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Besides writing half-dozen novels a year, editing as many anthologies, running assorted columns of book reviews and producing an incredible number of short stories and poems, Mr. August Derleth is the literary agent in this country for such writers as Stephen Grendon, H. Russell Wakefield and Lyndon Parker, M.D. Dr. Parker is the Boswell of that modern master of the science of deduction, Mr. Solar Pons, the famed consulting detective of 7B Praed Street, London. Mr. Derleth has marketed three volumes of the Doctor's accounts of his friend's triumphs: "IN RE: SHERLOCK HOLMES," THE MEMOIRS OF SOLAR PONS and THREE PROBLEMS FOR SOLAR PONS (all published by Mycroft & Moran) — a criminally delightful trio that any reader will, as Vincent Starrett says, "accept with enthusiasm." In a foreword to THREE PROBLEMS, Mr. Derleth sadly announced that Dr. Parker had, for personal reasons, decided to terminate his literary career. However, a kindly Fate has intervened to upset these plans of agent and author. A Mr. Mack Reynolds, while browsing in the archives of certain space-time continua, stumbled on a cryptic reference (in a most unlikely era) to Mr. Solar Pons. Careful research elicited the broad outlines of what is possibly the greatest triumph of the Pontine powers. Mr. Reynolds consulted Mr. Derleth; Mr. Derleth conferred with Dr. Parker; so persuasive was the agent (as agents should be) that the good Doctor was prevailed upon to give us one more adventure, the complete story of the one truly science fictional problem ever faced by the great detective.

The Adventure of the Snitch in Time

by MACK REYNOLDS
and AUGUST DERLETH

(Being a recently discovered, hitherto unpublished reminiscence of Dr. Lyndon Parker, of 7B Praed Street, London.)

ON AN AUTUMN afternoon of a year that, for manifest reasons, must remain nameless, there came to the attention of my friend, Mr. Solar Pons, a matter which was surely either the most extraordinary adventure ever to befall a

private enquiry agent in or before our time, or an equally extraordinary misadventure, the *raison d'être* of which remains obscure even now, though it might have been born in the circumstances of the moment, for it was one of those days on which London was literally swallowed in a yellow fog, and we had both been confined to our quarters for two days, with no more incident than the arrival of an occasional paper and the unfailing complaint of our long-suffering landlady about Pons' spare appetite.

Even our warm and comfortable quarters, for all that a fire burned at the hearth, had begun to pall on us. Pons had exhausted the microscope; he had abandoned his chemistry set; he had ceased his abominable pistol practice; and for once there was not a single item of correspondence transfixed to the center of the mantelpiece by his knife. He had hardly stopped his restless wandering among the disorderly order of our quarters, and seated himself in his velvet-lined chair, holding forth on the points of difference between Stradivarius and Amati violins, when he rose once more with his empty pipe in his hands.

He was at the fireplace, about to take the shag from the toe of his slipper, tacked below the mantelpiece, when suddenly, he paused. He stood so for a moment, in utter silence, his hawklike face keen with interest, his body seeming actually to lean forward as if to catch the sound that smote upon his ears.

"If I am not mistaken, Parker," he said with unaccustomed gravity, "we are about to have a most unusual visitor."

I had been standing at the window looking out, and had just turned. "Nothing has disturbed this fog for the past half hour," I protested.

"My dear Parker, you are looking in the wrong direction. The footsteps are approaching from out there, and a little above."

So saying, he turned to face the door with alert expectation in his gray eyes.

I had for some time been conscious of a curious sound, almost as of water sliding at regular intervals against the roof. Apparently this was what Pons had mistaken for the sound of footsteps. Almost at the same moment of this realization, a most peculiar assault was made on the door to our quarters. I had not heard the outer door; in truth, I had heard no step upon the stair. But now a kind of brushing sound broke in upon us; it began at the top of the door, and did not become a recognizable knock until it had descended to midpanel.

Being nearest the door, I moved to open it.

"Pray be cautious, Parker," said Pons. "And spare me your alarm. Unless I am in egregious error, our visitor is from another world."

I gazed at him, mouth agape. I had heard and marveled at his extraordi-

nary deductions before, but this came from his lips with such calm assurance that I could not doubt his sincerity even while I could not accept his words.

“Come, Parker, let us not keep him waiting.”

