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Opening extract from

# Young Sherlock Holmes: Fire Storm

Written by

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Published by

## Macmillan Children's Books

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# FIRE STORM



First published 2011 by Macmillan Children's Books
a division of Macmillan Publishers Limited
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Basingstoke and Oxford
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-0-230-75850-6

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library.

Typeset by Nigel Hazle
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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# CHAPTER ONE

'Stop it!' Rufus Stone cried out. 'You're *killing* me!'

Sherlock lifted the bow from the violin strings. 'Don't be so melodramatic.'

'I'm not being melodramatic – another few seconds of that and my heart would have leaped out of my throat and strangled me just to ensure that it didn't have to experience that cat-squalling any more!'

Sherlock felt his confidence shrivel up like a dry autumn leaf. 'I didn't think it was that bad,' he protested.

'That's the problem,' Stone said. 'You don't know what the problem *is*. If you don't know what the problem is, you can't fix it.'

He rubbed the back of his neck and wandered away, obviously struggling to find a way to explain to Sherlock just what he was doing wrong. He was wearing a loose striped shirt with the sleeves roughly rolled up and a waistcoat that seemed to have come from a decent suit, but his trousers were rough corduroy and his boots were scuffed leather. He swung round to look at Sherlock for a moment, and there was a kind of wild bafflement in his face, along with what Sherlock realized with a sickening twist of his heart was *disappointment*.

Sherlock turned away, not wanting to see that expression in the face of a man he considered a friend as well as a kind of older brother.

He let his gaze roam around the room they were in – anywhere so that he didn't have to look at Stone. They were in the attic of an old building in Farnham. Stone rented a room on the floor below, but his landlady had taken a shine to him and let him rehearse and practise his violin – and teach the one music student he had so far taken on – in the expansive attic area.

The space was large and dusty, with beams of sunlight penetrating through gaps in the tiles and forming diagonal braces that seemed to be holding the triangular roof up just as well as the wooden ones. The acoustics, according to Stone, were marginally worse than a hay barn, but considerably better than his room. There were boxes and trunks stacked around the low walls, and a hatchway off to one side that led down, via a ladder, to the upper landing. Navigating the ladder with a violin and bow clutched in one hand was tricky, but Sherlock liked the isolation of the attic and the sense of space.

One day, he thought, I will have my own place to live – somewhere I can retreat from the world and not be bothered. And I won't let anyone else in.

Pigeons fluttered outside, blocking the sunlight momentarily as they roosted. Cold penetrated the attic from the street, fingers of frosty air finding their way through the spaces between the tiles.

He sighed. The violin felt heavy in his hand, and somehow clumsy, as if he had never picked one up before. The music stand in front of him held the score of a piece by Mozart – a violin transcription, according to Stone, of a famous aria called 'The Queen of the Night's Song' from an opera called *The Three Oranges*. The black notes captured between the lines of the staves were, as far as Sherlock was concerned, like a code, but it was a code he had quickly worked out – a simple substitution cipher. A black blob on *that* line always meant a note that sounded like *this* – unless there was a small hash in front of it that raised it slightly to a 'sharp', or a small angular letter 'b' that lowered it slightly to a 'flat'. A sharp or a flat was halfway towards the note either directly above or directly below the one he was playing. It was simple and easy to understand – so why couldn't he turn the written music into something that Rufus Stone could listen to without wincing?

Sherlock knew he wasn't progressing as quickly as Stone would have liked, and that irked him. He would have liked to have been able just to pick up the instrument and play it beautifully, first time and every time, but sadly life wasn't like that. It *should* be, he thought rebelliously. He remembered feeling the same way about the piano that sat in his family home. He'd spent hours sitting at it, trying to work out why he couldn't play it straight away. After all, the thing about a piano was its relentless logic: you pressed a key and a note came out.

The same key led to the same note every time. All you had to do, surely, was remember which key led to which note and you should be able to play. The trouble was, no matter how hard he had thought about it, he had never been able to sit down and play the piano like his sister could – flowing and beautiful, like a rippling stream.

Four strings! The violin only had four strings! How hard could it be?

'The problem,' Stone said suddenly, turning round and staring at Sherlock, 'is that you are playing the notes, not the tune.'

