

## Case 104: The Adventure Of King Athelstan (1890)

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# Case 104: The Adventure Of King Athelstan (1890)

by [Cerdic519](#)

## Summary

§ A vitally important case that was a matter of life and.... actually it was another missing animal, arguably one of Sherlock's favourite ones. And worse, it involved certain fictional story writings of a certain blue-eyes someone's not distant enough parent.

## Notes

TW: Non-graphic description of difficult but successful childbirth.

# Chapter 1

*[Narration by Mr. Sherlock Holmes, Esquire]*

John stared at me in confusion.

“Pardon?” he managed at last, clearly thinking that he had misheard me. I was not the least bit surprised.

“We are going to Ulverston, Lancashire, on the edge of the Lakes. Because Mother has asked me to find some woman's missing pet.”



That I would be travelling some three hundred miles from London at a time when I was having to combat the vile Professor Moriarty may seem strange if not downright bizarre, let alone the cause of that journey, but there was it turned out a perfectly good reason. And not just that the professor had been shot at by a rival against whom he had to momentarily turn his attentions, but because of what I had just told John and which I knew he was going to find utterly incredible.

“You are trying to tell me”, he said at last, “that in this Nation of ours there are a number of ladies who read your mother's stories – *and actually like them?*”

He sounded like I was trying to convince him that the moon really was made of green cheese. There were of course some of Mother's stranger friends (and it was really wrong of John and Father to persist in calling them 'the Coven' even if they did favour black clothes) who also did something that they called writing, but I had assumed this was just one of those things. That there were a number of people elsewhere in this Nation who read that sort of thing and.... *liked it?* And worse, actually *admitted* that they liked it? I myself had disbelieved it at first and only when the offices of the efficient Miss Bradbury (who had hardly believed it herself for that matter, which was impressive when considering what she came across on a daily basis) confirmed it, had I yielded to the unimaginable.

“Mother has a number of people out there who communicate with her through both the telegraphic system and the general post”, I said, “and they find her stories most enjoyable. I recall you yourself commented on the one about the Viking warriors who found a rather unusual way to keep warm on a long voyage to Greenland?”

He shuddered.

“That was mean of you, making me read that!” he grumbled. “I can never look at a history book from those times without thinking... those long oars!!”

“Since for some reason publishers like your own Mr. Brett and Mr. Burke seem disinclined to release her works on the Nation, she shares them with her admirers using the postal service”, I said. “And one of the ladies who is so inclined, a Mrs. Jefferson of Ulverston in the county

of Lancashire, sent her a message yesterday bemoaning the fact that on top of everything else she has just lost her pet.”

“How did she lose it exactly?” he asked.

“I have no real details as yet”, I admitted. “However Mother has asked that we ride to this lady's assistance, and given her recent actions concerning a certain person recently released from hospital, I felt that we had to oblige.”

As I had known it would the reference to the recovering Bacchus had him smiling happily at the memory. We both definitely owed Mother a favour for that, even if I had managed to replace her broken walking-stick with an even better (and even deadlier!) one. Doubly reinforced this time.



“It is really neither one thing or the other.”

I could see what John meant as we traversed the streets of the town of Ulverston. For those unacquainted with the map of England, you should be. The county of Westmorland has a short coastline along the fringes of the wide expanses of Morecambe Bay, but enough to interpose between the main part of Lancashire with its great cities of Liverpool and Manchester to the south, and the Furness district where we now were centred around the ship-building town of Barrow-in-Furness. It was the Furness Railway on which we had completed our journey, a smart and rather unusual copper-coloured engine and train having just deposited us in this small town. It was as John said neither part of industrial Furness nor the beautiful Lakes to the north.

A beautiful area, I thought, but not as beautiful as the man beside me. Although he would have been mortified if I had used that word about him. But then he was even more beautiful when he blushed, the freckles that he so hated standing out like stars in the sky.

Mrs. Margaret Jefferson lived in Argyll Street in the southern part of the town, and on meeting her I did not need to be a detective of any ability to work out that my dear mother may have 'forgotten' to mention one small but arguably important fact about her. A well-kempt woman in her forties she was very heavily pregnant - and had just secured for herself the services of one of London's best doctors. Hmm.

