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opening extract from

# The Case of the London Dragonfish: A Slightly Jones Mystery

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## Chapter Two:

# Hammering at the Door

'Slightly!' called Granny Tonic. 'Wake up!'

Slightly Jones groaned and rolled over. She'd stayed up far too late last night reading the adventures of the famous detective, Mr Sherlock Holmes, until her candle guttered and went out. (Since her bedroom was at the top of the house, it would be a while before a gaslight was fitted.) Slightly read everything she could get her hands on about the great man because she was determined to become a detective herself when she grew up. If not sooner . . .

'Slightly!'

*Detectives never sleep in*, Slightly told herself firmly, and got out of bed. She looked in the mirror on the off-chance that her appearance had somehow magically changed in the night. It hadn't. She still didn't look like a detective. She still just looked like a girl – skinny and freckly and small, with hateful red hair and a pointy little face like an inquisitive ferret.

Slightly sighed. She threw on her clothes, splashed water on her face, stuck her tongue out at her reflection and clattered halfway down the stairs. Then she turned around and raced back to collect her detecting notebook and the silver propelling pencil Granny had given her for her last birthday.

'Good morning, Granny,' she said, bouncing into the kitchen.

In fact, Granny Tonic was Slightly's mother's aunt, so technically she was her Great-Aunt and not her Granny, but since *everybody* called her Granny, Slightly did too. She had come to Granny's house when she was a baby, after the death of her parents. Because she couldn't remember her father or mother, she didn't miss them, except in a wondering what-if sort of way. Besides, Granny and the boarders of Limpopo House gave her plenty of family to be going on with.

Slightly knew that Limpopo was a river in South Africa but why Granny had named her house that

was a mystery. It was just one hint among many that Granny had led a *very* interesting life, but whenever Slightly asked her about it, she always said,

'That's a long story.'

'But I love long stories!' Slightly would cry.

'Well, then, I shall have to tell you some day.'

And not a word more would Slightly get out of her.

But today Slightly wasn't thinking about anybody's distant and tantalising past.

'Good morning, Slightly,' said Granny. 'And what day are we on?'

'Day Three!' said Slightly proudly. 'I haven't lost my temper since Friday and here we are, bright and shiny, on Monday! I think I'll go for a whole *week* this time.'

'We'll see,' said Granny.

The autumn sunshine streamed into the basement kitchen. Granny Tonic always kept the back door open whenever the weather allowed, to let in the light and the air.

'I'm always at home to fresh air.' That's what Granny said.

Everyone at Limpopo House ate their meals at the big oak table, now that the dining room had become Mr Reginald Westerly's room. It had the best light

and, as all artists know, a good light is half the battle. He was the newest of the boarders, and Slightly loved his magnificent moustache (even though she suspected he dyed it that wonderful black) and the way he always treated her as if she were a proper grown-up (even though she wasn't).

No one really minded eating in the kitchen. It was more convenient for Granny and more friendly. (Miss Sally Forth, their only lady boarder, fluttered a bit about it being not quite respectable. But since it meant Cleopatra, her elderly cat, had quick and easy access to the garden when required, she didn't actually mean it.)

So far this morning only Mr Malcolm Gentler (first floor front room) had come down for breakfast, so he was helping Granny Tonic and Slightly get things ready for the others.

'I'm desperate to know what Mr Thurgood came up with last night. He said he was going to work on "Chapter Four: The Mystery of the Blood-stained Letter"! Don't you love that title, Mr Gentler?' asked Slightly as she set a pile of toast in front of him.

'I do – it's very trembly violins, don't you think?' said Mr Gentler in his soft Scottish voice as he buttered the toast. He was a young-ish man. Slightly thought he was probably older than Mr Thurgood

but not as old as Mr Westerly. He was a musician, and he buttered toast the way he did everything – in time to the music inside his head. This meant that some people's toast swam in butter and other people's had less than a scrape, but no one dreamt of complaining.

