



**THE GREAT DETECTIVE &  
THE MISSING FOOTBALLER**

*A parody by  
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An Affectionate Parody by  
**GURMEET MATTU**

It was a cold, rain-swept, November evening and Holms and I had just finished our dinner in our lodgings in Baker Street and were looking forward to a quiet night of smoking and reading. The meal had intrigued me and I turned to Mrs Houston, who stood by the table ready to clear away the crockery, and asked, "That was interesting, Mrs Houston, what was it?"

"Tandoori lasagne, Dr Wilson," she answered proudly.

"Not a dish I'm familiar with," Holms snorted.

"It's fusion cuisine, Mr Holms, a blending of Indian and Italian culinary traditions, creating something suitably modern for the twenty first century. There's nothing wrong with being a bit adventurous.

"Adventure is in my blood, Mrs Houston," Holms answered curtly, "I just don't want it in my stomach."

Our elderly landlady started lifting the plates, but there was a look of thunder on her countenance.

"Was there something else?" Holms asked.

The old woman lifted her chin proudly, "I hate to bring this up, but you're two months behind with the rent."

Holms lifted his napkin to his lips to hide his embarrassment and mumbled, "Ah yes, the rent."

"I'm an old widow woman, Mr Holms," and I can't keep two big strapping men in food and lodgings on fresh air."

"We've been encountering some difficulties, Mrs Houston," Holms explained.

"You'll be encountering even more if I put you out on the street," the indomitable lady replied boldly.

"There's no need for that," I complained vehemently.

"I'll give you two days," she threatened in response to my plea, "or you can start packing your magnifying glasses."

She took the dishes and departed as Holms and I moved over to the warmth and comfort of our armchairs by the fireside.

"That woman is a terror, Wilson," Holms complained, "a positive menace to my digestive system."

"It was a trifle on the spicy side," I agreed.

"Spicy? That excuse for a meal could be used to remove paint."

I ventured to change the subject of the conversation as Holms was a nightmare if allowed to vent on the problems of his digestion. "What are we going to do about the rent?"

"She has a nerve to ask for rent," Holms barked, "She should pay us to eat that slop."

I nodded in agreement but in my heart knew that she had cause for complaint. "This lack of cases is proving detrimental."

"Yes, that is a problem," Holms replied, lighting up his pipe. This modern age is singularly lacking in master criminals for me to tackle. And the authorities, with their databases of criminals and their DNA profiling would seem to have an edge on my natural deductive skills, but I have faith, the Lord shall provide.

"Well, if he doesn't," I jested, "I want first pick of the park benches."

Holms seemed unamused at my sally but a knock at the door saved me from any witty riposte he could muster. At his command Mrs Houston entered.

“There's a chap at the door, wants to see you,” she informed us.

We were expecting no visitors, so I asked who the intruder on our solitude was.

“Wouldn't say,” Mrs Houston replied curtly.

“Did he give you a card?” Holms asked.

“No, he's definitely not a postman.”

Holms blew an angry plume of smoke from his thin lips. “Have you been at the gin, Mrs Houston?”

“Only medicinal, Mr Holms, only medicinal. There's a nip in the air.”

Holms gestured with his pipe. “Oh, show him in.”

Mrs Houston left us and returned accompanied by a man swathed in a long coat, hat and scarf which covered his face. He approached and shook hands with Holms and myself.

“Please, take a seat and tell me how I can help you,” Holms volunteered.

“Feel free to remove your coat and scarf,” I offered.

In answer the man mumbled, “I'd prefer not to reveal my identity.”

I was unsure if I'd heard him correctly, “What?”

Holms, of course, was already ahead of me, “He said that he would prefer not to reveal his identity. I have honed my sense of hearing, Wilson, through years of listening to the recordings of Mr. Harry Lauder. But come, sir, I have already surmised that you are Fergus Alexander, manager of Manchester United football club.”

The stranger stiffened but slowly began unwinding his scarf to reveal his face. It was indeed the legendary Scots manager.

“But how?” he asked, once his lips were uncovered.

“Elementary,” the great detective replied, “For a start there was the way you shook my hand.”

The Scotsman shook his head woefully, “Damn that handshake.”

I, for my part, was still covered in confusion. “But that would only have revealed that he was in the craft.”

A thin smile played over Holms' lips. “Who but a football manager would be able to afford such expensive shoes, yet have mud on them from the training ground?”

“An architect?” I ventured, not wishing to appear totally obtuse, but Holms ignored me. “I can also tell you that Mr Alexander's wife is losing her affection for him and that he had spaghetti carbonara for lunch.”

This time Alexander positively started. “But this is amazing. I was informed that you had great powers of deduction, Mr Holms, but this goes beyond reason.”

