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Opening extract from

Young Sherlock Holmes: Black Ice

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CHAPTER ONE

Sunlight sparkled on the surface of the water, sending daggers of light flashing towards Sherlock's eyes. He blinked repeatedly, and tried to keep his eyelids half-closed to minimize the glare.

The tiny rowing boat rocked gently in the middle of the lake. Around it, just past the shoreline, the grassy ground rose in all directions, covered in a smattering of bushes and trees. It was as if it were located in the middle of a green bowl, with the cloudless blue of the sky forming a lid across the top.

Sherlock was sitting in the bows of the boat, facing backwards. Amyus Crowe was sitting in the stern, his weight causing his end of the boat to sink lower into the water and Sherlock's to rise higher out of it. Crowe held a split-cane fishing rod out over the lake's surface. A thin line connected the tip of the rod with a small clump of feathers which floated on the surface of the water: a lure that, to a hungry fish, might look like a fly.

Between them, in the bottom of the rowing boat, sat an empty wicker basket.

'Why did you only bring one rod?' Sherlock asked, disgruntled.

'This ain't a day's fishin',' Crowe replied genially, eyes

fixed on the floating lure, 'much as it may look like it. No, this is a lesson in life skills.'

'I should have guessed,' Sherlock muttered.

'Although it's also a way to get some dinner for me an' Virginia tonight,' Crowe conceded. 'Ah always, if possible, try to arrange that what ah do serves several purposes.'

'So I just sit here?' Sherlock said. 'Watching you fish for your dinner?'

'That's about the size of it.' Crowe smiled.

'And is it going to take long?'

'Well, that depends.'

'On what?'

'On whether ah'm a good fisherman or not.'

'And what makes you a good fisherman?' Sherlock asked, knowing that he was playing into Crowe's hands but unable to stop himself.

Instead of answering Crowe wound the bone-handled brass reel at his end of the rod, expertly pulling the line in. The feathered lure jumped out of the water and hung suspended in the air, glittering droplets of water falling from it and striking the lake. He jerked the rod back. The line flew above his head, the lure blurring as it moved. He whipped the rod forward again, and the lure made a figure-of-eight shape against the blue sky as it flew over his head and hit the surface of the lake in a different location, making a small splash. He watched, smiling slightly as it drifted.

'Any good fisherman knows,' Crowe said, 'that fish react differently dependin' on the temperature and the time of year. Early mornin' in spring, for instance, fish won't bite at all. The water is cold and it don't heat up much, because the sun is low and its rays bounce off the water, so the fish are sluggish. Their blood, bein' cold and influenced by the surrounding environment, is flowing slowly. Wait 'til late mornin' or early afternoon an' things start to change. The fish will bite intermittently because the sun is shinin' on the water, warmin' it up and makin' them more lively. Of course, the wind will push the warmer surface water and the little midges an' stuff they feed on around, an' as a fisherman you got to follow that movement. No point in fishin' where the water is still cold or where there ain't any food. An' all that can change dependin' on the time of year.'

'Should I be taking notes?' Sherlock asked.

'You've got a head on your shoulders – use it. Memorize the facts.' He snorted, and continued: 'In winter, to take an example, the water's cold, maybe even iced up, an' the fish ain't movin' too fast. They're livin' off the reserves they built up in the autumn, by an' large. No good fishin' in the wintertime. Now – what have you learned so far?'

'All right.' Sherlock quickly went over the facts in his mind. 'In spring your best bet is early morning or late afternoon, and in winter you are better off heading for the market and buying something from the costermonger.'

Crowe laughed. 'A good summary of the facts, but

think about what's *behind* the facts. What's the rule that *explains* the facts?'

Sherlock considered for a moment. 'The important thing is the temperature of the water, and the thing that drives the temperature of the water is how hot the sun is and whether it's shining straight down on the water or at an angle. Think about where the sun is, work out where the water is warm but not hot, and that's where you'll find the fish.'

'Quite right.'

The lure jerked slightly, and Crowe leaned forward, washed-out blue eyes unblinking beneath bushy grey eyebrows.

'Each fish has a different temperature which it prefers,' he continued quietly. 'A good fisherman will combine his knowledge of the fish's preferred water temperature with his knowledge of the time of year, time of day and lake turnover conditions to work out which fish will be in a particular part of a lake at a particular time of the year.'

