?" he glances down, the pale face outlined by a tangle of brown hair, the hands holding the nearly empty tray thin enough that he can identify the bones. He fishes in his pocket, dropping a whole shilling into the tray. The girl's eyes widen at the gleam of silver as he takes the three remaining matchsticks from the tray. The coin vanishes into her sleeve. She gives a tiny curtsy and vanishes into the street.

"Got a light. Guv'nor?"

Stone stops, making sure no pilfering urchins are near his wallet before he flicks one of the sulphurs across the grimy brickwork to kindle it to life. The thin hands hold up a wrap of paper towards the flame.

"Much obliged, m'Lord Stone."

Stone stiffens, taking in the man more thoroughly, cursing his inattentiveness. He's small, slightly crouched with a pronounced nose and curly black hair in ringlets. He wears a flattened cloth cap and long beard, his clothes substantially poorer cloth than Stone's own. "Mr Holmestein. I must say, sir, I had not heard you had fallen on hard times. I understood Sir Arthur was still being generous for your exploits since the Study in Scarlet was such a success."

"Like you, m'lord, I am here on business and wish to do so unobserved. Unlike you, however, I am able to conceal myself."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The coat, sir. Far too fine for this location. Even up close, I can barely see the stitching on the patches. And your bearing is far too erect. This place wears you down and bends your back. The blackening was a good thought, but inexpertly applied. And, of course, no one who lives here would pay a match girl a penny more for her wares than was necessary, let alone a whole shilling."

"I see."

"I only offer such appraisal for future considerations, of course."

"Of course. And what business brings you here? On the hunt for the Ripper? I'm sure Sir Arthur would..."

"I am not intending to share this case with my patron. I am tracing a missing person for their family, and such matters will surely have little spark to ignite his literary muse."

"Quite."

"And yourself, sir? What draws the King's Alchemist down into the depths of London?"

"Cult hunting."

"I see. And do we come to be on the same street on our own hunts by happenstance, do you think?"

"I'm not a great believer in coincidence, as you know."

"Nor I. So, I presume, your cult is located in the storehouse behind that door down the way with its new brass lock?"

"Which is also where, I presume, you have traced your missing person?"

"That is indeed where I have tracked her."

"Well, it seems someone upstairs with a truly macabre sense of humour has made us fellows, despite our best wishes."

"Apparently so."

"Then shall we extract your stray from my cult? Although, if she, it was a she, wasn't it, is truly a part of it, I may not be able to release her to you, despite your reputation."

"To my knowledge, she is an unfortunate victim rather than a perpetrator."

"And we know how exemplary is the knowledge of the Great Detective."

"We do, indeed."

"And is your instinct to approach directly or circumspectly?"

"My priority is the safety of their victim."

"Circumspectly, then. Lead on."

"Where is your man?"

"Adam is around back, making sure none decide to leave too early."

Holmestein nods, "Follow my lead."

Stone gives him a slightly mocking nodded bow, "As the Great Detective wishes."

Holmestein stiffens little as he makes his way across the street. He raps his knuckles on the aged wood. "Foolishness," he mutters, "A new lock on rotten wood. Draws the attention while providing nothing."

"I rather like my foes to be fools. Makes things easier."

Holmestein shakes his head, his ringlets bouncing, "Fools behave too unpredictably. I prefer men who are smart. But not as smart as they believe themselves to be."

Stone shrugs non-committally as the lock clicks. The door opens a crack, a shadowed face peering out. "Ere! Who are..."

"The knives wait for the unwary." Holmestein replies.

"And also the prepared." the man behind the door replies after a moment's silence. "Welcome, brother." the door opens wider, the interior dimly lit, bodies crowded around, no sign of Holmestein's kidnappee. Stone's eyes flick around the room, sniffing nervous sweat. His grip on the cane tightens. The door closes behind them, the lock closing again. Stone notes the furtive movements, the glint of the dim light on a blade before a knife appears at Holmestein's throat, a hand in his ringlets jerking his head back. "Now, Fagin," the doorman growls, his breath soaked with cheap gin, "why don't you tell us what a filthy Jew is doing knowing our secrets?" The others get closer, knives, cudgels and one gun appearing from their clothes. Stone focuses on two of them, the gunman and the doorman, the rest merging into a mass of threatening forms.

"Isabel," he whispers, "can you light that thing's powder?"

"Just the gun, grandfather? There's enough oil to set him nicely..."

"Ere, what are you saying?!"

"Praying," he replies.

"Haw. Your God ain't gonna help you..."