“I can't believe you gentlemen came all this way from London!” she exclaimed. “Lady Holmes said you would when she sent her last story, the one about the tentacled sea-monster, but this is wonderful.”

Ah yes, the many-tentacled sea-monster which was able to 'pleasure' a whole life-boat crew at one and the same time. The 'highlight' of Mother's last Reading, to which the coward next to me had refused point blank to attend, although he had consented to a long session of manly embracing when I had come home still shaking.

“We are delighted to be able to be of assistance”, I said, wondering if there was something wrong with her eyes the way in which she was looking at me. Although John's subtle

shuffling of his feet and a barely-suppressed annoyed cough suggested the reason for that. “My mother did not unfortunately provide me with any details of the case, so how may we help?”

I always noted the smile on John's face every time I said 'we' or 'us' at times like these. I could not have done my job without his steadying presence but I know he felt that he often contributed very little, and always looked so happy when I praised him for his work. Mrs. Jefferson looked between us curiously for some reason.

“Until last year we used to keep King Athelstan across the road.”

I stared at her. Had I unknowingly slipped into some parallel universe where that sort of statement actually made sense?

“Mother!”

A scrawny young boy had emerged from the dark rear of the cottage where, presumably, the beds were. He looked around five years of age, a tad undernourished but in reasonable condition.

“She gets like this after she's read one of them stories”, the boy said with a put-upon expression on his face. “I'm George Jefferson. And King Athelstan was our pet pig; the land across the street used to be open but they built the cottages there last year.”

“That's right”, Mrs. Jefferson said. “And I do *not* get 'like this', George. You mind your manners!”

“Please!” the boy scoffed. “I had nightmares for a week after that one about the creepy black slime that ate people from the feet up while they slept. And every time you get another story in the post poor Father hares off down to the pub like his life depends on it!”

She scowled at him but, perhaps fortuitously, was distracted by a sudden movement from young George's soon to be sibling (presumably the stories were disturbing them even before their advent into the world, which would not have surprised me in the least). John immediately moved to make sure she was all right, and once she was settled she continued.

“Mr. Black who owns Leven Farm, he offered us a deal”, she said. “He was strapped for cash at the time so he couldn't buy King Athelstan, but he would keep him on his farm and buy him from us come Christmas. That was generous of him considering we had nowhere else to put him.”

“And the pig was taken from the farm?” I asked. She nodded.

“Last week they swiped him along with two others”, she said. “Bold as brass; the place is pretty cut off but they got them away somewhere all right. Probably on someone's dinner plate already. And with a new mouth to feed we need they money we would have got for him.”

I thought for a moment.

“This Mr. Black”, I said at last. “What can you tell me about him?”

“My husband knows him better than I do”, she said. “He works down in Barrow Docks where Mr. Black's brother is a foreman, I think. He'll be back this evening, though.”

“I see”, I said. “I saw a decent-looking old coaching-inn in own earlier, 'The Sun', so the doctor and I will base ourselves there. Should you need us you will be able to send George here to fetch us. We will talk to your husband this evening and then take things from there.”

“Do you think King Athelstan could still be got back?” she said hopefully.

“I do not know”, I admitted. “As you said, a thief would most likely get rid of the evidence via the breakfast table, a most effective way of covering their tracks. But if I cannot get your pig back I do promise I will endeavour to track down the thieves who stole him and make them pay you his worth at the very least.”



## Chapter 2

I dearly loved John. But occasionally he was wont to say precisely the wrong thing at the wrong time.

“I wonder why she gave the pig such a noble name?” he mused as we walked back to The Sun to obtain rooms for our time here. “It hardly seems fitting, naming a set of future breakfast contents after the first King of England.

And he was also increasingly prone to spotting when I was keeping something from him. I was sure that I had not said anything or had any reaction to his observation, but he still looked at me sharply.

“What?” I asked innocently.