'That doesn't make any sense,' Sherlock responded defensively.

'It makes perfect sense.' Stone sighed. 'The trees are not the forest. The forest is all of the trees, taken together, plus the undergrowth, the animals, the birds and even the air. Take all that away and you just have a load of wood – no feeling, no *atmosphere*.'

'Then where does the *feeling* come from in music?' Sherlock asked plaintively.

'Not from the notes.'

'But the notes are all that's on the paper!' Sherlock protested.

'Then add something of your own. Add some emotion.'

'But *how*?'

Stone shook his head. 'It's the small gaps you put in – the hesitations, the subtle emphases, the slight

speedings up and slowings down. *That*'s where the feeling lives.'

Sherlock gestured at the music on the stand. 'But that's not written on there! If the composer wanted me to speed up or slow down then he would have written it on the music.'

'He did,' Stone pointed out, 'in Italian. But that's only a guide. You need to decide how *you* want to play the music.' He sighed. 'The problem is that you're treating this like an exercise in mathematics, or grammar. You want all the evidence set out for you, and you think that your job is to put it all together. Music isn't like that. Music requires interpretation. It requires you to put something of yourself in there.' He hesitated, trying to find the right words. 'Any performance is actually a duet between you and the composer. He's given you the bulk, but you have to add the final ten per cent. It's the difference between reading out a story and *acting* out a story.' Seeing the forlorn expression on Sherlock's face, he went on: 'Look, have you ever seen the writer Charles Dickens reading one of his own stories to an audience? Try it sometime – it's well worth the cost of a ticket. He does different voices for different characters, he throws himself around the stage, he speeds up at the exciting bits and he reads it as if he's never seen it before and he's just as keen as the audience to find out what happens. *That* is how you should play music – as if you've never heard it before.' He paused and winced. 'In a good way,

I mean. The trouble is that you play music as if you've never heard it before and you're trying to work it out as you're going along.'

That was pretty much the way it was, Sherlock thought.

'Should I give up?' he asked.

'Never give up,' Stone rejoined fiercely. '*Never*. Not in *anything*.' He ran a hand through his long hair again. 'Perhaps I've been going at this the wrong way. Let's take a different tack. All right, you approach music as if it's a problem in mathematics – well, let's look for musicians who write mathematics into their music.'

'Are there any?' Sherlock asked dubiously.

Stone considered for a moment. 'Let's think. Johann Sebastian Bach was well known for putting mathematical tricks and codes into his tunes. If you look at his *Musical Offering* there's pieces in there which are mirror images of themselves. The first note and the last note are the same; the second note and the second from last note are the same; and so on, right to the middle of the piece.'

'Wow.' Sherlock was amazed at the audacity of the idea. 'And it still works as music?'

'Oh yes. Bach was a consummate composer. His mathematical tricks don't detract from the music – they add to it.' Stone smiled, realizing that he'd finally snagged Sherlock's attention. 'I'm not an expert on Bach by any means, but I understand there's another piece by

him which is built around some kind of mathematical sequence, where one number leads on to the next using some rule. It's got an Italian name. Now, let's try that Mozart again, but this time, as you're playing it, I want you to bring back those feelings. *Remember* them, and let them guide your fingers.'

Sherlock raised the violin to his shoulder again, tucking it into the gap between his neck and his chin. He let the fingers of his left hand find the strings at the end of the neck. He could feel how hard his fingertips had become under Stone's relentless tutelage. He brought the bow up and held it poised above the strings.

'Begin!' Stone said.

Sherlock gazed at the notes on the page, but rather than trying to *understand* them he let his gaze slide *through* them, looking at the page as a whole rather than each note as something individual. Looking at the wood, not the trees. He remembered from a few minutes before what the notes were, then took a deep breath and started to play.

The next few moments seemed to go past in a blur. His fingers moved from one string to the next, pressing them down to make the right notes, fractionally before his brain could send his fingers a signal to *tell* them what the right notes were. It was as if his body already knew what to do, freeing his mind to float above the music, looking for its meaning. He tried to think of the piece as if someone was singing it, and let his violin become the

voice, hesitating on some notes, coming down heavily on others as if to emphasize their importance.

He got to the end of the page without even realizing.

