

THE BEDLAM DETECTIVE

Excerpt

Sebastian Becker's train had been standing in this little English rural halt for fifteen minutes or more. When he looked out through his compartment's window the view fogged and cleared, fogged and cleared, adding an illusion of movement as the locomotive's idling boiler vented its unused energies and a breeze drove the cloud vapour on down its flanks. Sebastian saw a landscape of field and hedgerow, hedgerow and West Country field, all the way out to the blue distant hills.

There was a Railway Guard working his way down the platform toward them, stopping at each compartment to ask the same question.

A glance around Sebastian's companions in First Class showed strangers, all. A fat man in tweeds. Two clerical men, and a woman with a child. The child was about eight years old and wore a sailor suit, much as Sebastian's own son once had. A pint-sized sailor, on his way to the seaside. The plush fabric of the seat made the child's bare legs itch. Whenever he squirmed his mother would reach for his arm and shake him, once, in silent remonstrance.

She was a widow, still in the attire. The boy was pale and blue, like the cloth of his suit. It was as if he was his father's only memorial, and she exercised her grief by keeping him scrubbed down to the marble.

She met Sebastian's eye.

"Forgive me," he said, and once more looked out of the window.

How far were they now, from the sea? Fifteen, twenty miles?

The sprung latch on the carriage door opened with a sound like the bolt of a rifle. The door swung out and the train Guard hauled himself up to stand on the footboard. He'd bypassed the Third Class compartment next door.

He was a man of some girth, and he was shining with perspiration. His thinning hair was the dark brown of a much younger man, but

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his thick moustache was mostly grey and ginger. He wore a watch chain and waistcoat and the uniform of the Great Western Railway.

"Pardon me," he said breathlessly. "But is anyone here a medical man or an officer of the law?"

He spoke to the company in general but when his gaze lit upon Sebastian, his manner changed.

No one moved.

"I thought perhaps you, sir?" the Guard persisted when Sebastian made no response.

Sebastian Becker could sense the eyes of everyone in the compartment upon him.

"I'm sorry, but no," he said.

The Guard seemed to hesitate, as if about to say something else. Then he accepted the rebuff, and moved to withdraw.

One of the clerical men called after him.

"Excuse me," he said, "But why have we stopped?"

"Just a slight problem in the baggage car, sir," the train Guard said. "The Station Master and I are having a difference of opinion over what's to be done about it."

The door closed with a bang. And that was that.

There was some shifting and throat-clearing in the compartment, but apart from something murmured by the fat man no one spoke. Back in America, Sebastian thought, the Guard's departure would have been the cue for some lively speculation and debate between strangers. But here, there followed a strained and British silence.

The Guard was repeating his question next door to the Third Class people, this time with no Pardon me.

Sebastian opened his book and pretended to read, but it was of no use.

Eventually he closed the book and got to his feet.

"Excuse me," he said, and opened the compartment door to climb down after the Guard.

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Sebastian had once seen half of a man's head blown clean off, gone from the eye sockets up. It had been done from behind, with a shot from a hunting rifle at a range of inches. Two men held the victim's arms and forced him to kneel. The man with the rifle called a warning as he fired, so that his friends might turn their faces away; not to be spared the sight, but to avoid the spray. Sebastian could do nothing. He was part of a mob that had, only minutes before, been a peaceful labor meeting. To drop his disguise would have been certain suicide.

Although his evidence had later helped to hang two of the men, the hour stood in his memory as one of shame. He might have intervened; he had not. The fact that he was a Pinkerton man and under cover, and that the mob would have turned on him in an instant, somehow counted for little after the event.

Others agreed. Complete strangers were generous with their views on how he could and should have acted. You could of said something abt. the sky and then taken the gun off the shooter when he was looking up and turned it onto him, wrote one correspondent. That is surely what I would of done in yr place. And after his court appearance, another with differing loyalties wrote, On your word two good men will hang. The scab only got what he deserved and some day so will you.