Holms waved away the compliment. “Not at all, you wear your club's tracksuit top under your coat. I caught a glimpse of it with your initials. This gave me your identity. That it is unpressed informs me that your wife no longer cares for you, and your garlic breath displays your dining habits.”

The deduction was so incisive, yet simple, that I could only mutter admiringly, “He's brilliant isn't he?”

Holms tapped out his pipe and reached for his tobacco pouch to refill it, “Come, Mr Alexander, tell me your woes.”

Alexander took a moment to divest himself of the no longer necessary scarf and remove his hat and coat, which I hung for him. Finally, he took a deep breath and spluttered, “It's awful, Mr. Holms, simply awful. Jimmy Henderson, you've heard of him, of course? He's simply the hinge that the whole team turns on. I'd rather lose one from the back, and have Williams in goal. Whether it's passing, or tackling, or dribbling, there's no one to touch him, and then, he's got the head, and can hold us all together. He's a right midfield maestro. What am I going to do with a game against our fiercest rivals coming up? No, Mr Holms, we're done for unless you can help me to find Jimmy Henderson.”

Holms arched his eyebrows as he tried to make sense of the Scotsman's rantings. “I confess, Mr Alexander, that I am no great follower of our national sport, and was unaware of this ... Jimmy Henderson.”

“But he's the greatest player of his generation, the captain of his country. Dear God, you're not a cricket man?”

Holms snorted. “If anything I favour rugger. I take it you have mislaid your captain? Pray tell me of the event.”

A tremor seemed to run through the Caledonian as he related his tale. “There's not much to tell. We were at training yesterday when he got a text on his mobile. When he read it he went totally white and rushed off without a word. We haven't heard from him since. I came to you directly I realised something was amiss.”

“I assume you have made enquiries?” Holms asked.

“Everywhere. He's not been home or at any of his usual haunts. It we lose this next game with Liverpool, we lose the league, it's as simple as that. And then there's England's World Cup qualifier with Spain coming up.” He paused. “You'd be handsomely rewarded if you could find him.”

“I rarely work for financial gain,” Holms said coldly.

I was more worldly than my inimitable friend. “The rent, Holms, the rent,” I hissed.

But the great detective ignored me, “Have you informed the police?”

“God no,” Alexander positively screeched, “It would be in all the papers then and Liverpool would say he'd ran away, scared of playing them.”

Holms considered for a moment, gathering his thoughts. Finally, he let out a loud sigh as if the matter were of little importance. “Very well, in this case, as he is our national captain, I shall find your Jimmy Henderson for you.”

The manager jumped up joyfully, “Thank you, Mr Holms, thank you. Manchester United Football Club and the English nation will forever be in your debt.”

Holms rose and escorted the shorter man to the door. “I shall call at your training ground tomorrow morning. Please ensure that all who were there at the time of his disappearance are present for questioning.”

Once Alexander had left Holms returned to his seat by the fire.

“Sounds like a right good earner,” I suggested, “United are one of the most wealthy football clubs in the world.”

“Indubitably,” Holms replied sourly.

“Any theories?” I asked.

“Facts, Wilson, I must have facts.”

“But you must have some notion of why a healthy young sportsman should just suddenly disappear?”

“I must think on it,” Holms answered.

As I feared he now turned to that one addiction which he required in order to finely tune his superb brain and the one that most annoyed me. He reached below his armchair and pulled from there a ratty old musical instrument.

“No, Holms,” I pleaded ineffectually, “Not the banjo!”

The following day, aboard the Virgin train to Manchester, Holms and I fell to discussing what had brought us to the 21<sup>st</sup> century from the Victorian era into which we had been born.

“That brute Moriarty and his infernal time machine!” I complained.

“An idea he got from a novella by a certain Herbert George Wells. But, I don’t know, Wilson, old boy, I quite like this modern age,” Holms confessed.

“But to throw us into the future just so he could continue his criminal career,” I insisted, still yearning for my dear and long-gone Mary.

Holms grinned broadly, a rare sight. “Which he never did.”

“But how can you know?” I demanded.

“Because mention of him would be in the historical record,” Holms explained.

“And there is none?”

“Quite the contrary. According to Wikipedia, Professor Moriarty perished by eating an excess of shish kebabs in a Turkish restaurant in Soho on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 1897.”

“But that is the very day we were propelled into the future!” I exclaimed.

“Exactly, the good professor did not live long enough to relish our demise and his criminal enterprises ended with him. He seemingly went out to dine after luring us into that metallic cabinet and the cuisine of our oriental friends proved too much for him.”

