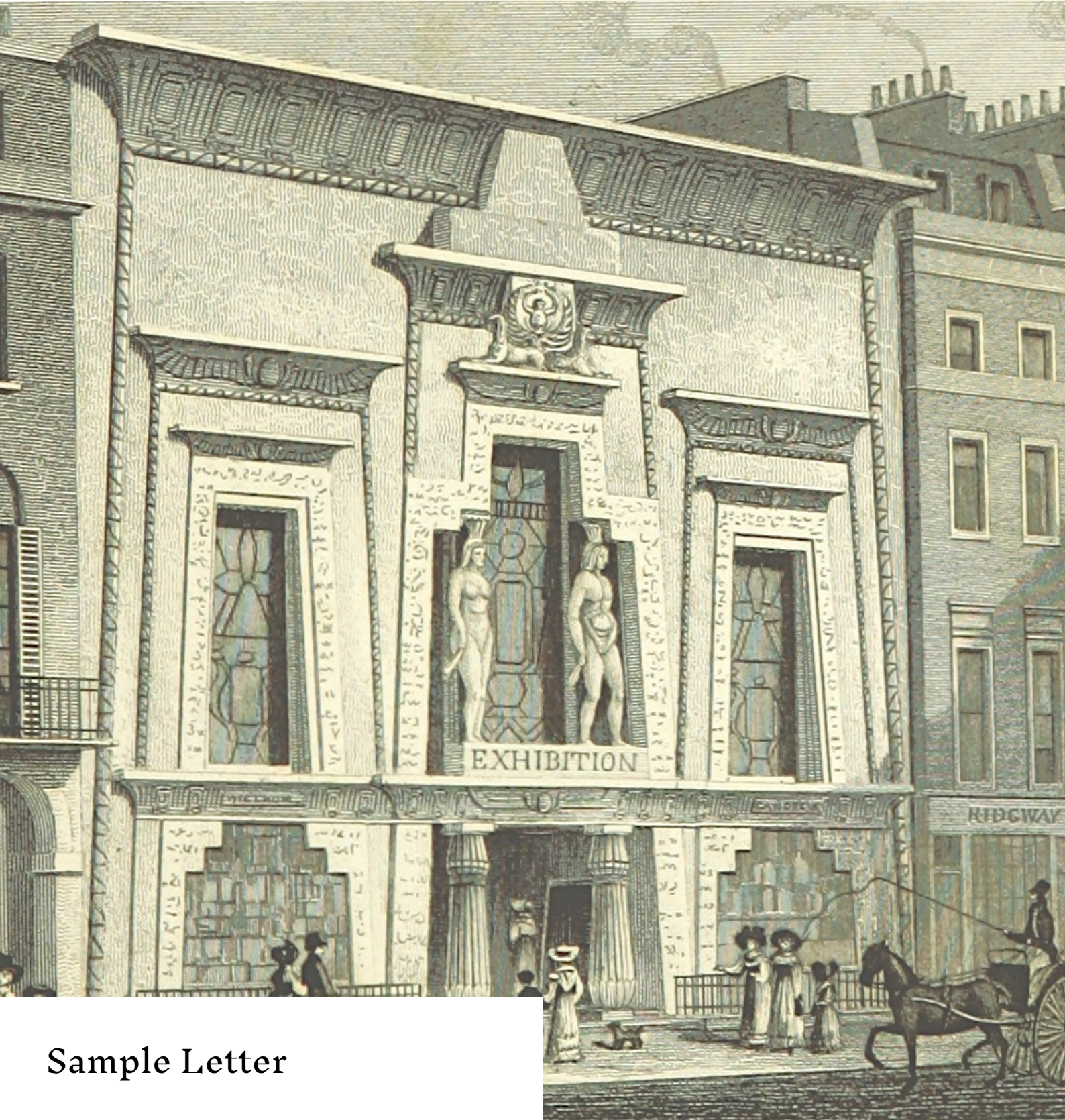


The Deduction Club

presents

Watson Writes: The Moncrieff Mystery



Sample Letter

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version 1.0

Copyright © 2024 The Deduction Club

All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the author, except as permitted under U.K. law.

Welcome

Watson Writes: The Moncrieff Mystery (henceforth 'WW:TMM') is a deduction game featuring Dr John H. Watson, unsung hero and friend of the renowned consulting detective Sherlock Holmes.

Unravel a tale of mystery, misdeed, and ancient Egyptian magic set amidst the murky milieu of Victorian London. Explore, observe, deduce, and, above all, embrace the elementary.