Stone's hand flashes out lightning fast and slams into the doorman's face, splattering his nose backwards in a spray of blood. He staggers back, releasing both knife and detective to clutch at his face. The pistol rises. There's a crack as the powder ignites prematurely and the pistol explodes, shards of metal tearing through the erstwhile gunman's hand, along with his neighbours. Their howls of pain ring through the room. Stone swings his cane like a cudgel, the polished wood snapping bones like dry wood. Holmestein jabs into the doorman's gut. Stone remembers the last briefing on him, that he was training under an anatomist and he's clearly learned the lessons well, each strike hard, fast and precise, finding every weak point in a human frame. The doorman falls to the ground, his knife clattering. Holmestein snatches it up and blade and cane lay about the ill-disciplined throng. Stone is an avalanche, cane rising and falling with brutal force as he barely shifts his feet, just letting the cult break upon him. Holmestein, in contrast, is always in motion. Never where the blows are, but appearing from nowhere, his borrowed knife dripping red as the cult members fall, hamstrings sliced, or clutching at deep, bleeding wounds in their abdomen.

Within a minute, two at the outmost, the melee is over, it's outcome never in doubt, the broken and bleeding bodies scattered around the room. "Are you injured, Stone?" he gestures with the knife at the rent torn across the ribs of Stone's coat.

Stone puts his hand there, "No. This coat may not be pretty, or authentic, but it is threaded with

steel.”

“Then we'd best hurry. Those upstairs will have heard us.” and he's away, taking the rickety stairs two at a time as a wild cackling laugh comes from above.

“This is why I hate cults.” Stone mutters as he races up the stairs.

In the corridor above, stands a tall, thin man in a black opera cloak and suit, dressed for the theatre. His too big grin rests in a jaw that sharpens to a point, giving his head a look like a crescent moon or Mr Punch. “There you are. You've caused quite a ruckus. And now Jack's come to sort you out.” A feral light gleams in his sunken black eyes, a short blade in each hand, although every inch of the man suggests a sharp point or edge. And then he moves, sinuously striding down the hallway, the blades sparking as he clashes them together, his limbs bending in ways and places no normal person's should. “This is nothing personal, you understand, Jack prefers doxies and mollies to you, but, well, poor old Jack doesn't always get to choose his targets. Jack's master wants you two dead, dead, dead. So be gentlemen about it and die.”

“What is that?!” Holmestein gasps.

“I think that's our friend from Whitechapel. No wonder no one could catch him.” he reaches into his inner jacket, tossing the small vial he finds there in front of the advancing Ripper. Flames leap up, burning blue and white in a curtain of heat and fire. “Hopefully that will keep it...”

Jack walks through the flames, the sharp edges of his jacket's shoulders burning bright for a few seconds. “You shouldn't play with fire, boys. You'll get burned that way.” one of his unnatural arms reaches out, the knife flashing in the firelight. Stone manages to raise his cane, deflecting the deadly weapon with a grunt of effort. “Oh, you're a tricky one, aren't you?” he purrs as his arm pulls back, “How skilled is your friend, though?” the second blade flashes out. Holmestein stumbles back trying to escape, which ironically saves him as it cleaves the air above him.

“What manner of demon are you?!”

“Oh, Jack is one of Legion, for we are many.” he turns towards Stone, as the cane swings down, skipping out of its way. “Still, you appear to be my main problem, so let's dance.” the blades swirl in intricate patterns. “Jack will lead.”

Stone parries, the cane moving as an extension of his arm, blocking flashing knife blow after flashing knife blow but unable to return the strikes. Holmestein scrabbles to his feet and dives past the Ripper.

“Oh, don't leave yet, old man. The party's just begun.” One arm idly flicks the dagger through the air, pinning Holmestein's coat to the wooden wall. As he tears at the coat, Jack continues to toy with Stone, his single knife seeming to be in as many places as two.

Finally Holmestein tears himself free, stumbling down the corridor, past the scorched patch of flooring. “No one leaves until Jack says so.” he turns to pursue and the brass head of Stone's cane slams into his cheek. Jack turns back to him, blood trickling from between the jagged teeth of his smile. “That's not sporting. Taking a shot when Jack's back is turned. Not sporting at all.” A knife appears in his free hand with a flick of his wrist, “Jack's going to gut you like a mollygagger and then your...”

They hear a wail from the back room Holmestein stumbled into, “Nooooo!!! Baruch Ata Adonai, Eloeinu Melcech HaOlam Dayan HaEmet.” his whispers carry as he recites the mourner's kaddish.