'Spooky!' said Slightly Jones as she passed Granny a bowl of eggs from the pantry. 'He said he was determined to figure out whose blood it was on that letter. So far it's been a complete mystery.' Mr Thurgood was writing a detective novel. It had no title yet, but it was *very* exciting.

'Don't worry. If Mr Thurgood can't come up with an answer, I'm sure you will,' said Mr Gentler, smiling serenely and dripping butter onto his waistcoat.

Granny rattled a shovelful of coal into the range. 'Careful, Mr Gentler,' she warned. 'Not too much buttering up in my house or you'll make the girl proud!'

Mr Gentler may have been a bit messy, but he was completely right about Slightly. Mr Thurgood was really excellent at imagining mystifying crimes, puzzling clues and false trails. Unfortunately, he wasn't quite so good at imagining answers and solutions. Detective-in-training Slightly had helped him out of more than one fictional predicament.

Nevertheless,

'One day the name of Thurgood will be as well known to the reading public as that of Mr Dickens or Miss Austen,' was what Granny Tonic always said, and Slightly believed her. Every morning she waited eagerly at the breakfast table for Mr Thurgood to come home and tell them what his characters had been up to that night. And not just her! They all did – Mr Gentler, Mr Westerly, even Miss Forth who pretended to think that popular fiction was really too vulgar for her delicate tastes, but still made sure she never missed a word.

Mr Thurgood had been the first boarder to come to stay at Granny Tonic's house. Everyone who came to stay at Limpopo House was special.

'I'm always at home to interesting people.' That's what Granny said.

Mr Thurgood, for example, was a writer with a problem. He had struggled for years with not being able to sleep at night. He couldn't get a wink of shut-eye all through the dark hours and then he was too sleepy to do any writing – or work of any sort – when the sun came up. It was Granny Tonic who realised the solution to his problem.

'What you need is a job that happens at night – when you're awake – but one that will also leave you with plenty of freedom in which to write,' she'd said

firmly. 'What you need is a job as a night-watchman. And I think I know just the place . . .'

The place Granny had in mind turned out to be the Natural History Museum!

Slightly couldn't think of anywhere more thrilling. Of all the wonderful new London museums and galleries, she loved the Natural History Museum the best. She went all goosebumpy every time she'd been there for a visit. And it wasn't just the creatures and fossils and exhibits that were so wonderful (though they were!). It was the great big blue and beige building itself, and especially the terracotta decorations – the weird pterodactyls and wolf-like beasts that guarded the outside, the evil-looking monkeys and scary deep-sea fish inside. She had two special favourites: the kangaroo over the great front doors and the bat-eared foxes by the main stairs. (She used to think *they* were particularly fond of *her* as well, but she was too old for silliness like that now.)

'Could Mr Thurgood really get a job there?' Slightly had asked.

'I've known one of the Professors there since we were children – Professor Appleword,' Granny had replied. 'I will write to him immediately . . .'

And the very next day, Mr Thurgood, his clothes freshly pressed and his hair slicked down with

Macassar oil, went right up to the big double doors of the Natural History Museum and offered his services as night-watchman. From that day to this, he had been a happy man and an even happier novelist. He was never lonely. Even in the dead of night, walking up and down the galleries without another living soul to speak to, his head was full of characters, events, mysteries and chapter headings.

'Oh, good morning!' fluted Miss Forth as she rustled into the kitchen. Slightly looked at her, then down at herself and sighed. No matter how late Miss Forth had stayed up, working at her translating (for her skill at languages was how she made her living) she was always beautifully groomed the next morning.

Slightly had asked Granny once how old Miss Forth was, partly because she was curious and partly because she wondered if perhaps just growing up helped you look neater. Granny had said, 'She's old enough not to be asked.' When Slightly had asked what that meant, Granny replied, 'Usually it means about 30.'

'Where is Mr Westerly? And, er, Mr Thurgood?' Miss Forth was asking now.

'Is our soon-to-be-famous author not back yet?' asked Mr Westerly as he also appeared. His

magnificent moustache shone in the sunlight, the ends waxed up into fierce little smiles on either side of his nose. (It was possible to tell just how well one of Mr Westerly's paintings was going by the state of his moustache – this morning, his work was obviously going very well indeed.)