FORMAT

WW:TMM adopts the style of a play-by-mail game. There are four cases, each of which comprise several documents (letters, diary entries, and so on). Each case features a self-contained mystery, and, collectively, all four cases form a larger, overarching mystery. The cases are designed to be played in order, from case one to case four. Likewise, the documents in each case are designed to be examined in chronological order, beginning with the earliest. The final document in each case is the solution, provided by Holmes.

DEVELOPMENT STATUS

WW:TMM is currently in development. This is a sample of the game, which contains the first letter from case one. For updates about the game's development, please visit the Deduction Club's website (<https://deductionclub.com>).

CONTACT

If you have any questions, suggestions, or other missives, please send an email to hello@deductionclub.com - thank you!

Case One – Letter One

J. H. W.
221B Baker Street
1st January 1883

My Dear Holmes,

I trust that your journey proceeded accordingly and that your lodgings are proving, no doubt, first rate. If you have not heard from me these past few days it is because until this afternoon there was nothing of importance to relate. Then, however, an extraordinary circumstance occurred, which I must detail forthwith.

It was perhaps a quarter to three. The heavy fog and snow storms which assailed London upon your departure have remained in situ, and thus, although desiring adventure, I nevertheless counted myself fortunate, on this darkening New Year's open, to be nestled once again amidst the comfortable confines of Baker Street. I had been sitting near the fire, engrossed in the Illustrated London News, when I found myself somewhat startled by the arrival of an errand boy who stood shivering in the doorway. His attire spoke of wear and tear, with patches adorning his trousers and sodden boots showing signs of heavy use. His cheeks were flushed red, and his hands, clad in threadbare gloves, trembled slightly as he passed me an envelope.

"A message for Mr 'olmes", he said, offering a brief nod, before hurrying back down stairs.

Momentarily, I called after him with thanks, but the boy had already made the front door and was venturing once more into the biting cold. Returning to the fire, I examined the delivery. The front of the envelope bore the inscription 'Mr S. Holmes, 221B Baker Street', whilst, inside, a single sheet of paper headed 'British Museum' featured a short, scrawled note:

Dear Mr Holmes,

a profoundly unusual incident has occurred.

I beg that you attend the Department of Egyptian Antiquities post-haste.

Sincerely,

Elias Trench, Curator

My curiosity having been piqued, I first paused to consider the request's veracity. Determining, on balance, the likelihood of the note being genuine and the sentiment sincere, I readied myself and set off whence the boy had come minutes earlier.

Outside, snow lay deep upon the ground. Despite prior efforts to clear the thoroughfare, the centre of Baker Street evidenced tracks left by those intrepid few in midday's fresh white fall, and at either side the pavements were near impassable. Belatedly reaching Marylebone Road, I had the good fortune to hail a hansom and, after a bracing ride, arrived at the museum under twilight.

There I entered, moved to the east wing, and approached the Egyptian galleries. You are aware, I'm sure, of the perennial parliamentary debates regarding the museum's inadequate lighting, and I can now quite attest to the issue. The windowless corridors, in particular, are a bane, harbouring long passages of darkness wherein surely all but the most attuned eye could discern little. Thankfully, at the boundary adjoining the collections of Assyria and Egypt, a lamp appeared, though its owner was a patrolling watchman who temporarily halted my progress. Clad in a heavy overcoat and with one hand resting on the hilt of a nightstick, he eyed me keenly.

"The museum's shutting now, sir."

"I'm here to see Curator Trench", I said, producing the note.

Holmes, what a changed countenance when he read your name! Indeed, such was his subsequent deference, one couldn't but wonder if he had in fact mistaken me for you. Following his direction, I retrieved the note, entered the main Egyptian gallery, and there encountered a solitary figure of grand stature, whose handheld lantern lit a slender, aged face and a long velvet cloak bedecked with curious brooches.

"Curator Trench?", I began. The figure nodded. "My name is Dr John Watson. I assist Sherlock Holmes with his cases. He has asked me to attend and observe on his behalf."

"You have my note?"

"Yes, right here."

"I see. And where, may I ask, is Mr Holmes?"

"He is... unfortunately indisposed at present. But I assure you we remain in close contact."

"Very well. Please understand, Dr Watson, that I am not accustomed to sending such messages. Yet the matter was so delicate that I could not immediately confide it to the police for fear of putting myself and the museum in great difficulty."

"Of course."

"The facts are briefly these. At around a half-past one I was installing an exhibit here in the main gallery when a terrible cry arose nearby. Naturally, I looked round but saw merely a few visitors who appeared equally concerned. Suddenly, another cry came, and this time I rushed in its direction. The sound seemed to have originated in the store room, the door to which stood ajar. Entering, I saw... I saw... Well, perhaps it is best if I show you..."

