The Art of Scientific Criminal Investigation

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Abstract

The great dowager of society paced nervously back and forth across the vast expanse of carpet that covered the sitting room...
Rotty stumbled ahead of Buck up the dusty gulley. The whir of the picking machines droned in the distance as the two threaded toward the timber. The sun worked its way up the sky and wilted the weeds.

— Roger D. Crouse, Sc. Jr.

The Art of Scientific Criminal Investigation

The great dowager of society paced nervously back and forth across the vast expanse of carpet that covered the sitting room. Her enormous bust shook within her lavender sequin-studded gown as she crossed to the window. She raised her glasses from the chain around her neck and fitted the lenses across the bridge of her overly-powdered nose. She searched up and down the quiet street with a look of urgency. Seeing nothing, she twitched her nose, and the glasses fell down to their resting place again at the end of the chain.

As she turned from the window, a flashing red light played upon the panes, and the sound of screeching tires reached her ears. She hurried back to the window in time to see a car settle back on its other two wheels after careening around the corner at the end of the block. A multitude of lights flashing, a siren wailing at the top of its lungs, the patrol car skidded to a halt in front of the great stone house. The siren died out slowly, exhausted.

A figure stumbled out and ran to the front door. A rapid staccato from the knocker, plus a counter-rhythm from the door bell, urged the mass of the woman to the door. She
swung it open to reveal a slight figure of a man in a trench coat and pork-pie hat. “You are Inspector Sherlock Chan,” she said, half stating, half questioning.

The man removed his hat, revealing a greying crew cut, and bowed slightly. “But of course. I came as soon as I could without attracting any attention to my arrival.”

“Come in, come in, please. I sent the servants to bed as soon as I discovered what had happened.” The man walked through the opened door into the foyer and slowly looked around. Seemingly satisfied with what he was searching for, he began to unfasten the wrinkled and worn trench coat that hung to his shoe tops. “May I take your coat for you?” the dowager asked.

“But of course, of course.” He finished unfastening the coat and with a shrug of his shoulders slid it off, revealing a sweat shirt with “Police Academy Debate Team” lettered across it, and a pair of old white gym shorts. “Excuse my appearance, madam. I was in the middle of a handball game with the chief when you called.”

“I understand,” the matron assured him. The great Sherlock Chan was known for his promptness on a critical case.

“Now, my dear woman, the scene of the crime. Take me to it at once.” The huge frame of the woman swept past him, and he followed her into the library. “Is this the place?”

“Yes.”

“About when did it happen?”

“Let me see. It was when I was getting ready for the bridge party. You know, I give the most talked-about bridge parties in town.”

“Yes ma’am. All I want are the facts, ma’am, just the facts.”

“I’m sorry. About two this afternoon.”

“It’s seven now. Why wait so long to call me?”

“I didn’t realize it had been stolen.”

“What makes you think it was stolen?”

“Because it isn’t where I always put it.”

“Where’s that, ma’am?”

“In the candy dish, of course.”
“Of course. How foolish of me. The only logical place.”
He stepped over to the candy dish. Reaching under his sweat shirt, he produced a neatly-folded handkerchief. Draping it carefully over one hand, he gently picked up one of the pieces of candy and held it close to his face. From a large signet ring on his other hand appeared a small magnifying glass. He carefully examined the candy, sniffed it once or twice, and delicately touched the smallest area of tongue to it. After a moment more of study he popped the piece into his mouth and chewed with gusto.

“Fudge, isn’t it?”
“Yes, I make it myself,” the woman said, with a hint of pride.

“Excellent. You must give me the recipe some time. Now, to the crime. In the candy dish, you say. Why there?”

“Why, it’s the obvious place to keep it.”

“Of course, of course. It seems someone said that before. Well, never mind. What did it look like?”

“It was about four inches long, two inches wide, silver, with a bit of white mink at one end. Just the usual kind.”