“I shall relish shish kebabs all the more because of this,” I said triumphantly.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” was Holms’ only comment, “you’re putting on weight.”

We thundered through the grey countryside, the diesel electric putting the steam machines of my own era to shame by way of speed. In comfort too they were far superior and in the buffet car we dined on comestibles unknown in our own time. Ere long we had pulled into Piccadilly station and took a cab directly to the Carrington training ground where Fergus Alexander was waiting for us.

His welcome was warm. “You came, thank God.”

“I always answer my country's call,” Holms answered patriotically, but the thought of our overdue rent was uppermost for me. “Was there any mention of a deposit, towards expenses?” I asked meekly.

Alexander waved my query and my outstretched hand away.” Oh, I don't deal with such things, but you'll need to submit an invoice.”

Holms took control of the situation. “Now, Alexander, what can you tell us about this Jimmy Henderson?”

A look of genuine affection flew over the older man’s face. “Ah, Jimmy. Jimmy was the product of a whole new training regime in English football.”

It was something I was unaware of. “A new regime?”

Alexander seemed eager to elaborate. “Thought up by scientists to explain why England has stopped producing quality football players.”

“Did we ever have those?” Holms asked woundingly.

“Oh aye, Mr Holms, giants, giants we produced at one time. Men who could stand shoulder to shoulder with any in the world.”

“And we haven't got them any more?”

Alexander shook his head sadly. “Gone, gone. Football has been driven out of young men's minds by mobile phones and computer games. We have bred a race of spoiled, pampered brats without the skill to kick a ball against a football stadium, never mind a goalmouth.”

I was still a little confused. “So, what does this new regime entail?” I asked.

“Poverty, Dr Wilson,” the Scotsman beamed proudly, “Poverty and deprivation. We take the lads away frae their families at an early age and thoroughly deprive them of aw the benefits of living in the 21st century. Bread and dripping for dinner, a copy of the Dandy to read every three months and a tennis baw to kick about in the streets night and day. All to turn them into football players. And it worked ... wi' Jimmy Henderson.”

It all seemed a bit extreme to me and I ventured to say so.

“Extreme?” the manager replied, “Of course it is, and expensive tae. Dae ye know it costs us twelve pound fifty fur a decent tennis baw these days.”

A stray ball broke from a group of players and rolled towards Holms who trapped it deftly and lobbed it back toward them without a glance.

“Not bad,” Alexander said, “Played a bit have you? Amateurs was it?”

“Let me assure you, Mr Alexander,” Holms replied, “That the only balls I have ever previously kicked were those of the Shropshire Amateur Flasher. But, to business, who was here when your Mr Henderson decided to disappear?”

“Oh, there was just a few of them,” Alexander replied, “I'll send them over if you want to talk to them.”

He walked off towards his squad of athletes and I turned to Holms. “This deprivation regime, you think it has some bearing?”

“Far too early to say, Wilson. We must consider everything, it could be a simple matter of a sudden illness.”

“In which case he would have reported to the medical staff here. No, no, I have a fancy for kidnapping.”

Holms snorted. “And what type of kidnapper orders his victim to report via a text message? No, the illness need not have been his, a family member or a friend perhaps.”

But I was not to be brushed aside. “But does he even know his family? You heard what Alexander said. They are taken away from their family at a young age.”

My theories were interrupted as one of the football players ran up, breathless from his exertions. “Gaffer says you wanted to talk to me about Jimmy.”

“And you are?” Holms asked.

“McCusker, Derek McCusker, left midfield.”

“And you were present when Mr Henderson disappeared?”

The young man shuffled his feet. “Well, it wasn't exactly disappeared. He wasn't a magician or anything.”

“What did you think of Henderson?” Holms probed.

“Jimmy? Great talent. Smashing lad.”

This seemed to be getting us nowhere. “Very well then, describe the events of yesterday.”

The lad took a moment to consider. “We were paired up, dribbling round the cones when Jimmy's phone went. He looked at it, read the message and buggered off.”

“And that is all?” Holms continued.

“Far as I can remember,” the footballer replied.

“And you never saw the message on his phone?”

“No, he never showed it to anybody.”

I could sense Holms' keen eye searching for any hint of deceit on the part of the young man but evidently there was none. “Very well, don't let me keep you from your training. Please ask the next player to come over.”

McCusker ran off but returned a few moments later and asked, “You wanted to see me?”

“No, no, send on the next chap,” Holms responded.

A baffled look crossed the young man's face. “What?”

“Send on the next chap.”

“But you haven't asked me anything yet.”

“Don't be silly,” Holms said, “I know you are a football player but I did expect some semblance of common sense.”

“Are you a loony?” the lad asked impertinently.