I threw open the door. There, confronting us, was a strong, healthy man, bronzed by the sun, clad in a fantastic attire of such brilliant hues as to dazzle the eye. His footgear — a strange combination of sandal and slipper — must have made the curious slapping sounds I had at first mistaken for the dripping of water, but which Pons had correctly identified as footsteps, however alien to our previous experience.

Our visitor looked briefly at me and said, “Ah, the famous literary doctor, I presume?” and smiled, as if in jest.

My astonishment at this manner of address, accompanied as it was with an almost insolent amusement, left me momentarily speechless.

“Come in, come in, my dear fellow,” said Pons behind me. “Pray overlook Dr. Parker’s rudeness. I perceive you have come a long way; your fatigue is manifest. Sit here and relieve yourself of the problem which brings you to these quarters.”

Our visitor walked into the room, inclining his head to acknowledge Pons’ invitation.

“I hope you will forgive my coming without an appointment,” he said, in a somewhat stilted voice, accompanied by florid and Victorian gestures. “I fear I had no alternative. Let me introduce myself — I am Agent Tobias Athelney of the Terra Bureau of Investigation, Planet Terra, of the Solar System League.”

Pons’ eyes twinkled merrily.

“My dear sir,” I could not help interrupting, “levity is all very well, but this is neither the time nor the place for it. Just where are you from?”

Our visitor had taken the seat to which Pons had waved him. At my words, he stopped short, took a small, violet-covered notebook from an inner fold of his robelike costume, and thumbed through it until he found the place he sought.

“Pray forgive me,” he murmured. “If we were still using your somewhat fantastic calendar system, it would be the year 2565 A.D.”

Pons, who had been scrutinizing him closely, now leaned back, closed his eyes, and touched his fingertips together. “So you represent yourself as a governmental agent of almost 700 years in the future, Mr. Athelney?” he said. “A traveler in time?”

Our visitor grimaced. “Not exactly, Mr. Pons. To my knowledge, there is no such thing as time travel, or can such travel ever be developed. No, the explanation for my presence here is more elementary. We have recently discovered that the universe is not, indeed, one, but of an infinite number.

We have learned that everything that possibly *could* happen *has* happened, *will* happen, and *is* happening. Given an infinite number of alternative universes, you can easily understand how this would be so. To illustrate, Mr. Pons, there are alternate space-time continua in which Napoleon won at Waterloo; there are still others in which Waterloo was a draw; and there are yet others in which the battle was never fought at all — indeed, in which Napoleon was never born!”

I flashed a glance of mounting indignation at Pons, but my companion’s face had taken on that dream expression I had learned to associate with intense concentration. Surely it could not be that he was being deceived by this patent mountebank!

“Infinite other universes than this,” murmured Pons, “containing other persons identical to myself, and to Dr. Parker, here, who carry on their little lives in much the same manner as we do?”

Our visitor nodded. “That is correct, Mr. Pons. There are still other space-time continua, in which there are no such persons as yourselves, never have been, and never will be.” He coughed almost apologetically. “In fact, in this multitude of alternate universes, Mr. Pons, there are some in which you two are fictitious characters, the product of a popular writer’s art!”

“Amazing!” exclaimed Pons, adding, with a glance at my dour face, “and yet, not entirely incredible, would you say, Parker?”

“Preposterous!” I answered. “How can you sit there and calmly accept this — this nonsense?”

“Dear me,” murmured Pons, “let us not be too hasty, Parker.”

“I am sorry to have upset Dr. Parker,” said our visitor soberly, “but it is from just such a universe that I have traveled to this. Approximately 700 years before my birth, in my space-time continuum, a series of stories dealing with Mr. Solar Pons and Dr. Lyndon Parker were written, presumably by Dr. Parker, and became the all-time favorites of the literature of deduction.”

“Let us assume all this is so,” said Pons. “For what purpose have you come?”

“To consult you, Mr. Pons.”

“I fancied as much,” said my companion with a serene smile. “Though it would seem a long chance indeed to consult a fictitious character.”

“Touché!” answered our client. “But a fictitious character in *my* universe and 700 years before my time. But in *this* universe you are very real indeed, and the greatest detective of all time!” He sighed. “You cannot imagine, Mr. Pons, the difficulty of first finding a continuum in which you were *real*, and then, on top of that, one in which you were contemporary.”