At this, he turned and moved with a perceptibly hesitant step through the cavernous main gallery. I followed, glimpsing towering statues, shimmering sarcophagi, a resplendent throne, and myriad other prodigious artefacts illuminated fleetingly in the

lantern's beam, for a moonless night had now fallen and the large eastern-facing windows offered only dark, clouded sky.

At the gallery's far end, Curator Trench paused beside a half-glazed door before turning the handle and ushering me in.

"This is the store room", he said. "This is where we found..."

He angled the beam towards the centre of the room, suffusing a deep, moted haze. I had prepared myself for a shock, yet, to my confusion, initially noticed only a sandstone statue, maybe eight feet in height, which lay broken on the floor. Bathed by the lantern's yellow glow, and surrounded by the haloed silhouettes of manifold densely-packed ancient objects, the statue, even when prostrate, commanded attention.

"It is Heka", Curator Trench said in a hushed tone. "Or, more accurately, it is the corporeal form of the god Heka, the deification of magic and medicine in ancient Egypt. But look...", he pointed, his voice wavering, "look beneath the head."

Before heeding instruction, I surveyed the floor encompassing the statue, seeking outstanding footprints or other markings, but found a layer of sand and stone dust so entirely impressed as to make differentiation impossible. Cautiously, I then bent down. The statue's head had become detached from its body at the neck, and its ornate crown cracked into several pieces forming an ad-hoc lattice. Suddenly my eyes caught the glint of a button, and then another.

"Coat buttons", I exclaimed, realising to my surprise that the buttons were attached to a man's dark suit jacket, with matching trousers, a waistcoat, a shirt, and underclothes crumpled to one side, and a pair of leather shoes nearby. In the heel of one shoe I saw a gold signet ring, and in the other a monocle. Yet, more peculiar still, was a perfectly formed conical pile of material, approximately one half-foot high, which stood atop the

jacket. At first glance, I had thought it a solid fragment of the sculpture. Upon closer inspection, however, the cone evidently comprised grains, perhaps of sand, whose damp surface reminded me of a sandcastle moulded from a bucket.

“How strange”, I said, genuinely puzzled.

“Strange!”, the curator cried. “You do not understand, Dr Watson.” He pointed again at the clothes and accoutrements. “These... these are the remains of Lord Moncrieff. Oh, I can scarcely believe he’s gone! Consumed by Heka.”

A vague recollection of the name Moncrieff came to mind.

“Lord Moncrieff, consumed?”, I said, facing Curator Trench. “What on earth do you mean?”

The curator drew a cravat from his pocket and, with a flourish, dabbed his top lip.

“Oh, of course, of course”, he said. “My apologies, Dr Watson. Please, allow me to explain. Lord and Lady Moncrieff are recently returned from Egypt, where they have been financing the excavations at Karnak, under the counsel of the archeologist Mr Ignatius Fane. Two months ago, Lord Moncrieff sent word detailing a remarkable series of finds and enquired as to whether the museum would entertain housing, or even acquiring, said objects. Of particular note were the many pieces related to ancient Egyptian magic, known as heka - amulets, statues, and papyri being chief amongst them. I favoured acquisition, yet, despite Lord Moncrieff’s most generously valued offer, the museum’s rather depleted funds curtailed this desire. Instead, it was agreed to house the collection, displaying significant objects whilst storing others.

A week ago, on Boxing Day no less, the majority of the collection arrived and the process of unpacking and cataloguing commenced. Lord Moncrieff attended from the outset, brandishing admirable knowledge of his charges and evidencing a zeal for heka,

whose marvels, he said, would prove a revelation which must be shared universally. True to his word, he proposed an inaugural preview today, and, with my blessing, prepared a select display for the second gallery. In all my years, never have I known such an engaged patron, and certainly not one who considers it his duty to oversee the storage and arrangement of practically every object gracing our modest facility.”

Curator Trench paused.