A return to England, the land of Sebastian's birth, had been Elisabeth's idea. She sold her jewellery to buy them steamer tickets. It meant a fresh start, but a step down in fortune. Sebastian Becker now lived in London, and drew his modest pay from the coffers of England's Lord Chancellor.

They were not rich. But he had his one decent suit of clothes, and a certain authority. An agent of justice once again, he now served as the special investigator to the Masters of Lunacy.

"I was a detective once," he said. "But a mere civil servant now."

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"Nevertheless, sir," the Guard said, "I'll ask you for your guidance and I'll value your opinion."

"On what?"

"Please. This way."

As they began to move, he signalled to the Station Master. The Station Master saw the wave, and broke off an argument with a Third Class passenger hanging out of one of the end carriage windows.

The train was a cross-country set, pulled by a tank engine. A full quarter of its length was taken up by the luggage van. British holiday passengers rarely travelled light. They'd arrive at their lodgings in a caravan of trunks, suitcases and hatboxes, more appropriate to a house move than a week-long stay. Many would even pack food, as if a Minehead or a Weymouth were some far-off and foreign place with unreliable supplies.

But this was the season's end. And a wet and disappointing season that 1912 summer had been. The train was less than half full.

As they walked up the platform the Guard said, "I expect you're wondering how I had you singled out, back there."

"My travel warrant," Sebastian said, to the Guard's disappointment. "I assume you noted the crest on it."

The Station Master caught up, and by the time they reached the luggage van they were four; Sebastian, the Guard, the Station Master, and the Station Master's gormless-looking lad who'd appeared from nowhere. The lad wore a porter's uniform and a haircut that looked as if it had been inflicted on him in a dark alleyway. He couldn't have been more than sixteen, but he was wiry.

"In here," said the Station Master, and once they were inside the station's baggage room he closed the doors behind them and drew down the blinds.

There was a wall of numbered cubbies for bags and suitcases, but most of the room was open floor space for setting out baskets and dry goods. A second set of doors opened into a lane behind the station.

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And there was a stink; a pungency somewhere between vinegar and turpentine, without quite being either. Sebastian knew it, and knew it far too well. It took him back to his first job in uniform, and memories of mortuary visits on hot summer evenings.

"Here, sir."

The station's platform cart had been dragged into the room. A leaking crate stood upon it. The side of the crate had been opened, with some of its boards prized off and then replaced loose to shield the contents from view.

The three railway employees stood watching him, and none offered to explain. So he moved the loose boards and looked inside.

Inside the crate was a cylindrical, glass-lidded tank, roped into place. Folded blankets had been wedged in around the sides to cushion it. Staring out at him, crammed in like so much colorless fruit in a preserving jar, was a small dead freak.

Or two dead freaks that shared a head. Opinions might vary. It was as if in creation their faces had been mashed together to make one three-eyed, two-mouthed horror. Their bodies, as far as he could see, were normal.

To get them into the jar they'd been arranged in a tight embrace, arms wrapped around each other as if clinging in terror to the only reassurance that either of them knew. Their limbs must have softened, to fit the space in the jar so closely. The lid had been sealed on with strips of tarred linen.

The Station Master said, "There are five more boxes like this on the train. We're supposed to hold them for collection."

Sebastian looked up at him.

"And?"

"That is some kind of a human child, is it not?"

Sebastian considered. He'd been expecting something suspicious concerning a trunk. Trunk murders, most of them involving dismemberment and left-luggage offices, were an enduring British obsession. He could recall one that had proved to be a consignment of theatrical

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costumes, unlaundered and reeking of glue and the sweat of performance.

This was something else.

He took a moment longer. Then he said, "I believe this should properly be called a specimen. Do you not recognize that rank smell?"

The three looked blank.

"It's formaldehyde."

Two of the three did their best to look enlightened.

He indicated the stain around the crate. "It's either leaked or spilled. What happened here?"