'This is all very interesting,' Sherlock said cautiously, 'but I'm not likely to take up fishing as a hobby. It seems to consist of a whole lot of sitting around waiting for something to happen. If I'm going to sit around for a long period of time, I'd rather have a good book in my hands than a fishing rod.'

'The point ah'm tryin' to make,' Crowe responded patiently, 'in my own countrified, homespun way is that, if you're tryin' to catch somethin', you need to go

about it in a structured way. You need to know about the habits of your prey, and you need to know how those habits change dependin' on the local environment and circumstances. The lesson applies equally well to men as it does to fish. Men have their preferences, their preferred locations, at different times of day, and those preferences might be different if the sun's shinin' compared with when it's rainin', or if they're hungry compared with when they're full. You got to get to know your prey so you can anticipate where they will be. Then you can use a lure – just like this pretty collection of feathers ah tied together with cotton – somethin' they can't resist takin' a bite at.'

'I understand the lesson,' Sherlock said. 'Can we go back now?'

'Not yet. Ah still ain't got my dinner.' Crowe's gaze was moving around the surface of the lake, looking for something. 'Once you know your prey and his habits, you got to look for the signs of his presence. He ain't just goin' to pop up an' announce himself. No, he's goin' to skulk around, bein' careful, and you gotta look for the subtle signs that he's there.' His eyes fixed on a patch of water some twelve feet away from the boat. 'For instance, look over there,' he said, nodding his head. 'What do you see?'

Sherlock stared. 'Water?'

'What else?'

He narrowed his eyes against the glare, trying to see

whatever it was that Crowe had seen. For a moment, a small area of water seemed to dip slightly, like a wave in reverse. Just for a moment, though, and then it returned to normal. And once he knew what he was looking for, Sherlock saw more dips, more sudden and momentary occasions when the surface of the lake seemed to flex slightly.

'What *is* it?'

'It's called "suckin'",' Crowe replied. 'It happens when the fish – trout, in this case – hang nose-up just below the surface of the water, waitin' for insect nymphs to float by. Once they see one, they take a gulp of water, suckin' the nymph down with it. All you see on the surface is that little dip as the water is pulled down and the nymph is sucked below. And that, my friend, tells us where a trout is located.'

He tugged on his fishing rod so that the lure drifted across the surface of the lake, pulled by the line, until it passed through the area where Sherlock had seen the trout sucking nymphs down. Nothing happened for a moment, and then the lure suddenly jerked below the surface of the lake. Crowe hauled on the rod, simultaneously winding the reel in as fast as he could. The water exploded upward in silvery droplets, in the centre of which writhed a fish. Its mouth was caught up in the hook which had been hidden inside the lure and its scales were mottled in brown. Crowe flicked his rod expertly upward and the fish virtually flew into the

boat, where it flapped frantically. Holding on to the rod with one hand so that it didn't fall into the water, Crowe reached behind him with the other and pulled a wooden club from beneath his seat. One quick blow and the fish was still.

'So what have we covered today?' he asked genially as he detached the hook from the trout's mouth. 'Know the habits of your prey, know what bait he's likely to go for, and know what the signs are that he's in the vicinity. Do all that, and you've maximized your chances of a successful hunt.'

'But when am I ever likely to be hunting someone or something?' Sherlock asked, understanding the basics of the lesson but unsure how they applied to him. 'I know you used to be a bounty hunter, back in America, but I doubt I'll ever go into that profession. I'm more likely to end up as a banker or something.' Even as he said the words he felt his heart sink. The last thing in the world he wanted to do with his life was a boring desk job, but he wasn't sure what else there was for him.

'Oh, life's full of things you might want to catch,' Crowe said, throwing the fish into the basket and placing the wicker lid over the top. 'You might want to flush out investors for some moneymakin' scheme you've come up with. You might consider findin' yourself a wife at some stage. You might be trackin' down a man who owes you money. All kinds of reasons a soul might want to hunt someone down. The basic principles remain the

same.' Glancing over at Sherlock from beneath his bushy eyebrows, he added: 'Based on previous experience, there's always the murderers and criminals you might come across during the course of your life.' He took hold of the fishing rod and flicked the lure back over his head in a figure-of-eight and into the water. 'And then, when all's said and done, there's always deer, boar and fish.'