“Do not come that with me”, he said warily. “What are you hiding?”

I sighed. He had brought this totally upon himself – but then they do say a trouble shared is a trouble halved.

“Most likely from a story my mother wrote about that king's capture of Viking York which in effect created England”, I said, wishing fervently that it was somehow possible to 'unread' certain things. “She described in graphic detail how he took twenty of the most handsome Vikings and told them that as they had spent half a century shafting England.....”

I trailed off. From his sudden pallor he had got it.

“Sherlock, damnation!”



I had planned to meet Mr. Arthur Jefferson next and see if he could shed any light on the case, but the Fates dictated otherwise. The landlord Mr. Connors had read some of my stories and had guessed that we were here to investigate the Case Of The Missing Bacon.

“You're lucky, sirs”, he said in his slow country burr. “Mr. Black himself is at the bar just now, back from the mainland not half an hour ago.”

I smiled covertly in that he viewed Furness as an island and the rest of the county as 'the mainland', guessing from the time that the farmer must have gone to Carnforth, the first town over the border. John and I stood up and crossed over to the bar where we introduced ourselves to Mr. Donald Black. He was a cheerful young fellow of about thirty years of age, and confirmed what we knew about the missing porcine. And he had a little more to add.

“That case abroad where you did not even go to the place and still worked out who did it from the clues was clever”, he said (he was I assume referring to 'A Scandal In Bohemia'). And the doctor always says you can make something out of nothing.”

“I do not believe I am quite yet capable of defying the laws of physics”, I said with a smile. “Was there something unusual about this theft?”

He scratched his blond thatch, which was almost as unruly as my own. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that John was covertly checking his own hair again (he always did that when he was concerned about his getting near 'thirty-ten' as Miss Joanna Harvelle had cheekily called it the other week) but of course said nothing. I am fairly sure that I did not even smirk.

“They took three pigs”, the farmer said.

“And?” I asked.

“I've got twelve”, he said, “or had twelve. The barn where they were kept is some distance from the house so they could just as easily have taken the lot. Three will not ruin me, but losing the lot might well have.”

He was right. That was strange.

“This is a difficult question in any case”, I said, “but I must ask it. Is there anyone who might have had reason to commit such an act of thievery?”

“Lord Parry might”, he conceded.

“Who is Lord Parry?” I asked.

“He owns the docks where my brother Douggie works”, Mr. Black said. “I did not even know the gentleman except by reputation until about five years back when I suddenly inherited this place.”

“Suddenly?” John asked. He nodded.

“My grandfather and uncle died within days of each other”, he said. “The farm had been supposed to go to my uncle but his sons were – still are – a pair of ne'er-do-wells and it got left to me. Lord Parry was cross because he owns South Point Farm, the one place further along the road than mine, and my uncle had agreed to sell Leven to him so he could combine the two.”

“And you do not wish to sell, I presume?” I asked. He nodded.

“Unfortunately the whole thing has dragged in family now”, he said with a sigh. “Douggie is a foreman at the Docks and Lord Parry has been doing everything he can to make his life difficult presumably in an attempt to get back at me for not doing what he wants. And His Lordship's son Mr. William has been using his father's influence to make matters still worse. When they built the new houses to the south of the town last year he tried to have the road down to the farm closed off, claiming I could just as easily drive two miles further each time I wanted to leave the place. Fortunately he is the sort of young idiot who rubs people up the wrong way every time he opens his mouth, and the Town Council said no.”

I thought for a moment.



“I know you had an arrangement to buy Mrs. Jefferson's pig King Athelstan after he had been with you for a time”, I said. “Do you think that other people were aware of this?”

He looked surprised at that.

“You are asking if the thieves knew that one of the pigs was not mine?” he asked. “I have no idea but I can hardly think so, and there was no mark on him or anything. Let alone the fact they only took three, why would they include one from a poor lot like the Jeffersons? Surely no-one can have anything against them?”

“It is hard on poor Mrs. Jefferson”, I agreed.

To my surprise the young farmer drew himself up at that.