'Bravo!' Stone cried. 'Not perfect, but better. You actually persuaded me that you were feeling the music, not just playing it.' He gazed over at the slanted rays of sunlight that penetrated the loft. 'Let's stop it there: on a high note, as it were. Keep practising your scales, but also I want you to practise individual notes. Play a sustained note in different ways – with sadness, with happiness, with anger. Let the emotion seep through into the music, and see how it changes the note.'

'I'm . . . not good with emotion,' Sherlock admitted in a quiet voice.

'I am,' Stone said quietly. 'Which means I can help.' He placed a hand on Sherlock's shoulder for a moment and squeezed, then took it away. 'Now be off with you. Go and find that American girl and spend some time with her.'

'Virginia?' His heart quickened at the thought, but he wasn't sure if it was happiness or terror that made it speed up. 'But—'

'No buts. Just go and see her.'

'All right,' Sherlock said. 'Same time tomorrow?'

'Same time tomorrow.'

He threw the violin into its case and half climbed, half slid down the ladder to the upper landing, then thudded down the stairs to the ground floor. Stone's landlady – a

woman of about Stone's own age, with black hair and green eyes – came out of the kitchen to say something as he ran past, but he didn't catch what it was. Within seconds he was out in the crisp, cold sunlight.

Farnham was as busy as it ever was: its cobbled or muddy streets filled with people heading every which way on various errands. Sherlock paused for a moment, taking in the scene – the clothes, the postures, the various packages, boxes and bags that people were carrying – and tried to make sense of it. That man over there – the one with the red rash across his forehead. He was clutching a piece of paper in his hand as if his life depended on it. Sherlock knew that there was a doctor's surgery a few minutes' walk behind him, and a pharmacy just ahead. He was almost certainly heading to pick up some medicine after his consultation. The man on the other side of the road – good clothes, but unshaven and bleary-eyed, and his shoes were scuffed and muddy. A tramp wearing a suit donated by a church parishioner, perhaps? And what of the woman who passed by right in front of him, hand held up to push the hair from her eyes? Her hands looked older than she did – white and wrinkled, as if they had spent a long time in water. A washerwoman, obviously.

Was this what Rufus Stone had meant about seeing the wood instead of the trees? He wasn't looking at the people as people, but seeing their histories and their possible futures all in one go.

For a moment Sherlock felt dizzy with the scale of what he was staring at, and then the moment was gone and the scene collapsed into a crowd of people heading in all directions.

'You all right?' a voice asked. 'I thought you were goin' to pass out there for a moment.'

Sherlock turned to find Matthew Arnatt – Matty – standing beside him. The boy was smaller than Sherlock, and a year or two younger, but for a second Sherlock didn't see him as a boy, as his friend, but as a collection of signs and indications. Just for a second, and then he was Matty again – solid, dependable Matty.

'Albert isn't well then,' he said, referring to the horse that Matty owned, and which pulled the narrowboat he lived on whenever he decided to change towns.

'What makes you think that?' Matty asked.

'There's hay in your sleeve,' Sherlock pointed out. 'You've been feeding him by hand. Usually you just let him crop the grass wherever he happens to be tied up. You wouldn't feed a horse by hand unless you were worried he wasn't eating properly.'

Matty raised an eyebrow. 'Just because I sometimes likes to give 'im 'is grub,' he said, 'there's no need to make a song an' dance about it. Albert's the closest thing to family I got.' He shrugged, embarrassed. 'So I likes to treat 'im sometimes wiv somethin' special.'

'Oh.' Sherlock filed that away for later consideration. 'How did you know I was here?' he asked eventually.

'I could hear you playing,' Matty replied laconically. 'The whole town could hear you playing. I think that's why Albert's off his food.'

'Funny,' Sherlock observed.

'You want to go get some lunch? There's plenty of stuff goin' spare in the market.'

Sherlock thought for a moment. Should he spend some time with Matty, or go and see Virginia?

'Can't,' he said, suddenly remembering. 'My uncle said he wanted me back for lunch. Something about getting me to catalogue and index a collection of old sermons he recently obtained at an auction.'

'Oh joy,' Matty said. 'Have fun with that.' He smiled. 'Maybe *I* could go and see Virginia instead.'