With that he settled back with eyes half-closed and devoted himself to fishing for the next hour while Sherlock watched.

After two more fish had been caught, dispatched and thrown into the basket, Amyus Crowe set his rod down in the bows of the boat and stretched. 'Time to head back, ah think,' he announced. 'Unless you want to try it yourself?'

'What would I do with a fish?' Sherlock asked. 'There's a cook at my aunt and uncle's house. Breakfast and luncheon and dinner just arrive on the table without me having to worry about it.'

'Someone has to catch the animals to make the food,' Crowe said. 'And one day you might actually find yourself having to worry about where the next meal comes from.' He smiled. 'Or maybe you might want to surprise the lovely Mrs Eglantine with a nice plump trout for dinner.'

'I could slip it into her bed,' Sherlock muttered. 'Would that do?'

'Tempting,' Crowe laughed, 'but no, I don't think so.'

Crowe took the oars and rowed the boat back to the shore. After tying it to a post that had been set into the ground, he and Sherlock set off back to his cottage.

Their path led up the steep side of the bowl containing the lake. Crowe pushed on ahead, carrying the wicker basket. His large body made surprisingly little noise as he moved. Sherlock followed, tired now as well as bored.

They got to the ridge at the top of the slope, where the ground fell away steeply behind them and levelled out in front, and Crowe stopped to let Sherlock catch up.

'A point to note,' he said, gesturing down at the blue surface of the lake. 'If you're ever out huntin', don't be tempted to stop at a place like this, either to take in the view or to get a better look at the surroundin' terrain. Imagine what we look like to any animal in the forest, silhouetted here on the ridge. We can be seen for miles.'

Before Sherlock could say anything, Crowe started off again, pushing through the undergrowth. Sherlock wondered briefly how the man knew which way to go without a compass. He was about to ask, but instead tried to work it out himself. All Crowe had to go on was their surroundings. The sun rose in the east and set in the west, but that wasn't much help at lunchtime when the sun would be directly overhead. Or would it? A moment's thought and Sherlock realized that the sun would only be truly overhead at noon for places actually on the equator.

For a country in the northern hemisphere, like England, the nearest point on the equator would be located directly south, and so the sun at noon would be south of a point directly overhead. That was probably how Crowe was doing it.

'And moss tends to grow better on the northern side of trees,' Crowe called over his shoulder. 'It's more shaded there, and so it's damper.'

'How do you do that?' Sherlock shouted.

'Do what?'

'Tell what people are thinking, and interrupt them just at the right moment?'

'Ah,' Crowe laughed. 'That's a trick ah'll explain some other time.'

Sherlock lost track of time as they walked on through the forest, but at one point Crowe stopped and crouched down, putting the basket down.

'What do you deduce?' he asked.

Sherlock crouched beside him. In the soft ground beneath a tree he saw a hoof print, small and heart-shaped.

'A deer went this way?' he ventured, trying to jump from what he saw to what he could work out based on what he saw.

'Indeed, but which way did it go and how old was it?'

Sherlock examined the print more closely, trying to picture a deer's hoof and failing.

'That way?' he said, pointing in the direction of the rounded part of the print.

'Other direction,' Crowe corrected. 'You're thinking of a horse's hoof, where the round bit is at the front. The sharp bit of a deer's hoof always points in the direction it is heading. And this one's a young 'un. You can tell by the small oval shapes behind the print. Those are made by the dewclaws.'

He looked around. 'See over there,' he said, nodding his head to one side. 'Can you make out a straight trail through the bushes and grass?'

Sherlock looked, and Crowe was right – there *was* a trail, very faint, marked by the bushes and grasses being pushed to either side. It was about five inches across, he estimated.

'Deer move all day between the area they bed down in and their favourite watering hole, trying to find food,' Crowe said, still crouching. 'Once they find a safe route they keep usin' it until they get spooked by somethin'. And what does that tell you?'

'Prey tends to stick to the same habits unless disturbed?' Sherlock replied cautiously.

'Quite right. Remember that. If you're lookin' for a man who likes a drink, check the taverns. If you're lookin' for a man who likes a bet, check the racin' tracks. And everyone has to travel around somehow, so talk to cabbies and ticket inspectors – see if they remember your man.'