“Of course, of course.” He walked to the middle of the room and slowly began to look around. Once or twice he darted to a particular spot or object to examine some small thing closer with his ring glass. Each time, he returned to his spot in the middle of the room. His penetrating gaze, sharpened by half-closed eyelids, moved slowly to the carpet at his feet. Suddenly his eyes shot wide open, and he dropped to his knees with the speed and grace of a tiger hunting its prey. Nose against the tuft of the carpet, he produced a pair of felt-padded tweezers from under the sweat shirt and carefully picked up a white wisp of something.

He moved under a strong light from a lamp and examined the object under the ring glass. “You own a dog,” he stated, rather than asked.

“Why, yes, I do.”

“And his color?”

“Why, it’s black.”

The inspector smiled an all-knowing smile to himself as he looked at the white hair between the tweezers. “Of
course, of course. It’s all clear now. Take me to the dog at once.”

The woman looked at him, puzzled, but urged on by his expression of confidence, she lumbered out of the library to a door across the hall. She knocked gently and opened the door a few inches. “Fifi, my little darling, it’s me. May I come in for a minute?” A short bark answered her and she opened the door the rest of the way. She went in, followed by the inspector.

Once in the room, he rushed to the small black dog, still half asleep in its bed, and with one quick motion scooped the dog up by its hind legs, tickled it under a lower rib, and applied a quick jab to the mid-section. The dog burped and a small object fell to the carpet. It was four inches long, two inches wide, silver, with a bit of white mink at one end.

With a gasp, the woman swooped over and laboriously bent down to retrieve the missing object.

“Forgive me, madam, for using a bit of violence with the young lady, but one must be firm at times.”

“Oh, of course, of course, I understand. But how, Inspector, did you know where to look?”

The Inspector gave a short, knowing laugh. He produced a pipe and pouch from beneath the sweat shirt and between puffs, explained. “Elementary, my dear madam. Immediately upon entering your home I heard a noise. I wasn’t sure at the time what it was, but I was sure I had heard it before. In the library I found small scratches on the candy, such as a claw might make. When you said that there was mink on the lost object, I knew what the culprit must have been.”

“I don’t understand. What about the noise you heard?”

“As soon as I saw the claw marks, I realized that the sound was a dog with a case of indigestion. One learns to identify many things after one has been a policeman as long as I.”

“But the hair you found. It was white and Fifi is black.”

“Very simple. It wasn’t just an ordinary white hair, but rather a black one turned white. Fifi obviously was aware of what she was doing, and a few hairs turned white with fear and fell out.”
“Oh, Inspector, you’re marvelous. Wait until I tell my bridge club about you. Just one more question. After you examined the candy, why did you eat it?”

“Elementary once again. I like fudge.”

“Of course, of course.” She showed him to the door. He donned the worn and stained trench coat, pulling the belt tightly about his lean and toughened body. He stepped through the door and walked down the steps to the street. There, he relit his pipe and slowly walked down the street. The street light threw his shadow grotesquely against the buildings next to him. He disappeared from sight slowly, and only the glow from his pipe and the hollow sound of his footsteps echoed his departure. The great dowager of society watched him disappear and said a silent prayer for him. Suddenly he reappeared next to the patrol car at the curb.

“Damn good dramatic exit, wasn’t it,” he yelled, and jumped into the car. The engine roared to life, the siren and flashing red light began once more, and the car disappeared around the corner on two wheels.

—Jack Gill, Sc. Sr.

First Snow Fall

The first snowfall bursts in upon me
In a rush of welcome as I open the door.
Like a great white dog it pounces
From the barren shrubs and lonely sycamore
To smother me in its fluffy coat
And lick my face with its wetness.
You’d think with the pattern of seasons
I wouldn’t be so absorbed in autumn’s undress
As to be unconscious of winter hiding there,
And let it always catch me unaware.

—James Wickcliff, Sc. Grad.