“This dedication aside, however, he possessed distinct concern. Heka should not, after all, be lightly availed, Dr Watson. My own slim monograph on the subject, which I was humbled to discover Lord Moncrieff had consulted, makes this eminently clear. Indeed, as if to emphasise the point, this morning Lord Moncrieff informed me of further Egyptian artefacts arriving imminently, which he again planned to handle personally. I duly unlocked both the trade entrance door and the outer gate. Six crates were delivered, the first of which had barely been rested when Lord Moncrieff set to, prising its upper. The other five followed and, having relocked the gate, upon my return to the store room I found Lord Moncrieff hunched over a book by the, now open, initial crate. Glancing round, he bade me approach, and in a sombre tone swore my secrecy. I did not recognise the book he clasped, although its brittle, vermillion cover held enough residual gold leaf that I could identify both the partial hieroglyphs signifying heka and an interlocking crocodile motif. “If any ill should befall me”, Lord Moncrieff said, “contact only Sherlock Holmes. Do so immediately. Tell him the Order of Heka covet all. I have every confidence he will comprehend.” Naturally, I pressed the matter but he said little else, suffice to mutter ‘the Order of Heka’ several further times as he wrapped the book in a muslin cloth before consigning it to the bottom of the crate and departing. I was about to examine the book alone, when George,

our departmental porter, called me into the second gallery. And now the book and Lord Moncrieff are gone, Dr Watson! Well, what do you conclude?"

Honestly, Holmes, what could I say? I stood up, taking a moment to gather my thoughts.

"Thank you, Curator Trench", I began, "although you have still not explained what you meant by 'consumed'."

"Ah", he said, looking abashed. "I evoke the crocodile, Dr Watson; the motif adorning the book's cover. There is a story in the Westcar Papyrus of a famous magician who made a figure of a crocodile in wax which, when thrown into the river, became a huge, living crocodile, and devoured the man who had done the magician an injury. Hence, one might say, the man had been consumed by heka. I fear a similar fate has now befallen Lord Moncrieff."

Curator Trench dabbed once more at his lip.

"You see, Dr Watson, earlier this afternoon Lord Moncrieff entered this room and then simply... vanished, leaving mere remnants...", he trailed off, gesturing. "Whilst admittedly rare, tales of animate statues and symbolic remains are not without merit. I appreciate it may sound fanciful to those unversed in heka, but there was no ordinary means of exit without detection."

Slowly, he rotated the lantern's beam, highlighting three doors in turn.

"First, there is our prior ingress from the main gallery. This is often open. However, as mentioned previously, I occupied the main gallery at the time of the cries and saw no-one emerge. Then there is the door to the second gallery. This is typically closed though unlocked, yet both Lady Moncrieff and Mr Fane assure me they were viewing the second gallery at the time of the cries and likewise met no-one. Finally, there is the trade entrance, but this is always locked unless required and, besides, the external area beyond is itself enclosed by high railings and

the aforementioned locked gate.”

“I see. And who keeps the keys to these doors?”

“Only myself, the senior watchman, and, of course, the museum director.”

Curator Trench returned the lantern’s beam to the statue of Heka.

“There is one other anomaly”, he said. “Upon arrival here following the commotion, I found George slumped against the cabinet at the room’s far wall. Blood ran from a wound across the back of his head and he was quite disoriented. I helped him sit and called for help. Mr Fane had entered by this time and thankfully proved most adept at fashioning a bandage from some packing cloth. I’m afraid, however, that my recollection of succeeding events remains ablut. All I could think of were Lord Moncrieff’s instructions to contact Mr Holmes. I recall little beyond writing a note and then leaving the store room to locate a watchman. They are always gracious in assisting with such missives, as their knowledge concerning the intricacies of errand services far exceeds my own.”

Curator Trench, now appearing to have finished his account, perched on a brilliantly painted wooden box. I borrowed the lantern and attempted, in a best approximation of your own meticulous method, Holmes, to observe.

“You wrote the note whilst in the store room?”, I began.

“Yes, there is a makeshift desk in the corner”, Curator Trench replied, motioning. “My office is at a distance, so I keep various supplies closer by.”

True enough, the desk, albeit untidy, held an assortment of common items including paper, envelopes, pens, a blotter, two inkwells, a pen holder, several candles, books, newspapers, and even a magnifying glass, though nothing evidently unusual. Next I checked the room’s doors. As expected, that to the second gallery

stood unlocked. However, much to Curator Trench's chagrin, so too did the trade entrance.

"I have certainly not unlocked any doors since... well", he said, quite flustered. "I can therefore only imagine, Dr Watson, that I must not have locked it properly earlier, being distracted when Lord Moncrieff called me to his confidence. For, without question, I locked the gate."

Testing this hypothesis, I first carefully examined the door's handle and lock, both of which appeared unblemished. I then opened the door, revealing the railed and gated courtyard. As in Baker Street, fresh snow covered the ground, and the only imprints thereupon were several meandering series of paired, small holes indicative of a passing cat or fox. Curiously, one set of tracks led near directly from the gate to the door and thence back again. I followed, gave the gate a sturdy shake, and confirmed it to be locked.