“I may be financially straitened, sir”, he said coldly, “but I would *never* allow a lady to suffer, let alone one who is expecting a child. My sole failing in this matter, to which I do confess, is not to have thought of that earlier. You may inform Mrs. Jefferson that regardless of whether her pig is recovered I shall still pay her the full price for the creature at the agreed time!”



## Chapter 3

I managed to placate the annoyed farmer (who I rather admired for his sense of social responsibility particularly as I knew so many with much more in life who were not possessed of such morals) and we parted. I made a mental note to make sure that Father supplied him with some covert aid in the future.

It was only a short time later that Mr. Arthur Jefferson arrived at the tavern, although I suspected that he would surely be unable to add much to what we already knew. I was however mistaken.

“About the only good thing to come out of the whole mess is that Con banned Mr, William and his cronies from this place of an evening!” he sighed. “They were always getting drunk and then setting off round the town to do something daft or other. And this daft rhyming thing was the last straw.”

I had a sudden inspiration. John looked at me sharply; he really was getting too good at this.

“What rhyming thing?” I asked as casually as I could.

“There's a woman at the end of our street called Mary Stoppard”, he said. “Contrary Mary we call her because she's always arguing, over anything and everything. They went round her place at midnight and threw seashells all over her nice neat garden. They were seen clambering over her fence afterwards but the local constable is in Lord Parry's pocket.”

“Why would they do a stupid thing like that?” John asked.

“Because of the nursery rhyme”, I said. “How does your garden grow, with silver bells and cockle shells.”

Mr. Jefferson nodded.

“Then it was poor old Miss Caldwell”, he said. “No proof it was them this time but it was their sort of thing. She has a red cloak and lives out of town; one of them wore some sort of wolf costume and leapt out at her from behind a tree. Poor girl fainted clean away.”

“Little Red Riding Hood”, I said. “It all begins to make sense.”

Both men looked at me uncertainly.

“The only other odd thing was someone stole Mrs. Featherstone's goat Billy” he said, “then took him out of town and tied him up in a field for some reason. But I don't see how that has anything to do with no nursery rhyme.”

“I can”, I said. “Rowley Powley, later better known as George Porgie, was in its original form related to a goat who had been named for King Charles the Second.”

“Another animal named after a king”, John mused. I smiled.

“Named supposedly because he shared that monarch's sexual appetite”, I said.

Mr. Jefferson winced but was distracted by the arrival of his son George, who burst into the tavern loudly for someone of his small size. He did not have to say anything; one look at his face told his reason for being here. John rose and walked over to him but Mr. Jefferson hesitated.

“The doctor would *never* charge for treating a friend of my mother”, I assured him. “Go be with your wife, sir.”

He looked at me gratefully and they all hurried off.



While John was easing the passage of the next Jefferson into the world I decided to test a theory and see if I could bring this case to a sudden and happy conclusion. But I would need help. As the post office was closed I went to the station where they were able to send off the telegram I required. We were not that far from the border with Cumberland and hence our old friends Inspector Macdonald and Constable Smith, or at least what was left of the latter by now. Then I returned to the tavern and waited. Sure enough, an answer to my telegram reached me before I turned in for the night and I went to bed happy.

Fairly happy. My bed was of course missing something quite important.



The following morning young George Jefferson arrived at the tavern to inform me that his brother or sister did not seem overly inclined to make an appearance just yet so poor John was still in Argyll Street. And thankfully I was soon joined by four gentlemen at the tavern whom I promised to stand drinks once we were done with our task.

The five of us took two carriages out of the town and headed south, eventually reaching Mr. Black's farm which was indeed a fair-sized one. Continuing past it we soon reached the much smaller South Point Farm which as its name had suggested lay around a headland.

I had hoped that we might find the farmer at home but as it turned out we did rather better. A supercilious-looking young fellow off about thirty years of age was just leaving the place in a most well-appointed carriage. He looked down on me from his perch, then more warily at the four policemen behind me.

“Who or what are *you*, sir?”