He straightened, picking the basket up again, and started off through the trees. Sherlock followed, glancing around. Now that Crowe had pointed out what to look for, he could see sets of different tracks on the ground: some deer, of various sizes, and some obviously something else – maybe wild boar, maybe badgers, maybe foxes. He could also see trails through the underbrush, where the bushes and grasses had been pushed to one side by moving bodies. What had previously been invisible was suddenly obvious to him. The same scene now had so much more in it to look at.

It took another half an hour to reach the gates of Holmes Manor.

'Ah'll take my leave of you here,' Crowe said. 'Let's pick up again tomorrow. Ah've got some more to teach you about trackin' and huntin'.'

'Do you want to come in for a time?' Sherlock asked. 'I could get Cook to make a pot of tea, and one of the maids could gut and bone those fish for you.'

'Mighty accomodatin' of you,' Crowe rumbled. 'Ah believe ah will take advantage of that offer.'

Together they walked up the gravelled drive towards the impressive frontage of Holmes Manor. This time Sherlock was in the lead.

Without knocking, he pushed open the front door.

'Mrs Eglantine!' he called boldly.

A black shape detached itself from the shadows at the base of the stairs and slid forward.

‘Young Master Sherlock,’ the housekeeper answered in her dry-as-autumn-leaves voice. ‘You seem to treat this house more like a hotel than the residence of your family.’

‘And you seem to treat it as if you are a member of that family rather than a servant,’ he retorted, voice cold but heart trembling. ‘Mr Crowe will be taking afternoon tea with me. Please arrange it.’ He stood waiting, uncertain whether she would take his orders or dismiss him with a cutting word. He had a feeling that she wasn’t sure either, but after a moment she turned and moved towards the kitchens without saying anything.

He felt a sudden and irresistible urge to push things a bit, to needle the woman who had done so much to make his life uncomfortable over the past year.

‘Oh,’ he added, gesturing towards the wicker basket at Amyus Crowe’s feet, ‘and Mr Crowe has caught some fish. Be so good as to have someone gut them and bone them for him.’

Mrs Eglantine turned back, and the expression on her face could have curdled milk and caused sheep to give birth prematurely. Her lips twisted as she attempted to force back something she was going to say. ‘Of course,’ she said finally, through gritted teeth. ‘I will send someone up for the basket. Perhaps you would be so good as to leave it here and repair to the reception room.’

She seemed to melt back into the shadows.

‘You should watch that woman,’ Amyus Crowe said

quietly. 'When she looks at you there is violence in her eyes.'

'I don't understand why my aunt and uncle tolerate her presence,' Sherlock replied. 'It's not as if she's a particularly good housekeeper. The other staff are so terrified by her that they can barely do their jobs properly. The scullery maids keep dropping dishes when she's around, their hands shake so much.'

'The subject would benefit from some further investigation,' Crowe mused. 'If, as you say, she's not a particularly good housekeeper then there must be some other compellin' reason why she's kept on, despite her vinegary personality. Perhaps your aunt and uncle are indebted to her, or to her family, in some manner, and this is a way of repayin' a debt. Or perhaps she's privy to some fact that your family would rather keep secret, and is blackmailin' herself into a cosy job.'

'I think Mycroft knows,' Sherlock said, remembering the letter his brother had sent him when he first arrived at Holmes Manor. 'I think he warned me about her.'

'Your brother knows a lot of things,' Crowe said with a smile. 'And the things he don't know generally ain't worth knowin' anyway.'

'You taught him once, didn't you?' Sherlock asked.

Crowe nodded.

'Did you take him out fishing as well?'

A laugh burst through Crowe's usually calm expression. 'Only the once,' he admitted, through chuckles. 'Your

brother an' the great outdoors ain't exactly on speakin' terms. It's the first time and the last time ah've seen a man try and catch a fish by chasin' it into its natural environment.'

'He dived in after a fish?' Sherlock said, trying to imagine the scene.

'He fell in, tryin' to reel it in. He told me, as ah was haulin' him out, that he would never leave the safety of dry ground again, and if that dry ground was a paved city street then so much the better.' He paused. 'But if you ask him, he can still tell you the feedin' an' swimmin' habits of all the fish in Europe. He may have a dim view of physical exertion, but his mind is as sharp as a seamstress's bag of pins.'

Sherlock laughed. 'Let's go into the reception room,' he said. 'Tea will be on its way.'