Returning inside, I checked the 'remnants' in greater measure. Curator Trench had moved to the desk and was lighting a candle. With his agreement, I took the magnifying glass and two large envelopes. Crouching on all fours, I placed the lantern abutting the cone and inspected its exterior. The magnifying glass revealed a smoothed surface, yet with distinct, fine ridges encircling its form. Satisfied, I swept the cone's material into the envelopes, freeing the jacket. Sand and stone dust veiled its otherwise conventional surfaces. The jacket's outer pockets yielded nothing. The inner pocket, however, held a photograph and a letter opener. The photograph captured a group portrait featuring seven people variably seated and standing around what appeared to be two wrought-iron garden tables situated in the desert. All wore formal summer dress, including variegated hats which cast long sun-born shadows, masking their respective visages. On the photograph's reverse, an inscription in faded

blue ink read 'Tea with Cleaver & co. Karnak, July 82'. The letter opener, meanwhile, though ostensibly mundane, boasted a devilish point which had pierced the pocket's lining, rendering a hole in the maker's label between the 'p' and 's' of 'John Piggot, Cheapside, London'. Of the other clothes, the trousers were likewise conventional and their pockets empty. The shirt had frayed cuffs and the underclothes were plain. The shoes were well worn, with scuffed sides requiring polish. Finally, of the accoutrements, the signet ring featured an elaborate 'M' and the monocle showed a cracked lens.

"Well, what shall be done with all... this, Dr Watson?", Curator Trench said.

Uncertain, I stood up, proffering the photograph. "Do you recognise the name Cleaver?"

"No, I don't believe so."

"What of the faces?"

He considered.

"It is difficult to tell. Lord and Lady Moncrieff conceivably... but the light", he motioned. "And, as you can imagine, I am quite exhausted. Perhaps we could resume tomorrow."

"Thank you, Curator Trench", said I, retrieving the photograph. "We need not endure much longer. Tell me, what do you know of the day's other visitors?"

"Nothing, again. Lord Moncrieff advertised his soiree privately, I understand. There may also have been quotidian visitors, though the weather surely quelled the irresolute."

As if in accordance, wind buffeted the trade entrance door, and I shook involuntarily, envisioning the sparsity of homeward hansoms should another snow storm descend.

"Where might I contact Lady Moncrieff, Mr Fane, or George..."

"Ransom", Curator Trench finished. "Oh, poor George! I lost all sense of his going. He resides somewhere in Clerkenwell,

yet will, I pray, resume his duties here shortly. Of Mr Fane, I am ignorant. And of Lord and Lady Moncrieff, I know only the residence on Cavendish Square.”

I thanked Curator Trench once more and proceeded to conduct my final examinations. Upon the cabinet where George Ransom had lain, I discovered dark spots consistent with blood. Locating a corresponding weapon, however, proved futile given the numerous candidates available - stones, statuettes, vases, jars, chisels, hammers, a crowbar, wooden planks, to name but a few - and I determined it prudent, for now, to concede.

I then visited the second gallery, navigating an array of wall-mounted and free-standing glass cabinets, the former predominantly encasing ceramics and the latter mummified remains. Curator Trench followed, drawing my attention, by contrast, to an exhibit of amulets and, above, a vast carved stone relief.

“These are Lord Moncrieff’s”, he said. “Though I must confess I would have thought them preferably positioned on the opposite wall, so as to optimise the gallery’s, albeit meagre, illumination.”

Glancing up, I observed two small, angled rows of windows lining one half of the ceiling’s high length, with every pane a darkened rectangle inexorably bedimmed by snow and frost. Reaching the room’s far end, we passed from the second to the main gallery via an archway, narrowly avoiding a ladder which stood at a crosswise guard. Bemused, Curator Trench could offer no explanation as to the ladder’s presence, and on this suitably strange note we parted, agreeing to resume activities when I returned by daylight.

I hope, my dear Holmes, that the preceding account does you well. Much of what I convey is no doubt quite irrelevant, but still I feel it best to present every fact such that you

may select for yourself those which will be of most service. Several substantive lines of inquiry occur to me, regarding Lord Moncrieff, the Order of Heka, the missing book, George Ransom, and, of course, the recollections of Lady Moncrieff, Mr Fane, and other attendees.

I shall endeavour, tomorrow, to discover more and will write again anon.

Always your friend,

John H. Watson

P.S. For reference, I enclose a sketch of the department's layout and the hieroglyphs signifying 'heka', the latter kindly provided by Curator Trench.