“Ooops. Guess he found the guest. Jack's employer will be displeased. He so wanted Jack to make sure you were dead before you got there.” the knives flash. “Jack will just have to gift him your heads to make up for it. Maybe I'll take the eyes out first.” The knife scores along Stone's arm, leaving a long and bloody gash. Jack skips back, licking the blood off his knife. “Mmmmm, what are you, Jack wonders? Your blood barely tastes like blood at all. Are you a man or some kind of soulless construct? Don't taste like angels, Jack's had opportunity to munch on a few of those to know.”

“I'm sure you have. Perhaps you need to get a bigger taste.” he flings his hand out, droplets of blood spraying the air, hissing and fizzing where they land like drops of acid.

“Tricksy, tricky. You don't play fair. So neither will Jack.” a knife leaves his hand almost before Stone's noticed. He barely dodges, the blade nicking his ear. A second follows, deflected at the last

minute by the cane, then a third, a fourth, a fifth, an unending number thrown faster than they could possibly be drawn and readied. The knives clip him, penning him in, not giving him time to counteract, "Jack's going to pin your tricksy skin down and tan it. Jack will..." he stops as his own blade erupts out through his chest. He looks down. "Jack will get you..." he hisses as his body, knives and all, dissolve into foul-smelling sulphurous black smoke and drifts away.

"What was...? How did...?"

Stone pushes himself off the wall, leaning on his cane. "He's gone. For now, at least. Whatever he was. You screamed. What did..."

His eyes wet, Holmestein leads him to the room. Strapped to a table is a body, covered in a white sheet, the chest staining it red. "Your missing person?"

"My niece." he chokes out, uncovering her face, mouth open in a silent scream, eyes staring fixedly at nothing. "My Rebecca. Poor Rebecca. I failed you. I failed you!" he slams his fist into the table.

"Holmestein..." Stone puts a hand on his shoulder, "Chanoch. You did all that was humanly possible."

"It wasn't enough!"

"No. It wasn't." he covers Rebecca's face. "It never is when we lose someone. Never is."

"What was that...madman?"

"I don't know. A devil of sorts. Never encountered one like that. But it's gone. You killed it."

"A devil?"

"A devil." he repeats firmly, "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio..."

"...than can be found in my philosophy? I..."

"Come away, old man. Come away. I'll see she's treated rightly."

"I..."

"Come away." he leads the unresisting man from the sombre room and down the stairs.

Amidst the carnage of their earlier fight, Adam stands with a dark portrait beside him and a struggling figure in a headlock under his arm, "If you don't stop squirming, I'll...ah, sir! This fellow was trying to get away with this ugly thing. Caught him as he was shinning down from the first floor. Had to give him a bit of a thump to cooperate. He seems to want another, though."

"Get off me, you lout!"

"Ah, you must be Jack's employer. I have so many questions for you."

"Also had this on him. Nasty looking thing." he holds up an athame, the triangular blade still wet with blood.

Holmestein's eyes light on the face. "You! You killed my Rebecca!"

"Was that her name?"

"I will..."

"No."

"You heard him! He..."

"I did. He will be punished. But not by you. That's not who you are."

"He..."

The man laughs, "Really? Punished? Over one Jewess? Don't be ridicu..." he stops as Adam tightens his hold and Stone has to hold Holmestein back.

"It won't bring her back. It will just stain your soul. He's not worth that."

"Oh, this is a fine joke. The King's Alchemist and Shylock Holmes and I've got..." Adam chokes him again.

"Sorry, sir. Keeps squirming loose. Want me to thump him a bit?"

"No. Let me look at that." Adam hands over the knife. "Nasty piece of work. Rituals. I hate cults."

"He killed my Rebecca! I'll..."

"Yes. Such a shame."

"A shame? A shame?!"

"Yes. Rather than facing up to his crimes, this one took the coward's way out."

The man looks confused, just before Stone drives the athame into his heart.

"You..." Holmestein stares.

“As I said, I couldn't let you stain your soul with him. You'd see his face every time you thought of her. Mine can take a little more blood.”

“But you had questions...”

“And I have means to have them answered. But that's for me to deal with. You concern yourself with your own matters. And make sure the bills are sent to me.”

“But I must...”

“We both failed your niece. The bills will be sent to me and I will take care of them. I will not be gainsaid in this matter.”

Whitechapel, now, “We wait until it's dark, then...”

“Sir. Coming down the street.”

Stone looks over, where two men flank a staggering blonde, keeping her on her feet and moving as they open the door beside the kebab shop and hustle her inside. He curses. “Not again. Well, it looks like our timetable just got sped up significantly.”