Pons sat for a moment in silence, stroking the lobe of his left ear. “I submit,” he said at last, “since patterns of crime and its detection contin-

ually evolve, you are haunting the wrong continuum, Mr. Athelney."

"I think not, Mr. Pons, if you will hear me out."

"Proceed."

"One of our most scientifically advanced bands of criminals is named the Club Cerise, after the favorite color of its leader, Moriarty. They —"

"Moriarty!" exclaimed Pons.

"Yes, Mr. Pons. Moriarty. The name is familiar to you perhaps?"

"Indeed it is!" Pons was silent for a moment, his eyes closed. "You know, Parker," he said after a moment, "I have always felt that one death at the Reichenbach was as false as the other." He sat up in his chair, his gaze now intent on our visitor. "Pray continue, Mr. Athelney! Where my illustrious predecessor could achieve but a stalemate, it seems that you offer me the opportunity for complete victory!"

"Well, then, Mr. Pons," our visitor resumed, "you will not be surprised to learn that Moriarty and his band have managed to escape retribution for some time, and it is in regard to their apprehension that I seek your assistance. The criminal method they have developed is based on the same discovery that allows my presence here. Moriarty and his Club Cerise have been making a practice of invading space-time continua in less developed eras than our own, and, utilizing our most advanced weapons and devices to assure their escape, have been despoiling these universes of their art treasures. Not long ago, for example, they went into a Twentieth Century universe and obtained a Da Vinci, a half dozen Rembrandts, and a priceless collection of Kellys."

Pons' eyes widened a trifle. "You are suggesting that the Irish have developed an artist of the stature of Da Vinci, Mr. Athelney?"

"Indeed, yes. A fellow named Kelly created a work of genius called *Pogo*, which appeared in hundreds of newspapers of his day. These were *Pogo* originals, including some of the very rare pre-strip drawings. With his fabulously valuable treasure, Moriarty and his band managed to return to our own space-time continuum. Obviously, we cannot punish them in our universe, since they have committed no crime there. Under ordinary circumstances, it would be possible to extradite them to the universe they plundered — but there are almost insurmountable complications."

Pons smiled, still giving no evidence of being in the slightest troubled by the mad, if ingenious, account of our prospective client. "I daresay 'insurmountable' is the word to describe the problems attendant upon extradition of a group of criminals from a country which doesn't exist in the universe where the crime was committed. I submit that a Twentieth Century nation might be compelled to adopt extraordinary protective measures — if indeed these would be adequate — to deal with criminals seven centuries

in advance of the police of that period." But now he shook his head, with a gentle smile on his thin lips. "But we must stop considering these ramifications, or we shall soon find ourselves involved in the higher mathematics of space and time."

"The importance of the problem is greater than might at first be evident," continued our visitor. "Given continued success on the part of Moriarty and his Club Cerise, there can be no doubt that other such bands will soon emulate them, and that eventually endless numbers of space-time pirates will give up other pursuits to devote themselves to the plundering of weaker continua with this type of snitch."

"Snitch?" I repeated.

"Elementary, Parker," murmured Pons impatiently. "Obviously idiomatic for 'theft'."

"The ultimate possibility will not have escaped you, Mr. Pons," continued our client. "Sooner or later, the increasing numbers of criminals would arrive in *this* space-time continuum and in *this* era."

I could not be sure, but it seemed to me that at this suggestion a little color drained from Pons' cheeks. And, if a shudder went through that lean frame, he was again under perfect control within moments. He sat then in silence, his eyes closed, his head sunk to his chest with his fingertips gently tapping together.

Our visitor waited in silence.

Pons opened his eyes presently and asked, "Pray tell me, Mr. Athelney — do you have income taxes in your world?"

Athelney groaned. "My dear fellow, last year my taxes were unbelievably high. Bureaucracy runs rampant!"

"Capital, capital!" exclaimed Pons. "Why not prosecute Moriarty for tax evasion?"

Our visitor shook his head dolefully. "The criminals of our days are advanced, Mr. Pons. They *pay* their taxes."

Once again Pons retreated into silence, taking time now to light up his calabash. But this time his silence was broken more quickly.

"I have some modest knowledge of British law, Mr. Athelney," said Pons, "but your laws may well differ. What type of social system prevails in your world and time?"

"It is usually referred to as Industrial Feudalism."