The reception room was just off the main hall, at the front of the house. Sherlock threw himself into a comfortable chair while Crowe settled himself on a sofa large enough to take his considerable bulk. It creaked beneath his weight. Amyus Crowe was, Sherlock estimated, probably as heavy as Mycroft Holmes, but in Crowe's case it was solid bone and muscle.

A soft knock on the door heralded the appearance of a maid carrying a silver tray. On the tray were a pot of tea, two cups and saucers, a small jug of milk and a plate of cakes. Either Mrs Eglantine was being unusually generous or one of the staff had decided to make the guest feel welcome.

There was also an envelope, white and narrow.

'A letter for you, sir,' the maid said without making eye contact with Sherlock. She set the tray down on a table. 'Will there be anything else?'

'No, thank you.'

As she left he reached out eagerly to take the envelope. He didn't get many letters at Holmes Manor, and when he did they were almost always from –

'Mycroft!'

'Is that a fact or a deduction?' Crowe asked.

Sherlock waved the envelope at him. 'I recognize the handwriting, and the postmark is Westminster, where he has his office, his lodgings and his club.'

He ripped the envelope open, pulling the flap from the grip of the blob of wax that held it firm.

'Look!' he said, holding the paper up. 'The letter is written on the headed stationery of the Diogenes Club.'

'Check the postmark on the envelope,' Crowe murmured. 'What time does it show?'

'Three thirty yesterday afternoon,' Sherlock said, puzzled. 'Why?'

Crowe gazed imperturbably at Sherlock. 'Mid-afternoon on a weekday, and he's at his club, writing letters, rather than at his office? Does that strike you as unusual behaviour for your brother?'

Sherlock thought for a moment. 'He once told me that he often walks across to his club for lunch,' he said after a moment. 'He must have written the letter over

lunch and got the footman to post it for him. The post would have been collected in the early afternoon, and the letter would have got to the sorting office for around three o'clock, then been stamped half an hour later. That's not suspicious, is it?'

Crowe smiled. 'Not in the slightest. Ah was merely tryin' to indicate that there's a whole lot of facts that can be deduced from a simple letter. If the postmark had been Salisbury rather than Westminster it would have been unusual, and would have prompted further questions. If we knew your brother never left his desk durin' the day, not even for lunch – an unlikely occurrence, ah have to admit – and yet the letterheaded stationery was from his club then that would have been unusual as well. You might have surmised that your brother had lost his job, or was sufficiently disturbed that he had not gone into work, or left early.'

'Or maybe he'd just taken some stationery from the Diogenes Club and was using it in his office,' Sherlock pointed out.

Crowe looked discomfited. 'Ah guess there's always an alternative explanation,' he growled.

Sherlock scanned the letter quickly, excitement growing as he read the words until he was almost at fever pitch.

My dear Sherlock,

I write in haste, as I am awaiting the arrival of a steak and kidney pudding and I wish to do it full justice before I return to my office.

I trust you are well, and that the various scars from your recent adventures have healed. I trust also that our aunt and uncle are well, and that our Mrs Eglantine is not proving too unpleasant.

You will be pleased to hear, I am sure, that arrangements have been satisfactorily concluded to allow your education to continue at Holmes Manor. The news that you will never have to return to Deepdene School will, I presume, not come as too much of a shock.

Amyus Crowe will continue to school you in the more practical and sporting aspects of life and Uncle Sherrinford has agreed to become responsible for your religious and literary education, which only leaves mathematics. I will ponder on that, and let you know when I have reached a decision. The aim, of course, will be to prepare you for university in a few

years' time. We can discuss at some stage whether you have a preference for Oxford or Cambridge.

This morning, by the way, a letter arrived from our father. He must have posted it in India the moment he arrived, as it summarizes everything that happened to him on the voyage. I am sure that you would rather read the letter than have me tell you about it, and so I invite you to dine with me (at my club, naturally) tomorrow.

Please pass the invitation on to Mr Crowe: I have some details I wish to discuss with him about your education. The 9.30 a.m. train from Farnham will bring you to Waterloo in good time to meet me at 12 sharp.

I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, and to hearing all about the events that have befallen you since we last met.

Your loving brother,

Mycroft.

'Anything interestin'?' Amyus Crowe asked.

'We're going to London,' Sherlock replied, grinning.