“I am Mr. Sherlock Holmes”, I said, “and I would wager that *you* are Mr. William Parry, here to check up on your recent act of thievery or possibly even to plan your next act of rank childishness.”

He looked disdainfully at me.

“I have no idea what you mean”, he said loftily. “Out of my way, unless you wish me to run you over.”

“If I go into this farm”, I said with a smile as I thought of what I had learned earlier that day, “I will surely find three pigs that have no right to be here. Having examined the roads in this area I know that it would have been exceptionally difficult, especially for three young idiots in their cups, to have directed three pigs along the road north from Leven Farm as it passes several houses. However it was much easier to move them south to the farm owned by your father, where they have been hidden ever since.”

“This is private property”, Mr. Parry said haughtily and I noted that he did not deny my assertion. “You have no rights here. Who are these men?”

“I rather think that the uniforms might tell even *you* that!” I snarked.

“They are not from round here”, Mr. Parry said. “I know George, our local constable.”

“It is easy to know someone who is in your father's pocket”, I agreed. “And these fine men are from the Cumberland and Westmorland Constabulary.”

“Then they have no business here”, Mr. Parry said shortly. “This sir, in case you have not noticed, is *Lancashire!*”

“I am aware of my county boundaries, *sir*”, I said. “But police forces do have the right to cross such boundaries if they have good cause to believe that stolen property is being maintained somewhere beyond them, provided that they inform the local constabulary first.”

“George told me nothing about this”, Mr. Parry said warily.

“Perhaps the letter has not reached him yet”, I said airily. “I believe that the postal service is somewhat reduced at weekends. Gentlemen?”

The four officers moved past us both and towards the farmhouse. I knew what they would find in one of the barns.

“My father will be having words with you about this!” Mr. Parry said hotly.

I smiled dangerously.

“I would be slightly more concerned about your *mother*, sir.”

He looked at me in confusion.

“What has she to do with any of this?” he demanded.

“Well, it turns out that she and the wife of the owner of one of the pigs you stole when you were doing 'Three Little Pigs' have something in common”, I grinned. “They are both enamoured of the writings of my own dear mother.”

He went deathly pale.

“Not the one who wrote that thing about the Pharaoh and his six Nubian slaves?” he gasped.

(I had missed that one. For which I was truly thankful!).

“The very same”, I said, making another mental note to make sure that I worked hard to continue to 'miss' that story. “And I shall be encouraging her to write to your mother and suggest that she 'share' her stories more widely among her family.

He yelped in horror and banged the roof of his carriage, which was driven away. I smiled as I watched him go. Although really I could not be that cruel, even to him.

On the other hand, they do say that sharing is caring!



We returned the stolen animals to Mr. Black's farm and I saw the officers back to the tavern where I stood them all a drink, making a mental note that I owed their former co-worker Mr. Fraser MacDonald one as well for his assistance. One of them men grinned as he told me that Constable Smith would have come along himself 'but he has trouble walking just now', which was both terrible of him and not surprising in the least. Then I hurried off to Argyll Street where I arrived to find that the latest Jefferson had finally made his arrival. John looked exhausted but happy, and the parents were clearly delighted at having a second son.

“He is to be Arthur after me”, Mr. Jefferson said proudly.

“And maybe Athelstan as a middle name?” his wife suggested.

“That would make him A.A.”, Mr. Jefferson pointed out. “And boys with initials like that get teased. How about Stanley? That's a town not far from where I grew up.”

That sounds wonderful”, his wife said, slumping back into her chair clearly exhausted after all her labours. “Arthur Stanley Jefferson.”



*Postscriptum: The more learned reader may now be aware why this particular case was unpublished, and not just because of its relatively minor importance. Arthur Stanley Jefferson would later acquire a sister and two more brothers, but more significantly he would become famous for his acting career the following century in some of the best 'movies' ever made. But not before he had changed his name since 'Stan Jefferson' was deemed unlucky because it had thirteen letters in it. He chose to be known instead as Stan Laurel, and in his long and glittering career with the equally talented Mr. Oliver Hardy he established a legacy of laughter and joy that contributed so much to the sum of human happiness.*



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