'And maybe I could hang you upside down from a bridge with your head under water up to your nose,' Sherlock replied.

Matty just gazed at him. 'I was only jokin',' he said.

'I wasn't.'

Sherlock noticed that Matty's gaze kept sliding away, down the road towards the market. 'Go on,' he said. 'Go and pick up some bruised fruit and broken pies. I might see you later. Or tomorrow.'

Matty flashed a quick smile of thanks and scooted away, ducking and diving through the crowd until he was lost from sight.

Sherlock walked for a while along the road that led out of Farnham and towards his aunt and uncle's house.

Every time a cart came past he turned to look at the driver, but most of them avoided his gaze. He didn't take it personally – he'd been doing this for long enough that he knew the success rate was around one in twenty carts. Eventually one of the drivers looked over at him and called: 'Where you going, sonny?'

'Holmes Manor,' he shouted back.

'They don't take on casual labour.'

'I know. I'm . . . visiting someone.'

'Climb aboard then. I'm going past the main gates.'

As Sherlock threw his violin up the side of the still-moving cart and clambered up after it, falling into a deep mass of hay, he wondered why it was that he still didn't like admitting where he lived. Perhaps he was worried that people might change their attitude if they knew that his family were part of the local land-owning gentry. It was so stupid, he thought, that something as simple as inheriting land and a house from your parents could set you apart from other people. When he grew up he would make sure that he never made social distinctions between people like that.

The cart clattered along the road for twenty minutes or so before Sherlock jumped off, calling a cheerful 'Thanks!' over his shoulder. He checked his watch. He had half an hour before luncheon: just enough time to wash and perhaps change his shirt.

Luncheon was, as usual, a quiet affair. Sherlock's uncle – Sherrinford Holmes – spent his time balancing

eating with reading a book and trying to move his beard out of the way of both his food and the text, while his aunt – Anna – spoke in a continuous monologue that covered her plans for the garden, how pleased she was that the two sides of the Holmes family appeared to be on speaking terms again, various items of gossip about local landowners and her hope that the weather in the coming year would be better than the one that had just passed. Once or twice she asked Sherlock a question about what he was doing or how he was feeling, but when he tried to answer he found that she had just kept on talking regardless of what he might say. As usual.

He did notice that Mrs Eglantine – the manor's darkly glowering housekeeper – was conspicuous by her absence. The maids served the food with their customary quiet deference, but the black-clad presence who usually stood over by the window, half hidden by the light that streamed through, was missing. He wondered briefly where she was, and then realized with a flash of pleasure that he just didn't care.

Sherlock finished his food faster than his aunt and uncle and asked if he could be excused.

'Indeed you may,' his uncle said without looking up from his book. 'I have left a pile of old sermons on the desk in my library. I would be obliged, young man, if you could sort them into piles depending on their author, and then arrange the individual piles by date.

I am attempting,' he said, raising his eyes momentarily and gazing at Sherlock from beneath bushy brows, 'to catalogue the growth and development of schisms within the Christian church, with particular reference to the recent creation of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in America. These sermons should prove very useful in that respect.'

'Thank you,' Sherlock said, and left the table.

Uncle Sherrinford's library smelled of old, dry books, mildew, leather bindings and pipe tobacco. Sherlock felt the quietness as something almost physical as the door closed behind him: an actual pressure against his ears.

Sherrinford's desk was piled high with loose papers of various sizes and thickness. Some were typed, some handwritten in various different styles; most were bound with ribbons or string. As he sat down, not without a tremor of nerves, in Sherrinford's creaking leather chair, Sherlock realized with a sinking feeling in his heart that the piles were taller than he was, and blocked his view of the rest of the library. This was going to be a long and tedious task.