Before Slightly could answer, there was the sound of the front door opening and closing, followed by a cheerful whistling along the corridor.

'Good morning, everyone!' said Mr Thurgood as he came in. 'And a good morning it is!'

'You don't mean . . .' said Slightly, trying not to spill the tea in her excitement, 'you don't mean you've cracked it?! You've discovered whose blood it is on the mysterious letter?'

'Ah!' crowed Mr Thurgood, looking thoroughly delighted with himself. 'I'm glad you asked – just listen to *this*!' And he pulled up a chair, took a quick slurp of tea and was just about to tell them all about it – when there was a great thundering and hammering at the front door. It sounded to Slightly as if a small army was beating on it with heavy sticks. Whoever it was very much wanted *in*.

'Heavens, who can that be?' said Granny, taking off her apron and smoothing her hair. 'They'll be having the paint off if they're not careful!'

She swept out of the room. The pounding continued. Everybody eavesdropped shamelessly as she flung open the front door and demanded to know what all the ruckus was about.

'Out of my way, my good woman!' demanded a voice no one recognised. 'We know he's in here!'

'What do you –' they heard Granny squawk and then three large policemen in high-collared tunics and helmets burst into the kitchen, waving their sticks menacingly.

'That's him!' cried one. 'That's the thief! Grab him!'

To Slightly's horror and amazement they threw themselves bodily at Mr Thurgood!

Granny appeared in the kitchen doorway, her hair coming out of its pins and her face red.

'*What do you –'* she began again, but the policemen ignored her.

The biggest of them rumbled, 'We are arresting you, Earnest Thurgood, for the wilful vandalism and outright theft of a valuable exhibit from the Natural History Museum on Cromwell Road, the crime to have taken place in the early hours of this morning. And I would be very much surprised indeed if the judge does not send you to prison for a very long time.'

'*WHAT?!*' everyone exclaimed, but Mr Thurgood exclaimed the loudest of all.

'I don't know what you're talking about!' he wailed.

*He looks so small!* Slightly thought, as the enormous policemen loomed over him, holding Mr Thurgood's arms as if he were some dangerous animal that might bite at any moment.

It made her heart hurt.

'You heard me,' said the biggest policeman roughly. 'Wasn't nobody else there, and didn't nobody else break in – we checked. The lock on the exhibit case has been picked and the Chinese box the fossil was supposed to be in is empty. We don't need to go searching for suspects. It was you, all right. You're coming with us!'

Pandemonium broke out. Granny shouted, Miss Forth shrieked (and pretended to swoon), Mr Gentler waved the butter knife about in an agitated double time, Mr Westerly bellowed and tried to detach the men from Mr Thurgood by poking them vigorously in the ribs and bristling his moustache. Slightly kicked one of the policemen hard on the shins and tried her best to trip up one of the others, but that didn't stop them. The last thing she saw was Mr Thurgood's face, chalk white

and bewildered, before he was dragged away, out of the sunny kitchen, down the corridor and into the street.

The front door slammed. An appalled silence filled the house.

Slightly felt sick. Things like this just didn't happen! Granny's was a safe, respectable household. Wasn't it?

She looked about, but there was shock and confusion on every face – no one seemed to know what to think or what to do.

'How could Mr Thurgood *do* such a thing?!' whispered Miss Forth.

'He couldn't,' insisted Slightly. 'You know perfectly *well* he couldn't!' But the last words were practically a wail.

'Oh, no, of course, oh, I didn't mean . . .' stammered Miss Forth. Her eyes welled up, but Granny was having none of that.

'Slightly,' she said briskly. 'Fetch my hat. I'm going out.'

Slightly wasn't sure what Granny was planning to do, but she *was* sure that she had no intention of being left out of it!

'Slightly? Hurry up, girl – I said I'm going out.'

Slightly checked that her notebook and pencil

were in her pocket. Then she drew herself up to her full height and stuck out her chin.

'No, you're not, Granny,' she said firmly. '*We* are.'