With a pointed look at the lad, the Guard said, "There was a mishap as the box was taken from the wagon. The box was dropped, something broke, and the smell came right after."

The boy might have been looking embarrassed, but it was hard to tell. His expression barely changed.

The Station Master said, "I stopped the unloading and took a decision to open the box. Specimen or no, sir, is there no special law to cover the transport of the dead?"

"You'd know that better than I would," Sebastian said. "Who's the owner of the crate?"

The Guard handed him the consignment papers, and he gave them a quick look-over. The boxes had been packed and shipped by a carrier in New York. The contents of the six crates were described as 'curiosities', and were to be collected by one Abraham Sedgewick or his representative.

Sebastian looked at the Station Master. He said, "Do you know this Abraham Sedgewick? Is he a local man?"

The Station Master made a small and helpless gesture, but the lad chipped in and spoke for the first time.

"Sedgewick's Fair is passing through on Thursday," he said.

Sebastian considered for a moment. "Well," he said. "A fair. That makes a kind of sense. Does it not?"

They were all looking at him and expecting more.

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Sebastian went on, "Created as specimens, bought to be exhibits. Destined for display in some fairground sideshow."

"Specimens, exhibits," the Station Master said. "I don't care what you call them. They're dead bodies, and I don't want them in my station."

"Well," the Guard said, "they can't stay on my train."

They looked to Sebastian for some kind of adjudication. He realized that what they'd been seeking was neither a doctor nor a policeman, but a Solomon.

Meanwhile, his train stood waiting. And there was an urgency to his mission that, though he could not advertise it, argued against delay.

The fact of it was that he had no answer. Freak or not, these were human remains and there was probably some law to govern their storage and use. His employer might know. But Sir James was up in Dundee for the week, giving an address to the British Association.

He gave the bottled specimen a more intense inspection. Here, only inches from the glass, the smell of formaldehyde was almost overpowering.

He had an idea.

He said, "Have you opened any of the other boxes?"

"No," the Station Master said.

"Have you taken a close look at this?"

"As close as any man would care to."

"Look," he said, and beckoned the man in. "Get close enough and you can see a faint crazing pattern in the surface of the skin. What does that tell you?"

The Station Master opened and closed his mouth and then was about to shrug, so Sebastian told him.

"I think you'll find that what you're looking at may not be flesh, but..."

"Wax!" the Guard said suddenly.

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The Station Master seemed doubtful. He regarded the freak through its glass and said, "They're waxworks?"

"Have you never heard of such a thing? Anatomical models. Bottled up in spirits of alcohol for a showman's trick. Of course," he added for safety, "that's only my guess."

Then he looked into the milky eyes of the three-eyed freak, and the dead freak stared ahead and through him as if refusing to meet his gaze.

He felt a touch of guilt.

But hadn't he witnessed worse things in this world? And the freak was long dead.

And as for the Guard, he had all the answer that he needed.

He clapped his hands together. "Right," he said. "I'll have the rest of your goods off my train and we'll be on our way."

As the lad went to unload the other crates, the Station Master crouched down and peered more closely into the jar. All of his reticence was forgotten now.

"A waxwork," the Station Master said, and he looked up at Sebastian with a face of wonder where, before, there had been only disgust.

"Indeed," said Sebastian.

"Who'd have imagined that?" the Station Master said. "You don't see it 'til you really look."

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The unloading of the boxes took another fifteen minutes. Once the train was moving again, Sebastian opened his book and tried to read. The reading was not for pleasure; behind the content of the book lay one of the reasons for his journey. If he arrived too late to seek out the author this afternoon, he could finish it in his hotel.

He was keeping alive a glimmer of hope for a decent supper. His warrant might give him First Class travel out of London, but the restaurant car was beyond his means.

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To those hopes of a quiet evening and a decent supper he added another, which was not to dream of carnival freaks in a strange bed.

In the event, he did not. But only because worse was to come, before the day was out.

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