“No, I am Sherman Holms, the greatest consulting detective in the world.”

“Oh yeah, well do some detective stuff then and ask me some questions.”

“I've already asked you all the questions I want, now send over the next player.”

For once I had the upper hand on Holms when it came to matters of deduction. “Wait a minute, Holms, this one's got a different number on his tracksuit.”

The great detective had the decency to look abashed. “Ah, what's your name, young man?”

“Balfour, Tom Balfour, fullback.”

“So, you're not Derek McCusker?”

“No.”

“You look very similar,” Holms commented.

“Ah, that's your modern game for you,” the young man replied, “They're breeding the individuality out of the players.”

“I see. Now, tell me about Jimmy Henderson.”

“Young Jimmy? Part of the new regime. Maybe made captain too young, should have been an older head.”

“Such as yourself?”

“I've been in the first team over ten years, but it's not my place to tell the gaffer ...”

There was a sourness about the response which obviously intrigued Holms. “And did you get on well with him?”

“Fine, I suppose, considering he was one of the new breed of individualists and not one of us clones.”

“Did he have any enemies?”

“None that I know of.”

“Any character flaws? Drink, drugs, gambling?”

Balfour shook his head. “Nothing you would really call a major flaw, just Jimmy always had a notion for older women.”

This caught me by surprise and I could not stop myself from exclaiming, “Aha!”

Holms kept a cooler head. “But you can give no reason why he should have disappeared?”

Balfour curled his lip. “Young fella, who's to say? Maybe didn't have the stomach for the fight.”

It was obvious that Holms had taken a dislike to this surly creature as his tone was frozen. You expected this Liverpool game to be particularly physical then?”

“Title decider, couldn't be anything else.”

This seemed to satisfy the great man for he waved the fullback away. “I see, please send over the next player.”

Balfour shrugged and wandered off to rejoin his comrades.

“The jealousy positively oozes out of that man,” I commented.

Holms could say nothing but agree. “I noticed.

“I'd wager he's had a hand in young Henderson's disappearance,” I continued.

“It's possible,” Holms concurred. “That's why I dismissed him so rapidly, I didn't want him to suspect that I might be on to him.”

Again our musings were interrupted by the arrival of the next player to be interviewed, but whereas the previous two had been as alike as two peas in a pod, this one was of an altogether different stamp. He was slim, swarthy and moustachioed and announced himself grandiosely with a struggling grasp of the English tongue. “Hai ham Rodrigo de la Cerveza Montoya. You want autograph?”

“Not one of the clones, I see,” I commented, which drew a disparaging glance from Holms.

“We do not want an autograph, Mister Montoya,” he said, “We are investigating the disappearance of Jimmy Henderson.”

“Jimmy Henderson, captain,” the little Spaniard replied as he stood to attention and saluted. “Top class, number one player.”

“Yes, you were present when he disappeared yesterday?”

“It is game of two halves,” Montoya answered boldly.

This seemed to perplex Holms. “Yes, yes, but Jimmy Henderson.”

“Is team game, eleven men,” was the response.

“You don't speak much English, do you?” Holms asked, finally realising that he was effectively wasting his time.

“Is all about putting ball in back of net. You want autograph? I give you two, one each, score draw.”

“We'll get nothing from him,” I confirmed to my friend.

“You no want autograph, I go,” the Spaniard said, before lifting his chin proudly and skipping off.

Holms nodded and once again I sensed the wheels of his mighty intellect at work. “And yet he is Spanish and England are due to play his native country.”

“You think he'd like Henderson out of the way to improve their chances?”

“We can't discount it.”

I quickly summarised the situation. “So, we have two suspects with motives.”

Holms reached into his coat for his pipe. “But no clues. Has this young man disappeared of his own volition, or has he been coerced.”

Of that I had no doubt. “It must be coercion, he wouldn't forsake his club, his country.”

Holms grunted scornfully, “He is a modern football player, Wilson, and would therefore sell his granny for an extra £1000 a week.”

There, I had to agree. “Well, so would I. Mine was a nasty old bag.”

“But it means we have nothing,” Holms complained.

I could not bear the thought of my dearest friend being beaten and tried to encourage him. “You must use your incredible powers, Holms. Fingerprints, a ragged cuff, tobacco stains, those are the things you need to work your magic.”

Holms puffed solemnly at his pipe and I was unsure if my urgings had lifted him. But before we could proceed further Fergus Alexander returned to our side.

“Get anything from the boys?”

“Only a Spanish lesson,” Holms replied glumly.

“Oh aye, Roddy, did ye get his autograph? He'd be in direct opposition to Jimmy in the international if we ever find him.”

“But he's not the type to have Henderson removed from the equation, as it were?”

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