He set to it. The process was simple on the face of it – take a manuscript from the nearest pile, find out who wrote it and when and then place it on one of a number of separate piles on the floor behind him – but of course it wasn't as straightforward as that. Some of the sermons didn't have an author named anywhere in them, some weren't dated, and some had neither date nor

name. Sherlock realized quickly that he had to make his judgements based on other clues. Handwriting was one of them. Some of the sermons were obviously written by the same person, based on the jagged, spidery text, and Sherlock could happily place them all in one pile. Other sermons mentioned particular places – churches, usually – which meant he could place them in at least the same geographical area and thus probably assign them to the same person or group of people. After a while he realized that some of the typewritten sermons had the same characteristics – a faded *n*, a partially raised *a* – which suggested to him that they might have been typed on the same machine, so he put them together in a pile as well. He didn't actually read the sermons in any detail – that would have wasted a lot of time that he couldn't afford – but as he flicked through them looking for indications of ownership and date he still managed to pick up a smattering of details: the ebb and flow of life of the countryside, the unsatisfied yearning for the love of God, the detailed analysis of things that were, in the end, unknowable. He also thought he had an understanding of the characters of the men writing the sermons – one of them serious and dour, terrified of eternal hellfire, another wide-eyed at the beauty of God's creation, a third focused on details and minutiae and completely missing the wider context. At least one, he thought, was a woman writing sermons for her husband to deliver.

All in all, the work kept him busy for a good hour or two, during which he remained undisturbed.

After a while he decided to take a break and stretch his aching back. He stood up and wandered away from the desk, amazed at the way the piles of papers didn't seem to be any smaller despite the fact that he had some fourteen or fifteen other piles on the floor around the desk by now.

Sherlock found himself wandering along the shelves of his uncle's books, letting his eyes idly scan the titles. For a while he wasn't sure what he was looking for, or even if he was looking for anything at all, but then it occurred to him that he could check to see if his uncle had any books on Bach, or music in general. Maybe he could find out some details on the way composers used mathematics in their music. Although Sherrinford Holmes spent his time writing sermons and other religious tracts for vicars and bishops around the country, his library was more than just a repository of books on Christianity. He had a good selection of works on virtually every subject under the sun.

And, Sherlock reminded himself, Johann Sebastian Bach *was* a noted composer of religious music. He had certainly written a lot of material for the church organ, and Sherlock was fairly sure that he had seen the composer's name attached to various hymns in the church hymnals at Deepdene School for Boys, as well as in the local church. It would make sense for a religious author to have books about Bach in his collection.

Sherlock moved deeper into the shadowy lines of bookcases, looking for anything to do with music. He was out of sight of the door when he heard it open. He assumed it was his uncle, and moved back towards the light to tell him how far the work had progressed, but when he emerged from the aisle between two bookcases he was just in time to see the black bustle of a crinoline skirt vanishing behind a case on the far side of the room.

Mrs Eglantine? What was she doing here?

She seemed to know exactly where she was going. Confused, Sherlock edged closer, keeping as quiet as he could. He wasn't sure why, but he had a feeling that she was doing something covert, secretive, and didn't want anyone to know. She certainly wasn't dusting the bookshelves – that task was below her station, reserved for one of the parlour maids.

Sherlock looked around the edge of the bookcase, keeping most of his head and all of his body hidden. It *was* Mrs Eglantine. She was kneeling down about halfway along the row of shelves, her crinoline skirt spread out around her, pulling out whole handfuls of books and letting them fall to the carpet. A part of Sherlock's mind winced to see the books so carelessly treated, some of them lying open with their pages bent or their spines creased. Once she had cleared them out she bent even further down, head close to the carpet, and scanned the space she had created. Whatever she was looking for

wasn't there. With a *huff* of disappointment she quickly stuffed the books back again, apparently not caring what order they had been in or whether she was putting them back upside down or back to front.

She gazed to her left, away from Sherlock. Alerted, he ducked back just as her head began to swing his way. He knew it was fanciful, but he could almost see the intensity of her gaze scorching the carpet and disturbing the dust.

He counted to twenty and looked back just as he heard an irregular thumping noise start up. Satisfied that she wasn't being observed, she was sweeping another row of books, higher up this time, off their shelf and letting them fall to the floor. Again she looked carefully into the space before grimacing in disappointment and shoving the books back pell-mell.

'How dare you enter my library!' a voice cried. 'Get out of here this instant!'

Sherlock looked up, shocked. There, at the other end of the line of bookcases, was Sherrinford Holmes. He must have come in quietly, without either Sherlock or Mrs Eglantine noticing.

Mrs Eglantine straightened up slowly. 'You are a fool,' she said, slowly and distinctly. 'You have no authority in this house – not any more. *I* am in charge here.'