"I am not familiar with the term, though I can guess its meaning. Pray elucidate."

"In the same manner that Feudalism evolved from Chattel Slavery, and Capitalism from Feudalism, so Industrial Feudalism has evolved in our continuum from Capitalism. Ownership has contracted until a few princes

of finance, a few industrial barons and lords of transportation completely control the government and practically all the wealth."

"Do national boundaries still prevail?"

"Terra is united, but we have loose ties with the other planets of the Solar System."

"Then doubtless you have tariff laws between the various planets."

"Very rigid ones. Last month we apprehended some Martians smuggling duppl berries; they were given ten years."

"I submit you have an obvious trap in which to take Moriarty and his Club Cerise, Mr. Athelney. They must pay import taxes on those art objects. Failure to do so puts them afoul of the law."

Our client smiled broadly. "I do believe, Mr. Pons, you have arrived at a solution of our problem."

He came to his feet.

"I suggest your government pass such tariff restrictions as to make imports from other space-time continua prohibitive. Such a move, in view of the fact that the criminals of your time are so advanced as to pay their taxes, would in all likelihood prevent further depredations."

Though our client was manifestly anxious to be off, he hesitated. "I wish there were some way in which I could remunerate you, Mr. Pons. Unfortunately, we do not use the same system of exchange. All I can do is offer profound thanks in the name of my continuum."

"There is surely remuneration enough implied in the promise that we will not be victimized here in our time and world by such as Moriarty," said Pons. "But, stay, Mr. Athelney — I perceive you are still troubled by some aspect of the matter."

Our client turned from the threshold, to which he had walked. He smiled wryly. "I fear, Mr. Pons, that this is but the initial step in our problem. Moriarty, when he learned I was to travel hither in search of the greatest detective of all time, took certain protective measures. He sent one of his own men to another space-time continuum to acquire the services of a most astute lawyer named Randolph Mason."

"Pray be reassured," responded Pons instantly. "I can refer you to a rising young contemporary, who promises to be even greater, and is gaining a challenging reputation in the legal circles of his world. By an odd coincidence, not uncommon to fiction, he bears a similar family name. His given name, I believe, is Perry. My correspondents on the west coast of the United States have given me flattering reports of his talents. You will find him in Los Angeles, I believe. I commend him to your government. Good afternoon, Mr. Athelney."

As soon as the door had closed behind our visitor, I turned to Pons.

"Should not one of us slip after him and notify the authorities of his escape?"

Pons walked to the window and looked out into the fog. Without turning, he asked, "You thought him a lunatic, Parker?"

"Surely that was obvious!"

"Was it, indeed!" Pons shook his head. "I sometimes think, Parker, that that happy faculty for observation which seems to come so readily to me encounters obstacles of demoralizing stubbornness in you."

"Pons!" I exclaimed hotly, "you cannot have been taken in by this — this mountebank and his hoax?"

"Was he both lunatic and mountebank, then?" asked Pons, smiling in that superior manner which always galled me.

"What does it matter which he was? He was certainly one or the other."

"If a mountebank, what was his motive? If a lunatic, how did he find his way here in this fog, which is surely as thick as any we have ever had? I fear some of us have an unhappy tendency to dismiss the incredible solely because it is incredible to *us*. Tell me, Parker, have you ever contemplated setting forth in the form of fiction these little adventures of mine in the field of ratiocination?"

I hesitated to answer.

"Come, come, Parker, it is evident that you have."

"I confess, I have thought of it."

"You have not yet done so?"

"No, Pons, I swear it."

"You have spoken of your plans to no one?"

"No."

"Our late client spoke of you as a literary doctor. 'The famous literary doctor' were his exact words, I believe. If he were but a lunatic or mountebank, as you will have him, how came he then to know of your innermost hope and ambition in this regard? Or is there some secret communion between lunatics and mountebanks? I perceive, thanks to our Mr. Athelney that, without regard to my wishes, you are destined to become a literary man at the expense of my modest powers."

"Pons, I swear I have never put pen to paper," I cried.

"But you will, Parker, you will. May I remind you of my distinguished predecessor's credo, that when all possible explanations have been shown false, the impossible, no matter how incredible, alone remains? This, I fancy, is one little adventure you will not be able to chronicle without a furtive blush or two."

In this, at least, my companion was correct.